

Dr Antony Lempert: Exploring religious freedom episode 05

Video available at:

<https://youtu.be/bdPBHCZICPc>

0:00:01.840,0:00:05.800

(Alastair Lichten) Hello and welcome to the National Secular Society podcast

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I am Alastair Lichten, Head of Education at the NSS

This is part five in a series of interviews

0:00:11.060,0:00:16.700

where I speak to activists and experts about religious freedom and what it means to them.

0:00:16.700,0:00:21.360

This is leading up to our major conference in May: Secularism 2019

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What does religious freedom truly mean? While some religious lobbyists use the

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term to demand privileges, this conference will serve to highlight that true

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religious freedom means freedom of belief for people of all religions and none.

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If this conversation has whet your appetite, then I hope you'll join us at

0:00:38.000,0:00:44.200

The Tower Hotel in London on the 18th May. Tickets are just £50, or half price for our members,

0:00:44.200,0:00:47.880

and students can even get a ticket for just £10.

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Today I spoke to Dr Antony Lempert, Chair of the Secular Medical Forum,

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about the importance and misuse of religious freedom in health care

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I hope you find the conversation interesting, and I'll be back at the end with a few thoughts.

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Doctor Lempert, welcome to the NSS podcast
(Dr L) Thank you, hello.

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(AL) Do you want to start by telling the listeners a little bit about yourself and how you came to be

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interested in this intersection between secularism and healthcare.

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(Dr L) Sure. Well, my background is a GP and I work in a rural practice on the Welsh/English border

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and I've long been interested in the rights of people to express their own beliefs.

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But, certainly, I was one of the initial members when the

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Secular Medical Forum was started in 2006, which was actually started by Dr Michael Irwin,

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who initially ran it.

Now, I got much more involved when I

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started to assist him, and then I took over from him in early 2008.

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And, to be fair, a lot of my understanding of the areas has evolved over the last

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ten or eleven years, working with other organizations that share similar views

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in certain of these areas, and also developing an understanding, and coming

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up against some of the the barriers, and starting to appreciate the depth of some of the problems

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as religious interference starts to affect other people's delivery of their own

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personal health care, or the other way around. The importance of allowing

0:02:23.840,0:02:29.720

individual people to have health care that's important to them and their own personal beliefs.

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(AL)What does religious freedom mean to you in a professional or personal capacity?

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(Dr L) Well I suppose in the personal context

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religious freedom means simply being allowed to believe what one wants, and to

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put those beliefs into practice, without unnecessary restrictions.

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Whilst also being mindful that any one person's personal beliefs will necessarily differ

0:02:50.740,0:02:56.140

from the beliefs of other people.

It's also really important to be able to

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change one's beliefs, and to recognize by doing so, that all religious belief is a choice of the individual.

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For me this is quite a basic point that sometimes

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goes missing in discussions, where people assume that they're

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intrinsically entwined with their religion, and there's simply nothing they can do about it.

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If you have that viewpoint, those who do wish to change

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their opinions or beliefs or thoughts, or even one element of them, can come up

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against real barriers within the community they've left by people who

0:03:28.549,0:03:33.560
don't understand that religion, like many other personal positions, is a personal

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choice, not an imposition. Obviously, as we know that can lead from

0:03:37.670,0:03:42.650
simple condemnation to really quite significant harm, being done to people

0:03:42.650,0:03:48.470
who choose to change their their beliefs. So in reality it's important to be

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respectful allow everyone the space and freedom to believe and practice what

0:03:51.560,0:03:55.790
they want. This freedom isn't passive either, and it needs to be worked for

0:03:55.790,0:04:00.530
because in some closed communities, for example, the dialogue is closed down

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such that people don't have the choice of changing their belief. They can't even

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conceive of a world without those particular beliefs or those practices.

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Equally, in a wider context, religious freedom sits within the

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spectrum of freedom of thought, conscience and belief, which is a

0:04:16.820,0:04:20.540
fundamental right, guaranteed to every single person on the planet,

0:04:20.540,0:04:25.400
by the UN Declaration of Human Rights. In this way it's no different from any other

0:04:25.400,0:04:30.030
form of freedom. I must similarly be constrained by the

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restraints necessary to protect harm to others.

