

fanning the flames of division

LEICESTER CHARITY REPORTED FOR EXTREMISM

The National Secular Society has referred a Leicester Islamic charity to regulators over concerns about extremism and antisemitism.

The NSS has referred the Islamic Centre to the Charity Commission after seeing a sermon recorded at the centre which suggested 'blasphemers' should be executed.

Another sermon said Jews have "greed of long life" because they fear punishment in the afterlife.

Both sermons, delivered by mufti Muhammad Shakir Patel Misbahi (pictured), were uploaded to Misbahi's YouTube.

Islamic Centre

According to the charity's newsletter, Misbahi joined the Islamic Centre in 2008 as head teacher of the madrassa – the centre's religious school for children aged 4 to 13. The centre is a registered charity and says it exists to "promote the spiritual teachings of the Islamic religion".

The Charity Commission has told the NSS it had "decided that on this occasion the best way forward is to engage with the Charity, to put the concerns raised to the trustees, and provide them with regulatory advice and guidance as needed."

Punished by Death

The NSS had previously reported the Islamic Centre to the Charity Commission in 2019, after finding statements on its website saying those who leave Islam should be punished with death.



Muhammad Shakir Patel Misbahi

Execution

In one sermon, Misbahi says Muslims should not use the term "ra'ina" (Arabic for "pardon") because Jews used it to ridicule the Islamic prophet Muhammad. He says scholars agree that anyone who dishonours Muhammad (rasulullah) "will be out of Islam".

He then adds that scholars also say "there is only one punishment for that person and that punishment is execution." He adds that even if the person repents, this is "not accepted".

In another sermon, Misbahi says "yahood" (Jews) "are the most greedy when it comes to having long life" because "as a result of their deeds" they

know they will "be punished for it by Allah" when they die.

Following the NSS's referral, both videos have been made private. Misbahi's account on X (formerly Twitter) has also been removed.

National Secular Society

NSS head of campaigns Megan Manson said: "We've reported this charity to the regulator before for apparently condoning the execution of those who leave Islam. Now it appears to be doing it again, as well as spreading antisemitic propaganda."

"Sowing division serves no public benefit. An organisation which repeatedly promotes extremist views should surely be stripped of its charitable status, and all the tax benefits that come with it."

Advancement of Religion

"Unfortunately, it is registered under the charitable purpose of 'the advancement of religion', which all too often provides a cover for the advancement of extremism."

"If the 'advancement of religion' enables organisations which say blasphemers should be killed to register as charities, that charitable purpose requires urgent review."



Kate Smurthwaite
performs her new show
"Fire Snake"
Secular Hall
Sun 12th May 6.30pm



A TWO STATE SOLUTION

Anthony Matthew

Many territories from which the British Empire withdrew had intercommunal tensions. Cyprus, Sri Lanka, Burma, Sudan and Nigeria are examples where fighting broke out after independence. In other cases the plan was to divide the territory. Ireland is an example, even though Britain did not withdraw from one of the fragments. Another is India which was divided into three parts comprising two states. In both cases armed conflict occurred sporadically for years in the divided territory. The immense bloodshed of the partition of India, the repeated wars between India and Pakistan, the conflict over Kashmir and the threat of nuclear conflict show that forming two states is not necessarily a solution.

British Mandate

In the case of Palestine the plan when the British mandate came to an end in 1947 was that there would be two states, Israel for the Jews and Palestine for the Arabs. The land was to be divided in a complex pattern, 56% of the area for Israel though Jews were only 33% of the population. The Jews accepted the plan perhaps regarding it as a step towards complete control of the whole of Palestine. The Arabs did not and hostilities broke out involving the neighbouring Arab states of Jordan and Egypt as well as Palestinians. An armistice in 1949 left the West Bank along the Jordan river under the control of the kingdom of Jordan and the Gaza Strip on the coast under the

control of Egypt. The rest was under the control of Israel, a larger area than under the 1947 plan. At this point there was one independent state, Israel, and two Arab areas under the control of other states, but no Palestinian state.

One State?

After a further war in 1967, Israel gained control of the whole area of the former Palestine mandate and has remained so ever since, with limited Palestinian autonomy over certain areas. Nevertheless, the whole area does not constitute a single state because Israel has not claimed the limits of its control as its legal borders nor accepted all its inhabitants as its citizens. The current status is not regarded as a long term solution by anyone. It is certainly not accepted by Palestinians, even by those living within the pre-1967 borders of Israel who do have Israeli citizenship and not by those in the occupied territories who have to suffer the presence of Israeli settlers and the Israeli army. As a result there have been several insurrections in the occupied territories.

There are some among both Israelis and Palestinians who wish for a one-state solution, but in neither case would that be a multiethnic state. Instead the wish is for domination by one community and probably the expulsion of most or all of the other. That would be a solution only from one point of view. It is certainly hard to imagine both communities living

side by side peacefully in a single state. The neighbouring state of Lebanon is home to several communities divided primarily on religious lines and with a constitution designed to balance their powers but has nevertheless suffered civil war, assassinations and opposing armed militias.

Those objections to a single state are often taken as arguments in favour of two separate states. Starting from the present situation, an independent Palestine would have to comprise the West Bank and Gaza with the 1967 borders, perhaps with some minor modification (and a resolution of the major problem of Jerusalem). Within those borders Palestinians would expect to have the normal rights of an independent state. Palestine would be in a weak position relative to Israel with the West Bank landlocked and although Gaza would have access to the sea it would be cut off from the rest of Palestine by Israeli territory. Even if Palestine had its own seaport and its own airport its use of them could be subject to control by Israel. Both as a symbol of independence and to resist pressure from Israel, Palestine would expect to have its own armed forces, even though they would be far from an equal match to those of Israel. Possibly not all Palestinians would accept this division of power and territory and some might stage incursions into Israel, provoking a reaction into which the Palestinian armed forces would be drawn.

Settlers

A much more difficult question than defining borders is what is to happen to the populations within them. The West Bank is now the home of about half a million Israelis. They would not be content to live under a Palestinian government nor would the Palestinians want them to remain. A major purpose of an independent Palestine from its citizens' point of view would be to reclaim the land

they have lost to Israeli settlers. It is hard to imagine an Israeli government which would accept the withdrawal of the settlers. Possibly a quid pro quo would be the expulsion of all Arabs from Israel. There is a certain logic to the idea that when two states are defined in ethnic terms, then populations should be moved to accord with them. However, that movement of population would be traumatic and give rise to further grievances which reduce the chances of the two states becoming peaceful neighbours.

