

# Simon Barrow: Exploring religious freedom episode 09

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9XDrdnBS0s>

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Alastair Lichten: 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 9 in a 10 part series

0:00:12.630,0:00:16.410

of interviews where I speak with activists and experts about religious

0:00:16.410,0:00:21.330

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

0:00:21.330,0:00:25.859

While some religious lobbyists use the term to demand privilege, this series will

0:00:25.859,0:00:29.310

serve to highlight that true religious freedom means freedom of belief for

0:00:29.310,0:00:34.230

peoples of all religion and none. This is leading up to our major conference Secularism 2019:

0:00:34.230,0:00:38.790

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

0:00:38.790,0:00:43.440

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

0:00:43.440,0:00:47.219

in the show notes. Today I spoke with Simon Barrow.

0:00:47.219,0:00:51.629

Simon is director of Ekklesia - a non-profit think tank focusing on the

0:00:51.629,0:00:55.860

changing world of beliefs, values and faith and non faith belief in public

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life. Simon has a background as a commentator, journalist and lecturer and

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theologian as well as various NGO roles. So without further ado let's get the

0:01:05.309,0:01:13.470

interview. Enjoy. Simon, welcome to the National Secular society podcast.

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Simon Barrow: Thank you very much indeed. Delighted to be with you. (AL) Happy to have you here. I

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thought perhaps you could start by introducing yourself to the audience -

0:01:20.280,0:01:22.220

just telling them who you are and what you do.

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(SB) Okay. Well, I'm Simon Barrow as you've already said, and I'm based in Edinburgh

0:01:28.170,0:01:33.780  
in Scotland and I'm the director of Ekklesia which is a think-tank that

0:01:33.780,0:01:37.860  
looks at the relationship between beliefs and ethics on the one hand and

0:01:37.860,0:01:42.930  
then politics, economics, environment and so on on the other hand and we have

0:01:42.930,0:01:47.700  
quite a long track record of dealing with these issues of religious freedom

0:01:47.700,0:01:52.649  
and the role of religion in public life and I guess the orientation we have is

0:01:52.649,0:01:57.750  
is what you would describe as at the dissenting end of Christianity, the

0:01:57.750,0:02:03.540  
progressive end of Christianity, arguing against overbearing religious

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privilege and arguing very much in favor of a conversational approach between

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people of different convictions and also collaboration wherever possible.

0:02:12.340,0:02:15.760  
So I'm delighted that we have been on the same side as the National Secular

0:02:15.760,0:02:21.130  
society on a number of issues and the Humanists UK as well and so on and we've

0:02:21.130,0:02:26.890

also drawn into conversation about these big public issues people of all

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religious traditions and none, so that's very much part of my personal commitment

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as well and so I, as I say, I'm director of Ekklesia. I've been working with Ekklesia

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since 2003 really and before that I was actually assistant general

0:02:41.290,0:02:44.739  
secretary of churches together in Britain and Ireland and have a

0:02:44.739,0:02:49.239  
background both in public affairs journalism but also in working for the

0:02:49.239,0:02:54.310  
the churches. So these days, apart from directing a think-tank, I do sort of

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commentary in journalism and bits of teaching at university level as well -

0:02:59.230,0:03:05.380  
it's what my wife describes as my way of earning a lack of income. (AL) Very good.

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So what does religious freedom mean to you personally? (SB) It means a lot to me

0:03:11.799,0:03:16.690  
personally though, forgive me, I'm a policy wonk - I'm immediately going to

0:03:16.690,0:03:21.820  
kind of want to redefine the term a little bit - I tend to refer to freedom of

0:03:21.820,0:03:26.140

religion or belief first of all to stress that what I'm concerned about is

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not just people of my own beliefs and convictions but people of all other

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beliefs and convictions who might find their freedom of expression or their

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freedom of actions threatened by others and so I regard my freedom of thought

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and action as interrelated to other people's freedom of thought and action

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and, and indeed I think I'm a little bit nervous about talking of freedom of

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religion because we're not talking about the freedom to hold or dispute ideas,

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we're talking about people. In a sense it's freedom of believers whether those

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are religious or non-religious believers and it means a lot to me personally

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because for example I have friends - Christians and humanists and others in

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the Middle East and other parts of the world who've had direct experience of

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imprisonment and harassment, threats of death and so on, so this is a very

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personal issue and it's something that we, you know, have to

0:04:28.150,0:04:33.580

find ways of working together on across our other differences in order to begin

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to create a world where actually we do not need to threaten and harass and

0:04:39.490,0:04:44.620

imprison and torture and kill those who are different to ourselves. That's

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absolutely fundamental. (AL) I guess one of the things that brings up is if we look

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around the world, Christians are the group, if we look at abuses of freedom of religion and belief, Christians are by and large the largest

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group suffering those. (SB) Yeah (AL) .... and I mean we

look at quite horrific stuff, you know, we

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see churches being bulldozed in China, you see house churches being

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raised in Saudi Arabia and they're often some Christians in the UK, sort of talk

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about the persecution of Christians and then they also lump in '.....and also this

0:05:22.419,0:05:29.410

this Christian had to serve a gay person in their shop in the UK. (SB) Yeah, absolutely. Well indeed and

0:05:29.410,0:05:34.270

and let me say to start off with that I think attempts to suggest that

0:05:34.270,0:05:40.479

Christians are persecuted in the UK, is simply an abuse of language - it's

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extremely insulting to Christians and other people who really are threatened

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and persecuted throughout the world, and it's an ideological attempt to advance a

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particular narrow form of religion by using that kind of language. Now as a

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matter of fact, a couple of years ago Ekklesia published a very interesting

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book called The Jesus Candidate: Political religion in a Secular age by

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Paul Lusk, who comes from an evangelical Christian background as well as having

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very wide experience in public affairs and one of the things that Paul does in

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that book is to go into detail regarding the kind of cases that some well-known

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Christian lobby groups in Britain had been using to suggest that there is

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persecution and he dismantles those really rather effectively from a legal

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point of view but also from a Christian point of view because what this is

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really about is an attempt to institute a