I think it's really important

0:04:34.020,0:04:37.320
to put religious belief in the same context as other beliefs, because it

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often assumes, or assumes for itself, a special place, a reserve

0:04:43.139,0:04:47.639
place, which is different from other beliefs. In a professional context

0:04:47.639,0:04:52.740
freedom of religion means very much just empowering patients to get the care, the

0:04:52.740,0:04:56.370
medical care, that's important to them. That works both ways. It means

0:04:56.370,0:05:01.800
ensuring that patients get the care that they choose within a reasonable context

0:05:01.800,0:05:06.840
of what's legal and reasonable and available, without other people imposing

0:05:06.840,0:05:10.950
or making unnecessary restrictions on them.
an

0:05:10.950,0:05:15.030
Equally, it means allowing religious
people to access care that's in

0:05:15.030,0:05:17.669
accordance with their own personal
beliefs, and not having people who

0:05:17.669,0:05:22.169
disagree trying to stop them from doing
something that some

0:05:22.169,0:05:27.040
of us might regard as as wrong or it
goes against the medical grain.

0:05:27.040,0:05:33.860
(AL) That has an interesting interaction, I
guess,
when we talk about the health care of
children,

0:05:33.860,0:05:39.240
because the religious freedom of an adult to
make health care

0:05:39.240,0:05:44.780
decisions which their doctor, or
their community, may disagree with,

0:05:44.780,0:05:49.420
is different to the freedom to make those
decisions for another.

0:05:49.420,0:05:55.940
(Dr L) It certainly is. Now, ordinarily, in health
care, obviously, there are certain people, and
children

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are one of the most prominent among them,
who don't have the capacity ordinarily.

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Obviously some children develop the
capacity during their childhood. But don't

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have the capacity to make a decision for
themselves, so there has to be somebody,

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and usually that's the parent or guardian,
who makes that decision for them.

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It's really important, again, to
remember that that decision is not just

0:06:16.220,0:06:21.900
plucked out of the air. That's a decision
based upon what's being medically
recommended.

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So parents don't have a carte blanche to say
"I want this",

0:06:24.960,0:06:30.600
"I want my child to be have their face
scarified"
"I want to", for example, "chop off their little
finger".

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There's no automatic right of parents

0:06:33.700,0:06:38.280
to determine everything about their children.
Because, in those circumstances, doctors also
have

0:06:38.280,0:06:41.040
a role in terms of safeguarding children.

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So there's a balance going on here,
between what parents want for their children

0:06:45.440,0:06:52.640
and what's a safe and reasonable decision
for them to make for their child

0:06:52.640,0:06:57.160

Obviously there are certain contexts in this where this really does come up,

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where there's a very large conflict, between normal medical care and what parents want.

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I suppose two of the biggest ones: one of them is is parents, who have a

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Jehovah's Witness belief, who wish to to ensure that their own

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children don't have a blood transfusion, because they don't believe in a blood transfusion,

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even to the point where the child's life might be at risk.

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One of the other main areas, in common practice now,

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is where parents want to perform a ritual cutting of the child's genitals,

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for a religious belief, as well. If I may expand a little bit on the Jehovah's

0:07:41.400,0:07:44.960

Witness side of things. Many of these cases have actually gone to court,

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because, clearly, it's quite a difficult area where children's

0:07:49.470,0:07:53.270

lives are potentially at risk, but the parents beliefs are so strong, and

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naturally, they do want the best for their child, but they believe the best

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for their child is by restricting a blood transfusion.

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And in all these cases that have gone to the courts recently, the courts have upheld,

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actually, that the child's right to appropriate medical care is more

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important. It's actually just so fundamental that the parents can't

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impose their beliefs. It's very different when a person has capacity

0:08:22.620,0:08:27.330

so, for example, a 25 year old person who has a

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life-threatening injury who, perhaps, needs a blood transfusion,

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says "I will not have a blood transfusion under any circumstances".

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It would be absolutely wrong for a doctor to provide that.

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(AL) I think it's safe to say that one of the most contentious areas of the Secular Medical Forum's work,

0:08:43.620,0:08:47.600
is your efforts to challenge
non-therapeutic male infant circumcision,

0:08:47.600,0:08:53.240
a practice which is often justified in
terms of religious freedom.

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(Dr L) That's right.
It's intriguing that it is one of the most

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controversial. because there's no doubt
that it is. Even amongst some

0:09:01.930,0:09:08.440
people who are naturally secular.
To me, ritual male cutting of the genitals,

0:09:08.440,0:09:12.370
or ritual cutting of any child genitals,
gets to the very heart of secularism.

0:09:12.370,0:09:18.860
Because the essence of protecting
children from imposed religious belief,

0:09:18.860,0:09:24.120
what could be more fundamental than
allowing an individual person the right

0:09:24.120,0:09:31.330
to determine the branding, the markings
of their own body. The claims that

0:09:31.330,0:09:40.080
it's a religious 'right' rather than 'rite'

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apply to the parents, the community.
In a similar way to the

0:09:43.640,0:09:50.400
Jehovah's Witness story, or to any belief,
these beliefs are not formed in infants.

