

Rudolf Elliott Lockhart: Exploring religious freedom episode 06

Video available at: <https://youtu.be/cVE8vsffUOk>

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Alastair Lichten (AL): Hello and welcome to the National Secular society podcast. I am Alastair Lichten,

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Head of Education at the NSS. Today's episode is part six in a series

0:00:12.959,0:00:16.410

of interviews where I speak with activists and experts about religious

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freedom and what it means to them. What does religious freedom truly mean? while

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some religious lobbyists used the term to demand privileges, this series will serve

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to highlight that true religious freedom means freedom of belief for

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people of all religions and none. This is leading up to our major conference

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Secularism 2019: if this conversation whets your appetite, then I hope you'll join us

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at the Tower Hotel in London on the 18th of May - details are at the end of the

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show. Today I spoke with Rudolph Elliott Lockhart or Rudy, CEO of the Religious

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Education Council of England and Wales. Our focus was on how RE can improve

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understanding or freedom of and from religion so we didn't get too deep into

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other RE issues. Perhaps another time... Hopefully you'll find the conversation

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as interesting as I did and I'll be back at the end with a few thoughts. Enjoy.

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Rudy, welcome to the NSS podcast. Rodolph Elliott Lockhart (REL): Thanks, it's great to be with you.

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(AL): It's great to have you here. Do you want to start by introducing yourself to the

0:01:18.090,0:01:22.770

audience and telling them what you do? (REL): Yeah, of course. So, I am the chief

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executive of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. We are an

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education organisation who's interested in raising the standard of religious

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education in schools across England and Wales. We've got, we're a membership

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organisation and so we've got about 63 members at the moment - they're all

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organisations themselves. Most of them are religion and belief organisations

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and within that we're very inclusive, so it's everyone from Anglicans to

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Zoroastrians and everyone in between. We're inclusive of non-religious groups,

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so Humanists UK has been in membership since the year we were founded, 46 years

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ago. We've also got members who are organisations of professionals working

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in RE - so, teachers, university lecturers, inspectors, advisors - those sorts of

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things. So it's a really varied membership, but and, based on all sorts of

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things that they fundamentally disagree on, but the one thing they do all

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agree on is that RE is really important and they come together through us to try

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and raise that standard across all the schools in the country. (AL): There's a lot

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going on in the world of RE reform at the moment but today we're talking about

0:02:36.010,0:02:42.580
freedom of and from religion, so what does religious freedom mean to you?

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(REL) I think religious freedom means that everyone should have the right to

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identify with the religion that they choose, to practice that religion, and to

0:02:52.390,0:02:57.970
hold whatever beliefs come along with that but I think that there are some

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important qualifications to this - so when we talk about religious freedom, I want

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religion to be understood in its broadest sense. So, if you look at

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Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights, it tries to set out the

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beliefs beyond religion that should be protected under equality in human rights

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law - so obviously I'm really keen that non religious beliefs should also be

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protected under freedom of religion, and article 9 talks about then how you've

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got to define those those beliefs so they say that they've got to be

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genuinely held, they've got have a certain level of cogency, of seriousness,

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cohesion and importance, and they've got to be beliefs rather than

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just opinions and compatible with human dignity and worthy of respect in a

0:03:45.459,0:03:51.130
democratic society. So, I want religious freedom to protect those sorts of non

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religious world views as well and that's convenient because that's what the law

0:03:55.540,0:04:00.420
in this country tries to do. So that's that's good. But the other qualification

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that I think is vital to remember is about the limits of religious freedom

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so while religious freedom means that I've got the right to practice my

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religion, I don't think that that means that I have the right to impose it on

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other people. And also, you know, our religious freedom is, is potentially

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limited by a larger framework of rights and responsibilities that we, we

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agree on in our society so again my religious freedom might be limited by

0:04:33.430,0:04:40.360
the need to ensure the safety of other people or public order as well as the

0:04:40.360,0:04:46.630
rights and freedoms of other people.
(AL): So how does, or indeed should, good religious

0:04:46.630,0:04:53.670
education promote religious freedom?
(REL): I think, well, I think there's lots of ways -

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I'll give you two. So first, RE's a subject where pupils can explore how

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questions of freedom of religion work in practice -

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so, an RE teacher might choose to do a lesson that uses, I don't know, say

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the so-called 'Gay Cake' case as a start point for an exploration of these ideas.

