

# Ep 59: The advancement of religion

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(Megan Manson, MM): ....but in this case, advancement of religion has quite clearly meant

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the advancement of extremism which is harmful to the public - certainly not a public benefit.

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(Emma Park, EP): You're listening to episode 59 of the National Secular Society podcast produced by Emma Park.

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Over the last couple of years I've spoken to guests on this podcast on a range of issues

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relating to secularism. One theme which has come up again and again is the archaic nature of Britain's

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legal system. From education to marriage, Parliament to death, the laws and secondary legislation that

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regulate so many aspects of our lives seem in many cases to be not merely conservative but hopelessly

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out of date and strangely enough, religious interests seem nearly always to be on the side

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of regression rather than reform. This episode considers another example of this phenomenon

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which relates to charities law. The Charities Act 2011 set out to consolidate the law and charities

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including the purposes which could count if an organization was applying for charitable status.

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Among the charitable purposes which are listed in section 3, subsection 1

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is the advancement of religion. Indeed of over 12 purposes listed, it is the third

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falling only below the prevention or relief of poverty and the advancement of education.

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In guidance issued by the Charity Commission in 2008, amended in 2011 and currently under review

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it is stated that 'it is not enough that an organization does something in the name of

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religion in order for it to be a charity advancing religion it has to be shown that the aim of the

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organization is to advance the religion in a way that is for the public benefit and

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not to further some other non-charitable aim' but where in practice do the Charity Commission and

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the courts draw the line? In February 2019, the NSS released a report entitled 'For the Public Benefit:

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The Case for Removing Advancement of Religion as a Charitable Purpose'. This report argued that

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it was time to stop treating the advancement of religion as an inherent good. Over the two and a

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half years since the report was released the NSS has brought to light a number of new cases of

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organizations which have registered as charities solely on the basis of the advancement of religion

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even though their public benefit has been at best highly questionable. With me to discuss

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this topic today is Megan Manson, Head of Policy and Research at the National Secular Society.

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Megan welcome back to the podcast. (MM): Well thank you very much Emma.

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(EP): How did the advancement of religion come to be a charitable purpose in law?

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(MM): Well this dates back to Elizabethan times, so we're going back a long way here. Um, it was part of the

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um, Elizabethan 1601 Statute of Charitable Uses and in the preamble of that statute it refers

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to the repair of churches alongside bridges, ports and highways so that's where the origin

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of religion as a charitable purpose comes from is that really it was only there to maintain churches.

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So, pretty narrow. So it developed from there and it sort of turned into supporting organizations that

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advanced the established church, so the Church of England. You couldn't really have an organization

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um considered a charity if it supported non-conformist religious purposes because they

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were identified as superstitious uses which were illegal. Gradually, you know, as, as things have sort

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of developed, charity law has become less sectarian and it has widened to basically become the

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advancement of religion. It was eventually defined in law as a charitable purpose in 1891 as one of

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the three heads of charity - the others were the relief of poverty and the advancement of education -

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so that's where it comes from originally. (EP): So the most recent charities act we've had I believe

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is the 2011 Charities Act. Now you at the NSS released a report about um, the current state of

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of this provision of the advancement of religion in February 2019. Could you just briefly summarize

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what the main findings of the report were? (MM): Well first I absolutely want to stress that we are

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not against religious charities. What we are saying here is that the advancement of religion

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in it, in its own sake as a um, as a public benefit needs to be challenged. So, there are many

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um charities that have a religious ethos that are doing really good work um, and there are many that

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sort of have a historical religious ethos as well um but these charities - I can't think of a single

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case where this isn't true - is that every charity with a religious ethos that is providing a genuine

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public benefit could probably register under a different head of charity so they could register,

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for example, under the relief of poverty. There's many religious charities which are helping poor

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people in stress but on the flip side there are many religious charities that aren't doing that.

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All they are doing is advancing um religious ideology and it's a case of we've, we, we don't

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think necessarily that this is in the wider public benefit and the other issue is this advancement of

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religion means that religious and non-religious charities are not treated equally. So, if you're

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advancing a non-religious worldview that you think is in the public benefit you can't register

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under a similar purpose to the advancement of religion - there's nothing for you there so it's

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giving a favourable status to religious

organizations and it's also treating um charities

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of different religions differently as well because we get into that question of what is a religion

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and if the Charity Commission thinks that you don't look much like a religion because

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you look a bit different to some of the more traditional religions, then they might reject you

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um, as a charity in the first place. So, not only does it cause inequality between religious and

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non-religious charities, it's causing inequality between organizations of different religions too.