Diaspora

Another population issue is immigration. Israel has a policy which allows any Jew to immigrate and become a citizen. Correspondingly, Palestine could allow any of the Palestinian diaspora to return to Palestine (which Israel has prevented while it has been in control of the West Bank and Gaza). How many would wish to do so might depend on how well the new state of Palestine was prospering. However, it might be not entirely a matter of their choice.

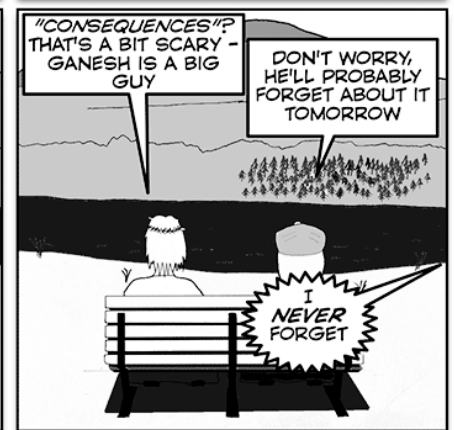
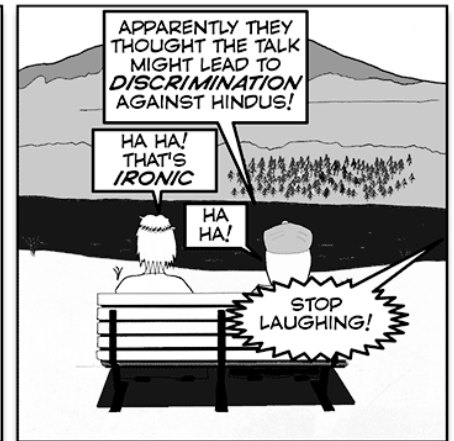
Ever since 1948 there have been Palestinian refugees in neighbouring Arab states who are now the second or third descendants of the original refugees. They have generally not been assimilated into their host countries and often do not have all the rights of the local inhabitants. It could be that the host countries would decide that the refugees should return to Palestine now that it was an independent state of which they would be citizens. Such a movement of population might be experienced as homecoming or as being uprooted.

Reconciliation

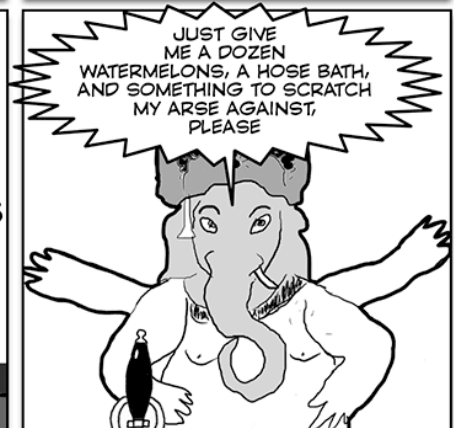
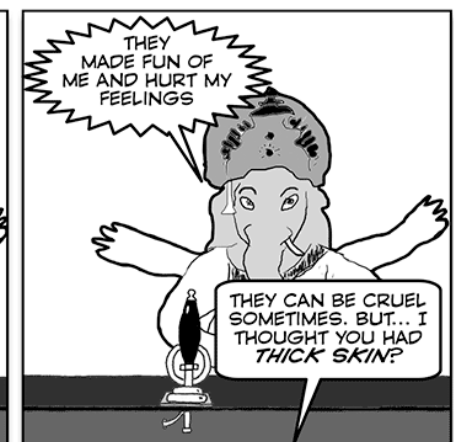
For the future of the land between the river and the sea it is possible to imagine a single state, but the problems likely to arise from that provide an argument for having two states. But the problems arising from two states conversely make a case for a single state. Neither is a solution in itself and could even cause further antagonism.

What is necessary is a reconciliation between the peoples in addition to a political arrangement. With the terrible violence that has taken place this year added to a century of conflict that is not going to be possible for many years.

JESUS & MO INSPIRED BY TALK AT THE HALL



jesusandmo.net



jesusandmo.net

This is probably the first time a lecture at the Secular Hall has inspired, not one, but two cartoons. Thanks to Jesus and Mo for their cartoons. **See the full story on page 4**

Last December, one of our members gave an excellent talk on the discriminatory workings of the the caste system. We will print a summary of his talk in due course.

We reprint below the letter sent to the Leicester Secular Society by the Hindu Council and the letter that was sent in reply.

From: Hindu Council Secretariat

Concerns Regarding Offensive Title of Event - Hinduism Wretched Immoral Compass

We write to express our deep concern and offense regarding the title of an event scheduled to take place at your venue, titled "Hinduism: Wretched Immoral Compass." It has come to our attention that such a choice of words is not only derogatory but also appears to be anti-Hinduism.

Hinduism, a faith with a rich history spanning thousands of years and followed by over one billion people worldwide, deserves respect and understanding. Using such inflammatory language seems designed to appeal and incite hatred towards Hindus, who are one of the largest and most peaceful communities globally. As a secular society, we believe it is your responsibility to avoid language that may be offensive or disrespectful towards any faith.

We urge you to consider the implications of this event title and whether it aligns with the principles of secularism that your organization claims to uphold. In the spirit of fairness and equality, we propose that you conduct a series of lectures with similar titles across different faiths. If you find it inappropriate to use such language for any other faith, it raises serious questions about the motivation behind choosing such a title for the Hinduism-related event.

We intend to bring this matter to the attention of the local Hindu community and local authorities, including the police. The use of offensive language targeting a religious community can have significant repercussions, and we hope you take our concerns seriously.

Additionally, we encourage you to review your organization's statements on your website, particularly those made in response to the violence in your city last year. Do the lectures planned for this event align with the principles of unity, understanding, and tolerance that your organization claims to promote?

We believe in open dialogue and respectful exchange of ideas. We hope that you will address our concerns

promptly and take appropriate action to rectify the situation. Failure to do so may lead to further escalation of this matter.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

with all good wishes,

Rajnish Kashyap

General Secretary/Director Hindu Council UK (HCUK)

Our reply

Dear Rajnish Kashyap

Thank you for your email and we note your concerns. The Leicester Secular Society, has since its inception in 1851, been committed to the free discussion of religion. This has frequently offended the sensibilities of those with religious beliefs. However Leicester Secular Society is deeply opposed to discrimination. It is for this reason we are keen to explore the relationship between religion and discrimination. This applies to where the Abrahamic religions have advocated discrimination against women and gays. In our coming lecture, it is our intention to explore the relationship between Hinduism and the discrimination inherent in the caste system.