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So, this was the case of the bakery run by Christians who didn't want to make a

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cake that was going to have a slogan iced on it in support of same-sex

0:05:25.510,0:05:31.090
marriage. So people might want to explore why it is that the baker's took

0:05:31.090,0:05:37.120
the position they did, what that tells you about the baker's religion, why some

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other Christians disagreed with the baker's and what that tells you about

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diversity of belief within a religion, you can also explore the customer's

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freedoms and the disagreement you get over this cake as the result of the

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competing beliefs and then finally why it is that in our pluralist society, we resolve

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these issues in the way that we do. So you can do quite a practical exploration

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of freedom of belief like this and that I think is an important part of

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what RE can offer here, but I think that there's a broader way that RE

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can help promote religious freedom - I think that a key part of RE is an

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exploration of the 'other' . So, in RE, you end up learning about religious or

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non-religious world views that are different from your own and you get to

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understand, at least I hope you get to understand, how it's possible for your

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neighbour to live in the same society as you and

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yet to have potentially a very different religious identity and beliefs from you

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and for that to be absolutely fine - that having a different religion is, you know,

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normal so it needn't stop you from having just as good ethical code, being

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just as invested in building a strong shared society and being just as good a

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friend and a neighbour and it should help you therefore to understand why they

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might live their life in a different way from you. Now, I think that the empathy

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across religious difference that RE can therefore help inculcate is potentially

0:07:14.810,0:07:18.949

a vital part of fostering a commitment to freedom of religion, so I think that

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sort of bigger reason is really vital. (AL): Thank you for that. How can teachers best

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bring these real-life examples into the classroom, when, I think, no matter what

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your position on religious freedom, you'd have to say that the media do a very bad

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job of covering cases like this?

(REL): Yeah, well, I agree with you on that. I

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think that's one of the reasons why having good RE is so important and you

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need that space to be able to develop

real critical thinking about religion of

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belief and contest the sort of media narratives that you get, and you know, the

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media and, it's not just the media, it's wider society as well, is very

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prone to simplifying religion and turning it into a sort of cartoon

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caricature and RE's got that opportunity to show its complexity, it's

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fuzzy edges, its diversity and pupils can have the opportunity to really

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develop as, you know, skilled intercultural navigators that will help

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them understand all of these issues much better, which, you know, i think is vital if you're

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then going to get to the questions about freedom of religion and belief - if you

0:08:46.459,0:08:51.890

haven't got the basic foundations of understanding, you really can't navigate

0:08:51.890,0:08:55.879

those sorts of questions effectively. (AL): Which religious freedom issues do you

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think students are most interested in then? (REL): I think it really depends on the

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pupils, you know it depends on the classroom. Well, as you know, some of

0:09:08.600,0:09:11.449

our schools have got religious characters and in some cases they're

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going to select pupils on the basis of religion. (AL): We noticed. (REL):

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.....and in addition, different religious communities are

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concentrated in different parts of the country, so, if you take those two things

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together, it's really not a surprise that the

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demographics of religious identity can vary dramatically from school to school

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and I think sometimes the issues of religious freedom that are going to

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interest pupils the most are going to be those that have most relevance to

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them at which they see playing out in their local community. So, for example,

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if you take the recent debate over male circumcision after legislators in, I

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think it was Iceland, debated whether it should be prohibited and then there was

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then push back over how much the right to circumcise should be protected as

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part of religious freedom, or not, now I'm speculating here, but I think

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that you would probably find that schools with a large number of Jewish

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and Muslim pupils might be more interested in this particular issue than

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schools that didn't have that sort of demographic, but I think that in

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general, issues relating to freedom of religion really do fire up the interest

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of a lot of pupils, you know, I think freedom of religion is one of those

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things that most people instinctively think is, sounds like a good thing

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and people get a bit nervous about the idea of anyone trying to deny them

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freedom of religion but the moment you start looking at what it means in

0:10:46.100,0:10:51.290

practice it can get really difficult, you know really really contentious, and I

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think that most pupils find that base interesting and important and then,

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just sort of to go one step further, I think it gets really interesting when

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religious freedom gets turned into a vehicle for,

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well, frankly the opposite of religious freedom, so you can see cases

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in America where the language of freedom of religion or religious liberty gets

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used by some groups as a means for asserting the rights of certain types of

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Christians to impose their beliefs and values on others. So here I'm

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thinking of cases like you know the employer that used a religious freedom

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argument successfully at the Supreme Court to secure the right to limit the

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health insurance offered to employees so that it can actively exclude access to

0:11:47.390,0:11:53.060

the contraceptive pill. So I think it's really fascinating, if rather scary,

0:11:53.060,0:11:57.769

to see how religious freedom can effectively become code for something

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very very different and I think that can really, you know, fire the imagination of

0:12:02.329,0:12:08.630

pupils in the classroom too. (AL) May it be that, and this is equally speculating,

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that it might be easier for pupils to explore examples of genuine and

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distorted religious freedom that they have less of a personal connection to, so

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looking at issues from abroad or from the past rather than, you know, what's on BBC news today. (REL): Possibly, I think it can cut both ways so there's a risk

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it can cut both ways, so there's a risk that that if you're talking about things that the pupils really don't have a