0:09:50.400,0:09:55.810
To actually cut any persons body,
to make an irreversible change to a

0:09:55.810,0:10:01.520
person's body, solely on the presumed
beliefs of this person, when they're older,

0:10:01.520,0:10:06.060
it's completely opposite to religious freedom,
because, as you get

0:10:06.070,0:10:10.480
older, you will form your own beliefs.
There are many people who either believe

0:10:10.480,0:10:14.180
something differently, or even choose to
believe, both the

0:10:14.180,0:10:19.500
Jewish and Muslim communities practice this
on their children. So some

0:10:19.500,0:10:25.120
of them will believe in Judaism or Islam,
but will also choose not to be cut or

0:10:25.120,0:10:29.700
not to have their own children's genitals cut.

0:10:29.700,0:10:33.160
These claims of religious freedom
miss the point of religious freedom.

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Religious freedom is for the individual.
It's not for the community.

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As soon as you start getting onto the territory
of community religious freedom, you actually
end up in

0:10:42.900,0:10:48.760
a situation where people lose their
religious freedom entirely, because the

0:10:48.760,0:10:52.820
community claims ownership of everybody
within that community.

0:10:52.820,0:10:57.040
That's precisely what happens with ritual
circumcision. Children are cut because of

0:10:57.040,0:11:02.260
the presumed beliefs of the community.
(AL) This is a recurring theme in all of

0:11:02.260,0:11:07.960
the interviews: this misuse of religious
freedom as being about

0:11:07.960,0:11:12.780
a freedom to impose practices on other
people.

0:11:12.780,0:11:16.880
Are there are any other areas of healthcare
where this is a particular problem?

0:11:16.880,0:11:23.020
(Dr L) Well, there are many areas where,
on a personal level and the community level,

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individual freedoms are restricted by
community claims for freedom.

0:11:28.420,0:11:32.460
For example, something in the
news quite a lot at the moment

0:11:32.460,0:11:37.420
is the situation in Northern Ireland,
where women's right to sexual health

0:11:37.420,0:11:45.460
and abortion are completely restricted
compared to the rest of the mainland UK.

0:11:45.460,0:11:51.320
So, less than 10 women were allowed, within
the confines of Northern Ireland last year,

0:11:51.320,0:11:54.380
to have an abortion, which is widely
recognized as a

0:11:54.399,0:11:59.439
fundamental part of medical care.
This is based largely on the

0:11:59.439,0:12:05.740
control on the community by the
established religious order.

0:12:05.740,0:12:09.370
Saying that, that's not
to blame individual people.

0:12:09.370,0:12:14.040
These are the representatives of the
religions and the abuse of power from

0:12:14.060,0:12:18.460
those at the top. Many individual people,
whether they believe or don't believe,

0:12:18.460,0:12:22.870
have all sorts of widely varying beliefs.
But it's the abuse of power of people

0:12:22.870,0:12:27.250
who assume that everybody has a
conformity of belief and they use that

0:12:27.250,0:12:32.660
to restrict other people's rights to to
access appropriate health care.

0:12:32.660,0:12:37.260
(AL) Obviously, any advocate of religious
freedom would have to say that people

0:12:37.260,0:12:44.940
should be able to advocate and preach
against, and disagree with abortion

0:12:44.940,0:12:50.259
But to use a claim of religious freedom,
to deny someone a

0:12:50.259,0:12:55.420

particular form of health care,
seems really to misunderstand the

0:12:55.420,0:12:58.809

purpose of religious freedom.
(Dr L) Yes. Of course everybody should be

0:12:58.809,0:13:03.790

allowed to have an open dialogue and a
debate, but they shouldn't have the

0:13:03.790,0:13:07.140

power to trump other people's views.
Because this is what's happening over

0:13:07.280,0:13:11.800

and over again. People say
"Well, my beliefs are so strong that I must
make

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sure that these are enforced".
Whereas, on the other side people who ,for

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example in another area of abortion,

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nobody goes to seek an abortion because
they think
"Oh, that's what I'll go and do today.

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It's a nice sunny day".
They've given it an enormous amount of
thought.

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But, equally, none of them will go
up to somebody else who's not having one

0:13:33.170,0:13:36.100

and say "How dare you not have an abortion".

