

Episode 10: Secularism 2019 conference review

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlyczsLx9I&feature=youtu.be>

0:00:01.929,0:00:06.560

Chris Sloggett (CS): Hello and welcome to the National Secular Society podcast. I'm Chris

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Sloggett, communications officer at the NSS. This is a special edition of our

0:00:10.910,0:00:15.139

podcast to follow up on Secularism 2019: our conference which brought together

0:00:15.139,0:00:20.660

more than 200 people on Saturday the 18th of May in London. The conference

0:00:20.660,0:00:24.830

explored what the term religious freedom really means, what reasonable limits can

0:00:24.830,0:00:30.230

be placed on it and how to ensure it's defended equally for everybody. Our

0:00:30.230,0:00:33.860

speakers addressed subjects including freedom of expression, children's rights

0:00:33.860,0:00:39.560

and the relationship between religious orthodoxy and religious freedom. So in

0:00:39.560,0:00:42.680

the interest of full disclosure, I'll say now that unfortunately I had to miss the

0:00:42.680,0:00:46.940

conference myself so my colleagues who were there are going to tell me and you

0:00:46.940,0:00:51.140

what they've taken away from it. I'm joined by Megan Manson who's our

0:00:51.140,0:00:55.220

campaigns officer and who was in charge of organizing the event, Megan Manson (MM) Hi. (CS) Alastair Lichten, Our head of Education, Alastair Lichten (AL) Hello.

0:00:55.220,0:00:58.790

(CS) And our membership officer, Helen Nicholls (HN) Hello.

0:00:58.790,0:01:02.390

(CS) So Megan let's start with you. If you

0:01:02.390,0:01:07.820

just tell us one thing that you took away from the day. (MM) Um, I think the clue's

0:01:07.820,0:01:12.280

in the title - reclaiming religious freedom and this was an opportunity to

0:01:12.280,0:01:17.960

really clear up some of the confusion about what's meant by that and I think

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the conference really helped to do that. So this conference emphasised that

0:01:23.900,0:01:28.610

secularism is about protecting freedom of belief and that includes non-belief

0:01:28.610,0:01:33.380

for everyone rather than just a privileged few and that religious

0:01:33.380,0:01:38.630

freedom isn't an absolute freedom at all.
It's important to discuss when

0:01:38.630,0:01:42.229

freedom of religion needs to be
restricted and we established that

0:01:42.229,0:01:46.700

religious freedom ends where the human
rights of others begin. (CS) Very interesting.

0:01:46.700,0:01:51.350

So Alastair, you were saying that the
subject of conspiracy theories came up

0:01:51.350,0:01:54.650

in a couple of the talks - that isn't
something we tend to think about

0:01:54.650,0:01:59.840

regularly in our day to day work. (AL) Yes
this is something I was thinking of and

0:01:59.840,0:02:03.259

really came about from some of the side
conversations I was having with the

0:02:03.259,0:02:07.729

other delegates, it wasn't something I
had previously considered and I'd say

0:02:07.729,0:02:12.050

it's more a different way of thinking
about some of these debates rather than

0:02:12.050,0:02:15.360

a new phenomenon.
So we're seeing some opposition to our

0:02:15.360,0:02:20.129

campaigns against religious non-stun
slaughter or male genital mutilation or

0:02:20.129,0:02:24.299

in some of the more extreme religious
school issues we deal with in the

0:02:24.299,0:02:28.319

Islamic and Jewish communities, there's
this idea that this is a front or it's

0:02:28.319,0:02:34.140

part of a conspiracy to get rid of these
religions. Now that conspiracy obviously

0:02:34.140,0:02:39.720

isn't real but some of the fear it
generates is and should be something we

0:02:39.720,0:02:44.040

might want to consider and in order to
try and reach these people. So we see

0:02:44.040,0:02:47.909

this when you've got protesters outside
school gates who have bought into this

0:02:47.909,0:02:52.980

conspiracy theory that relationships and
sex education is part of, you know, this

0:02:52.980,0:02:58.349

vast conspiracy to turn children gay or
we see these people were spouting the idea