0:12:38.449,0:12:47.420

connection to, it can make it easier to take quite a sort of hardline view -

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you're maybe less likely to be a bit more nuanced about it, so, in the way that

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you sometimes see attitudes towards, I think I've got this right, so polling on

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on things like attitudes towards Muslims wearing headscarves,

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sometimes you find much more opposition or much more high levels of

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people being uncomfortable in areas where there's actually really very few

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Muslims in the local community

so, it's the sort of, if you don't have that personal connection, you can

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you know, conjure up some extreme view in your head. So, I don't know whether it's always the case that by

0:13:34.899,0:13:41.649

getting away from stuff that's personal and recognizable it becomes easier, you

0:13:41.649,0:13:46.660

know in some ways it might make it harder, so I think, I think it can go

0:13:46.660,0:13:52.149

either way. (AL): Yeah, I imagine it 's probably a bit of both and I guess whenever

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we're considering social issues it can be useful to look at the real

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social issue and then you know, change the nouns and see how people

0:14:03.130,0:14:07.569

react to it, see how students, and reflect ourselves how we react

0:14:07.569,0:14:15.639

differently. (REL): Yeah, so it's an opportunity to, to reflect that back on yourself, so

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rather than always talking about the other, it's encouraging you to

0:14:19.839,0:14:23.769

empathize - to put yourself in their shoes - and see how things change

0:14:23.769,0:14:30.010

when you do that. (AL): If you were designing a

course for pupils to explore freedom of

0:14:30.010,0:14:33.670
and from religion and
designing it from scratch, what would be

0:14:33.670,0:14:40.870
your starting points? (REL): Right, well, I
think.... (AL): Big question. (REL):Yeah,

0:14:40.870,0:14:46.779
interesting one. I think discussing
freedom of and from religion is one of

0:14:46.779,0:14:50.529
those things that becomes an awful lot
easier if you've got a really solid

0:14:50.529,0:14:54.730
foundation in how a range of different
religious and non-religious worldviews

0:14:54.730,0:15:01.300
operate. I think you need to be able to
really get to grips with what it is that

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matters to different people with
different worldviews before you can

0:15:06.100,0:15:10.779
really make sense of quite how difficult
some of the clashes of competing rights

0:15:10.779,0:15:16.630
could be. So, first things first, I think
you need to learn about the religions

0:15:16.630,0:15:23.800
themselves. Secondly, I think you've got
to make sure that you are hearing from a

0:15:23.800,0:15:29.649
range of people about what freedom of
religion means to them - it's only when

0:15:29.649,0:15:34.180
you can grasp the complexities of how
religions are actually lived by

0:15:34.180,0:15:39.100
people who adhere to them, that you can
really see how the tensions of freedom

0:15:39.100,0:15:45.160
of religion play out and when I say this
I don't just mean that I want to see

0:15:45.160,0:15:48.930
token representation you know one person
from each of the so-called big six

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religions, you know, not all Christians
take the same approach to things

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neither do all atheists, neither do all
Muslims and so on . If you want to avoid

0:15:59.529,0:16:06.970
seeing freedom of religion as a
purely legal issue, you've got, you've

0:16:06.970,0:16:12.870
got to actually talk to people about the
reality in their lives so you need those

0:16:12.870,0:16:21.370
those messy case studies of what it is
to them personally and just the sheer

0:16:21.370,0:16:29.020
range of examples, so I don't want to
root it really heavily in lived

0:16:29.020,0:16:36.990
religion but I think you clearly would
also need to, to do that exploration of

0:16:36.990,0:16:43.930
the legalities of it, of questions of
Rights that go much beyond questions

0:16:43.930,0:16:51.029
just about religion and belief, you know
there are wider issues of

0:16:51.029,0:16:57.490

citizenship, of how social society should work, so you'd have to have that framing

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as well. (AL): I guess if it was easy, we could just give students a post-it note with

0:17:01.720,0:17:06.579

the text of article 9 written on it. (REL): well it wouldn't be bad start, you know, I'd

0:17:06.579,0:17:11.410

like people to really understand that and I'm, I'm not sure that , I'm not sure that

0:17:11.410,0:17:17.170

people always do. I think it's one of the - I mean sorry to go off topic - but one of

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those slightly distressing things, one of the many distressing things about debates

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following the EU referendum, is how poorly people understand something like the

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European Convention on Human Rights and where that fits with our law. I'm

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quite scared by that, particularly when it's people in the

0:17:40.510,0:17:46.419

government who seem to have some of these misunderstandings, but I apologize,

0:17:46.419,0:17:50.080

I stray from the issue at hand. (AL): You've not seen our exploring sectors

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and resources yet so we won't dock you any points for not just saying

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"NSS, your resources have got it absolutely perfectly right". Do you think