0:13:36.100,0:13:41.860

There is respect and it's often going
unfortunately just in the one direction.

0:13:41.860,0:13:47.720

People who advocate for individual freedoms
mean it on both sides.

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So, from my perspective,
the Secular Medical Forum perspective,

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it's about allowing people to make those
reasonable choices, not forcing anybody

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into choosing one way or the other,
whether to have one whether or not to.

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It's a big decision, and women who have
got to that point to make that decision.

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have usually given it an
enormous amount of thought before

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they've got there. They should be
allowed to access that that reasonable care.

0:14:11.500,0:14:15.220

(AL) What do you think can be done to
help health care professionals

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recognize and maintain appropriate
professional boundaries. so that they are

0:14:19.940,0:14:24.490

respecting others religious freedom but
not imposing their own religious views?

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(Dr L) Well, in truth, much of the
guidance around this area already exists.

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I suppose the main thing is to ensure
that the regulators themselves

0:14:34.340,0:14:39.080
don't make exceptions in this area.
For example, General Medical Council,

0:14:39.080,0:14:43.970
which regulates doctors in the UK,
provides guidance already, and actually

0:14:43.970,0:14:49.339
gives explicit guidance on personal belief and
tells

0:14:49.339,0:14:52.400
doctors, very clearly, that we must
respect those boundaries. You mustn't

0:14:52.400,0:14:56.990
impose our beliefs on our patients, and
we must do everything we can to ensure

0:14:56.990,0:15:01.520
that patients have care that's in
accordance with their own personal beliefs.

0:15:01.520,0:15:05.180
The real problem comes when
people just ignore that for

0:15:05.180,0:15:09.529
special pleading cases of religion.
Again, I come back to the circumcision,

0:15:09.529,0:15:14.240
where the GMC guidance is that they clearly
circumvent its own guidance in this

0:15:14.240,0:15:20.000
area, by jumping through hoops to
ensure that doctors can ignore

0:15:20.000,0:15:24.470
the fact that children can't make up
their own mind, and children

0:15:24.470,0:15:29.480
are intrinsically vulnerable
But on the whole the

0:15:29.480,0:15:33.700
guidance is there already and
it's very clear that doctors should not

0:15:33.700,0:15:38.380
be imposing our own personal beliefs on our
patients.
And, to be fair, most of us don't.

0:15:38.380,0:15:42.180
It's only a very small proportion of very
religious doctors

0:15:42.199,0:15:48.199
from certain sections that do try to do this.
(AL) I've never been a healthcare

0:15:48.199,0:15:53.749
professional, but I worked on a
helpline with young people, where we

0:15:53.749,0:15:58.040
had very clear guidance on not inserting
our own beliefs. People may have been

0:15:58.040,0:16:01.670
motivated by their personal beliefs to
give up at a time and volunteer at the

0:16:01.670,0:16:05.989
service, but we had very clear guidance about
not

0:16:05.989,0:16:10.970
bringing our personal views in.
I don't think anyone ever felt that that

0:16:10.970,0:16:15.920
was violating their freedom of speech or
their religious freedom.

0:16:15.920,0:16:19.900
(Dr L) No. It's about being responsible.
If you're walking down the street and you get

0:16:19.910,0:16:23.600
engaged in conversation, then you have

freedom of speech to say what you want.

0:16:23.600,0:16:28.309

But if you choose a role where you're providing, certainly for medical

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professionals or other healthcare professionals, you've actively chosen

0:16:31.790,0:16:36.739

that role, and you have a responsibility to go with that role. It's very similar

0:16:36.739,0:16:39.949

to a teacher not turning up in school and banging on about their own political

0:16:39.949,0:16:43.759

beliefs and and teaching children that's the only one. That would be an abuse of

0:16:43.760,0:16:47.720

power in a very similar way.

I think most people recognize that,

0:16:47.720,0:16:52.300

but a few people, unfortunately, feel so strongly about their own beliefs, that they

0:16:52.309,0:16:56.560

think that the greater good means that they must impose their belief, because

0:16:56.569,0:16:59.269

they're saving people, or they're preventing people from doing

0:16:59.269,0:17:03.949

something so much worse.

They actively avoid following the guidance,

0:17:03.949,0:17:10.069

and there have been a few cases of that recently.

(AL) I think another complicated, or

0:17:10.069,0:17:13.789

potentially complicated, area of the intersection of religious freedom and

0:17:13.789,0:17:17.860

healthcare is around conscientious objection.

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Obviously we can all say we wouldn't want someone

to be forced to do, or to provide, a service,

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which goes against their conscience.

