

Living better together: secularism and cohesion

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Later this year the NSS will mark its 150th anniversary with a special conference around the theme of 'living better together'. Campaigns director Stephen Evans explains why the time has come for people of all faiths to stand together in supporting secularist principles.

In September this year we'll be marking the 150th anniversary of the National Secular Society with what's shaping up to be a very special conference. The theme – [living better together](#) – reflects the role secularism can play in building a society in which all of us, whether religious or not, can live together fairly, cohesively and peaceably.

A secular democracy guarantees religious freedom for all. It protects believers from religious persecution and nonbelievers from religious compulsion. When a clash of rights occurs, secularism performs a vital balancing act – one we need to get right if Britain is to stay free of the sort of sectarian conflict that has torn other societies apart. While Britain remains a tolerant country for many, we've seen sectarian conflict and a rise in hate crime – both within and against religious groups.

It should be painfully clear to everyone by now that universal support for fundamental freedoms and values cannot be taken for granted. Earlier this year a Channel 4 documentary about British Muslims, based on new research about their attitudes, painted a bleak picture for social cohesion in Britain.

The [research highlighted](#) some troubling views among British Muslims, revealing that significant numbers of, especially young, Muslims living in Britain do not share the values of their fellow citizens including liberal Muslims, with many wishing to lead separate lives under sharia law.

The recent spate of Islamist inspired terror attacks across the continent are a reminder, if any were needed, that these problems need to be addressed. But how?

Speaking to these points at the forthcoming Secularism 2016 conference will be two of Britain's foremost commentators on Islam and social cohesion. [Maajid Nawaz](#) and [Douglas Murray](#) will set out their view on whether Islam and secular liberal democracy can be reconciled. They'll be [joined by Raheel Raza](#), President of the Council for Muslims Facing Tomorrow, an organisation seeking to reform of Islam in order to nurture harmonious coexistence between people of all faiths and none.

Now, more than ever, sincere believers and non-believers must unite in defending the important principle of church state separation and stand up for the concept of liberté, égalité, fraternité and laïcité that the theocrats so savagely seek to undermine.

Another country where a long tradition of [secularism is endangered](#) is Turkey. Human rights there are in peril following the bloody failed coup attempt on 15 July and the subsequent crackdown on civil liberties by Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has long embraced Islamist-rooted politics.

[?afak Pavey](#), a leading Turkish opposition MP and former recipient of 'Secularist of the Year' will join the conference to explain the important role of secularism in safeguarding everybody's human rights by curtailing religion's theocratic tendencies.

There are of course, numerous ways in which secularism can be implemented. The French model of laïcité, which has long been a pillar of France's political and cultural identity, [may not](#) be the perfect fit for Britain.

A 'soft secularism' that manifests itself as multi-faithism is also a [path best resisted](#). While lived experiences of diversity have enriched many people's lives, multiculturalism as public policy has manifest failures, and in a country as religiously indifferent and diverse as ours it's a nonsensical and dangerously divisive to organise public policy around religious identities.

The American concept of separation is perhaps closer to the National Secular Society's vision, as codified in our [Secular Charter](#).

With that in mind, keynote speaker at Secularism 2016 will be Jacques Berlinerblau, author of the internationally acclaimed [How to Be Secular](#) and Professor of Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. He'll be highlighting the many virtues of America's hard-won secular tradition and reminding us of what secularism it is and what it protects.

Berlinerblau is brilliant thinker and [Secularism2016](#) is a rare and not-to-be-missed opportunity to hear him speak in Britain.

Secularism then, can come in various shapes and sizes, and perhaps it's time to carve out a British model of secularism to chart a new course for the UK's religion and state relations. That's why it's so important for us, the National Secular Society, to articulate a principled and British interpretation of secularism – assertive, yet tolerant – a codification of 'live and let live' – but within limits.

Stephen Evans

Stephen is the CEO of the National Secular Society. You can follow him on Twitter [@stephenmevans1](#). The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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