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religious education is the best subject to explore these issues, or does it

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need to be linked with a wider sort of humanities, citizenship,

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politics curriculum. (REL): I think RE is obviously one of the subjects where

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these issues come up and can come up a lot and RE can certainly contribute a

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huge amount here. Other subjects just don't have the same amount of time to go

0:18:34.600,0:18:39.490

through, you know, thorough exploration of different religious and non-religious

0:18:39.490,0:18:43.860

worldviews and the way that they interact with the law and civil society

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so RE's got a really crucial role to play but I wouldn't want to claim that

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RE is the only place where you can or should discuss freedom of religion. Now

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obviously it's not my place to speak the rest of the curriculum but it's not gonna

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stop me, I can certainly see a place for other subjects here, so history is

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one really obvious place - plenty of opportunities to explore religious

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conflicts and religious freedom in history. English offers great

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opportunities - so literature can be a fabulous way of exploring freedom of

0:19:23.679,0:19:28.480

religion depending on whatever set texts you are using. I would imagine that

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aspects of human geography might be really useful here and sociology as well

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and so yeah there are there are lots of places where this can also be, be

0:19:39.220,0:19:45.300

discussed but I, you know, I don't think this should be much of a surprise -

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tolerance, respect and individual liberty are all part of fundamental British values

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and that's gotta be seen as a whole school matter,

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so it would be really wierd if we thought that engaging with freedom

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of religion was exclusively the job of RE. I think it'd be a real

0:20:15.100,0:20:19.870

problem in a school if that was the attitude that they took. Obviously, none

0:20:19.870,0:20:26.380

of this is to downplay the wonderful contribution that RE can make but it's

0:20:26.380,0:20:32.380

RE as an element within wider education - it relates to the rest of the

0:20:32.380,0:20:37.720

curriculum it doesn't, you know, take over the whole curriculum. (AL): Really you've

0:20:37.720,0:20:41.500

spoken about the importance of understanding different people's

0:20:41.500,0:20:47.860

religious perspectives when it comes to the clash of Rights and although I want

0:20:47.860,0:20:51.340

to push back on that a little bit whilst acknowledging the

0:20:51.340,0:20:57.580

importance of the point, there is among some religious people who view religious

0:20:57.580,0:21:03.250

freedom as, you know, being about their ability to impose religion, of when

0:21:03.250,0:21:06.820

they're disagreed with, it's because people don't understand their religion

0:21:06.820,0:21:11.919

and this is sort of I guess a distorted view of religious literacy, so, you know,

0:21:11.919,0:21:16.150

if you understood my religion better, you'd understand why I need this

0:21:16.150,0:21:21.549

exemption; if you had more religious literacy, you'd understand why I wanted

0:21:21.549,0:21:30.669
to discriminate in this case. (REL) Yes, well I think I want to be clear here, I'm

0:21:30.669,0:21:38.200
not suggesting that you should learn more about other religions because with

0:21:38.200,0:21:44.470
that increased understanding it explains why that particular religion

0:21:44.470,0:21:50.740
should be given a free pass on whatever the issue might be. If we're talking

0:21:50.740,0:21:56.290
about what rights and responsibilities we have in our pluralist society, there

0:21:56.290,0:22:01.090
are no laws of land that we're all subject to and that we've got a

0:22:01.090,0:22:09.100
democratic process by which we can address those and I'm very happy with

0:22:09.100,0:22:12.309
that, with that system we have. What I mean is

0:22:12.309,0:22:18.820
that, if you don't have the proper grounding in where the other

0:22:18.820,0:22:22.750
person is coming from, it's really hard to emphasize with them - it's really hard

0:22:22.750,0:22:28.210
to understand why it is they've got the view that they have, so you're much more

0:22:28.210,0:22:38.080
likely to just want to dismiss them as just wrong or not understanding, not

0:22:38.080,0:22:43.330
understand the issue and having some reprehensible views perhaps. If, if you

0:22:43.330,0:22:47.560
really get to grips with why it is they're coming from the place that they

0:22:47.560,0:22:52.660
are, it makes it a lot easier to engage with, it means you can have a civil,

0:22:52.660,0:22:58.780
sensible conversation about stuff. Now I'm not saying that that means that you

0:22:58.780,0:23:06.190
then necessarily say well there's a sort of religion card that means that

0:23:06.190,0:23:10.660
everything else can be bypassed and that with all rights and responsibilities

0:23:10.660,0:23:14.530
there's a, there's a constant negotiation going on in our society and that's

0:23:14.530,0:23:19.510
that's how it works.
(AL): I guess you could have a very detailed

0:23:19.510,0:23:26.860
understanding of the diverse religious views on LGBT equality, to use the

0:23:26.860,0:23:31.090
example which always comes up, and you can have a great and well-developed