But if you've opted into

0:17:30.900,0:17:35.880

being a health care professional, what are the limits, or what should the limits be,

0:17:35.880,0:17:40.220

on your conscientious objection, your ability to say "I don't

0:17:40.220,0:17:44.059

want to do this particular thing, or this particular part of my job or serve this

0:17:44.059,0:17:49.130

particular type of person?

(Dr L) I think we'd all recognize that people go into

0:17:49.130,0:17:54.040

health care for a variety of reasons, and everybody has their own personal conscience.

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Where possible, obviously, we want

- it's kind, on each other and on patients -

0:18:00.820,0:18:02.780

to make sure that health care professionals

0:18:02.780,0:18:06.520

aren't pushed into a position where they feel they're doing something completely

0:18:06.520,0:18:09.720
against their own beliefs.
For this reason I would completely agree

0:18:09.720,0:18:16.020
that medical students in their training,
shouldn't be forced to participate in an

0:18:16.020,0:18:20.240
abortion procedure, for example, but
should be given the choice to opt out.

0:18:20.280,0:18:25.040
On the other hand, once that person is
qualified, they have a responsibility not

0:18:25.050,0:18:30.240
to choose an area that's going to bring
them in direct conflict with the

0:18:30.240,0:18:33.660
delivery of necessary healthcare for other
people.

0:18:33.780,0:18:40.820
This has happened, where people deliberately
choose a role, so that they

0:18:40.830,0:18:44.460
can obstruct the delivery of healthcare.
And, unfortunately, we keep coming back to

0:18:44.460,0:18:49.560
sexual health, because many of these
issues are not driven by

0:18:49.560,0:18:54.180
secularism, they're driven by religious
concerns. Religious concerns seem to

0:18:54.180,0:18:59.510
be centered around personal sexual
freedoms, such as sexual health,

0:18:59.510,0:19:03.930
homosexuality, cutting of children's genitals.
A lot of them revolve around

0:19:03.930,0:19:10.200
their obsession with other people's sexuality.
In law there are

0:19:10.200,0:19:14.780
a couple of areas where doctors are allowed
to conscientiously object.

0:19:14.780,0:19:17.520
One of them is in the delivery of abortion.
The other one

0:19:17.520,0:19:22.710
is in the Human Fertilization Embryology
Authority regulations. Most of us

0:19:22.710,0:19:26.480
think these are quite reasonable,
but should not be extended.

0:19:26.480,0:19:30.680
Unfortunately, there have been moves
from some religious people, and

0:19:30.680,0:19:34.460
there's certainly a bill going
through the Lord's at the moment, from

0:19:34.460,0:19:40.380
Baroness O'Loan called the Conscientious
Objections (Medical Activities) Bill,

0:19:40.380,0:19:43.140
that would really open the floodgates to allow

0:19:43.140,0:19:47.120
healthcare professionals to say "Oh! I'm not
going to
do this because it's against my belief".

0:19:47.120,0:19:50.120
And that would be disastrous
for the delivery of healthcare,

0:19:50.120,0:19:57.940
because it's not about where individual
healthcare
professionals are delivering the care,

0:19:57.940,0:20:02.600
but it's about whether the institution itself
can deliver the care,

0:20:02.600,0:20:05.780
and where the care can be delivered by
other people, reasonably, without putting

0:20:05.790,0:20:10.380
undue pressure on the service, that's fine.
But where patients risk

0:20:10.380,0:20:16.350
not receiving the care that they need,
that becomes a big problem and that

0:20:16.350,0:20:20.070
becomes the responsibility of the health
care professionals. And if I may just say,

0:20:20.070,0:20:26.700
about two years ago, the General
Pharmaceutical Council updated its own

0:20:26.700,0:20:31.760
guidance on this, and they they took a
very brave stand. They initially thought

0:20:31.760,0:20:36.210
that the beliefs of the pharmacist,
who didn't want to

0:20:36.210,0:20:41.020
prescribe emergency contraception, for
example,
and the patient, should be balanced.

0:20:41.020,0:20:45.500
And following some challenge,
they actually completely backtracked.

0:20:45.500,0:20:48.870
They finally recognized,
and they updated their guidance

0:20:48.870,0:20:54.030
to say: the balance must be shifted

in favor of the patient and,

0:20:54.030,0:20:57.890
if the prescription has been written,
it must be delivered to the patient,

0:20:57.890,0:21:02.700
irrespective of the individual beliefs
of that pharmacist, who really has a

0:21:02.700,0:21:07.440
responsibility to choose to work somewhere
that's not going to cause a problem to
patients.

