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In the fourth article to mark Inter Faith Week, humanist **Allan Hayes** makes the case for secularism.

United effort to solve problems in our society

It is very welcome that this first National Interfaith Week aims “to increase understanding between people of religious and non-religious belief”: both sides have much to contribute.

There have been encouraging developments in Leicestershire this year: for example the city’s new religious education syllabus includes humanism, and both city and county Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) now have humanist representatives. The Secondary Student’s RE conference, aimed at forming a Student RE Council, was a stimulating experience with students from all backgrounds getting to know one another, and humanists and non-religious generally were urged to join the Council.

But we need to go beyond understanding, to working together on the problems that we see in our society.

Leicester Secular Society, founded in 1851, is in fact the oldest secular society in the world; it arose in the nineteenth century from the struggles, shared with non-conformists, Jews and Catholics, for freedom of belief, education and expression, and for democracy and equal respect - often, it must be said, against the Established Church. The notable tolerance of our country is due in large part to such struggles, as are the Human Rights Declarations and our recent equality legislation.

The Society’s vision combines secularism, emphasising equality and separation of state and religion, and humanism, emphasising a view of life based solely on humanity, with a fierce defence of freethought; it has a long tradition of dialogue and engagement with others; its talks, discussions and social events, are open to all.

Many of our concerns and interests are shared with people in the religions, for example, the Sea of Faith Network studies and promotes religious faith “as a human construct”; the Accord Coalition, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Humanists, is concerned about division and discrimination in our educational system; the think-tank Ekklesia wishes to see separation of state and religion.

We must guard against being blindly divided by religious/non-religious and faith/no faith classifications.

Secularism protects the right to belong to a religion, the right not to belong one, and the right to simply get on with our life without such a classification. It encourages cooperation by removing the possibility that the state will take sides. The American and Indian constitutions are both secular.

Humanism, by viewing humanity as our own responsibility, and religions and beliefs as our own creations, allows us to be proud of what we have achieved and draw on all our experience; and by seeing ourselves as one humanity and part of the natural world it urges us to care for one another and join in protecting our planet.

We will have different, sometimes conflicting, views, but we must offer friendship and goodwill in making a better life for all.

Allan Hayes is president of Leicester Secular Society.