Mims Davies MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Sport and Civil Society
Department for Digital, Culture, Media And Sport
100 Parliament Street
London, SW1A 2BQ

13 March 2019

Dear Ms Davies

Meeting Request - The case for removing ‘the advancement of religion’ as a charitable purpose

We would like to request a meeting to discuss the findings of our recent report which calls for the ‘advancement of religion’ to be removed as a charitable purpose.

The report, ‘For the public benefit?’ is attached. Crucially, the report finds that too many religious charities are receiving public funds without delivering wider public benefits and, in some instances, using public money to promote extremism and harmful practices.

By way of summary, the report found:

- The sole purpose of many charities is to advance religion, some of which are large, well-known and wealthy organisations.
- Out of the 165 religious charities with an annual income of over £10 million, over 25% list no objectives apart from religious activities.
- 7% of all registered charities only list “religious activities” in their charitable purposes – equating to over 12,000 charities.
- Some of these organisations are undermining public trust in charities by promoting and facilitating harmful religious practices, such as ‘gay cure therapy’, infant circumcision and non-stun animal slaughter.
- Despite the Charity Commission stating that charities can never have a political purpose, many religious charities are highly politicised, with some promoting extremist and divisive views.
- With the Charities Act accepting the advancement of religion as a charitable purpose, religious organisations are eligible to receive tax breaks on the grounds of advancing religion alone, despite the fact that 53% of British adults today do not identify with a religion, and a majority of the public believe religious causes more harm than good.

Our report argues that the benefits provided by most of the thirteen charitable purposes set out in The Charities Act 2011 are clear; relieving poverty, promoting good health, saving lives and protecting the environment are undeniably in the public interest. But the benefit to the public of advancing a religion is far more contestable and is based on the outdated presumption that religion is inherently a good thing.
Not only has religion ceased to be the force for social cohesion that it once was, the rise of religious fundamentalism has also demonstrated how religion can exacerbate tension, division, segregation and conflict in Britain. As such, there is a clear need now to consider whether the advancement of religion should be regarded as an inherent public good, deserving of the status of a charitable purpose.

It is not our intention to undermine the role of faith communities in Britain today. Faith groups contribute greatly to social capital and have historically played an important role in the charity sector on a wide range of issues and these charities should be congratulated. However, gaining charitable status is and must be an entirely secular endeavour whereby tax benefits are provided in exchange for the public good that a charity provides.

Removing the advancement of religion from the list of charitable purposes would require religious charities to justify their charitable status in exactly the same way that secular organisations must do. In this way, not only could the public begin to rebuild its trust in the trust in the charitable sector, but it could develop a greater confidence that the taxpayer is only supporting the charities that genuinely deliver a public benefit.

In summary, we believe this change is overdue and in the public interest. It would align the sector with public expectations of charity, restore money to the public purse and relieve the burden on charity regulators.

Please do let me know if you would be open to meeting with me to discuss this.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Evans
Chief Executive Officer
National Secular Society