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kind of religious privilege and to use the language of religious freedom in

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order to disguise that, and I think, you know, I find that something that that's

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insulting as I say to those who genuinely are persecuted and

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something that we all need to expose and combat and along with that of course

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more recently has become the attempt to introduce the term Christophobia and so

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again that's another attempt to turn into ideology a particular viewpoint that's

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trying to assert itself from a position of dominance which is what it really

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seeks I think. I mean that also relates to to the sort of changing place of of

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different forms of Christianity in different forms of religion in society

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in Britain and more widely in the West which we might go on and and have a look

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about, look at, as a sort of contributory factor here. (AL) How much is Ekklesia's focus or work

0:07:35.840,0:07:39.620  
divided between sort of those international freedom of belief issues and

0:07:39.620,0:07:44.419  
more domestic concerns? (SB) Well, freedom of belief is I suppose something

0:07:44.419,0:07:47.960  
that cuts across a number of other issues. As a matter of fact, probably the

0:07:47.960,0:07:52.610  
majority of our work in recent years has been on public policy issues to do with

0:07:52.610,0:07:57.950  
poverty, working with disabled people on disability issues and all of that kind

0:07:57.950,0:08:04.160  
of stuff and in our earlier years we worked quite heavily on those questions

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of religion in public life and we perhaps done less of that more

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recently. So amongst other things, it's good to be brought back to that and to

0:08:11.870,0:08:16.070  
have this opportunity to have a conversation with the NSS and its

0:08:16.070,0:08:21.289  
partners about that because I think it's very much coming back into the arena and

0:08:21.289,0:08:25.430  
something that we need some fresh ways of tackling but the one thing that I

0:08:25.430,0:08:29.990  
would say about Ekklesia in terms of the work that we've done over the years, is

0:08:29.990,0:08:36.260  
that a common thread has been a critique of what we would call Christendom - indeed

0:08:36.260,0:08:39.620  
that's a term that's been used throughout history - Kierkegaard for

0:08:39.620,0:08:44.600  
example distinguished between what he saw as a sort of liberating Christianity

0:08:44.600,0:08:48.530  
on the one hand and the dead hand of institutional religion that he labeled

0:08:48.530,0:08:52.550  
Christendom on the other hand. When we use the term, what we mean by it is that

0:08:52.550,0:08:55.850  
period which is really 1700 years, particularly

0:08:55.850,0:09:01.070  
in European history, where some of the major churches have done a kind of deal

0:09:01.070,0:09:05.360  
with 'Governing Authority' and effectively what they've done is to say look, we will

0:09:05.360,0:09:10.250  
give you our religious blessing on the one hand if you give us particular

0:09:10.250,0:09:14.750  
positions of privilege and protection on the other hand and that era for a number

0:09:14.750,0:09:19.040  
of years has been coming to an end. Now Ekklesia's perspective is that it's good

0:09:19.040,0:09:24.769  
that that's coming to an end because our understanding of the core of the

0:09:24.769,0:09:29.990  
Christian message is about liberation not about an imperial dominating kind of

0:09:29.990,0:09:33.290  
religion, indeed, we do need to remind ourselves from time to time that Jesus

0:09:33.290,0:09:37.760  
was actually executed by a toxic combination of the wrong kind of

0:09:37.760,0:09:41.720  
religion and the wrong kind of politics - so that's very important, but there's a

0:09:41.720,0:09:45.980  
new possibility emerging out of that, that what we're seeing is really quite a

0:09:45.980,0:09:55.040  
strong backlash from ideologues against, in a sense, the removal of privilege

0:09:55.040,0:10:00.709  
and prestige and that kind of Imperial top-down church and top-down religion. So

0:10:00.709,0:10:04.910  
people are feeling threatened and one of the responses of that is is those who

0:10:04.910,0:10:11.480  
are using a narrative of persecution within the UK to describe what is in

0:10:11.480,0:10:15.620  
fact the loss of their ability to tell other people within the churches and

0:10:15.620,0:10:20.420  
outside the churches what they should do and to try and enforce that by law. (AL) So

0:10:20.420,0:10:25.940  
would you say then, would you diagnose this problem as a bit of a Christian

0:10:25.940,0:10:33.230  
identity crisis, perhaps similar to the crisis in masculinity caused

0:10:33.230,0:10:39.020  
by moves towards gender equality. (SB) Yeah. I, I think that's absolutely the

0:10:39.020,0:10:44.529  
case, that when you find movements of change and of liberation within society

0:10:44.529,0:10:49.850  
there is an identity crisis and some people feel threatened. I certainly don't

0:10:49.850,0:10:53.990  
think the majority of people who identify as active Christians in the UK

0:10:53.990,0:10:57.380  
actually buy into this persecution narrative - I think its a very small number of

0:10:57.380,0:11:01.820  
people are trying to promote it but some people are rather prey to it because

0:11:01.820,0:11:05.930  
they're confused and baffled by the fact that they they used to be able to count

0:11:05.930,0:11:09.200  
on,

0:11:09.200,0:11:12.890  
you know, a certain kind of recognition, a certain kind of social status coming out of their, their Christianity

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and that's no longer the case, and what we're doing is saying actually you know

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that kind of privilege really didn't have anything to do with the core of

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what the Christian gospel is about, if you look at it hard, and it's something

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we need to move away from and actually there are lots of new opportunities for

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finding bridges rather than walls between ourselves and other people,

0:11:33.850,0:11:38.839

finding common cause - also, you know, where there are disagreements on the basis of

0:11:38.839,0:11:42.620

religion or anything else, finding different and better ways of disagreeing

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rather than trying to enforce your, your views but I mean the kind of issues that

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are really important around this are for example equality issues and Ekklesia has

0:11:51.020,0:11:55.430

argued for long a long time that's it's entirely wrong for example that the

0:11:55.430,0:11:58.640

Church of England, if I might talk about a church across the border from where I

0:11:58.640,0:12:02.810

live, that the Church of England has exemptions to equalities legislation,

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that it is a church established under the crown - we think that's wrong -