0:02:58.349,0:03:03.540

that there is a politically correct conspiracy
to silence Christians in this country. We

0:03:03.540,0:03:07.680

to some extent should be seeing these
people as victims of a conspiracy theory

0:03:07.680,0:03:11.250

and using the skills that others have
developed to break through to these

0:03:11.250,0:03:15.569

people, so not just pointing out - oh, you
know, the facts of you're wrong about

0:03:15.569,0:03:21.449

this but perhaps saying okay, how did you
form that belief?, why do you think that,

0:03:21.449,0:03:25.590
you know, schools are trying to turn
Muslim children gay?, who, where'd you get

0:03:25.590,0:03:29.699
that idea?
(CS) So Alastair, were there any talks in

0:03:29.699,0:03:35.310
particular where you thought this, that
you saw this conspiracist thinking

0:03:35.310,0:03:40.319
mentioned and raised or was it just in
the side rooms. (AL) I think we'll probably

0:03:40.319,0:03:45.199
come on to it but I would say Yasmin
Rehman's talk about the anti RSE

0:03:45.199,0:03:50.879
protests, some of the discussions, side
discussions around male genital

0:03:50.879,0:03:56.970
mutilations: that's circumcision and Izzy
Posen's talk about his experience

0:03:56.970,0:04:01.260
and how he viewed these campaigns when
he was within that community. (MM) I think

0:04:01.260,0:04:06.060
at this point I want to sort of add that,
just going on from what you said there,

0:04:06.060,0:04:09.919
that it was important for us to actually
reach people in religious communities

0:04:09.919,0:04:14.849
for this event and I think we actually
succeeded in doing that. A lot of our

0:04:14.849,0:04:18.239
supporters and the people who come to
our events tend to be on the, on the non

0:04:18.239,0:04:22.079
religious side of things but there were
definitely people from religious

0:04:22.079,0:04:24.650
communities at this conference: I
remember that

0:04:24.650,0:04:29.600
there was a group of Muslims who requested
that they have a room to pray in at the

0:04:29.600,0:04:34.009
afternoon, which we were able to provide -
so I think that was a really good

0:04:34.009,0:04:36.889
feeling that we did manage to get both
religious and non-religious people there

0:04:36.889,0:04:41.720
in the room discussing these issues,
listening to people about these issues

0:04:41.720,0:04:45.500
and doing it in a very calm and adult
fashion. So I think we were quite

0:04:45.500,0:04:49.490
successful and I'm really hoping that
people who do have those fears have

0:04:49.490,0:04:53.630
maybe had some of those fears alleviated
a little. (CS) Well secularism's for everybody,

0:04:53.630,0:04:58.729
isn't it? this is what we, one of the
points we really try to make. Yeah, it's,

0:04:58.729,0:05:03.560
it's often sort of painted as an atheist
movement and of course many of our

0:05:03.560,0:05:09.590
supporters are inevitably atheists but
at the same time religious freedom, if we

0:05:09.590,0:05:15.650

apply it in a sort of equitable way and apply to everybody, does protect

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the religious as well so long as you know people follow the law and

0:05:20.300,0:05:24.560

appreciate that that law is drawn up on reasonable grounds and guards

0:05:24.560,0:05:31.099

everybody's rights equally. Um, so yeah, I wanted to pick up on that conspiracy

0:05:31.099,0:05:36.349

theory point as well that Alastair made - it does feel to me like there's a

0:05:36.349,0:05:40.159

bit of a link between conspiracist thinking and anti secularist sentiment -

0:05:40.159,0:05:44.810

so, for example, at the moment there's quite a lot of attention in America on

0:05:44.810,0:05:48.680

the anti-vaxxer movement - the anti-vaccination movement - and this

0:05:48.680,0:05:55.250

movement seems to have sort of shifted its focus recently - it's always peddled

0:05:55.250,0:05:58.669

'junk science' but now it seems to be putting quite a lot of emphasis on

0:05:58.669,0:06:04.810

demanding religious opt outs from laws which everybody else has to follow and

0:06:04.810,0:06:08.539

if you look at something like the Hindu nationalist movement in India as

0:06:08.539,0:06:14.389

well, that's very anti science as well. It all seems to be part of a kind of

0:06:14.389,0:06:17.599

ultra individualistic way of looking at the world, where you can justify

0:06:17.599,0:06:22.820

almost anything on the grounds that it's in line with your personal beliefs and

0:06:22.820,0:06:27.800

in the case of vaccinations, it's endangering children's lives - the U.S. is

0:06:27.800,0:06:32.349

now suffering its worst measles outbreak for at least 25 years.....