0:23:31.090,0:23:35.950
sense of empathy for people with different experiences and still just say

0:23:35.950,0:23:41.280
well, yeah, but look this anti-discrimination law is the law and

0:23:41.280,0:23:46.630

you, you can understand someone's position and disagree with them

0:23:46.630,0:23:52.090

but I think there is often religious literacy, just as religious freedom

0:23:52.090,0:23:56.020

is often used as a code word for something which I don't think is

0:23:56.020,0:24:01.360

religious freedom, religious literacy is often used as a code word for agreeing

0:24:01.360,0:24:14.380

with or acquiescing to. (REL): Yeah I mean I'm very clear in my view that we've got

0:24:14.380,0:24:23.520

protected characteristics, equalities legislation and that means that the

0:24:23.520,0:24:29.370

rights of LGBT people are protected there, as they should be,

0:24:29.370,0:24:38.130

and the fact that there might be or that there are people who might take a

0:24:38.130,0:24:44.400

different view of that on the basis of their religion, well they're

0:24:44.400,0:24:48.570

entitled to have their view, but they're not entitled to ignore what the law of

0:24:48.570,0:24:58.800

the land is. So I'm not saying in any way understand about religions so that you

0:24:58.800,0:25:02.040

can somehow ignore what the law is - that's not what I'm saying at all,

0:25:02.040,0:25:06.540

I'm saying understand the religions so that you realize why things are

0:25:06.540,0:25:13.260

contentious in the way that they are, why there is anxiety about whatever the

0:25:13.260,0:25:19.620

issue that you're considering is. I'm not saying that in the liberal pluralist

0:25:19.620,0:25:26.610

society we should necessarily give up any of these carefully won rights that

0:25:26.610,0:25:33.260

we have. (AL): That's a really good way of putting it. One potentially contentious

0:25:33.260,0:25:39.350

religious freedom or religious freedom adjacent issue within the world of RE is

0:25:39.350,0:25:47.910

the right to withdraw from religious education. (REL): Sure, so there's been a right

0:25:47.910,0:25:53.700

for parents to withdraw their children from religious education for almost

0:25:53.700,0:26:00.030

a hundred and fifty years now and it's a function of the history of the subject

0:26:00.030,0:26:07.890

which used to be religious instruction and so this right of withdrawal for

0:26:07.890,0:26:14.580

parents, of a parent to withdraw their children, was very much intended to

0:26:14.580,0:26:21.360

safeguard the religious freedom of of those children and say if you were after

0:26:21.360,0:26:27.600

school where the religious instruction was not in accordance with the religious

0:26:27.600,0:26:32.100

identity that you had, you would be able to be withdrawn from those classes and

0:26:32.100,0:26:42.610

now the subject has changed an awful lot over the years and I would hope that RE

0:26:42.610,0:26:50.440

is something that every child in the country would benefit from, but that

0:26:50.440,0:26:57.340

right of withdrawal is still there. Now it's now tied up in in the European

0:26:57.340,0:27:05.440

legislation and the key issue being that parents still have the right for their

0:27:05.440,0:27:12.840

children to be educated according to their own philosophical tenets so

0:27:12.840,0:27:18.040

parents still have that right of withdrawal and it would be necessary to

0:27:18.040,0:27:25.540

show that the subject is objective, critical and pluralistic for pupils to

0:27:25.540,0:27:31.720

be no longer having the right of withdrawal from the subject. Now that's a

0:27:31.720,0:27:38.110

really difficult thing to guarantee in legal terms. Obviously, I want to try and

0:27:38.110,0:27:40.900

make sure that the curriculum is objective, critical and pluralistic. I

0:27:40.900,0:27:45.370

mean, who wouldn't want that - that's a really sensible education thing to be

0:27:45.370,0:27:53.919

trying to pursue, but in legal terms, very hard to guarantee. We've still got some

0:27:53.919,0:27:59.770

schools where individual teachers might be appointed because of their religious

0:27:59.770,0:28:03.640

position, particularly the heads of departments in those schools, so you

0:28:03.640,0:28:09.250

could easily say well the delivery of the subject therefore might not be

0:28:09.250,0:28:13.990

objective critical and pluralistic, and we've got schools where religious

0:28:13.990,0:28:22.750

authorities have a role in setting the curriculum - now those authorities will be

0:28:22.750,0:28:26.890

striving to try and provide an education which they would argue is objective,

0:28:26.890,0:28:33.299

critical and pluralistic but I think it's quite likely that the courts would

0:28:33.299,0:28:38.500

find it harder to go along with that that line if there was some sort of test

0:28:38.500,0:28:44.620

case should the right of withdrawal be taken away. Now, the really frustrating

0:28:44.620,0:28:49.750

thing here, is that there are increasing numbers of people who are using the

0:28:49.750,0:28:55.690
right of withdrawal for ways that the law
was not intended originally - so, some