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as well, we think that it's wrong that there are in the second unelected

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chamber of Westminster people from, leaders from one religion of one

0:12:21.680,0:12:26.570

country who actually take part in the legislative process. Everyone who is in

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Parliament, however they get there - by election or nomination should do so on

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the same basis. You know, if bishops want to to to put themselves forward for, you

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know, a second chamber that's absolutely fine but it should be on the same basis

0:12:39.079,0:12:43.760

as everybody else not because they're bishops of one Church of one religion of

0:12:43.760,0:12:47.660

one country and so on, so those kind of things we would challenge from a

0:12:47.660,0:12:52.100

Christian point of view and enable, hopefully enable, people to see that

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there's a positive case for that change and it actually opens up a new kind of

0:12:56.779,0:13:01.459

path for a different kind of Christianity in the 21st century, which

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interestingly enough will perhaps have a little more in common with with some of

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the earliest strands in Christianity before it became an imperial religion.

0:13:08.709,0:13:15.170

(AL) Might an effort to make more Christians aware of the tradition of, you know,

0:13:15.170,0:13:20.209

secular, secularist thought within Christianity and more aware of the

0:13:20.209,0:13:23.660

experiences of, because Christians in this country are

0:13:23.660,0:13:27.619

becoming a minority religion, as we become a majority non-religious country. (SB) Yes (AL) So

0:13:27.619,0:13:35.480

perhaps, you know, more knowledge of what it's like to be a Christian

0:13:35.480,0:13:40.999

community in a, say, a majority Muslim or majority Hindu country. (SB) Yeah, well that's

0:13:40.999,0:13:43.850

a really interesting point actually because of course Christians in other

0:13:43.850,0:13:47.749

parts of the world have long experience of being minority

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communities. I mean, Christians in the Middle East, let's remember that

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Christianity in in the Middle East is, has a longer tradition than Islam for

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example - it's the cradle of Christianity and in most countries in the Middle East

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Christians are minority so they've had to negotiate their position in society

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from a very different kind of perspective and actually over the years

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that's often been a very positive experience. At the moment of course for

0:14:12.470,0:14:16.129

many it's an extremely negative experience for reasons that I hope we're

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going to go on and discuss in terms of worldwide persecution of people on the

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basis of religion or belief, which, as you said, does affect Christians particularly

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badly though, I don't think we should be trying to in a sense out-compete each

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other as different kinds of communities but I mean

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unless it's important to recognize that. So yes, that's one thing - beginning to

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rethink your position, your place and your opportunities - I think it's about

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two things - I think it's about looking for the sources of pluralism and

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bridge-building within your own community and tradition and I would want



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to say as a Christian that Christianity is an internal argument - there are

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strands historically within Christianity, within the life of the church, within the

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Christian scriptures and so on which are monarchical and overbearing and somewhat

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authoritarian but there are also strongly liberating traditions which are

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about freedom and autonomy and justice for the poor and peacemaking and other

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kinds of things and that argument has gone on throughout Christian history and

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it's going on at the moment and I'm part of that argument and I would want to

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advocate a Christian perspective which is, wants to see

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a plural society, a level playing field, the freedom of ourselves tied into the

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necessary freedom of other people who are different to ourselves and so on. So

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there's a kind of pragmatic argument for secularism, there's also I think an

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argument from within each of our traditions for a secular polity which is

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about a level playing field and I mean, last comment to make on that, in in his

0:15:56.970,0:16:01.230

book that Jesus candidate Paul Lusk makes the point that Christians within

0:16:01.230,0:16:05.700

Europe have actually contributed to the development of a secular polity in a

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positive way. Again, I would want to be very careful and not sort of, you know, do

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the Imperial thing of claiming that somehow secularism is the product of

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Christians and so we take credit for it and so on and so on - it's something

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that's developed from a number of different sources, as has humanism, but it

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does seem to me if we can recover a sense of that, that there is a shared

0:16:25.560,0:16:29.400

thing that we're trying to do here which is to create freedom and opportunity for

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all, then we can find a pragmatic way forward as well as finding those

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resources deep within our own traditions which argue in favor of that. (AL) Hmm. I mean

0:16:38.550,0:16:43.709

I would sort of conceptualize it as

perhaps, something I've been thinking about recently, of

0:16:43.709,0:16:48.690  
secularism as like a language, if two people are speaking different moral

0:16:48.690,0:16:52.980  
languages - one is speaking the moral language of Christianity and one is the

0:16:52.980,0:16:57.600  
moral language of atheism and secularism is sort of a language that's neither of

0:16:57.600,0:17:02.670  
their native tongues but they can, they both can share, but then would both be

0:17:02.670,0:17:07.500  
speaking it with their own accent. (SB) Yes, I really like that. I think that's

0:17:07.500,0:17:12.030  
important. I think we can all contribute something to it. It is a common space,

0:17:12.030,0:17:16.800  
a common language and a common opportunity that we are trying to create

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and I think that's that's really really important. I mean, I would say also that

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that we need to recognize that secularism as a way of thinking and as a

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path for action has taken different forms and I'm, I'm at the kind of liberal

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plural end of it if you like. I mean, some people have interpreted secularism as an

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attempt to exclude religion from public life

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and I think that's much less helpful and much less healthy - I think the way in

0:17:48.809,0:17:53.640  
which secularism developed in France is not so much to my taste for a number

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of reasons, though I understand why it's happened in the way that it has. I think

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we need a more plural path so on the one hand what I would say is we need a

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separation of religion and state and government and I would argue that we

0:18:08.580,0:18:12.450  
need that on in my case Christian grounds as well as on secular grounds

0:18:12.450,0:18:16.049  
but you know there's plenty of space for people of different religious

0:18:16.049,0:18:20.970  
convictions and no religious conviction in civil society in public life - they

0:18:20.970,0:18:25.890  
shouldn't claim a privilege in the way that they engage, they should seek to

0:18:25.890,0:18:31.380  
engage in a conversational way, to try and persuade one another about public

0:18:31.380,0:18:35.820  
Goods and so I think that's that's really quite possible, and I mean I

