

The chief rabbi has made an anti-democratic attempt to shut down criticism

Posted: Wed, 18th Sep 2019 by [Chris Sloggett](#)

The chief rabbi has asked secularists to stop campaigning against practices such as faith schools and infant circumcision. His apparently polite request should be firmly rejected, says Chris Sloggett.

The chief rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, has used a [speech](#) to an interfaith conference to claim "Humanism" is becoming "ever-more combative in the way in which it regards faith communities".

His soft and carefully worded address was not so much an attack as a lament. Jewish tradition, he said, drew heavily on humanist principles (with a lower-case 'h'). So what a shame that "Humanists" (upper case 'H') and other secularists - presumably meaning the National Secular Society, given the name-check he gave us - made arguments which the rabbi did not like.

Mirvis highlighted campaigns against two religious privileges in particular: [faith schools](#) and [ritual infant genital cutting](#). And it's firstly worth noting how thin his arguments in favour of these practices were.

He claimed those who campaign against faith schools were "in effect campaigning against my freedom to raise my children in accordance with the tenets of my faith". This only holds true if you think that freedom extends to expecting the state – funded by taxpayers from all religious backgrounds and none – to provide support for those schools. The rabbi's line suggests there are credible campaigns to stop religious people from being allowed to take their children to synagogues, churches or mosques in their free time. It hardly needs saying that this isn't the case.

On circumcision, Mirvis noted [comments](#) made by NSS chief executive Stephen Evans. He quoted Stephen saying: "The demand for religious freedom to be respected is often little more than a demand for the state to turn a blind eye to the violation of other's rights and freedoms when done in the name of religion." (Readers can make up their own minds over whether Stephen has a point.)

He then said circumcision was "an essential part of our existence" for Jewish men and claimed: "An attack against our right to perform circumcision is an attack against a most fundamental element of our belief." But this suggests the boy being circumcised is also the one practising the belief – rather than a child having someone else's religion irreversibly and painfully imposed on him.

Nor did the rabbi engage with reasonable criticisms of the practices he defended. Consider the case against faith schools: the state shouldn't endorse the idea that religion is inherently worthy of respect; children shouldn't be encouraged to identify themselves with religious labels; society shouldn't be segregated between different religious groups. Mirvis didn't respond to any of these points. And on circumcision, he didn't acknowledge that his logic could be used to defend any abusive practice – most obviously female genital mutilation.

Instead he simply decried the fact that people made these points at all. And this is where his remarks become alarmingly anti-democratic.

Amid his religious allegories, references to "Humanist friends" and flowery metaphors about cricket (we should all be batsmen rather than bowlers, apparently) and symphony orchestras (we are best off playing instruments "together under the baton of respectful cooperation") came the following passage:

"If it is freedom you seek, please do not campaign against our freedom to practice our faith. If you are calling for tolerance, please do not stoop to intolerance of faith communities and religious practice. If you wish to prevent religion from imposing its values on our society, please don't do just that, by seeking to impose Humanism on our society."

This roughly means "shut up". Or perhaps "please shut up". But either way, the effect is the same.

The request not to campaign against "our freedom to practice our faith" effectively asks people not to highlight abusive religious practices or work to end them. The insinuation that criticism of religious groups is "intolerance" is a well-worn reflex which reveals that the speaker cannot win the argument without resorting to illegitimate attacks on those raising reasonable points. And the claim that there is an attempt to "impose Humanism" is a mischaracterisation of efforts to defend the principle that there should be [one law for all](#).

The attitude the rabbi articulated poses a threat to values which citizens of enlightened societies should hold dear. And his diplomatic pleasantries shouldn't blind us to that. Religious groups have long sought to shut down debate about their practices and beliefs. When they've failed to win arguments, they've resorted to silencing tactics. And human flourishing has long depended on people being willing to defy them.

If the chief rabbi's words are taken seriously, it will become harder to criticise and end religious practices such as infant genital cutting and faith based schooling. If we care about freedom of thought, individual rights and social cohesion, we should instead try to make it easier. This apparently polite request should be firmly rejected.

Image: © Brian Minkoff – London Pixels [[CC BY-SA 4.0](#)], via Wikimedia Commons

[Discuss on Facebook](#)

Chris Sloggett

Chris Sloggett is a former head of communications at the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS. Follow Chris on Twitter: [@ChrisSloggett](#)

[This short film explains why I'm saying #NoMoreFaithSchools. Please share and join the campaign. Click to tweet](#)

What the NSS stands for

The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

- [Read the Secular Charter](#)
- [Share on What's App](#)

- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)

Tags: [Faith schools](#), [Free speech](#), [Genital cutting](#)

Related Campaigns

-

[**Protect freedom of expression**](#)

We promote free speech as a positive value.

[Read More](#)

-

[**No more faith schools**](#)

We need inclusive schools free from religious discrimination, privilege or control.

[Read More](#)

-

[**End forced genital cutting**](#)

No child should be subjected to unnecessary genital cutting.

[Read More](#)

Related Articles

[**NSS announces major conference on protecting liberal values**](#)

Kenan Malik, Joan Smith and more speaking at NSS Secularism 2024 conference in London. [Read More »](#)

NSS address urges UN to call for government action on human rights

Religious privilege is undermining rights of UK citizens, NSS tells UN committee. [Read More »](#)

Protect human rights from religious imposition, NSS urges UN

NSS tells UN Human Rights Committee religious privilege is undermining rights in education, healthcare and around free speech. [Read More »](#)

Election 2019: Where do the major parties stand on secularist issues?

Megan Manson studies the election manifestos for the main UK-wide parties – and says religion will continue... [Read More »](#)

Election 2019: pledges that should be in the parties' manifestos

As the UK's political parties consider their manifestos for the upcoming election, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans... [Read More »](#)