0:28:55.690,0:28:58.850
people are using it
for Islamophobic and anti-semitic

0:28:58.850,0:29:06.200
reasons and we see examples of template
letters produced by some far-right

0:29:06.200,0:29:10.640
organizations encouraging parents to
withdraw their children, saying, you know,

0:29:10.640,0:29:15.020
I don't want my child to go to the
mosque or I don't want my child to learn

0:29:15.020,0:29:20.900
about Islam and parents have that right
to withdraw their child and they don't

0:29:20.900,0:29:25.460
actually have to justify why they're
doing it and so this is, this is really

0:29:25.460,0:29:29.840
difficult. Those children who are
being withdrawn for what look like

0:29:29.840,0:29:33.830
Islamophobic reasons are exactly the
sorts of children who I think would

0:29:33.830,0:29:40.430
benefit the most from good RE,
but we've got this problem that for very

0:29:40.430,0:29:47.420
sensible human rights reasons, parents
are entitled to withdraw their

0:29:47.420,0:29:51.080
children should they choose so. Now,
there's a lot of people in the world of

0:29:51.080,0:29:54.920
RE - I'd say the vast majority of people
in the world of RE - who want to get rid

0:29:54.920,0:29:59.720
of that right of withdrawal - they say,
you know, the subjects moved on, it's

0:29:59.720,0:30:08.570
time to get rid of it and the recent
Commission on religious education made a

0:30:08.570,0:30:12.650
recommendation here and I think some
people were rather disappointed to see that

0:30:12.650,0:30:16.880
the recommendation was not to get rid of
the right of withdrawal. Now, the

0:30:16.880,0:30:21.260
Commission did this because I think it
recognized that the legal problems were

0:30:21.260,0:30:26.000
just too difficult to get around and I'm
I'm inclined to agree with the

0:30:26.000,0:30:31.910
Commission on this one, so I think what
we need is better guidance for head

0:30:31.910,0:30:37.190
teachers on how to deal with parents
making what look like Islamophobic

0:30:37.190,0:30:41.630
requests and there's good guidance just
come out from NAHT -

0:30:41.630,0:30:44.660
National Association of head teachers
and NATRE - the National Association of

0:30:44.660,0:30:49.310
teachers of RE but I think the
government needs to do more here, I

0:30:49.310,0:30:52.550
think the government needs to make sure
that heads understand exactly what they

0:30:52.550,0:30:58.160
can and can't do and what options they
have under things like Prevent to flag

0:30:58.160,0:31:05.120
up issues of concern and for the focus
to be on dealing with prejudicial

0:31:05.120,0:31:08.300
behaviour, you know, Islamophobic
behaviour or anti-Semitic behaviour

0:31:08.300,0:31:11.899
rather than getting
tangled up in what I think will be a

0:31:11.900,0:31:21.580
fruitless legal argument over whether
parents should have that right of withdrawal
or not. (AL): Yeah, I guess it's one of those
things that shows that

0:31:21.940,0:31:29.480
religious freedom does lead to sort
of messy compromises and enshrining, if

0:31:29.480,0:31:34.429
you enshrine a right, very similar to the right
to freedom of speech, you're going

0:31:34.429,0:31:42.529
to get people who use that right in an
antisocial way or a way that

0:31:42.529,0:31:49.549
might itself be harmful to a civil
pluralistic society. I think there's

0:31:49.549,0:31:54.830
definitely a difference in the religious
freedom balances between a school where

0:31:54.830,0:32:01.490

RE is being genuinely taught in a
pluralistic, - the word objective, I know we

0:32:01.490,0:32:05.929
can never, nothing can ever be truly
objective about aiming towards

0:32:05.929,0:32:10.880
being non-directive way versus you know
the way in which religion is taught,

0:32:10.880,0:32:16.190
still taught, in many schools. I
guess also a lot of people exercising

0:32:16.190,0:32:22.309
the right to withdraw from RE because,
you know, for lots of reasons - the subject

0:32:22.309,0:32:28.460
is not always at the level that it is in the best
examples or in the

0:32:28.460,0:32:31.460
examples that we'd like to see more of.
(REL): Yeah, I think there's widespread

0:32:31.460,0:32:39.470
misunderstanding about what the subject
religious education actually is. I think

0:32:39.470,0:32:45.500
there's, there's a lot of people whose
instant reaction on hearing or even just

0:32:45.500,0:32:53.289
hearing his name is to think that it's
somehow about making children religious

0:32:53.289,0:33:00.260
and I'm really keen to try and show that
that's not the case and to try and break

0:33:00.260,0:33:07.730
that down. I want people to realize that
the subject is totally embracing the

