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MP owes non-believers apology, says professor

by **STUART ABEL**

Herald Reporter [@stuabel](#)

A UNIVERSITY professor has called upon a Plymouth MP to apologise after he suggested Christians did more to help the needy than non-believers.

Atheist Dr Susan Blackmore said she was shocked that Gary Streeter claimed that people of faith did more volunteering and charity work.

Dr Blackmore, a constituent of the South West Devon MP, said the research showed that the proportion of volunteers who were religious and non-religious was almost the same.

She also criticised comments from the Prime Minister, where he said the country should be "more evangelical" about its faith.

Psychologist Dr Blackmore, visiting professor at [Plymouth University](#), said in an open letter to Mr Streeter: "Either way you look at it, while churches may do good in their communities, so do non-religious people.

"Your faith might be the thing which motivates your charitable work, to whatever extent it is that you do support charities or volunteer, but all sorts of people volunteer in their communities - simply because they want to."

Mr Streeter, chairman of the cross-party Christians in Parliament group, joined a debate on Radio 4's Today programme in which he took a side-swipe at "militant atheists".

He argued it is "the churches, not the secular groups, not the atheists" leading community work in his constituency and

across the country.

But Dr Blackmore, whose husband is the television presenter Adam Hart-Davis, said that the 2011 Citizenship

Survey, showed that 39 per cent of non-religious volunteers took part in formal volunteering at least once a year.

The mother-of-two added: "That is precisely the same proportion as those volunteers who are religious - a figure which includes Muslims, Jews, Hindus and other non-Christians. "When it comes to informal volunteering, the numbers are slightly in favour of non-religious people."

Dr Blackmore, who lives in the South Hams, said she and her husband gave to many charities and were "deeply involved" in local affairs.

She said: "According to the latest Census figures, 32.9 per cent of people in Plymouth report having no religion. Com-

ments which alienate one third of voters aren't just divisive and untrue, but politically foolish.

"I call upon you to apologise to your constituency and to recognise all the good work which is done by non-religious people not just in South West Devon, but right across the country."

Dr Blackmore said that David Cameron's call for the country to be "more evangelical" in matters of faith would only divide the nation.

She added: "It would be deeply divisive, setting one type of belief against another and making out that the non-believers amongst us are somehow inferior or less altruistic than believers when this is not true."



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ABOVE: Dr Susan Blackmore. **RIGHT:** Gary Streeter MP