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(EP): So take humanism, for example, has that ever been recognized as able to be for the advancement of

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religion and to fall under that head? (MM): No, no. Not in, not in England and Wales, no. Um, so uh,

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charity law I think is, is fairly um, clear that it's, it's favourable to religion. The common law

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has um refused to accept belief systems that are adverse to the very foundations of all religion, so

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you could interpret that as being, you know, atheism cannot be, is adverse, to the foundation of religion

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so that, you know, an atheist organization can't be a charity for example um and in a 1962 ruling

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a judge ruled that um between different religions the law stands neutral but it assumes that any

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religion is at least likely to be better than none. So, again um the law is very much favoring the idea

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that having a religion is a, is a good thing. (EP): So is that, is that still a current law that any

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religion is better than none? (MM): Um, well certainly in terms of charity law um you could argue that it is

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because it's giving privilege to organizations that advance religion on the assumption that

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somehow having a religion is a good thing - you know, there's no there's nothing for advancing

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atheism because charity law doesn't recognize that as being a good thing. (EP): You talked about, you

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know, obviously a religion can be described as a religious ideology perhaps in, in many cases, I mean -

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where do you draw the line say between a religious ideology and a political ideology?

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(MM): Well that's really difficult and, and sometimes there really isn't a clear line there because

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many religious ideologies incorporate political ideas and there are indeed some religious

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charities that do want to advance um politicized forms of religion. (EP): Do you have any specific

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examples there? (MM): We do know of one Hindu charity in particular that is, has been advancing the Hindutva

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ideology um, so that's the, that's sometimes called Hindu nationalism and um is basically advancing

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the idea that India is inherently a Hindu state and it should be by Hindus for Hindus

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which goes against much of um India's history and its own constitution which basically says that Hindu,

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that India is a secular state where um people of all religions and none should be treated equally.

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(EP): Now just to be clear, the National Secular Society is, is not a charity is it? And, and just

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to clarify, why is that? (MM): Well charities can't be established for um, for political purposes and you

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know, the separation of uh, church and state - the disestablishment of the Church of England which is

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you know, fundamental to the National Secular Society is a political purpose and we certainly

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don't want to hide this. So, you know, well I don't think under charity law it will be

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appropriate necessarily for us to register as a charity. (EP): Sure but, your point is, is just that

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um while religious charities may, you know, do many good things in virtue of being religious they

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shouldn't just be able to register as charities on that basis alone. (MM): No and in fact our um, report

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sort of found examples of this. We found plenty of examples of quite benign um religious charities

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that, you know, we're not sort of harming anyone but we're not necessarily advancing

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a general public good - so, organizations that just exist to print pamphlets or distribute bibles -

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it's hard to see how that is in the wider public benefit. (EP): Do you have any specific examples? Not

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doing, nothing particularly bad but just nothing particularly beneficial to the public? (MM): Um, so

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I suppose one example would be the British and Foreign Bible Society and that does exist just

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to distribute the bible. I mean, that's, that's fine if you, if you like the Bible but, you know, would we

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have similar charities set up for the advancement of any other book that wasn't religious ?

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(EP): Now just talking about um, the idea of charities having a public benefit, the reason why

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they get special status is because it is thought that in exchange for their special

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status in law they provide public benefits. What are the privileges which anyone's organization

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would get as a result of being a charity? (MM): Well, then I think the main benefits are financial -

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and so, charities are mostly exempt from income tax, corporation tax, capital gains tax and stamp duty.

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They pay no more than 20 per cent of normal business rates on buildings.

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On top of that, some charities can claim an additional 25 percent of donations from gift aid.

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And, you know, one of the big benefits is that the public is more likely to donate

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to registered charities because sort of having that charitable status and that registered

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charity number is kind of a mark of approval - it makes an organization seem more trustworthy

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if it's registered with the Charity Commission. (EP): Absolutely so it's, you know, partly about image

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as well as about um financial benefits. (MM): Absolutely. (EP): So, I mean basically are charities, in effect, partly

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propped up by the taxpayer? (MM): Um, I think so, yes, yeah. I think that there's certainly an argument for

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that and of course that really needs us to call into question the fundamental idea of separation

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of religion and state when the state is giving this very favourable tax relief to religious

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organizations on the basis that they are religious and not on the basis that they're doing a good job

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elsewhere, it's just on the basis that they're religious. (EP): Yeah and it's got to be religious not

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just any old world view, so it's, it's privileging some world views over other world views. (MM): Absolutely.