0:33:07.730,0:33:12.320

study of non-religious worldviews
alongside religious ones and indeed to

0:33:12.320,0:33:16.309
say that it's not as simple as splitting
into religious and non-religious, there's

0:33:16.309,0:33:20.899
a huge messy overlap between the two, you
know, people are complicated - they

0:33:20.899,0:33:23.670
borrow, if they're
non-religious they borrow a whole lot of

0:33:23.670,0:33:26.850
religious ideas a lot of the
time and if they're religious there's a

0:33:26.850,0:33:33.240
whole lot of non-religious stuff that
they also draw from. I want to show that

0:33:33.240,0:33:39.240
it's, it's a subject that really
encourages critical engagement so it's

0:33:39.240,0:33:41.910
not about making someone more religious
it's not about making someone less

0:33:41.910,0:33:47.400
religious even though for some pupils
it'll do that either way and that's

0:33:47.400,0:33:52.710
that's fine.
So I think one of the things we can do

0:33:52.710,0:33:58.230
is we can we can talk about a proposed
change of name for the subject and again

0:33:58.230,0:34:02.120
the Commission on religious education
did recommend a new name because I think

0:34:02.120,0:34:07.800

religious education as a name is
freighted with an awful lot of assumptions

0:34:07.800,0:34:12.120
so the Commission talked about renaming
the subject as religion and worldviews

0:34:12.120,0:34:18.450
so religion singular to illustrate that
it's a subject that engages with the

0:34:18.450,0:34:23.190
concept of religion and gets people to
think about you know what religion

0:34:23.190,0:34:26.330
actually is, how it operates,
you know, what the boundary between

0:34:26.330,0:34:32.669
religion and non-religion actually is
and worldviews plural - second part of the

0:34:32.669,0:34:37.770
name - because that shows the scope of
things that could be studied within the

0:34:37.770,0:34:42.750
subject and I think, I think that will be
a really helpful way of talking about

0:34:42.750,0:34:47.340
the subject and might make it easier for
the wider public to understand what it

0:34:47.340,0:34:52.710
is that we're hoping that children do in
these lessons. (AL): Yeah, we will link to the

0:34:52.710,0:34:59.010
Commission on RE report in the show
notes. I'll just say, it's such a

0:34:59.010,0:35:04.620
big subject that we hopefully maybe we'll get
into it on another occasion. The audience

0:35:04.620,0:35:09.120

can find National Secular Society's view on RE and our view on the right to

0:35:09.120,0:35:14.700

withdrawal which I would say, you know, I think

is quite nuanced and does take on board

0:35:14.700,0:35:21.210

a lot of the stuff you've said there, at www.reformre.org. Rudy, it's been

0:35:21.210,0:35:25.950

great chatting to you today. Before you go, we always like to ask our guests if

0:35:25.950,0:35:30.840

they have any recommendations for books or films which they think do a good job

0:35:30.840,0:35:37.560

of exploring religious freedom. (REL): So, well, there's loads of films

0:35:37.560,0:35:44.610

that make an interesting entry point to the subject but I think it's often the

0:35:44.610,0:35:50.430

nature of films that they're often, they're going to be polemics in favor of

0:35:50.430,0:35:55.290

a particular position so I don't know how nuanced some of the things I could

0:35:55.290,0:36:06.360

suggest would necessarily be. I'm tempted, to be difficult or whatever, and suggest

0:36:06.360,0:36:13.590

DW Griffith's epic Intolerance back from 1916 which

0:36:13.590,0:36:16.640

basically says that intolerance including religious intolerance is bad

0:36:16.640,0:36:20.730

although of course if you're being a cynic you might say that what it's

0:36:20.730,0:36:26.130

really about is him atoning for having made his earlier blockbuster - the pro KKK

0:36:26.130,0:36:33.300

film - Birth of a Nation, which is a little bit of a smear on his record. I mean I

0:36:33.300,0:36:36.840

could go on for ages- there are loads of other interesting films. If you let me say,

0:36:36.840,0:36:44.540

there's a couple of recent documentaries that might make interesting viewing

0:36:44.540,0:36:52.830

about what's happening in America. So a couple of years ago, or less, there was

0:36:52.830,0:36:59.640

'The Most Hated Woman in America' about Madalyn Murray O'Hair who was the

0:36:59.640,0:37:06.150

atheist activist who was kidnapped and murdered in the 1990s so that's, that's

0:37:06.150,0:37:12.600

quite an interesting one to try and there's one - I haven't haven't actually

0:37:12.600,0:37:16.590

seen this one yet, but I really want to and I think your

0:37:16.590,0:37:23.040

listeners might be intrigued from the sound of it - it's called 'Hail Satan' and

0:37:23.040,0:37:28.830

it's a documentary about the Satanic temple in the US which, if I understand

0:37:28.830,0:37:33.960

it correctly, is a group that, I don't know whether they really are

0:37:33.960,0:37:41.100

Satanists, I think they probably pose as Satanists in order to pose some really

0:37:41.100,0:37:45.450

interestingly..... (AL): So, they're allegorical Satanists (REL):Yes, yes so that