0:18:35.820,0:18:41.340

noticed that when a lot of my atheist and humanist friends you know object to

0:18:41.340,0:18:46.200  
religion being involved in politics what they tend to mean by that I think quite

0:18:46.200,0:18:51.120  
rightly is is manipulative domineering attempts by religious organizations to

0:18:51.120,0:18:54.690  
privilege themselves at the expense of others. I don't know that many atheists

0:18:54.690,0:18:59.520  
who complain about let's say Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King and there's

0:18:59.520,0:19:03.179  
a good reason for that which is that they that their involvement in politics

0:19:03.179,0:19:07.380  
is very strong and their argument is that their politics is resourced from

0:19:07.380,0:19:11.159  
the liberating strands in Christianity but they're not trying to privilege

0:19:11.159,0:19:17.400  
themselves, they're trying to campaign for human freedom, justice and peace for

0:19:17.400,0:19:21.510  
everybody and therefore they're very willing to work with other people and so

0:19:21.510,0:19:25.230  
on. That seems to me to model the positive engagement of religion in

0:19:25.230,0:19:30.720  
public life as distinct from that dominating attempt or the confusion of

0:19:30.720,0:19:36.750

religion with state and government, so I, you know, I I want a level playing field

0:19:36.750,0:19:41.669  
for us all - I want a space where we feel we really can bring the depths of our

0:19:41.669,0:19:47.130  
own traditions and thinking to public debate but in a way that opens up

0:19:47.130,0:19:52.530  
possibilities rather than contributes to a narrative of domination. (AL) I'm often very

0:19:52.530,0:19:56.990  
confused by these opinion polls that we see - you ask people a question of

0:19:56.990,0:20:00.650  
'do you think religion should influence politics?' and you tend to get sort of

0:20:00.650,0:20:04.990  
these vast majorities up in the eighties, nineties percent that people saying no

0:20:04.990,0:20:10.250  
but I think that's a product of the question is is too narrow - as you say,

0:20:10.250,0:20:15.590  
someone who is influenced by their faith to support equality,

0:20:15.590,0:20:19.160  
versus someone who's influenced by their faith to support discrimination -

0:20:19.160,0:20:24.350  
that, that's the difference - it's not where the influence comes from.

0:20:24.350,0:20:29.000  
(SB) I, I think that's absolutely right and, I mean, when I'm asked that question well,

0:20:29.000,0:20:33.440

you know, 'do you think we should separate religion and politics?' I say two

0:20:33.440,0:20:37.520

things really- I say well first of all I'm not in favor of the wrong kind of

0:20:37.520,0:20:41.600

religion being involved in promoting the wrong kind of politics, by which I mean

0:20:41.600,0:20:46.070

the kind of politics and the kind of religion which denies human

0:20:46.070,0:20:50.780

dignity, which denies human rights, which takes civil liberties away from

0:20:50.780,0:20:56.570

people etc. etc. - I want to argue against that and I think we should, but where

0:20:56.570,0:21:01.910

people are using their religious tradition and their motivation to open

0:21:01.910,0:21:05.690

up space and possibility for other people, that's a really quite different

0:21:05.690,0:21:09.800

thing. So I think there are two kinds of things that we're talking about when we

0:21:09.800,0:21:13.400

talk about religion and politics in those terms but the other thing is, I

0:21:13.400,0:21:17.980

mean, sometimes people will say and it's commonly said in a sort of liberal

0:21:17.980,0:21:22.160

democratic society, 'well, religion is a purely private thing and it needs to be

0:21:22.160,0:21:26.480

kept to the private sphere' well first of all, you know, I would have to say

0:21:26.480,0:21:30.559

personally that, as a Christian, my Christianity impels me to get involved

0:21:30.559,0:21:35.059

with issues of peace and justice so I don't see it as a purely private thing - I

0:21:35.059,0:21:40.460

see it as a matter of public engagement - but the second thing is that when people

0:21:40.460,0:21:44.240

gather together for religious or any other purposes, they create institutions,

0:21:44.240,0:21:47.690

they have buildings, they pay taxes, they employ people -

0:21:47.690,0:21:51.140

there's no way in which it can be a purely private enterprise - that's just

0:21:51.140,0:21:56.690

not possible - so the issue then becomes what kind of public enterprise is it?, you

0:21:56.690,0:22:01.460

know, how do we pay our taxes, how do we treat ourselves and other people with

0:22:01.460,0:22:05.900

equality and justice and so on and what are the values that actually underpin

0:22:05.900,0:22:10.549

that? and that's what we need a conversation about. (AL) Yes, I think that is

0:22:10.549,0:22:15.830

a product - when people say that it's often a product of language not

0:22:15.830,0:22:23.269

being very precise so, for example, I meet for my role, work in

0:22:23.269,0:22:28.429  
education in NSS many many people who say they don't want any religious education

0:22:28.429,0:22:33.409  
in schools but then I've never met anyone I have a conversation with that

0:22:33.409,0:22:38.960  
actually means that. What they mean is there's this idea of, or there's this

0:22:38.960,0:22:42.710  
type of religious education I don't want, and I think that's very similar many

0:22:42.710,0:22:47.899  
people would say I don't want religion involved in politics and if, and if you

0:22:47.899,0:22:54.169  
had, like, you know, a yes/no tick box, you know, I think I'd probably tick the yes I

0:22:54.169,0:22:59.419  
agree with that statement tick box but if I was given, you know, 140 characters

0:22:59.419,0:23:03.500  
to expand on that versus, and then a five-minute conversation to expand on

0:23:03.500,0:23:08.450  
that, that position is, even though you or I, you might tick the no, I might tick

0:23:08.450,0:23:11.269  
the yes,  
actually in the longer conversation

0:23:11.269,0:23:16.519  
our position is much more aligned. (SB) Yeah, I mean, well, being being a natural member

0:23:16.519,0:23:19.070

of the awkward squad I would just across the box out and write something else

0:23:19.070,0:23:23.539  
underneath it but, but I think it is important that we really need to create

0:23:23.539,0:23:27.080  
better understanding in a better conversation and since you come on to