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(EP): Okay well let's look now um, at some of the more egregious charities that have come to the NSS's

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attention between February 2019 when you wrote the report and now. First of all, do you have

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the statistics on the number of charities in the UK which have no other charitable

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purpose apart from the advancement of religion? (MM): Well we found in 2018 there were over 12,000

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and that number will have grown a little bit since then and that's just the organizations

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that only had religious activities and nothing else listed as their charitable objects

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but there will be other ones as well that do have other objects listed that possibly aren't really

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fulfilling them in a way - it's debatable whether they are fulfilling them and some of the times

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you can register as well under other charitable purposes so you can have religious activities and

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other so I think that number is a conservative estimate and there will be some that are

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registered with just religious activities that are actually doing other things as well.

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So, it is quite difficult to get an accurate picture of exactly um, which religious charities

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are doing other things that you know a non-religious person would consider a, you know,

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public good and those that aren't, so um yeah, it is quite difficult. You just have to look at what the

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charity is actually doing um, rather than looking at what it's submitted to the Charity Commission

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as its objects. (EP): So how has, have you and the NSS gone about this research? (MM): So, the project that

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we did in 2019 and the report was sort of a deep dive looking into charity law. It was sort of our

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first real look into some of these charities and then since then um, every month we've been taking a

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look at what new religious charities register with the commission and sometimes this has turned up

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some charities that we think could be promoting um, a public harm in some of the things they've

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been saying. (EP): So let's look at, specifically at charities that have come to your attention

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that might be promoting public harm. Um, could you give us some examples of some of the worst?

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(MM): Well um, just looking uh, earlier this month um, we discovered a charity uh called uh, Miftahul Jannah

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academy which was hosting extremist lectures on its website and so the preacher Muhammad Patel

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who was giving these lectures was saying that Muslims had a duty to fund jihadists and when we

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were saying jihadists here, um, it was quite clear from this lecture they were talking about violent

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jihadists - they were saying that if a, a Muslim country wants to go to war then Muslims should

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provide money to jihadists so they can buy machine guns. They actually said that quite

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explicitly um and this preacher was also putting out very anti-Semitic messages - he was talking

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about the dirty qualities of Jews and what's very concerning as well is that this preacher has also

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been hosted by Walthamstow central mosque which is um, also a charity and it's, it's funded by the, the

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Masjid e Umer trust and so, and it could be this preacher has been speaking at other charities as well,

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you know, we don't really know that how far that this preacher's gone but yeah it's very worrying

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that um a charity like Miftahul Jannah could be, you know, a registered charity with the commission

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and be hosting things like this and it just shows that yes, absolutely this charity is

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advancing religion, there's no question, this was a, a lecture about what's in the Koran, about this



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preacher's interpretation of the Koran but in this case advancement of religion has quite clearly meant

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the advancement of extremism which is harmful to the public - certainly not a public benefit.

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(EP): Many I think religious people's response to that is is often, you know, well

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that's not real religion - real religion is, is peaceful or real religion is good but doesn't

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um a case like this rather show that actually religion is a matter of interpretation? (MM): Absolutely.

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Absolutely and the, and that's, that's part of the problem is that religion - it can be

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good or bad - the charity system doesn't really um, accommodate that issue - it basically says well

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if you're a religion you must be for the public benefit. I mean, technically there is no longer

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an assumption that religious charities provide a public benefit but in our research it showed that

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in practice the bar for whether something is a public benefit is incredibly low for religions. The

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Charity Commission have made it quite clear in the, and um, politicians have made it quite clear

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when religions, religious organizations have expressed concerns about the duty to fulfill a

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public benefit they said don't worry it's not going to be an onerous duty - that's one thing

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that Ed Miliband said when discussing this particular change to charity law. (EP): On

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Ed Miliband's reassurance to religion - I mean, do you think this is part of

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you know, the general theme which I think the NSS has often come back to - that there is this

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deference to religion in many aspects of public life in the UK? (MM): Yeah, absolutely. It's, it's