The Leicester Secular Society believes in reasoned argument based on a study of the available evidence. Whilst I have not seen the text of the talk, knowing the lecturer, I have every reason to believe that his contribution will be well researched and will stand up to scrutiny.

We believe that a secular democracy should be underpinned by the right to free speech. Without this, democracy cannot exist. Therefore, religion must not be returned to a place of special protection, where it cannot be satirised, ridiculed or criticised. This would amount to a return of blasphemy laws.

We do not accept that free expression should be curtailed to protect 'community cohesion.' Free

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expression is a fundamental principle of a free, democratic, secular society, and we must not go back, through the backdoor, to the type of society where religion is exempt from criticism, ridicule and satire.

I think your letter confuses respect for individuals and respect for beliefs. While respect for the rights of the individual is enshrined in law, beliefs and organisations do not and should not automatically command respect in a democracy.

We do not think that "taking offence," which is a subjective response, can be used to justify curtailing freedom of expression. This is because it is hard to challenge such a subjective response. People or groups who claim the right not to be offended often demand the right to offend others in the expression of their beliefs, moral values and so on.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe points out:

"What is likely to cause substantial offence to persons of a particular religious persuasion will vary significantly from time to time and from place to place".

It also states that:

"The Assembly is of the opinion that freedom of expression ... should not be further restricted to meet increasing sensitivities of certain religious groups".

Importantly, claiming offence and demanding respect cannot be acceptable when claims are made by cultures that violate basic human rights.

The European Court of Human Rights' guide to the implementation of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights states:

"Those who choose to exercise the freedom to manifest their religion, irrespective of whether they do so as members of a religious majority or a minority, cannot reasonably expect to be exempt from all criticism. They must tolerate and accept the denial by others of their religious beliefs and even the propagation by others of doctrines hostile to their faith."

Ned Newitt - Chair, Leicester Secular Society

Christine de Pizan - *An early writer in defence of women*

Marta Uminska gave us an entertaining talk about a little known Frenchwoman, Christine de Pizan, the first European woman to make her living as a writer. Born Cristina da Pizzano in Venice, her father was a physician and court astrologer in Venice before moving to France as King Charles V's astrologer.



In 1379 Christine married the notary and royal secretary Etienne du Castel and they had three children.

However, her father died in 1388, and her

husband died of the plague the following year. Thus she was widowed and had limited opportunities to earn a living and support her mother and her children. She became a court writer, initially writing love ballads, she became prolific, and the first professional woman of letters in Europe.

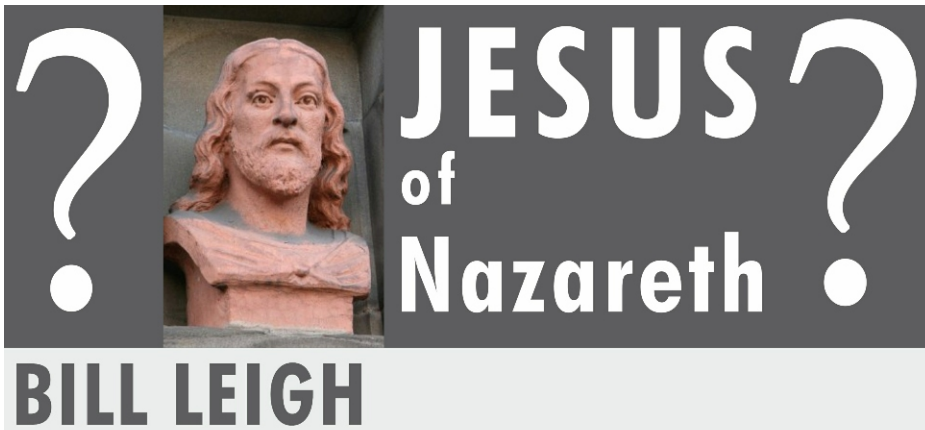
Marta described how progressive she was for her time, something of a feminist. Her best known work is *Le Livre de la Cite des Dames*, (the Book of the City of Ladies). Three ladies, Dame Raison (Reason), Dame Droiture (Righteousness) and Dame Justice (Justice), tell Christine that they will give her the materials to build the City of Ladies, an allegorical construct. Coloured illustrations accompany the text, showing the mixing of lime mortar and clearing the ground, by removing all false beliefs and criticisms about women and their abilities, as propounded by Matheolus, the 13th Century French cleric whose *Lamentations* argues that marriage makes men's lives miserable.

Christine poses as an innocent, asking questions such as, why do men slander and blame women? She addresses the education of girls and women, saying if little girls studied science they would be as good as boys. In doing so, she was the first to write such ideas, and very progressive for her time. She also urges women to flee courtly love.

Not only a writer, Christine de Pizan was a publisher too. Before the Gutenberg Press, she published manuscript books in the late 14th century. At this time there were secular books in cities with universities. parchment was prepared with space for miniatures, and a scribe or calligrapher did the writing. Any mistakes could be scraped off with pumice stone. Christine herself was a talented calligrapher.

After this, the illumination of miniatures was done by painters, including one woman, Anastasia. An example of one such manuscript is *The Book of the Queen* (1414), presented to Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France, a copy of which is in the British Library.

WHO WAS JESUS OF NAZARETH ACCORDING TO SECULAR HISTORIANS?



A review of a talk delivered in March 2023 at Leicester Secular Society by Dr Bill Leigh

In the world's oldest Secular Society members and visitors gathered in the wood-panelled meeting room with the photo-portraits of Annie Besant and Josiah Gimson looking down on them. Both were leading lights of the secularist movement. The first was a prominent speaker and prolific author on humanism and rights for women. The latter was an early benefactor of the Leicester Secular Society and a tour de force in developing and sustaining Victorian Leicester's vibrant community of freethinkers.

A Historical Enquiry

Our freethinking contemporary speaker in modern Leicester was Dr Bill Leigh who was as forensic in his choice of title as he was in the research and delivery of his subject. This was most definitely not a conventional Christian biography of Jesus Christ (Jesus the Anointed One) rather it was, what he called,

“a historical (and therefore necessarily secular) enquiry into the man known as Jesus who was reputed to be from Nazareth.”