0:23:27.080,0:23:32.570  
the matter of education again Ekklesia was part of setting up the Accord

0:23:32.570,0:23:36.799  
Coalition which campaigns against religious discrimination in education

0:23:36.799,0:23:42.139  
and wants to see the reform of schools that are religious foundation schools

0:23:42.139,0:23:48.139  
away from excluding people on the basis of religion or giving privilege to

0:23:48.139,0:23:52.519  
certain kinds of perspectives and so on so again there's a large measure of

0:23:52.519,0:23:58.610  
agreement between us as Christians and humanists and atheists in that kind of

0:23:58.610,0:24:03.379  
area but as far as religious education is concerned, again, I would want to talk

0:24:03.379,0:24:09.980  
about education about religion or belief and values and life stances and so on to

0:24:09.980,0:24:13.669  
broaden it out and it seems to me absolutely essential in the kind of

0:24:13.669,0:24:18.200

world we have at the moment that kids grow up learning about the different

0:24:18.200,0:24:23.539

convictions that that people hold and ways of handling all of that stuff but

0:24:23.539,0:24:29.330

it's not about propaganda or trying to inculcate people into one way rather

0:24:29.330,0:24:34.700

than another way, it's about, you know, learning how to be citizens, that amongst

0:24:34.700,0:24:37.999

other things, deal with issues of religion, belief, along with politics,

0:24:37.999,0:24:43.309

economics, environment and so on so I think when people want to say you know

0:24:43.309,0:24:47.509

they want to keep religious teaching out of schools what they mean is they want

0:24:47.509,0:24:52.970

to keep propaganda and attempts to indoctrinate people into one way out of

0:24:52.970,0:24:57.169

schools and of course I entirely agree with that. Not, incidentally, that I think

0:24:57.169,0:25:00.590

anyone should be doing indoctrination and propaganda but it is the role for

0:25:00.590,0:25:05.929

example of Christian communities you know to bring up people within those

0:25:05.929,0:25:09.440

communities, to give them an understanding of what that community

0:25:09.440,0:25:14.419

stands for and of course then also to give people the choice to to stay in

0:25:14.419,0:25:17.960

that community or leave that community - that seems to me to be really important

0:25:17.960,0:25:23.590

but it's the job of the church is to teach Christianity. It isn't the job of a

0:25:23.590,0:25:29.299

public, publicly funded school to try and make people Christians or indeed

0:25:29.299,0:25:34.489

atheists or Muslims or Jews or Sikhs or Hindus or anything else from that point

0:25:34.489,0:25:38.479

of view, that the job of the public school is to enable us to engage

0:25:38.479,0:25:42.919

together and I think of course that happens when you have the kind of

0:25:42.919,0:25:48.109

schools which can be mixed, where people meet not just in in textbooks or in

0:25:48.109,0:25:51.649

propositions but they actually meet people in the playground, down their

0:25:51.649,0:25:55.099

Street etc and I think the problem with faith schooling at the moment is that

0:25:55.099,0:26:00.019

it's actually dividing people on on grounds of religion and I as a Christian

0:26:00.019,0:26:06.889

think that's wrong. (AL) Hmm. And I think that does go then back to

0:26:06.889,0:26:12.859

the question of the crisis of identity and the, I think fear among some

0:26:12.859,0:26:18.470  
religious groups that that  
internal community Faith Formation

0:26:18.470,0:26:25.070  
aspect isn't sustainable in the long run -  
that, that if we don't have the faith

0:26:25.070,0:26:29.330  
formation taking place in schools that  
it's not going to be able to take place

0:26:29.330,0:26:33.649  
and some Christians will then say well  
what we need to do in response to this

0:26:33.649,0:26:37.309  
is we need to find a new way to engage  
the public

0:26:37.309,0:26:40.820  
through perhaps increased charitable  
work that sort of reaching out to people

0:26:40.820,0:26:45.679  
and some Christians would say well we  
need to double down on, you know, the

0:26:45.679,0:26:50.149  
Faith Formation can't take place in  
churches, so take place in schools. (SB) Well,

0:26:50.149,0:26:55.429  
yes. I mean, my response to that would be  
well first of all you know if as

0:26:55.429,0:27:00.740  
Christian communities you can't even  
have your own, you know, forms of

0:27:00.740,0:27:06.950  
education which show that that  
Christianity is a viable belief, a viable

0:27:06.950,0:27:11.990

way of life etc, that's that's a counsel  
of complete despair and you should

0:27:11.990,0:27:17.090  
perhaps pack up and go home. Also, you  
shouldn't be expecting someone who isn't

0:27:17.090,0:27:21.350  
Christian to somehow make Christians of  
us but I do sometimes think that the

0:27:21.350,0:27:26.149  
sort of, within parts of the Church of  
England as the established Church for

0:27:26.149,0:27:30.619  
example is this kind of idea that the  
next generation will be produced by, you

0:27:30.619,0:27:34.549  
know, increasing our stake in public  
schooling etc. Of course the actual

0:27:34.549,0:27:40.460  
evidence is that when you try and put  
religion on to the curriculum as a way

0:27:40.460,0:27:44.720  
of inculcating people into a certain  
form of belief, be it Christianity or

0:27:44.720,0:27:48.740  
anything else, what you usually do is you  
inoculate people against it and indeed

0:27:48.740,0:27:54.110  
that's what's been happening I think  
really. So, you know, the churches have to

0:27:54.110,0:27:57.649  
take responsibility for their own staff  
and stop believing that someone else

0:27:57.649,0:28:01.879  
should do it for them really but that's  
part of the kind of Christendom mindset

0:28:01.879,0:28:06.619

that, you know, we should be privileged, we should be in control, other people should

0:28:06.619,0:28:11.090  
be serving our interests - that's disappearing and I think it's

0:28:11.090,0:28:15.710  
spiritually healthy that it's disappearing and we're likely to see I

0:28:15.710,0:28:20.629  
think the continuation of the decline of institutional and formal religion but I

0:28:20.629,0:28:24.169  
believe that out of that there's the possibility of the recreation of a much