0:21:07.440,0:21:13.460
(AL) If someone were an ethical vegan,
we would respect that life stance,

0:21:13.460,0:21:17.560
but then they probably wouldn't be able
to get a job in that in an abattoir.

0:21:17.560,0:21:21.560
(Dr L) Precisely.
(AL) Are there any other areas where a
mistaken

0:21:21.570,0:21:26.970
understanding of religious freedom is
leading to religion being imposed in

0:21:26.970,0:21:32.150
health care in an inappropriate way?
(Dr L) Well, going back in the past, certainly

0:21:32.150,0:21:38.400
the biblical condemnation of
homosexuality led to homosexuality being

0:21:38.400,0:21:44.600
regarded as an actual psychiatric illness.
Not too far in the distant past,

0:21:44.600,0:21:47.340
and certainly in the living memory
of many people now,

0:21:47.340,0:21:52.500
people were offered the awful choice
between
electro-convulsive therapy, a shockwave
treatment

0:21:52.500,0:21:58.740
to the brain, or jail for their supposed illness.
Equally, in modern times

0:21:58.740,0:22:07.240
gay conversion therapy is still being offered
as a therapy. It doesn't deserve the word
"therapy".

0:22:07.260,0:22:13.900
There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever
that people's
sexuality can be changed.

0:22:13.900,0:22:19.600
And, in fact, this leads to awful situations
where people brought up

0:22:19.600,0:22:24.760
in these communities, aren't able to
to be open with their friends and

0:22:24.760,0:22:30.400
relatives. And then it causes serious
mental health difficulties with them.

0:22:30.400,0:22:34.840
Of course here you can interpret that
two ways, but quite often those who

0:22:34.840,0:22:39.480
are against homosexuality say "Look these
people are mentally ill".

0:22:39.480,0:22:43.840
Well, yes, if you're in a community which
doesn't accept you, which actually

0:22:43.840,0:22:49.000
actively rejects you, it will affect your
mental health, certainly, adversely.

0:22:49.040,0:22:53.300
And the gay conversion therapy
covers a wide spectrum.

0:22:53.309,0:22:57.730
but some of it is really quite sinister.
If you believe strongly enough

0:22:57.730,0:23:04.700
that people are absolutely wrong, and
must have their sexuality changed,

0:23:04.700,0:23:08.460
people will go to extraordinary lengths to
change it. We've heard stories that

0:23:08.460,0:23:14.900
people have been forced into
starvation regimes, even forced rapes.

0:23:14.900,0:23:18.160
It really is quite awful
what happens to some people from some of

0:23:18.160,0:23:20.720
these communities. And, of course, these
are some of the most vulnerable,

0:23:20.720,0:23:25.320
so they're teenagers discovering their
sexuality and it's the

0:23:25.320,0:23:28.680
people they trust and love the most who
are doing this to them. And they're doing

0:23:28.690,0:23:35.350
it out of a mistaken sense of religious
freedom.

Other areas, which sometimes

0:23:35.350,0:23:39.020
don't get touched on, and which are
slightly more than the edges of secularism,

0:23:39.020,0:23:43.570
things like assisted dying.
Now, I think, because people could

0:23:43.570,0:23:47.540

have views for and against assisted dying, on both sides of the religious

0:23:47.560,0:23:52.320

spectrum, some people often assume this doesn't have much bearing on secularism.

0:23:52.320,0:23:58.240

Whereas, in fact, much of the push against allowing people the right to make their own decision

0:23:58.240,0:24:03.060

at the end of life, that their life is intolerable and there's no reasonable prospect of improvement,

0:24:03.060,0:24:07.500

most of those people pushing against that decision are religious.

0:24:07.500,0:24:12.320

Twenty years, or so, ago they used to declare their religion, and say life is sacred.

0:24:12.320,0:24:17.679

Nowadays, they recognize that society is changing and using those words will

0:24:17.680,0:24:23.540

not get them very far, so we hear the same people using so-called secular arguments,

0:24:23.540,0:24:27.800

that people are vulnerable, and that we don't want to be killing people.

0:24:27.800,0:24:31.540

And, of course, people are entitled to those views if they wish,

0:24:31.540,0:24:37.220

but the medical profession within the UK has been severely influenced by people

0:24:37.220,0:24:43.440

with these strong views, many of whom are quite covert about their affiliations

0:24:43.440,0:24:47.680

with the religious organizations that they they adhere to.