Nothing was taken for granted and everything commonly thought of as biographical fact or gospel truth was interrogated through the prism of

historiography which is history writing based on the critical examination of sources.

Bonds of Belonging

Dr Leigh's views about the nature of religion have been strongly influenced by the work of philosopher Tim Crane who, in his book *The Meaning of Belief*, offers an account of religion based on two ideas. The first is the idea of religious impulse: a sense people have of something transcending the world of ordinary experience, even if it cannot be explicitly articulated. The second is the idea of identification: the fact that religion involves belonging to a specific social group and participating in practices that reinforce the bonds of belonging.

Consensus

Dr Leigh began by defining history as a story with a narrator and an audience or readership. The word history derives from the Greek word *historia* meaning inquiry and narrative. Most importantly, the audience was informed that the academic consensus is that a man called Jesus of Nazareth did indeed exist between 4 BCE and 30 CE. However, disappointingly for historians, no writing by Jesus survives and there is not verifiable evidence from secular primary sources that he was even literate.

The presentation centred on the places and the period within which the life of Jesus must be framed. The places were part of the Roman Province of Syria-Palestina and an extended timeline of the province was provided to outline the course of mainly secular Jewish history. There followed a resume of the primary sources which are documents or artefacts created by a contemporary witness of a person or an event. Putative primary sources for Jesus are the canonical gospels but these were written between 40 and 65 years after his death. In any case, the gospels were not written as biographies and there are several inconsistencies in accounts of the same central person. Unfortunately, many other potential sources were destroyed by Proto-Orthodox Christianity.

Memory

Dr Leigh explained that all we know of Jesus is based upon memory. The earliest New Testament writing by Paul was about 20 years after the death of Jesus. Paul did not describe the life of Jesus but he developed a doctrine of resurrection and salvation - spreading the Gospel (from the Anglo-Saxon god + spel “good news”) to Gentiles.

Western historians currently think that Jesus lived between about 4 BCE and 30 CE and that he was an observant, apocalyptic, Aramaic-speaking Jew who had local followers and disciples in Galilee. They further claim that Jesus re-interpreted Jewish scriptures in a way that threatened the established, Jerusalem-based Jewish authorities. They agree that he was in Jerusalem at the Jewish Passover and crucified for treason during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate. This description does not

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contradict the mainstream Christian consensus on Jesus.

Not Supernatural

There was subsequent focus on a much shorter period towards the end of the nineteenth century when Leicester secularists chose to include a bust of Jesus on the façade of Secular Hall. Why would secularists do this? The Leicester Secular Society answers thus:

"Many early members of the Society came from a Christian background, particularly Unitarian, and saw Jesus as a human teacher with nothing supernatural about him."

Fascination

It was Josiah Gimson who was responsible for the controversial bust of Jesus. Two of Gimson's lectures had the titles: 'Jesus Christ: a Witness for Secularism and against doctrinal Christianity', and 'The Ethical Teachings of Christ testify to the all-sufficiency of Secular Conduct'.

It is a testament to the fascination that secularists continue to have for the human Christ that approximately 170 years later in the same secular space a modern audience assembled to hear another lecture on the man known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Dr Leigh's meticulously researched exposition of the secular Jesus was well received. I daresay Annie Besant and Josiah Gimson would have approved of the academic rigour of his research and the rhetorical force of his delivery.

With hearty thanks to Dr Leigh.

Thanks also to Ned Newitt, the Leicester Secular Society and Humanist Heritage for additional material.

Reviewed by Harkesh Farma

Outrage at Secular Hall messages in 1930



This photo c1930, may show the messages mentioned in the *Leicester Mail* article below.

Last year, the Secular Hall's shop window was revamped. (writes Ned Newitt) New signage and a display screen now provides passers by with information about the Secular Society.

Back in March 1930, Secular Society members were also displaying messages in the shop window. These caught the eye of a *Leicester Mail* reporter who duly noted down the contents and published them. He wrote:

"How many Leicester people passing the Secular Hall in Humberstone Gate have stopped to read the cards displayed in the window? Many, no doubt, are unaware that such statements and gibes as these (copied by a *Leicester Mail* representative to-day) are shown in such a way as to be read by all - even children?

Who is this God? We know naught of him save by report,"

says one large placard, and another in bold letters states that:

The clergy fear Disendowment, not Disestablishment."

Other messages included:

Custom blinds us to the atrocity, stupidity and cruelty with which the Christian Church is permeated.

Our clerical friends, while exhorting us to put our complete trust in God, do not neglect the blasphemous

precaution of affixing lightning conductors to their churches.

Ignorance not Mary, was the mother of God.

The proper study of parsonic mentality is that of the primitive medicine man.

When Christians declare that it is only belief in God which keeps them from running amok, they are saying the same thing as the pickpocket who declares he would pick no end of pockets if the policemen weren't around.

A case is quoted by Mr. H. H. Joy, K.C., in which a medical witness at an inquest gave equal support to lightning and foul play, and the bewildered jury returned a verdict a Death by a visitation of God under suspicious circumstances."

A few days later, the Leicester churchman Canon James Sturdee commented:

"The purpose of these captions is to pour ridicule upon Christianity and to undermine religious sense of those who read them. They afford us a foretaste of what we should have been treated to had the attempt to repeal the Blasphemy Act been successful.

If such statements as those there displayed are now made with the Blasphemy Act still upon the Statute Book we can well imagine the kind of statements that would have Immediately appeared had that Act been repealed."



On 28th April, Mubarak Bala will have spent four years in custody since his arrest. Despite intensive campaigning and a long legal battle, he was sentenced to 24 years in prison for blasphemy in 2022.

Written Evidence submitted by Mubarak Bala of Nigeria, to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into freedom of or belief, 2019

I am Mubarak Bala, the individual who was persecuted in 2014 for leaving Islam and becoming an atheist, and almost losing my life to sharia implemented in the state, and my family.

1. I would recall most moments of my childhood today and see that I really have lived as a humanist all my life, only that as adolescence kicked in, bombardments by my madrassa, the strictest of all those in north Nigeria, I pretended to behave like a religious person. I was liberal most of my life, and secular by University years. By the end of those years, a decade ago, I was agnostic, and I never hid nor kept quiet about it.