0:37:45.450,0:37:51.150

there are some really interesting legal questions about religious liberty and

0:37:51.150,0:37:58.740

showing some of the I, I think hypocrisy of the way in which religious liberty is

0:37:58.740,0:38:05.130

sometimes interpreted in the US and the reaction from that and from the sounds

0:38:05.130,0:38:10.289

of things that documentary sounds really good but as I say, I haven't actually seen

0:38:10.289,0:38:14.309

it so I can't be held responsible if anyone does go off and

0:38:14.309,0:38:18.990

see it and it isn't their cup of tea. (AL): Oh well, we'll have links in the show notes. Is

0:38:18.990,0:38:23.039

anything else you'd like to plug before you go? (REL): Well I've mentioned the

0:38:23.039,0:38:27.749

Commission on religious education but I think it's worth mentioning again, you

0:38:27.749,0:38:33.599

know, the final report came out last September - it is arguably the most

0:38:33.599,0:38:39.319

important publication in the world of religious education for 50 years - it's

0:38:39.319,0:38:45.359

promoting or recommending a radical program of reform of the subjects which

0:38:45.359,0:38:50.789

has had a lot of support from a wide range of different organizations so

0:38:50.789,0:38:56.039

National Secular Society has been pretty positive about it but so has the Church

0:38:56.039,0:39:01.259

of England and I think if you can get responses from those sorts of groups all

0:39:01.259,0:39:06.269

being positive that's got to be quite a good thing, so I would recommend checking

0:39:06.269,0:39:15.390

that out. (AL): Okay, thank you so much for joining us. (REL): It's been a pleasure. (AL): I had

0:39:15.390,0:39:18.420

some great recommendations from Rudy - we'll have links in the show notes and

0:39:18.420,0:39:23.700

remember that you can find our range of book / film reviews at secularism.org.uk/reviews. that's

0:39:24.220,0:39:28.400

I do just want to say something about the film,

0:39:28.410,0:39:33.869

America's Most Hated Woman. I have been told that the film advances the theory

0:39:33.869,0:39:37.799

that Madalyn Murray O'Hair was

embezzling from American Atheists. I

0:39:37.799,0:39:42.150

haven't seen the film, and I'm not familiar with the full history, but as I

0:39:42.150,0:39:47.970

understand it, that has been debunked. To be clear, this smear is victim-blaming.

0:39:47.970,0:39:52.470

It is a common trope to undermine human rights activists by accusing them of

0:39:52.470,0:39:56.400

being in it for the money and it's particularly hurtful for some because in

0:39:56.400,0:40:00.270

a very real way this smear led to Madalyn's abduction and death -

0:40:00.270,0:40:04.020

spoiler warning - I'm still looking forward to watching the film at some

0:40:04.020,0:40:07.650

point and I still thank Rudy for the recommendation - I just wanted to note

0:40:07.650,0:40:13.920

that. Before I go, I want to give Secularism 2019: a plug. This is our upcoming major

0:40:13.920,0:40:18.810

conference that this series of interviews is leading up to. Its on Saturday, 18th of

0:40:18.810,0:40:23.880

May 2019 and all the details are on our website. If you're thinking about coming

0:40:23.880,0:40:27.150

along but are undecided please let me give you a quick pitch for

0:40:27.150,0:40:32.040

why you should come. Firstly, the value

for money is fantastic - it's a full-day

0:40:32.040,0:40:35.730

conference in a stellar venue with an internationally esteemed lineup of

0:40:35.730,0:40:40.860

speakers, refreshments, awards ceremony and drinks reception. Student tickets are

0:40:40.860,0:40:46.320

just 10 pounds, NSS members 25 pounds - even the full price non-member tickets

0:40:46.320,0:40:50.880

are a steal at 50 pounds. It's been almost three years since we did an event of

0:40:50.880,0:40:54.300

this scale - you don't want to miss out on being in the room with this group of

0:40:54.300,0:40:58.560

activists and experts, the opportunity to draw inspiration and make connections.

0:40:58.560,0:41:05.250

Just visit secularism.org.uk/2019 - that's two zero one nine for all

0:41:05.250,0:41:10.050

the details. If you have any feedback on the podcast, please get in touch. You can

0:41:10.050,0:41:14.070

support the podcast by sharing it on social media or joining the National Secular

0:41:14.070,0:41:18.660

Society today. Until next time, I've been Alastair Lichten. Thank you for joining me.

0:41:18.660,0:41:21.440

Goodbye.

0:41:22.260,0:41:24.320