

NSS to host major conference on reclaiming religious freedom

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The National Secular Society will host a major conference in May 2019 under the tagline 'reclaiming religious freedom', with prominent figures from the UK and abroad confirmed to speak.

The one-day conference will take place on Saturday 18 May 2019 at the Tower Hotel in central London.

The conference will highlight the disconnect between genuine religious freedom for people of all religions and none and the 'religious freedom' commonly claimed by religious lobbyists.

The keynote speaker will be Rachel Laser, President/CEO of the US-based lobbying group [Americans United for Separation of Church and State](#). The group advocates for the principle of church-state separation and the defence of freedom of and from religion for all.

Rachel was the architect of a bill in the US Congress which included comprehensive sex education and broader access to birth control. She was also the [deputy director](#) of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

Also speaking at the conference will be:

- Sara Khan, Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism
- Dr Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Gita Sahgal, the executive director at the Centre for Secular Space
- Martin Rowson, one of the UK's leading satirists and cartoonists.

Panel discussions will focus on subjects including pluralism and religious orthodoxy, freedom of speech and healthcare.

The event will also feature the presentation of the 2019 [Secularist of the Year](#) award.

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said the conference was "already shaping up to be an excellent opportunity to make the case for, and discuss how to advance, secularist principles in public life".

"This conference will make two substantial points about religious freedom: that it is for everyone and that it is a qualified right.

"Secularism defends both freedom of and from religion. It protects many freedoms which often get ignored in public debates around religious freedom, such as LGBT people's freedom not to face discrimination, individuals' rights to autonomy over their own bodies, and children's right to grow up and make their own minds up about religious or philosophical issues.

"Secularists also defend the idea that religious freedom should not be a reason for exemptions to laws which are otherwise deemed necessary. Too often, the concept of religious freedom is being distorted to mean religious privilege. This needs to be called out.

"We are excited by the early line-up of speakers and topics and we look forward to announcing more plans in due course."

Tickets will cost £50, with a 50% discount for NSS members (£25) – including those who buy a membership at the same time as their tickets. Student tickets are available for £10.

Secularism 2019: Reclaiming Religious Freedom

This conference will serve to highlight that true "religious freedom" means freedom of belief for people of all religions and none, and will also explore the limits of religious freedom when it impedes on other human rights, including bodily autonomy, equality and freedom of expression.

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