2. Asking the most celebrated cleric at the time, about the benefits of killing a gecko lizard for a 100 reward, and the answers I got, consolidated my suspicion that Muhammad's thought and philosophy are too narrow to have any say in my life. I was 5 years into my freethought when my family dumped me in a psychiatric hospital, for my posts on Facebook. My father then took my phone, posted the Islamic testimony sentence while I was being drugged unconscious, by a federal medical doctor.

3. The evidence against my sanity were, not adding PBUH to the name Muhammad, denying 'history', Adam/Eve story as fact of our origin,

blasphemy, saying Allah is imagined, saying there is no life after I die. I was given anti-psychotic drugs and epilepsy drugs, so strong that I lost orientation most times I took them, I tried to avoid them when I could. Friends around the world led by Humanists International, [then] IHEU, helped free me, and I was let go. Legal proceedings against my family dropped, but I intended suing the unprofessional federal hospital, there was no support, I thought since my case was even mentioned in the UK parliament, (I was shown the video in 2014), I could see officials asking if I needed help, medically or legally, only the US embassy did. Later, as I sought assistance for preliminary legal fees, the UK govt had no facility for such in my country, or I was not aware if there was, it was Freedom House in Washington D.C that helped.

4. Much later, when Boko Haram leader threatened me in one of his videos, it was friends online that raised some token for me to seek asylum away, it was \$1,600 they could raise, I sought a UK visa and it was rejected. I did not know any avenue from the UK that could have sponsored me as they did with others like Malala [from] Pakistan or Jamila in Sudan, the lady that married a Christian, the recent cases then.

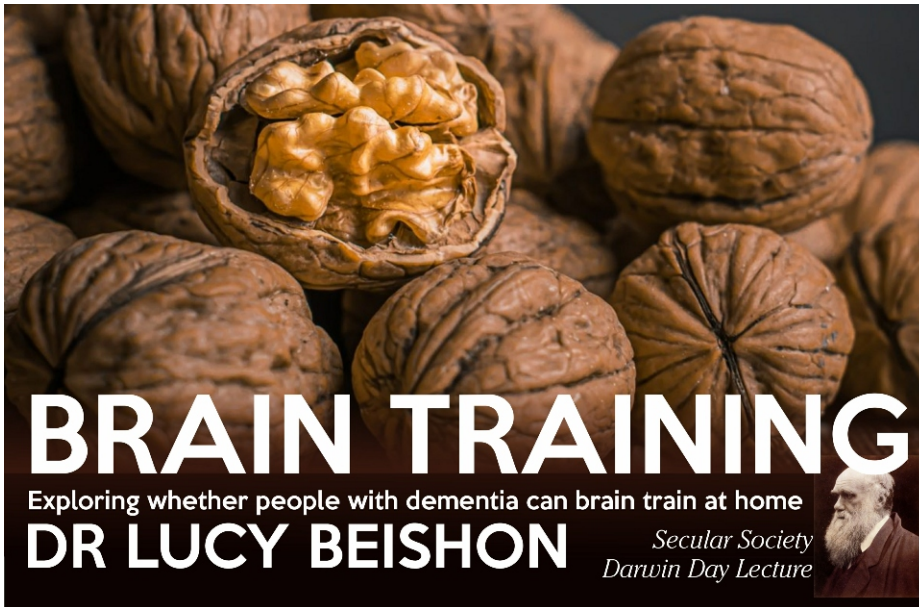
5. I was sent away from home, immediately the media hype died down, and they did not live by the peace deal we reached, but I could not pursue any legal case, even the

Nigerian government that assured me protection, after a barrage of mob threats, vanished. I was forlorn. Friends vanished, I became an internally displaced person, a few I met online, were too far, I thought of trekking through the Sahara northwards, I thought of ending it all, since no one cared, but I braved on. The only thing I could do, was to maintain a presence online, like my life depended on it, because it did.

6. For the next five years to date, this is what I do, finding jobs and losing them when they know who indeed I am, losing rent, when the neighbourhood realizes I am an atheist, but being online made the world know I still am there, my silence for too long, must be investigated, that's my hope. This is how I live now.

7. But I have helped a lot of people like me now, we have formed our own community, and get assistance time to time from other bodies, as well as give jobs that we could secure within our circle, to a point that, the society has now adapted to live with us with no threats of death, only other trivial threats such as ostracism, threats of eternal torture, or threat with poverty and hunger, the government, no matter how we complain, never take substantive action, even treating us as a threat.

8. We, the Nigeria Humanist community, lead many others in Africa, with guidance and coordination, to form an even bigger body that would have a stronger voice and clout to influence policy, and ensure human rights for not just Christians and other minorities under threat, but also people fleeing from religions.



For our 2023 annual Darwin Day lecture, Dr Lucy Beishon spoke about her research investigating whether mental exercises could affect the flow of blood in the brain and thereby benefit patients suffering from dementia. She is a clinical lecturer in geriatric medicine at Leicester University and did the research for her PhD.

Dementia affects 850,000 people in the UK and is expected to increase by 40% in the next 12 years, mainly because of increase in the elderly population though there are some risk factors such as obesity which is also increasing. The problem is worldwide with no cure and little treatment which can alleviate it.

Dementia is classified in two types, Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia but these are not sharply

Anthony Matthew

distinguished and there is mild cognitive impairment (MCI) with aspects of both types. Early symptoms of Alzheimer's are loss of memory of recent events and disorientation. It is associated with amyloid plaques in the brain cells. Vascular dementia is the result of breakdown of blood vessels which supply neurons in the brain with oxygen and nutrients, without which the neurons rapidly cease to operate. A steady flow of blood is needed at a pressure of 60 – 150 mmHg. The brain can regulate the flow and pressure to some extent by the expansion or contraction of blood vessels and by modifying metabolic activity.

Volunteers

The research relied on a group of volunteers, 24 with Alzheimer's, 12 with MCI and 20 healthy as a control group. They had a 12 week programme, working together, of exercises provided by Lumosity, which markets them to the general public. These are cheap and designed to be fun. It is possible to measure blood flow in the brain using ultrasound and there were also measurements of blood pressure, carbon dioxide in the blood and heart rate. Not everyone showed an effect on blood flow, which is generally lower in dementia patients than in

healthy persons. Mostly there was an increase for dementia patients and a decrease for the healthy, perhaps explained by their not needing an increased blood flow to cope with the exercises. The reaction of most of the subjects was positive (though a few did not engage with the exercises and dropped out). They were tested for any effect on their memory and fluency with speaking and asked about any effect on their mood and general quality of life.