0:28:24.169,0:28:29.419  
more healthy form of Christian community and and witness if you like and by the

0:28:29.419,0:28:33.919  
term witness I mean simply living out a good example of what you're about really

0:28:33.919,0:28:39.860  
not trying to propagandize other people in in forced ways, so there's a whole lot

0:28:39.860,0:28:43.580  
of stuff there which relates to what you've called the identity crisis and I

0:28:43.580,0:28:48.500  
think that's right but you know I think now let's also get back to this whole

0:28:48.500,0:28:53.300  
question of what we mean by religious freedom or freedom of religion

0:28:53.300,0:28:56.720  
and belief and what are the threats to it because this is something I think

0:28:56.720,0:29:01.970

where Christians and atheists and other people have a very common agenda in

0:29:01.970,0:29:07.250  
seeking to identify what's going wrong and how we challenge it. (AL) Give us your

0:29:07.250,0:29:12.800  
diagnosis and your prescription. (SB) Okay, well I mean first of all what are the

0:29:12.800,0:29:17.810  
threats to freedom of religion and belief, to the freedom of believers

0:29:17.810,0:29:20.750  
whether they're religious or non-religious believers as I prefer to

0:29:20.750,0:29:24.200  
put it throughout the world? Now I think ironically of course one of the answers

0:29:24.200,0:29:27.740  
to that is that one of the biggest threats to freedom of religion comes

0:29:27.740,0:29:34.400  
from religion. In other words, from dominating and top-down forms of

0:29:34.400,0:29:39.800  
religion that really develop a narrative of exclusion and domination and frankly

0:29:39.800,0:29:44.300  
hatred as well and that does happen within pretty well all religious

0:29:44.300,0:29:47.870  
traditions - I think I might exclude the Quakers from that for

0:29:47.870,0:29:52.670  
example - I think those of us who are both religious or non-religious can learn an

0:29:52.670,0:29:56.270



awful lot from the Quakers both historically and from their practice but

0:29:56.270,0:30:00.230  
unfortunately that is a trend within a lot of religion. The second thing I'd say

0:30:00.230,0:30:05.570  
is that the threat comes from people of a totalitarian mindset who kind of

0:30:05.570,0:30:09.170  
believe that only they should really have freedom and everyone else should do

0:30:09.170,0:30:13.910  
what they want and I'm afraid you find these people, you know, you find them

0:30:13.910,0:30:18.440  
amongst religious communities, you find them amongst political ideological non

0:30:18.440,0:30:22.880  
religious communities, political parties and groups as well - so that's the second

0:30:22.880,0:30:26.180  
kind of threat. The third threat at the moment that I think is particularly

0:30:26.180,0:30:30.320  
prominent in different parts of the world is the growth of the far-right

0:30:30.320,0:30:38.780  
and often the way in which the far-right can co-opt religion, perhaps particularly

0:30:38.780,0:30:42.590  
Christianity, as we're seeing in the United States at the moment or we're

0:30:42.590,0:30:46.190  
seeing in the likes of someone like Nigel Farage - says we should be a

0:30:46.190,0:30:51.980

Christian nation which keeps immigrants out etc etc - he has a very particular

0:30:51.980,0:30:58.460  
ideological picture of what Christianity has and in terms of white evangelicals

0:30:58.460,0:31:03.020  
in the United States, many of them have almost totally abandoned

0:31:03.020,0:31:08.300  
core aspects of the Christian message and turned it into a hard right-wing

0:31:08.300,0:31:12.559  
ideology - it's become evacuated really of spiritual meaning.

0:31:12.559,0:31:16.010  
So it's interesting. I've referred a couple of times to Paul Lusk's book The Jesus

0:31:16.010,0:31:23.600  
candidate that came from, I can't remember which of the religious right

0:31:23.600,0:31:28.550  
candidates in a previous American election, first used that term the

0:31:28.550,0:31:32.000  
Jesus candidate but the whoever said it, that their point was that every election

0:31:32.000,0:31:35.720  
needs a Jesus candidate and they went then went on to say extraordinarily of

0:31:35.720,0:31:40.550  
course this, this Jesus candidate, this Christian candidate, shouldn't do any of

0:31:40.550,0:31:43.490  
the things that Jesus talked about - shouldn't love our enemies, shouldn't

0:31:43.490,0:31:46.910

forgive people, shouldn't stand up for the poor and so on - that's all entirely

0:31:46.910,0:31:53.300  
unrealistic. What we must do essentially, is put ourselves in control so what it's

0:31:53.300,0:31:59.210  
done is to turn Christianity into an ideology which says we are the

0:31:59.210,0:32:03.770  
representatives of God and we will rule and dominate other, other people. Now I

0:32:03.770,0:32:08.900  
think that's - I'm tempted to use the word blasphemous - for certain reasons I don't

0:32:08.900,0:32:13.820  
tend to use that word very much, which we'll come on to in a minute, I would say

0:32:13.820,0:32:17.960  
it's it's an obscenity really and there's a massive crisis of identity

0:32:17.960,0:32:23.090  
within Christianity in the United States as a result but undoubtedly a certain

0:32:23.090,0:32:29.390  
kind of Christianity has been co-opted for a certain kind of political agenda

0:32:29.390,0:32:37.580  
which seeks to, to go against equality for all people, human rights, it's even in

0:32:37.580,0:32:41.540  
favor of torture and other kinds of things and from my point of view it's

0:32:41.540,0:32:46.040  
something I as a Christian because this is justified in terms of Christian

0:32:46.040,0:32:50.270

language scripture and so on have a particular responsibility to be engaged

0:32:50.270,0:32:54.650  
in combatting and certainly that is one of the things that Ekklesia is seeking

0:32:54.650,0:32:57.920  
to do. So that kind of co-option of religion - and then I think that the last

0:32:57.920,0:33:02.809  
kind of threat to freedom of religion and belief comes from what I would

0:33:02.809,0:33:07.280  
call exceptionalism - the temptation of all communities to say we above all

0:33:07.280,0:33:13.640  
people are treated badly and so you know we will pursue our own interests without