0:06:34.650,0:06:41.170

(AL) Sorry I wasn't quite..... and I think that's something, sorry to interrupt, but we need

0:06:41.170,0:06:45.190

to look at in this country as well - when you have illegal unregistered faith

0:06:45.190,0:06:50.470

schools and children inaccurately recorded as being home educated when

0:06:50.470,0:06:53.800

they're in fact attending these institutions they're a group I think who are

0:06:53.800,0:06:57.070

particularly at risk of not being immunized because of so much of the

0:06:57.070,0:07:00.520

immunization process is delivered through schools and I know this is

0:07:00.520,0:07:04.750

something that we've covered in our response to the consultation on elective home

0:07:04.750,0:07:08.130
education which we're reporting on the next couple of weeks.

0:07:08.130,0:07:12.580
(CS) Yeah, it's often very easy to forget people who are in these sort of

0:07:12.580,0:07:17.380
conservative religious communities and they're often sort of dismissed, thanks

0:07:17.380,0:07:20.890
to the bigotry of low expectations, aren't they?, as just one

0:07:20.890,0:07:25.840
homogeneous bloc who all think the same and actually people's rights within

0:07:25.840,0:07:31.450
those communities, if you do you want to use that word, are often forgotten and do

0:07:31.450,0:07:40.360
need to be protected. Now, perhaps we'll turn to Helen next - you enjoyed a talk by Izzy

0:07:40.360,0:07:44.620
Posen so this is sort of leading on from what we just said actually about illegal

0:07:44.620,0:07:48.310
and unregistered schools - he's a very articulate young man who dissented from

0:07:48.310,0:07:53.890
his strict upbringing in an ultra-orthodox Jewish community, he

0:07:53.890,0:07:57.610
attended an illegal unregistered school where corporal punishment was routinely

0:07:57.610,0:08:01.720
used especially to silence children who

asked questions. He's now the

0:08:01.720,0:08:05.050
president of Bristol University's free speech Society. What was it that

0:08:05.050,0:08:09.130
impressed you in particular Helen. (HN) One thing that impressed me a lot was the

0:08:09.130,0:08:13.420
fact that he said his own family was so strict he had very little education even

0:08:13.420,0:08:16.840
by the standards of that community and yet he eventually managed to teach

0:08:16.840,0:08:21.610
himself English and then within a few years of leaving the community he had

0:08:21.610,0:08:25.900
managed to get his education - bear in mind he had no GCSEs, no a-levels - he

0:08:25.900,0:08:30.670
managed to get to the point where he was ready to go to university and um, you know,

0:08:30.670,0:08:33.820
he's studying physics, I think physics and philosophy - he's doing difficult, some

0:08:33.820,0:08:37.180
quite difficult subjects - so it's incredible the way he's managed to do

0:08:37.180,0:08:44.050
that and I think his situation does demonstrate one of the key issues

0:08:44.050,0:08:47.750
with religious freedom which is where a parent's right to bring up their

0:08:47.750,0:08:54.620
children in a religious tradition ends

with the child's right to something else -

0:08:54.620,0:08:58.129

in this case the child's right to an education - and it's clear that there are

0:08:58.129,0:09:03.709

parents who will try to bring up their children in a way that will ultimately stop

0:09:03.709,0:09:09.050

them from making decisions to leave the group later by not teaching them English

0:09:09.050,0:09:12.589

and ensuring they don't have the kind of education that will make it easy to get

0:09:12.589,0:09:18.259

a job in later life and it's important the government don't turn a blind eye to

0:09:18.259,0:09:23.019

this. (CS) Yeah this is an important part of our work, isn't it?