Brain Blood Flow

Only quality of life was found to be improved in the healthy group, and no effects on memory, mood, everyday function in the dementia or healthy groups (but this was a small study so did not have the statistical power needed to detect these effects or relationships fully). Despite this being a small study, the results showing measurable changes in brain blood flow are encouraging and this warrants further investigation in a larger study. Perhaps some readers will want to volunteer.

Hearing Loss

The audience asked a variety of questions, some relating to their experience (and these could be issues for future research). For example, there is some indication that hearing loss contributes a decline in mental capabilities, perhaps because of its effect on the use of language.

NHS Support

Physical exercise obviously has an effect on blood flow so it is a reasonable hypothesis that it helps to maintain brain function. An important political question is why the NHS does not provide a similar level of support for those with dementia to that for patients with a physical condition – probably because of the enormous cost that would require as well as the lack of any effective treatment.

LIGHT POLLUTION

Carolyn Bedwell



West Bridge, Soar Lane, Leicester. Left: white light from Ferris wheel in Jubilee Square. Right: lighting from King Power Stadium used to make grass grow at night, 13th November 2022, Photo: Carolyn Bedwell

It is sometimes asked how can light be polluting? But artificial light can be intrusive, too bright, and when used in areas that would naturally be dark, can have consequences for animals and plants. These include sleep, which must be important because it has persisted over time, despite the danger of reducing awareness of the sleeper's surroundings.

Fruit Flies

Prof Bambos Kyriacou was' talk *From Fruit Fly Love Songs to a Nobel Prize* (February 2023) was about one of the areas of research in this field. It began with chronobiology. "Chrono" means related to time. It includes the study of body clocks which regulate circadian ("approximately a day") rhythms. But what has this to do with fruit flies? They sing and sleep!

Research on fruit fly songs showed that they change with time, and it was discovered that this was related to sleep. The science of body clocks as studied in fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*) is relevant to humans. All living creatures possess them, although they are not known in viruses.

The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2017 was awarded jointly to Jeffrey C. Hall, Michael Rosbash

and Michael W. Young "for their discoveries of molecular mechanisms controlling the circadian rhythm."

There are genes responsible for releasing proteins on a daily cycle - the molecular mechanisms - which include feedback loops. They are: PER - period, which builds up during night; TIM - timeless, which is needed for normal circadian rhythm; and DBT - doubletime, which delays PER accumulation.

Body Clocks

Earth has had 4 billion years of day/night and life appeared about 3.7 billion years ago. Everything follows this cycle, though not all in the same way. "Chronotype" is used to describe the different responses to the variations in brightness of light. For humans they change as we age. Teenagers have later chronotypes, which means they are naturally inclined to stay up, and get up, later than older people. Disrupting body clocks has consequences on human health, as has been found with research on the effects of shift work. Artificial light at night has many other effects, not all of which are obvious. There is the disappearance of the stars in the sky. A significant proportion of the population of the

world can no longer see the Milky Way.

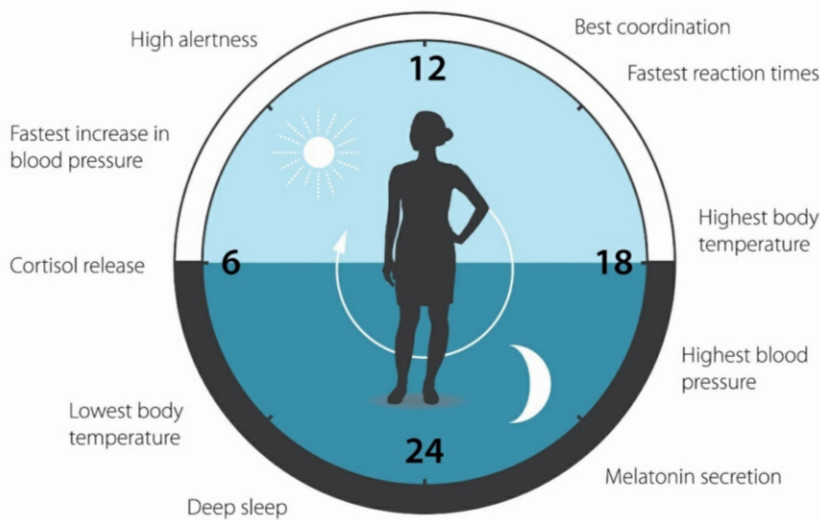
There are environmental effects. Light on water at night disrupts the daily cycle of the small organisms that change depth according to the time of day. Baby turtles after hatching naturally are drawn to the sea, but can go the wrong way, to nearby roads with streetlights. The 9/11 Tribute in Light memorial, New York, caused confusion to over one million migrating birds. Streetlights or other bright lights often have cobwebs on them. Spiders take advantage of nocturnal insects confused by the light.

Lights On All The Time

The change in length of day triggers some trees to lose leave in autumn. If they are near streetlights, one tree can retain leaves on lit branches while other branches in darkness are bare. Lighting is often cited as reducing crime. The evidence for this is not clear. Lights that are on all the time can enable criminals to see what they are doing. They can be too bright, badly sited, and create dazzling glare and areas in shadow.

What can be done to reduce light pollution and its adverse effects? This does not mean turning all lights off, but thinking about how and where

continued from the previous page



they are used. A lot of artificial light shines on areas where it serves no purpose, wasting energy.

Site lights where they are needed, but not so they are unnecessarily lighting the sky or causing glare which can make it difficult to see. Fit outdoor lighting that is directed downwards and motion activated (they actually detect heat). A light switching on draws more attention than one that is constantly lit. Many so-called security lights are too bright. Human eyesight adjusts to lower light levels, but this adaption is lost when suddenly confronted by a bright light.

Colour Temperature

It is advisable to sleep in the dark and use brighter light during the day. This is an issue in, for example, care homes, where there is not enough contrast in lighting between day and night, resulting in poor sleep. The natural length of the body clock is slightly more than 24 hours and the daily changes in brightness reset it.

Light bulbs are sold in different shades of white, "warm" and "cold", which are noticeable when they are placed next to each other. The different shades are denoted by colour temperature measured in Kelvin (K). A change of 1K is the same as 1°C. On the temperature scale, 0K is -273°C, absolute zero, the coldest possible temperature. Lumens (lm) are a measure of the brightness of the bulb.