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all part of it. (EP): So the bar, equally the bar is low for becoming a religious charity because

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once, once it's established that you are some sort of religion um that's enough effectively

0:17:09.840,0:17:16.160  
for you to be considered to have a public benefit? (MM): Yes. Yeah that's what our research has, has shown

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is that there is absolutely favourable  
treatment of religion here. (EP): Um, so  
you've given one example

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of a problematic religious charity, do you, do  
you have some more? (MM): Well if we're just  
looking at sort

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of what we found this year, there was a  
Christian charity which registered this year.  
It's called

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the holiness revival movement worldwide  
Europe or HOREMOW Europe and its website  
was blaming

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rape on how women dress and saying that  
women who wear trousers are wearing the  
uniform

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of a harlot. So this is, so this is a charity  
openly promoting, you know, really bad  
misogyny and

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victim blaming when it comes to rape and this  
is obviously quite a topical issue and we found  
a

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charity that registered this year. Um, the  
Charity Commission clearly didn't look at this  
charity's

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website. I don't think the charity  
commission does um vet charities that are  
registering

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with it and I can see why because there's  
so many, the Charity Commission just doesn't  
have

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the capacity to do that but because it's  
advancing Christianity - that's what the charity  
is set up for -

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it just gets waved through. And then  
there was another one I think that registered

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um late last year um, and we sort of found  
out about it in January. Um, it's an Islamic  
charity

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the Ghamidi Center of Islamic Communication  
had a lecture on its website saying that being  
gay

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is a disease that needs to be cured and it  
was comparing um, having a same-sex  
attraction

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to um having homicidal tendencies and saying  
well we don't let people kill people if

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they want to, so we therefore shouldn't let  
people who are attracted to members of the  
same sex

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be gay or lesbian and live their life. So  
that was another one. This is at the time when  
we're

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discussing um, um outlawing gay  
conversion therapy and a, a charity registered  
promoting

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the fundamental ideas that underpin gay conversion therapy - the idea that being gay

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is an aberration and a disease that needs to be cured. (EP): Does the Charity Commission have any

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powers to shut down or otherwise restrain these types of charities? (MM): Not really. It

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does when we have.... we do complain to the charity commission about these charities and when we do

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it is the case that the the material that we've pointed out disappears from the website usually

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but I worry that that really doesn't solve the underlying problem, I mean, like, you don't know

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what these churches or mosques or other religions are preaching to their followers off the website

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for example, it doesn't tackle the underlying issue - all it does is take away the evidence really.

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So there's several reasons why the Charity Commission can't really act. Firstly,

0:20:04.480,0:20:10.480

it doesn't have the the capacity - there are far too many charities for it to be able to tackle and too

0:20:10.480,0:20:16.320

many of these issues to be honest um, so you know, I have sympathy with the Charity Commission here and

0:20:16.320,0:20:20.720

Secondly, charity law makes it really difficult for the Charity Commission to act as well - its hands

0:20:20.720,0:20:28.240

are tied on this. One really prominent example I can think of is a charity called Core Issues Trust

0:20:28.240,0:20:35.840

which is registered with the Charity Commission Northern Ireland and that charity um promotes what

0:20:35.840,0:20:41.920

it calls change orientated therapy um and we would call it gay conversion therapy - it's promoting

0:20:42.640,0:20:50.160

sort of, psychological techniques for people who they say want to be rid of same-sex attraction

0:20:50.160,0:20:54.960

because they want to live um according to traditional Christian values - that's how it

0:20:54.960,0:20:58.880

advertises itself, it doesn't like the term conversion therapy. It only uses the term

0:20:58.880,0:21:04.080

change orientated therapy and we went to the Northern Ireland Charity Commission and said,

0:21:04.080,0:21:08.560

you know, this, this charity surely is not providing a public benefit - it's doing something

0:21:08.560,0:21:16.480

that is universally almost, regarded as harmful by reputable psychologists, it's promoting something

0:21:16.480,0:21:24.720

that the UK Government is, is planning on outlawing, so surely it shouldn't be a registered charity? And

0:21:24.720,0:21:29.840

the commission came back to us and said well what it's doing isn't illegal at the moment

0:21:29.840,0:21:35.120

and the charity itself says that what it's doing is in the public benefit so we can't do anything

0:21:35.120,0:21:40.960

about it. (EP): So there are no sort of objective criteria for public benefit? (MM): Not really, no.