0:24:47.760,0:24:53.000

So, I think that's a real issue, and I think it's one of the area's that's quite

0:24:53.000,0:24:57.239

difficult to challenge on a religious basis, because the people are

0:24:57.240,0:25:06.200

not openly talking about their religion. (AL) Someone's personal religious worldview

0:25:06.200,0:25:13.920

could include the idea that they should be able to control their own life and how it might end as well.

0:25:13.920,0:25:19.640

So their religious views, which actually do affect them, themselves, could potentially be restricted.

0:25:19.640,0:25:22.420

(Dr L) Well, that goes with every single one of these religious freedoms.

0:25:22.420,0:25:25.100

The bottom line is, if somebody else is imposing their religion

0:25:25.109,0:25:28.820

on someone else, they are necessarily restricting that other person's

0:25:28.820,0:25:33.659

opportunity of choice to choose their own beliefs. And that's always the case.

0:25:33.660,0:25:38.220

And that's why it has to be an individual personal freedom.

0:25:38.220,0:25:43.700
(AL) I know we've already discussed non-therapeutic male circumcision, but before you go can I

0:25:43.700,0:25:47.700
just ask for your thoughts on the newly published guidance for doctors from the

0:25:47.700,0:25:51.100
British Medical Association?
(Dr L) Yeah. You can have my thoughts

0:25:51.120,0:25:57.960
but it's a disaster zone to be perfectly honest. The British Medical Association is the

0:25:57.960,0:26:01.200
trade union for doctors, and the professional body for doctors, and

0:26:01.200,0:26:07.220
provides guidance. The updated toolkit for doctors explicitly says that

0:26:07.220,0:26:12.280
it didn't have access to all the evidence, and it's not an ethical document.

0:26:12.280,0:26:16.520
Unfortunately, they didn't stop it from making ethical statements and

0:26:16.529,0:26:21.929
making scientific assertions. Many of the points made within this document

0:26:21.929,0:26:27.720
contradict themselves. So it's actually an incoherent document.

0:26:27.780,0:26:32.720
For example, the BMAs new guidance helpfully notes that in the recent cases of a dispute

0:26:32.720,0:26:37.420
over whether non-therapeutic circumcision was in the best interest of a child lacking competence,

0:26:37.420,0:26:41.560
the courts have ruled that it was not in the child's best interests,

0:26:41.560,0:26:46.260
and that children's best interest should best be served by waiting for them to make up their own mind.

0:26:46.380,0:26:52.800
So they note that, but despite this, the BMAs updated toolkit recommends that doctors are

0:26:52.800,0:26:56.210
asked to remove the child's healthy foreskin, make a best interest

0:26:56.210,0:27:02.060
consideration, that's almost exclusively reliant on parental beliefs.

0:27:02.060,0:27:08.460
And this completely subverts normal medical principles. The new guidance is a

0:27:08.460,0:27:12.090
completely lost opportunity to remind doctors that the cutting of any child's

0:27:12.090,0:27:18.320
healthy body, for no medical reason, is simply not in the child's best interest.

0:27:18.320,0:27:23.640
It makes extraordinary assertions such as circumcision does not need

0:27:23.640,0:27:28.460
to be performed by a doctor. So the BMA is actually saying there's no need,

0:27:28.500,0:27:32.900
as there would be for any other invasive surgery, for a sterile hygienic

0:27:32.910,0:27:37.120
environment, and a competent trained surgeon who's gained appropriate consent.

0:27:37.130,0:27:42.180
It's difficult to overstate just how different this is from any other piece

0:27:42.180,0:27:46.680
of medical guidance that's given, and it's difficult to escape the fact that

0:27:46.680,0:27:53.160
the BMA has actively walked a tightrope and straddled the tightrope, really, trying

0:27:53.160,0:28:01.640
not to offend religious bodies, and trying not to understand that

0:28:01.640,0:28:05.600
actually cutting a healthy functional sensitive erogenous private part

0:28:05.600,0:28:09.040
of someone else's body, goes against every single grain

0:28:09.040,0:28:14.900
of what being a doctor involves.
(AL) Anthony, thank you so much for your time today.

0:28:14.900,0:28:20.600
Before you go, we always like to ask our guests
if they've got any recommendations.

0:28:20.600,0:28:25.840
So are any books or films which you think do a good job of exploring religious freedom

0:28:25.840,0:28:31.280
that you'd like to recommend?

(Dr L) Sure. Well, firstly I think the book

0:28:31.280,0:28:35.080
God is Not Great by Christopher Hitchens is a stunningly good book

0:28:35.080,0:28:37.400
which highlights the contradictions and harms

0:28:37.400,0:28:42.660
of many religions while stating one thing and doing another thing.