The concept of colour temperature can be seen when metal heats up from dull orange to blue-white. Though, counter intuitively, blue (cool white) temperatures are hotter than red (warm white) temperatures. 2700K-3000k is best for living rooms and bedrooms and 4000K for workplaces. Daylight bulbs at 6000K are not usually suitable for homes.

No Night Sky

In gardens, don't light trees or water, unless it really can't be avoided. As has been mentioned, trees and the creatures living in water are adversely affected by light where it should be dark at night.

City dwellers have lost the night sky. This is one example of how many people no longer have connection with the natural world. However, there are dark sky places where lighting is controlled. In the British Isles these include many of the National Parks.

From an economic point of view, dark sky areas encourage tourism in winter, usually a quiet time of year. In the summer in the UK the Sun doesn't go far enough below the horizon for the sky to get properly dark. All year round, dark skies only occur when the Moon is not in the sky i.e. a few days either side of New Moon. So when planning a visit for dark skies, check the phase of the Moon.

DENISE BUCHAN



Denise Buchan was one of the volunteers who helped ensure that the Secular Society's meetings ran smoothly.

Visitors to the Hall might remember her as one of the people who served teas at the end of meetings. She did this until a little more than a week before her death in hospital on Friday 16th February.

Denise was 78 years old and though she was a non smoker she was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2023. She had moved to Leicester from Newbury to be close to her family about ten years ago. Previously, she had worked for West Berkshire Mencap and had also been a director of the local charity Home-start.

Denise occasionally wrote articles for the Secularist and was also active in the U3A where she at one time organised bus tours where people only used their bus passes.

Her funeral was on March 11th at the Natural Burial Ground in Markfield.

EQUALITY CONFLICTS?



Paul Crofts is an equality, diversity and human rights campaigner and is equality officer at the University of Northampton. He has spoken at the Secular Hall before a long time ago, when he was in the Young Socialists and there was an anti-apartheid meeting to organise opposition to the South African rugby tour.

He titled his talk *Equality Conflicts?* with a question mark because he wanted to argue that rights against discrimination awarded by the Equality Act 2010 do not entail conflict between groups with protected characteristics. One such characteristic is sexual orientation and another is religious belief and there have been cases where there has appeared to be a conflict. A famous case was the “gay cake”, where a baker in Northern Ireland refused to accept an order for a cake decorated with a slogan in support of same-sex marriage.

Non-judgmental

The protected characteristics include race, sex, age, disability, religious belief, and more. Paul's argument was that the underlying principle of human rights requires that the whole set of protected characteristics comes as a package which has to be applied

impartially. There should be no discrimination based on these characteristics without good justification. Where a service is provided to the public it should be non-judgmental, even though the provider may have some objection to features of the recipient which are perfectly lawful and do no harm to others. There is no right or freedom to harm others. Individuals cannot claim protection for activity that advocates or destroys the rights or freedoms of others. However, most human rights are not absolute rights but are subject to balancing factors and proportionality.

Rights Not Absolute

At the end of his talk Paul mentioned some controversial issues. One is whether the rights of trans-women include all the rights of other women. Another is the extent to which religious practices are compatible with a secular state. These issues involve protected characteristics. There are other apparent conflicts of rights within the scope of the fundamental principles stated above which do not involve protected characteristics, as when exercising the right to strike causes harm to the public. These examples illustrate the point which he mentioned that rights are not absolute: they need to be balanced against each other and to be acted on proportionately. That is why resolving these issues gives rise to so much argument and often lengthy legal battles.

There is certainly no general right to cause harm to others, but that does not mean that all cases of causing harm are prohibited. The purpose of workers going on strike is indeed to harm the employer, otherwise the

action is futile. Some cases of harm are justifiable, others are not.

Religious Beliefs

As for advocating against the rights and freedoms of others, that is a large part of what politics is about since laws generally restrict freedoms. Some people claim a right to have their children educated outside the state system, while others wish to abolish private education.

As for religious belief and practice being protected, Jews and Muslims regard the circumcision of boys as an essential element of their religion, and whether or not campaigns against the practice are justifiable surely freedom of expression requires that they should not be prohibited. Much of the conflict between secularists and established religions argues that some traditional rights should be regarded as privileges. That is to beg the question though of whether the traditional right is justifiable.

A retiring MP may say that it has been a privilege to serve the constituency and he or she has had the right to determine legislation, which most of us do not have, but that right or privilege has been acquired through being elected, a sufficient justification.

This was a stimulating talk, presenting us with a general view as to how many current controversies should be approached. Certainly applying the concept of human rights is relevant in trying to reach a conclusion which can be agreed or at least accepted, but we must be prepared for the manner of applying it to be contentious.

HINDU - MUSLIM DISORDER IN LEICESTER



Emeritus Professor Gurharpal Singh, a political scientist (a former Deputy Director of the Religions and Development Research Programme at the University of Birmingham.) gave a talk analysing the underlying causes of the 2022 riots in Leicester.

He began by saying that Leicester had developed a reputation as a multicultural City but, but while this was still the case for the vast majority of inhabitants in their day to day lives, the political reality was changing, and the riots to some degree reflected this.

Three Enquiries

He pointed out that there were currently three enquiries looking into the riots and the main motivations alleged are 'Outsiders', the 'others' did it, social media and transnational actors, new migrants and a failure of policing.

He pointed out that for rioting to take place usually requires some organisation and is accompanied by a failure in policing due to negligence, complicity or a failure in intelligence leading to an ineffective response. This can be exacerbated over time if no action is taken on post-disorder prosecution of perpetrators and holding responsible officials to account.

Low Cost Political Change

Ethnic/communal riots are a low cost way of affecting the political order. The propensity of people to riot is

much lower where minority groups are represented in the governing coalition/party and higher where there is an increase in social diversity combined with an economic downturn.

In the case of Leicester, the city was reputed to be the most racist in the UK in the early 1970s. The Council declared that it was full and published pamphlets for distribution to Ugandan refugees that stated "you should accept the advice of the Uganda Settlement Board and not come to Leicester" and the National Front demonstrated in the city.