0:21:43.120,0:21:48.240

Not really - there is a stipulation that charities must not cause harm or that the public benefits

0:21:48.240,0:21:53.280

must outweigh any harm it's causing but from this example of Core Issues Trust

0:21:53.280,0:21:58.720

it's very hard to see exactly what does count as harm and what does count as benefit because when you have a

0:21:58.720,0:22:04.720

charity that is promoting something that is almost universally regarded as harmful - I think most

0:22:04.720,0:22:09.440

mainstream religious organizations have even said, you know, conversion therapy is wrong um and, and

0:22:09.440,0:22:15.360

is harmful - you'd have thought that that would be enough for the Charity Commission to go, okay,

0:22:15.360,0:22:20.560

society no longer considers conversion therapy to be acceptable therefore it's not serving

0:22:20.560,0:22:26.240

a public benefit and you cannot be a charity and promote this but no, it seems the Northern Ireland Charity Commission

0:22:26.240,0:22:32.800

is powerless here. (EP): Is there any public appetite for the abolition of the

0:22:32.800,0:22:37.600

advancement of religion as a charitable purpose or is the NSS really on its own here at the moment?

0:22:38.720,0:22:45.440

(MM): Um it is really quite a niche issue at the moment. I think people just aren't aware of this

0:22:45.440,0:22:50.560

um, this privilege in charity law. Certainly, I wasn't um before I started working for the NSS

0:22:50.560,0:22:55.440

- it's something I hadn't even considered - I didn't realize that the advancement of religion in and

0:22:55.440,0:23:00.320

of itself was a charitable purpose, you know, I think like most people we hear the word charity

0:23:01.120,0:23:07.360

and we automatically assume that it is something that's providing a public benefit that, that you

0:23:07.360,0:23:11.920

can recognize so, you know, helping the poor, helping people who are ill or disabled - things like that.

0:23:12.800,0:23:18.080

So I was completely unaware that just by virtue of being a religious organization you could be

0:23:18.080,0:23:23.760

a charity and you know I think most people are unaware of this. (EP): And, I mean, there seems to also

0:23:23.760,0:23:29.600

be this very strange dichotomy - on the one hand, the law will not or Charity Commission doesn't

0:23:29.600,0:23:36.080

seem to judge whether, you know, what what the religion advances is is good or bad in and of

0:23:36.080,0:23:40.560

itself and once it's past the religion part but it sort of seems to be slightly arbitrary in the

0:23:40.560,0:23:46.800

way it decides whether something is a religion or not in the first place. (MM): Yes, I think so. Um, as I said,

0:23:46.800,0:23:53.280

the definition of religion has sort of developed over time and it has broadened but it's still the

0:23:53.280,0:23:59.200

case that the Charity Commission does seem fairly arbitrary on, on what it considers a religion and

0:24:00.640,0:24:05.200

sometimes it does go down to, if it is something that the Charity Commission's not sure about,

0:24:05.200,0:24:11.520

it becomes a sort of a battle where if the charity is wealthy enough it can sort of push

0:24:12.480,0:24:18.400

charitable status just by taking legal action. (EP): Do you have any examples of this? (MM): Yes, so probably the

0:24:18.400,0:24:24.240

most prominent example is the Plymouth Brethren. Now they certainly are a religion, there's no

0:24:24.240,0:24:29.920

question about that. They are a fundamentalist Christian sect that are quite insular.

0:24:30.720,0:24:36.400

They do practice quite a few things that people would find objectionable, for example, um, shunning

0:24:36.400,0:24:42.800

members who leave so I think that's one reason why the Charity Commission was quite hesitant to

0:24:43.440,0:24:50.000

start registering um Plymouth Brethren organizations as charities but the reason why it's

0:24:50.000,0:24:54.480

it, it said you can't be a charity fundamentally was because well, you don't evangelize enough.

0:24:55.280,0:24:59.200

That's, that's the reason they gave as well - this organisation, this charity is a little bit too

0:24:59.760,0:25:03.520  
insular so it's not really advancing  
religion because it's not publicizing it.