0:33:13.640,0:33:16.429  
really paying attention to other people and it seems

0:33:16.429,0:33:20.869  
to me that actually freedom of believers whether religious or non-religious is

0:33:20.869,0:33:26.029  
indivisible - if we are not campaigning for the other but only campaigning for

0:33:26.029,0:33:29.990  
ourselves, were not really campaigning for freedom - we're campaigning for

0:33:29.990,0:33:34.549  
privilege and so it's extremely important that we find ways of standing

0:33:34.549,0:33:40.309  
together across our other differences for the indivisibility of freedom of

0:33:40.309,0:33:44.720

thought and freedom of action in this kind of context. (AL) One of the issues you

0:33:44.720,0:33:48.470

raised there is a phenomenon which I would refer to as either Christian

0:33:48.470,0:33:54.019

nationalism or Christian supremacy and I don't want to get into this trap of, I

0:33:54.019,0:33:58.220

think many religious people do, of when someone's manifestation of religion you

0:33:58.220,0:34:01.789

don't like you say well they're not a real Christian or they're not a real

0:34:01.789,0:34:07.279

Muslim or they're not a real atheist but there does seem to be these people, I think there's a significant

0:34:07.279,0:34:13.010

number of them even within the various atheist communities, that view whether or

0:34:13.010,0:34:18.849

not they're personally religious, view privileging Christianity as

0:34:18.849,0:34:24.020

central to a certain form of Western civilization, and I think when

0:34:24.020,0:34:29.809

people say Western civilization we know what that's code for, so, we see this

0:34:29.809,0:34:34.280

among certain leading figures within the English Defence League and

0:34:34.280,0:34:38.030

within Britain First who don't seem to be personally religious or have even said

0:34:38.030,0:34:42.889

stuff that suggests they don't believe in God but are very much invested in

0:34:42.889,0:34:46.419

defending the idea of a Christian country and Donald Trump,

0:34:46.419,0:34:52.159

Donald Trump is is an atheist by all accounts but is also certainly a

0:34:52.159,0:34:57.109

Christian nationalist in turns of his political thinking. (SB) Yeah, well, I mean, you

0:34:57.109,0:35:01.880

know, I have no idea about what his personal beliefs are apart from very

0:35:01.880,0:35:06.680

clearly believing in Donald Trump and his own interests but and really that's

0:35:06.680,0:35:12.380

not my concern - my concern is the way in which he has quite openly courted what

0:35:12.380,0:35:16.040

you rightly called Christian nationalists. Now again, from my point of

0:35:16.040,0:35:19.400

view I'd say that Christian nationalists are a lot to do with nationalism and not

0:35:19.400,0:35:23.030

much to do with Christianity but I I think there's something you said there

0:35:23.030,0:35:26.869

is incredibly important - I'm not going to sort of say oh these people aren't real

0:35:26.869,0:35:30.240

Christians so you know I can ignore them etc - if they use

0:35:30.240,0:35:34.619

a Christian language and source themselves in that way, I as a Christian

0:35:34.619,0:35:38.490

have some responsibility to engage with that and I have some specialist

0:35:38.490,0:35:43.050

experience in using and understanding what that language is about and so I

0:35:43.050,0:35:47.970

have a responsibility to try and combat that. They will of course deny that I'm a

0:35:47.970,0:35:53.160

Christian but I have no need to do that. I'm interested in what their ideas are,

0:35:53.160,0:35:57.600

how they're using them and how they're harming people. So that's one side of an

0:35:57.600,0:36:01.830

equation but I've also been in the situation which I think at least one

0:36:01.830,0:36:05.580

member of the National Secular society, I'm sure not necessarily representative

0:36:05.580,0:36:10.470

in this, accused me once of being a cover for such people - you know, the very fact

0:36:10.470,0:36:14.220

that I'm a Christian, and I think I was designated as a liberal Christian, means

0:36:14.220,0:36:18.060

that I'm providing cover for all kinds of terrible fundamentalists and so on

0:36:18.060,0:36:22.200

which I think is also wrong - I mean simply from the point of view that if

0:36:22.200,0:36:25.800

you look at, I don't know someone like Franklin Graham in the United States,

0:36:25.800,0:36:30.780

people like me are far worse than atheists or all kinds of other people

0:36:30.780,0:36:36.420

that he regards as terrible because he knows... (AL) You're an apostate (SB) ...well that's right

0:36:36.420,0:36:40.560

and because he knows that when he tries to use the Bible to justify

0:36:40.560,0:36:45.480

all kinds of awful things, I am amongst other things a theologian

0:36:45.480,0:36:50.280

and understand principles of legitimate and illegitimate interpretation and use

0:36:50.280,0:36:55.550

of texts and will challenge all of that and so there's nothing more that

0:36:55.550,0:37:01.320

totalitarians hate than people who have the same kind of labels from them but

0:37:01.320,0:37:05.910

actually can call them out for what they are doing and again therefore for me it

0:37:05.910,0:37:12.150

is extremely important to do that but also to make common cause with atheists

0:37:12.150,0:37:16.050

and humanists friends and Muslim friends and Jews and Sikhs and Hindus and others

0:37:16.050,0:37:19.890

who are trying to do the same things within their own communities and across

0:37:19.890,0:37:25.220

those kind of boundaries, those are the  
the common bonds that we actually need

0:37:25.220,0:37:29.730

to develop because amongst other things  
that proves that one of the central

0:37:29.730,0:37:34.080

narratives of Christian nationalism is  
wrong and part of that narrative is that

0:37:34.080,0:37:38.970

somehow you know people are different to  
you or a threat and must be excluded. No,

0:37:38.970,0:37:43.770

actually in our diversity lies our  
strength, if we can find

0:37:43.770,0:37:49.950

better ways of cooperating and better  
ways of conversing together. (AL) Simon, it

0:37:49.950,0:37:54.920

seems like every question sort of  
opens up whole new avenues and things,

0:37:54.920,0:38:00.060

things for us to talk about, you know.  
Perhaps we just need to sit down

0:38:00.060,0:38:05.130

with some coffees and tea and  
biscuits and chat all these things

0:38:05.130,0:38:09.660

through much more at our leisure but you've  
been very generous with your time so I