0:28:42.660,0:28:46.840
I'm going to go a little bit sideways here, because one of the things

0:28:46.840,0:28:51.260
about religious freedom is that people often talk about how it's a special case.

0:28:51.260,0:28:56.940
And I don't think it is.
Some of my other choices really shine a light

0:28:56.940,0:29:00.040
on the collective madness that often takes over whole communities,

0:29:00.040,0:29:02.620
when people try to speak out with an individual voice.

0:29:02.620,0:29:07.820
So Catch 22 is one of my all-time favorites and just the complete madness of

0:29:07.820,0:29:10.980
"They're trying to kill me".
Yes they are. It's a war.

0:29:10.980,0:29:19.500
1984, removing the language of change, that works towards preventing people from escaping from the

0:29:19.500,0:29:24.740
status quo. That's so common in

very strong religious communities.

0:29:24.740,0:29:28.740

And, from the point of view of film, one of the films that really struck me many

0:29:28.740,0:29:34.680

years ago, was actually on a kibbutz, as a student, and I was shown the film *The Wave*,

0:29:34.680,0:29:39.960

which was all about the classroom experiment in America,

0:29:39.960,0:29:46.250

and how the community stopped people speaking out, and it became more and more

0:29:46.250,0:29:51.020

violent and vicious against people who just wanted to share their own personal

0:29:51.020,0:29:56.250

views and who wanted to challenge the perceived collective orthodoxy of the

0:29:56.250,0:29:59.800

day, which in the film was the way...

(AL) It's a true story, isn't it?

0:29:59.840,0:30:05.220

(Dr L) It is a true story, and it was actually a story that was to highlight the dangers of the

0:30:05.220,0:30:09.750

Holocaust, and to highlight the dangers of people not being allowed to have

0:30:09.750,0:30:13.980

their own personal views, because that's when these harms happen to other people,

0:30:13.980,0:30:18.880

when the individual voice is lost to the collective.

(AL) Okay. Well we're share links

0:30:18.880,0:30:23.400

to all of those in the show notes.

Thank you so much your time, again.

0:30:23.400,0:30:29.040

(Dr L) Thanks Alastair

(AL) It's always a pleasure to speak with Dr. Lembert

0:30:29.040,0:30:33.220

and he's actually speaking at a health care conference in Belfast on 20th March,

0:30:33.220,0:30:36.480

and I'm over at the same time to learn more about efforts to

0:30:36.480,0:30:40.800

integrate Northern Ireland's deeply sectarian education system.

0:30:40.800,0:30:47.220

So we'll be organizing an NSS social on the evening of the 20th. Please message me if you're interested.

0:30:47.220,0:30:51.420

If you're getting this podcast on YouTube or you feel like visiting,

0:30:51.420,0:30:56.280

you may want to check out our playlist from the 2018 Healthcare and Secularism Conference,

0:30:56.280,0:31:00.160

which covers many of the issues we've discussed today in more depth.

0:31:00.160,0:31:04.540

Speaking of conferences, there's just over two months to go till Secularism 2019,

0:31:04.540,0:31:08.140

our major conference on the 18th May at the Tower Hotel.

0:31:08.140,0:31:11.739

Our lineup of speakers include
Rachel Laser CEO with

0:31:56.280,0:31:59.520

to protect freedom of and from religion
in health care

0:31:11.740,0:31:17.280

Americans United for Separation of Church
and State, who I spoke to in episode 2 of the
podcast,

0:31:59.600,0:32:08.609

please visit secularism.org.uk/healthcare
Until next time, goodbye

0:31:17.280,0:31:22.360

Medical Ethicist Dr Brian Earp,
who I'll be speaking to in a future episode,

0:31:22.360,0:31:27.220

and Dr Ahmed Shaheed,
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or
belief,

0:31:27.220,0:31:30.840

the United Nations Office of the High
Commissioner for Human Rights.

0:31:30.840,0:31:32.919

You can find out more about the conference
and

0:31:32.920,0:31:37.940

book your tickets at
secularism.org.uk/2019

0:31:37.940,0:31:42.460

The conference includes a drinks reception
and the
award of our 2019 prize for

0:31:42.460,0:31:46.660

Secularist of the Year.
So it really is fantastic value at just £50

0:31:46.700,0:31:52.360

and even better value for our members.
Links to the books Dr Lempert mentioned will
be in the show notes

0:31:52.360,0:31:56.280

And if you want to learn more about
how the NSS and SMF work together