0:25:04.160,0:25:08.720  
So, essentially the Plymouth Brothers  
said, said okay we'll amend it so we do a bit

0:25:08.720,0:25:14.240  
more evangelizing and the charity  
commission said okay, you're fine now - you  
can, you can be a

0:25:14.240,0:25:18.720  
charity, uh, you can be registered with us.  
(EP): And they're quite misogynistic in the  
Plymouth Brethren, I

0:25:18.720,0:25:23.360  
think aren't they? their themes? (MM): Yeah, I  
believe so - there's, there's a lot to, there's an  
awful

0:25:23.360,0:25:27.840  
lot to object to with the Plymouth Brethren.  
(EP): And so it was again, it was not really a  
question of

0:25:28.720,0:25:33.920  
their views perhaps so much as a technicality  
of whether or not they're evangelized. (MM):  
Exactly. Exactly.

0:25:33.920,0:25:39.920  
There's been other examples as well - there  
was the Pagan Federation applied for  
charitable status

0:25:39.920,0:25:45.440  
under the advancement of religion and the  
Charity Commission were not satisfied that  
um Paganism in

0:25:45.440,0:25:51.600  
terms of what the, the Pagan Federation  
defined it as counted as a religion, so they  
were told no.

0:25:52.320,0:25:56.720  
(EP): Well why not? I mean, why did they  
think that Paganism... was it not the lack of  
belief in a deity?

0:25:57.280,0:26:01.360  
(MM): Um, no it was the, it was the fact that  
it was, it was too vague. They said, well it  
gives,

0:26:01.920,0:26:06.560  
I think if I remember that the exact  
wording was something like it it gives  
followers too

0:26:06.560,0:26:13.520  
much freedom to interpret Paganism. I know,  
which you know, that, that's something that is  
is quite

0:26:13.520,0:26:20.240  
um central to Paganism is that it is, it's  
fairly free in terms of what, how, people uh  
interpret it

0:26:20.240,0:26:25.280  
and the Charity Commission didn't like  
this. (EP): What about Buddhism? (MM): So,  
Buddhism, I think because

0:26:25.280,0:26:30.640  
it is regarded as a world religion um, it  
doesn't really..... Buddhist charities don't  
really have

0:26:30.640,0:26:37.520  
any difficulties um, so the, the current  
definition of religion um as the charity, as  
charity law sees

0:26:37.520,0:26:44.160  
it includes religion that doesn't have a deity so  
because whether or not Buddhism has a  
deity

0:26:44.160,0:26:49.680

is, is ambiguous it's fine because it fits some of the other definitions of religion according

0:26:49.680,0:26:54.000

to charity law so buddhism doesn't really have a problem anymore. (EP): ... Even though you might say it's

0:26:54.000,0:26:58.800

just, it's not that much less vague than paganism perhaps? (MM): Yes but, because.... it's basically the case

0:26:58.800,0:27:04.960

well, one, I think is, is, um, it's quite a mainstream religion and the other one isn't. (EP): Yeah, so again

0:27:04.960,0:27:10.480

it's inconsistent - the law is inconsistent and it's, it's interesting what you say about the this idea

0:27:10.480,0:27:16.400

that advancement of religion is, is a sort of niche issue and when researching this topic um I think

0:27:16.400,0:27:22.400

both I and you were only able to find one legal academic who opposes this provision, who would like

0:27:22.400,0:27:27.360

to see it abolished and that's Professor Peter Edge at Oxford Brookes but it doesn't seem that

0:27:27.360,0:27:31.600

um, even among legal academics there's any support for the idea that this provision

0:27:31.600,0:27:36.000

needs to be removed. Why do you think that might be? (MM): Well some academics have argued that

0:27:36.720,0:27:43.840

there's a net benefit. I saw one academic argue that um, being a member of religion means you're

0:27:43.840,0:27:49.520

more likely to give to charity though, you know, the fact that charity includes religious organizations

0:27:49.520,0:27:54.960

um, is, it almost makes it a tautology because the case of well, they're going to donate to their own

0:27:54.960,0:28:04.640

charity but as we've explored, it's a problem when you have religions that do advance some ideologies

0:28:04.640,0:28:12.000

that these days a lot of people reject, so that's.... So yeah, it doesn't seem uh, right in principle to

0:28:12.640,0:28:20.000

say that religion is a net benefit on society for that reason. (EP): Looking at other secular democracies

0:28:20.000,0:28:24.880

at least sort of within the anglophone world that are based ultimately on the English common law,

0:28:24.880,0:28:30.960

does religion still have a special status in all of them? (MM): Yes, I can't think of any liberal