0:09:23.019,0:09:27.170

Alastair, as our head of Education, is there anything, I mean you were talking

0:09:27.170,0:09:30.560

about illegal and unregistered schools with the vaccination point, is there

0:09:30.560,0:09:34.730

anything else you wanted to add on this? (AL) I think I'll just say that an important

0:09:34.730,0:09:39.290

part of our response to this needs to be shifting the narrative - to be talking

0:09:39.290,0:09:43.819

about children's rights and children as independent right holders. Obviously

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parents have the right to raise their

children in accordance with their

0:09:47.180,0:09:51.949

religion or belief but that's not unlimited - children also have independent

0:09:51.949,0:09:56.990

rights to, you know, to not have their chances in life shut down unnecessarily and

0:09:56.990,0:10:01.519

particularly have the right to an education. (CS) Yeah, it's an important part of

0:10:01.519,0:10:07.610

what we need to stress isn't it and I suppose I, I would add as a former

0:10:07.610,0:10:11.569

teacher myself, my thinking on this is always that we should be enabling

0:10:11.569,0:10:17.000

children to grow up and develop their own religious views and beliefs in their

0:10:17.000,0:10:22.279

own time when they're mature enough and not essentially trying to push a

0:10:22.279,0:10:28.189

particular religious worldview on them. So perhaps we'll turn to Megan again

0:10:28.189,0:10:34.459

next. I know that you enjoyed Izzy's talk and you want to say a bit more about the

0:10:34.459,0:10:38.389

way in which our speakers focused on, a couple of our speakers - Izzy and Brian Earp

0:10:38.389,0:10:44.449

focused on children's rights. (MM) Yeah, I was really pleased that we put Izzy and

0:10:44.449,0:10:49.129

Brian together, one after another - that

was deliberate because we knew they'd be

0:10:49.129,0:10:53.120

able to talk about aspects related to children's rights and religious freedom.

0:10:53.120,0:10:58.040

So from Izzy we had the perspective of really very restrictive religious

0:10:58.040,0:11:03.110

schooling and from Brian - he talked about religious genital

0:11:03.110,0:11:09.260

cutting both in, well in, male, female and intersex children. So in both cases I

0:11:09.260,0:11:13.250

think we established quite firmly that children's basic rights to bodily

0:11:13.250,0:11:17.660

autonomy and safety and a decent education have to be prioritized over

0:11:17.660,0:11:22.610

parents' religious wishes, no matter how deeply held or well intended those

0:11:22.610,0:11:27.380

wishes might be. (HN) I just want to add something - that when I spoke to Izzy

0:11:27.380,0:11:31.040

afterwards, he was a bit concerned that he had only spoken about the negative

0:11:31.040,0:11:34.520

aspects of his community and family and he thought, was worried, that people

0:11:34.520,0:11:37.850

might think they were all bad and it's important to remember that the

0:11:37.850,0:11:40.700

people brought up in this way were

probably raised in the exact same way

0:11:40.700,0:11:44.210

themselves, they probably genuinely think the outside world is dangerous and want

0:11:44.210,0:11:49.450

to protect their children and that ultimately it's not so much about

0:11:49.450,0:11:54.080

good guys versus bad guys, it's about balancing rights and about thinking of

0:11:54.080,0:11:57.410

the best policies because otherwise you will have the same cycle perpetuating

0:11:57.410,0:12:01.580

itself forever.

(CS) Yeah balancing rights is a theme that we,

0:12:01.580,0:12:06.440

that we like to sort of stress, isn't it? it's, it's just about essentially saying

0:12:06.440,0:12:11.840

that a child has the right to a decent education and to grow up in their own

0:12:11.840,0:12:16.550

body and that, I don't think either of those things should be particularly

0:12:16.550,0:12:22.340

difficult to defend but it's obviously still very important to do so because a

0:12:22.340,0:12:28.670

lot of people do disagree with this. So this conference has come about

0:12:28.670,0:12:34.810

just as we're again witnessing these rather vocal and increasingly aggressive

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protests outside a primary school in

Birmingham over LGBT inclusive education.