0:38:09.660,0:38:13.710

think we're gonna draw it to a close  
there. Simon, thank you very much for your

0:38:13.710,0:38:17.820

time. Before you go we always like to ask  
our guests are there any recommendations

0:38:17.820,0:38:22.770

for books or films that you think do a  
good job of exploring freedom of

0:38:22.770,0:38:27.540

religion and belief? (SB) Yeah, well I'll  
mention a couple of books and I won't

0:38:27.540,0:38:32.340

mention ones that I've been involved in  
myself - very self-effacingly here... (AL) It's  
not a

0:38:32.340,0:38:36.690

strict rule (SB) .....but in this case I think  
that there are a couple of others that -

0:38:36.690,0:38:40.740

I've already mentioned The Jesus  
Candidate: political religion in a

0:38:40.740,0:38:48.270

secular age by Paul Lusk and that's an  
Ekklesia book, you can find it on Amazon

0:38:48.270,0:38:52.830

and you can find it on a number of other  
sites that don't involve colluding with

0:38:52.830,0:38:57.810

Amazon's non-payment of taxes, as you  
choose, another couple of books that I'd

0:38:57.810,0:39:04.320

mention, I'd mention Faith and Politics  
after Christendom which is by Jonathan

0:39:04.320,0:39:07.770

Bartley. Jonathan, of course, doesn't have  
anything to do with Ekklesia anymore -

0:39:07.770,0:39:10.830

he was the founder of it and we worked  
together for a number of years - he's now

0:39:10.830,0:39:15.990

working as co-leader at the Green Party

of England of Wales, so that book was

0:39:15.990,0:39:20.940

written a number of years ago back in 2006 but it's a fabulous exploration of

0:39:20.940,0:39:25.880

the sort of scene of Christianity in the UK including the sort of right-wing

0:39:25.880,0:39:30.720

radicalization that's been happening in some Christian circles and those issues

0:39:30.720,0:39:35.490

of freedom and belief that come up as a result of that, so I think that's quite

0:39:35.490,0:39:40.380

insightful - it also illustrates our understanding of what Christendom means

0:39:40.380,0:39:44.220

and why we need to be moving away from that from a Christian point of view as

0:39:44.220,0:39:46.740

well as from the point of view of a secularist

0:39:46.740,0:39:50.280

and then the last book I would mention isn't directly on this subject, but I

0:39:50.280,0:39:55.530

have touched on Quakers in the midst of all of this and my colleague Jill Segger

0:39:55.530,0:39:57.660

who's an associate director of Ekklesia has just

0:39:57.660,0:40:02.369

published a book called Words out of Silence which is a collection of poetry

0:40:02.369,0:40:08.400

and prose and in writing something about

this, I said I think it will appeal

0:40:08.400,0:40:12.510

to people of both religious and non-religious persuasion and begin to

0:40:12.510,0:40:17.789

open up the kind of conversations which enable us to think and act together much

0:40:17.789,0:40:23.309

more collegially and show also how someone from a particular spiritual path

0:40:23.309,0:40:27.150

can, you know, have deep understanding in connection with with people who are

0:40:27.150,0:40:31.559

quite different to them as well and I think that's as important as the

0:40:31.559,0:40:36.690

campaigning action for civil rights against the erosion of equalities on

0:40:36.690,0:40:40.369

religious or other grounds and so on that we must be engaged in together.

0:40:40.369,0:40:44.730

(AL) Okay well we'll have links those in the show notes and as well to our review or

0:40:44.730,0:40:50.490

the Jesus candidate. (SB) Oh, excellent. Good. (AL) .... so thank

you very much and I hope we speak again

0:40:50.490,0:40:58.170

soon. Well that was the penultimate episode of this series, so thanks for

0:40:58.170,0:41:02.220

joining us. Episode 10 - my interview with Pragna Patel should be out next week

0:41:02.220,0:41:05.730

and at that point I'll have some closing thoughts on the whole series.

0:41:05.730,0:41:10.440

This won't be the last podcast on the National Secular Society - we have plans

0:41:10.440,0:41:14.369

for future interviews, in-depth coverage of specific issues and other news and

0:41:14.369,0:41:18.029

commentary so please keep subscribed, please keep sharing with your friends

0:41:18.029,0:41:23.190

and leaving us 5-star reviews everywhere you can. This will be my final or maybe

0:41:23.190,0:41:28.470

penultimate chance to plug our major upcoming conference Secularism 2019 - that's

0:41:28.470,0:41:33.569

on Saturday 18th of May at the Tower Hotel in central London. When this

0:41:33.569,0:41:36.900

episode comes out there'll be about a week left to book tickets but they are

0:41:36.900,0:41:42.420

running out fast. Tickets are just fifty pounds with fifty percent and 80 percent

0:41:42.420,0:41:48.450

discounts available for NSS members and students - so pretty incredible value. They

0:41:48.450,0:41:51.630

include the full-day conference with our internationally esteemed line-up of

0:41:51.630,0:41:55.740

speakers, lunch, refreshments and our Secularist of the Year awards drinks

0:41:55.740,0:42:01.200

reception overlooking Tower Bridge. You can visit [secularism.org.uk/2019](http://secularism.org.uk/2019)

0:42:01.200,0:42:06.170

for details on all our speakers and to buy tickets.

0:42:06.170,0:42:10.460

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0:42:10.460,0:42:13.880

organization which works for the separation of religion and state and

0:42:13.880,0:42:18.260

equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged

0:42:18.260,0:42:22.609

or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs. Please make a stand for freedom,

0:42:22.609,0:42:26.740

fairness and human rights by adding your voice to the call for a secular democracy

0:42:26.740,0:42:32.390

at [secularism.org.uk](http://secularism.org.uk) . I've been Alastair Lichten - Thank you again for

0:42:32.390,0:42:36.549

joining us. Until next time, goodbye.

0:42:38.130,0:42:40.190