0:28:30.960,0:28:38.160

democracies that don't give some form of of tax exemption to religion. It'll vary slightly

0:28:38.160,0:28:43.840

from place to place but um, countries that have charity law that's quite similar to ours

0:28:44.400,0:28:48.400  
have this advancement of religion um as one of the charitable heads probably because they've

0:28:48.400,0:28:53.200  
duplicated a lot of it from our own charity law... (EP): So you're talking Australia, Canada, New Zealand

0:28:53.200,0:28:59.440  
that sort of thing? (MM): Yes, that's right um but this is being questioned. It's being increasingly questioned

0:28:59.440,0:29:06.640  
in many of these countries. So in uh, 2017 um there was a bill heard in the Victorian Parliament in

0:29:06.640,0:29:13.200  
Australia to amend the charities act to exclude the advancement of religion. One of the Uppper House MPs

0:29:13.200,0:29:18.240  
said that the notion that the advancement of religion as a charitable purpose would be questioned

0:29:18.240,0:29:23.280  
by most people in our community these days which I think is absolutely true - I think this, the idea

0:29:23.280,0:29:28.560  
that religion is a net public benefit really is questioned now, you know, with lots of people

0:29:29.280,0:29:36.160  
leaving religion, I mean the, in the UK it's only about 50 per cent of people who have a religion now

0:29:37.680,0:29:42.240

and of course people question um the benefits of religion when they can see how much harm it causes

0:29:42.240,0:29:50.320  
as well, what with homophobia, misogyny uh sectarianism... (EP):.... extremism (MM): Yeah and in Canada as well

0:29:51.040,0:29:55.680  
it's this, this idea that um religious organizations should have uh tax-exempt

0:29:55.680,0:30:02.240  
status um is being questioned particularly in the wake of the the recent revelations about the

0:30:02.240,0:30:08.720  
the mass abuse of indigenous children at Catholic residential schools. I've seen more than one

0:30:08.720,0:30:13.600  
article in the Canadian press calling for the tax exempt status of religious organizations to be

0:30:14.160,0:30:18.480  
questioned or, or abolished and particularly for the Catholic church, you know, which is

0:30:18.480,0:30:22.000  
a big deal, you know, the Catholic church is one of the most - the largest and most

0:30:22.000,0:30:28.160  
powerful religious organizations in the world so, you know, if you can question its charitable status

0:30:28.880,0:30:32.080  
then, you know, we should be questioning the charitable status of all religions.

0:30:32.880,0:30:38.080



(EP): So, I mean, just as a final question - is there any hope then that um, we, we might be moving

0:30:38.080,0:30:43.040  
in the UK towards the eventual abolition of the advancement of religion as a special

0:30:43.040,0:30:48.800  
charitable purpose? (MM): It is difficult because it is, as I said, it is quite an issue where

0:30:49.440,0:30:53.280  
really we need to build more awareness. I think that's the number one thing is building awareness

0:30:53.280,0:30:58.880  
of this issue um, you know, emphasizing the fact that it's not religion really that

0:30:58.880,0:31:04.320  
we have a problem with it's the problem of the unfairness that a religious organization

0:31:04.320,0:31:09.200  
can um register as a charity solely on that basis that it is religious and nothing more

0:31:09.840,0:31:16.640  
and the the increasing number of stories that we see about religious charities which are causing

0:31:16.640,0:31:22.720  
harm. So it's one where we are hoping to build some momentum on this to make sure that only religious

0:31:22.720,0:31:29.200  
charities that do provide a public benefit and there are many that do, only those ones can benefit

0:31:29.200,0:31:35.360

from the tax breaks and the other perks of being a charity. We've recently raised this with the Law

0:31:35.360,0:31:40.960  
Commission - the Law Commission have been asking for views on what areas of law it should be looking into

0:31:40.960,0:31:44.800  
and we've raised it with the Law Commission and said, you know, this is one area of law

0:31:44.800,0:31:52.000  
where things are really out of date and, you know, they no longer meet the needs of a 21st century UK.

0:31:52.560,0:31:55.680  
So we just hope that the Law Commission take a look at that and also

0:31:55.680,0:32:00.080  
realize that we have a point here. (EP): Megan Manson, thank you very much. (MM): Thank you.

0:32:06.080,0:32:10.560  
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