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These protest has been dominated by intolerant Muslims outside Anderson Park

0:12:47.420,0:12:51.890

School in Birmingham at the moment. The protests are part of a wider religious

0:12:51.890,0:12:57.770

campaign against relationships and sex education which is spreading around England and yeah, it's,

0:12:57.770,0:13:02.450

as I say, it's becoming increasingly aggressive. Alastair, this was something

0:13:02.450,0:13:06.200

you wanted to pick up on. (AL) Yes and I think the first thing to pick up on is to say

0:13:06.200,0:13:11.390

that these people, this campaign, is under the banner of religious freedom and so

0:13:11.390,0:13:17.270

that comes back to how, why, it's so important for us to reclaim this phrase

0:13:17.270,0:13:20.480

religious freedom.

Two of the speakers in particular - that

0:13:20.480,0:13:24.590

was Pragna Patel of the Southall Black Sisters and Yasmin Rehman - one of our

0:13:24.590,0:13:28.550

council members - really helped crystallize for me an idea that I've

0:13:28.550,0:13:33.200

been thinking about for a while, the last couple of months, and that's, and

0:13:33.200,0:13:40.070

particularly in the face of this anti RSE campaign, and that's that I feel like

0:13:40.070,0:13:45.230

we're in a current moment where religious fundamentalist groups and human rights activists

0:13:45.230,0:13:51.650

are beginning to organize around sort of a symbolic moment and that naturally

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just raised for me, it's like the idea that this, could this be this generation's

0:13:55.910,0:14:01.250

Rushdie moment? could it be the galvanizing, could, you know, the rollout

0:14:01.250,0:14:06.290

of relationship and sex education be a galvanizing moment for groups who are organized to

0:14:06.290,0:14:10.850

campaign against that and then they're making connections there and also could

0:14:10.850,0:14:15.920

it be a galvanizing moment for those of us who feel called to defend the

0:14:15.920,0:14:19.580

progress of secularism, equality and human rights that we've made over the

0:14:19.580,0:14:24.860

decades? And if it is, then I think the people in the room on Saturday are gonna

0:14:24.860,0:14:30.050

be key to building that movement. (CS) Yeah. So

this week, we've actually published a

0:14:30.050,0:14:33.170

blog from Yasmin which draws

parallels between the Rushdie affair and

0:14:33.170,0:14:37.640

the protests which are currently taking place, so I certainly recommend reading

0:14:37.640,0:14:43.100

that on our web site. The last highlight that we wanted to bring up comes

0:14:43.100,0:14:47.630

from you Helen - this is certainly a special one - so, as the event drew to an

0:14:47.630,0:14:53.660

end, we awarded our annual Secularist of the Year prize to a truly brave man from

0:14:53.660,0:14:59.120

Pakistan.(HN) Yes, we awarded Secularist of the year to Saif ul Malook - he was the

0:14:59.120,0:15:04.180

lawyer defending Asia Bibi who was on death row in Pakistan for eight years. He

0:15:04.180,0:15:10.670

represented her from 2014 until 2019. Others who have defended her have been

0:15:10.670,0:15:14.180

killed.
Now, obviously campaigning for secularism

0:15:14.180,0:15:19.010

is always a lot of effort, there's a lot of work goes into it, but we have to

0:15:19.010,0:15:23.540

remember that in some parts of the world it's not just a hassle, it's not just

0:15:23.540,0:15:27.529

something you can get fierce criticism for, it's something you can be killed for.

0:15:27.529,0:15:32.329

And as a law graduate, I look, also look

at it from the perspective that when a

0:15:32.329,0:15:37.129

lawyer can be assassinated for defending their client, you no longer have the

0:15:37.129,0:15:40.579

right to a fair trial and you no longer have for the proper rule of law and that

0:15:40.579,0:15:47.290

should be a grave concern to anybody who cares about a proper system of law and

0:15:47.290,0:15:51.410

society.
(CS) Yeah, hugely important point there and

0:15:51.410,0:15:55.790

we've published more details on Saif ul Malook's prize and the work he's

0:15:55.790,0:16:01.069

done on our website this week - he's certainly a remarkable man and he's now

0:16:01.069,0:16:05.269

taking up another blasphemy case in Pakistan where a couple are potentially

0:16:05.269,0:16:09.050

facing a death sentence so he is, for now at least,

0:16:09.050,0:16:13.819

undeterred - he certainly deserves and needs all the support that we can give

0:16:13.819,0:16:15.769

him. I think, I'm sure we all agree on that.

