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At a convivial and glitzy gathering last Saturday, the £5,000 Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year was won by the [Southall Black Sisters](#) (SBS).

Announcing the prize, NSS President Terry Sanderson said: “Southall Black Sisters (SBS) was set up to meet the needs of Black and Asian women who are the victims of domestic violence or injustices in the legal system. The main aim of the organisation is to help women to gain more control over their lives, to be able to live without fear of violence and be able to assert their human rights to justice, equality and freedom. SBS are right on the forefront of the feminist struggle in this country. They celebrated their thirtieth anniversary last year, being founded in 1979 during the Southall race riots.”

Mr Sanderson said that the group had been chosen to receive the prize because they provide a secular space where women fleeing violence or injustice — often resulting from religious attitudes — can find a safe haven.

He said: “The Government’s ‘cohesion’ agenda has put an enormous amount of power into the hands of religious leaders in minority Asian communities. These are almost always very conservative in their outlook and some consider women’s rights to be unimportant. The Southall Black Sisters can provide women with some time away from this all-powerful religious patriarchy for them to sort out their problems in their own way.

“Over a thousand women a year contact SBS on issues such as domestic violence, homelessness, immigration, police and racial harassment, health and concerns about their children.”

Receiving the award on behalf of the SBS was its Director, Pragna Patel. Pragna gave a very moving acceptance speech in which she commented: “If you had asked me 20 years ago what one of the biggest struggles would be in 2010, I would not have said the struggle for a secular society. Yet here we are today.” Pragna is also a founder of Women Against Fundamentalism.

A special campaigning award was presented to Samantha Stein for her work on setting up Camp Quest, the UK’s first residential summer camp specifically for children whose parents want an alternative to the usual religious sponsorship of such camps.

Keith Porteous Wood, who was compère, said “umpteenth people had come up to him to say that this, the fifth, Secularist of the Year presentation had been the best ever. The atmosphere had been electric with nearly 200 people enjoying a slap up meal in a glamorous restaurant in London’s west end.”

Also on stage was Peter Hearty, who runs the Platitude of the Day website, rating each *Thought for the Day*. Dressed in his preachers garb (after all he is a “Reverend” courtesy of an

accommodating website and \$20 cash) he presented The Platitude of the Year award for the most Platitudinous “Thought” – it went to Right Reverend James Jones, Lord Bishop of Liverpool and Bishop of Prisons, for reminding us all how Christianity solved the problems of Northern Ireland (yes, really!). Anne Atkins narrowly avoided winning – each time her name was mentioned there was a loud hissing.

Unfortunately, because the Bishop was not there to collect his award, the prize has now been forfeit. This consists of five personally signed and inscribed books by Richard Dawkins, which will be put up for auction on eBay to raise funds for the NSS.

Photography by [Trevor Aston Photography](#) and Sven Klinge.