0:16:15.769,0:16:20.629

Okay so we'll just perhaps, before we, before we finish off we'll just have

0:16:20.629,0:16:25.069

final thoughts. So, Alastair why don't we start with you?

0:16:25.069,0:16:30.829

(AL) I think I was gonna thank Megan for, and the volunteers, for the work that went

0:16:30.829,0:16:37.250

into the conference. I was just truly inspired by, not just the talks, but the

0:16:37.250,0:16:42.230

diverse people there that I met - the delegates, the people running stands and, you know,

0:16:42.230,0:16:47.000

just hearing the experiences and what people are doing to reclaim religious

0:16:47.000,0:16:51.860

freedom and to defend secularism in the UK and around the world. (HN) I was quite

0:16:51.860,0:16:56.449

struck also by Rachel Laser's observation that, where she said that, when, this is in

0:16:56.449,0:17:00.620

America, she asks an audience what they associated with religious freedom

0:17:00.620,0:17:04.789

and that one person immediately said homophobia and it's important for us to

0:17:04.789,0:17:08.480

give people a better sense of what religious freedom is and what it, and

0:17:08.480,0:17:14.240

what it means in terms of balancing of Rights. (CS) Yes, so Rachel delivered the

0:17:14.240,0:17:19.880

keynote address on religious freedom in Trump's America and why it's

0:17:19.880,0:17:26.899

unrecognizable - so that will be well worth catching up on when the video comes out,

0:17:26.899,0:17:31.280

from everything that I've heard at least. And Megan, your thoughts.... (MM) I just want

0:17:31.280,0:17:34.820

to extend some more thanks really to some of the speakers that we haven't

0:17:34.820,0:17:38.929

mentioned, so we also had Nick Cohen who will have to give a special thanks

0:17:38.929,0:17:42.350

to because he managed to come despite breaking his foot but

0:17:42.350,0:17:45.740

he still came and talked about freedom of speech and went on to some other

0:17:45.740,0:17:51.770

issues as well. Dr. Ahmed Shaheed from the United Nations - he actually

0:17:51.770,0:17:55.760

introduced the conference and gave a really good sort of summing up of what

0:17:55.760,0:18:00.320

religious freedom means and that was a really, really useful little introduction

0:18:00.320,0:18:05.030

he gave. Sara Khan was there and she's the lead commissioner for counter

0:18:05.030,0:18:12.110

extremism and she, her speech really emphasized the challenges that people

0:18:12.110,0:18:16.130

who speak out against religious fundamentalism, particularly those who

0:18:16.130,0:18:19.220
speak out against religious
fundamentalism within their own

0:19:13.210,0:19:17.770
we'll have another podcast soon. Thanks
for joining us.

0:18:19.220,0:18:25.700
communities, really face and, you know, the
onus is on all of us to try and tackle

0:18:25.700,0:18:32.050
issues of fundamentalism and extremism
and lastly Geoffrey Robertson QC

0:18:32.050,0:18:37.130
introduced Saif ul Malook and he gave
an absolutely fantastic speech that was

0:18:37.130,0:18:41.690
both very emotive and really funny as
well and so I just want to extend my

0:18:41.690,0:18:47.690
thanks to them for coming and for making
this a really good conference. (CS) So thank

0:18:47.690,0:18:51.830
you all for joining us and thanks also
to everyone who came to Secularism 2019

0:18:51.830,0:18:57.290
and we'll have videos of all the talks
that took place at the conference on our

0:18:57.290,0:19:01.700
YouTube channel in due course. If you support
the work we do at the NSS, please

0:19:01.700,0:19:06.050
consider joining us or donating to
support our work - it's easy to find the

0:19:06.050,0:19:09.290
link to become a member on our website -
it's under the tab which says get

0:19:09.290,0:19:13.210
involved on the homepage so it should be
perfectly easy to find, hopefully, and