Housing

This changed with the Race Relations Act (1976) which placed a duty on local authorities to combat racism and promote equality. The local Labour party took control and promoted diversity (particularly in its own political representatives), equality, anti-racism, equality of service delivery and cultural celebrations. Thus by the 1980's it was regarded as a 'model' multicultural city. One factor that allowed this to happen without any major inter community conflicts was a ready supply of low cost housing that was either rented at low cost or purchased by the incoming communities. This meant that there were few political disputes about the allocation of social housing and this was further enhanced by the culture

of many of the immigrant families from East Africa who had an entrepreneurial approach to life.

Demography

Over the last 75 years there has been a major change in both the size of population and its makeup. In 1951 the population of the city was 285K and it was 99% white but by 1991 the population had dropped to 270K with 70% white. The great majority of the non white population would have been Hindu. However, since then the population has grown to 369K (41% white) with a religious split into four almost equally sized groups of Christians, Hindus & Sikhs, Muslims and the non religious (59% born in the UK). Within these groups there are multiple sub-groups, with hostility between some. Thus Leicester is probably best described as a super-diverse city.

There has been a geographical concentration of the city's Hindu and Muslim populations in Belgrave, Rushey Mead, Spinney Hill, Highfields and Crown Hills. The riots came about at the intersection of these communities and are a symptom of the social and political changes within the city.

New Political Order?

They, and the results of the latest local elections, probably signal the end of the 1980s Leicester model of multiculturalism with a diverse Labour party representing all the communities. A new political order is emerging in the city which provides an opportunity to construct a new vision of a global, super-diverse, more 'secular', Leicester. However, it is an open question as to whether it will be a progressive coalition or result in further ethnic consolidation, conflicts and segregation.

PHAGES

THE GOOD VIRUSES

ANTHONY MATTHEW



Bacteria are the cause of many infectious diseases, though there are many species such as those living in our intestines which are beneficial. Antibiotics have been a vital means of countering bacterial infections since their discovery by Alexander Fleming in 1928. He found by chance that a fungus which had infiltrated his samples of bacteria secreted some substance which killed them. That was penicillin and since then many other antibiotics have been developed. However bacteria evolve very rapidly because of their fast reproduction and many which cause serious diseases such as tuberculosis have developed resistance to antibiotics. There are around currently 2000 deaths a year in the UK from antibiotic resistant infections. The pharmaceutical response has been to develop new antibiotics but no more have been introduced for several years and the death toll from antibiotic resistant infections has been increasing. Developing new drugs requires major investment and the most profitable are those prescribed over a long period. A drug which cures a disease completely thereby loses a customer and so is less profitable.

Bacteriophages

All animals and plants are susceptible to attack by viruses, and that applies to bacteria as well. Bacteria are single-cell organisms which are capable of feeding and reproducing. Viruses do not have that capability: they are just packets

of genetic material in a protein coat which can reproduce only by invading cellular organisms and using their facilities to produce more copies of the virus. When those burst out of the host cell they will go on to invade others. Viruses all have specific hosts and those that invade bacteria are called bacteriophages, or simply phages.

Georgia

Martha Clokie is professor of microbiology at the University of Leicester and has been working for twenty years on phages with the aim of using them as clinical treatments for some common diseases. The talk on 11th February was to celebrate Darwin Day, the 215th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. The great range of living creatures he referred to in *The Origin of Species* did not include bacteria as techniques for studying them have developed greatly since then. Nevertheless they are good examples of the power of evolution by natural selection, hence the problem of drug resistance. Bacteriophages were discovered only in 1915 and they have been utilised for clinical treatments at the Eliava Institute of Infectious Diseases in Tbilisi, Georgia, since 1919. However, although they were used throughout the Soviet Union, in France and in other pockets in Europe until about the 1960s, they are not currently used today other than in Georgia and Russia and even in these places their use is



Professor Martha Clokie

limited. A difficulty is that very precise identification of the bacteria is required to apply the appropriate phages. (On the other hand, because phages are so specific they can tackle harmful bacteria without affecting those that are beneficial.) Another difficulty is that phages do not fit well into the regulatory system for drugs which are chemical substances.

Finding New Phages

The Centre for Phage Research was founded at Leicester in 2023 and a major part of their work is to collect relevant phages and to do the underpinning research needed to develop phages as new treatments. Researchers have studied many pathogenic bacteria and their phages including *Clostridium difficile*, a species of bacteria which can cause diarrhoea and which has become more resistant to antibiotics. For any one species of bacteria there are likely to be several phage types which will attack it so the first step is to find some in nature. Sewage is a promising source and also mud in marshes, in the case of *C. diff.* as this bacterial species needs an anaerobic environment. Then the viruses can be isolated and have their genomes

continued

analysed. Different species vary in effectiveness because any parasite which is virulent enough to kill every individual of its host species will also cause its own extinction. For a clinical treatment a virus is needed which gets as close as possible to killing all the target bacteria. Other factors are whether a virus can deal with variants of the bacteria and how stable it is in storage. A suitable method of application also needs to be found, which might be orally, or applied to the skin, or as an aerosol or an injection. It may be that a combination of phages increases effectiveness and they might also be applied together with certain antibiotics. Potential treatments are tested on cell cultures, insects and small mammals.

Revolutionary

A major cause of sepsis is urinary tract infections. Trials have been held on treating the bacteria which inhabit catheters by means of phages and the results showed this method to be effective in comparison with antibiotics. The Centre for Phage research is working towards doing a human clinical trial on urinary tract infection in women with recurring infections. They are currently optimising their phage product and carrying out the necessary work to allow regulators to approve the trial. This would revolutionise treatment and pave the way to use phages in other human infections.

Funding

In February 2023 Professor Clokie was invited with others to address the Parliamentary Science and Technology Committee on the potential for phage therapy and whether regulatory procedures are impeding it. The report from the committee was released in January 2024 and it will hopefully impact positively funding and infrastructure that is desperately needed for this research.

GROWING SUPPORT FOR SECULARISM IN IRAN

From the National Secular Society



Iranian support for secularism has more than doubled since 2015. Nearly three quarters of Iranians want a secular government instead of a theocratic dictatorship. This is revealed in a leaked regime-conducted poll. Seventy-three per cent of those surveyed expressed support for separating religion and state, compared to 31% in 2015 when the survey was last held.

Hijab

A similar increase in those actively objecting to mandatory hijab was also recorded, up to 34% from 16% per cent in 2015.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, authorities in Iran have imposed a mandatory dress code requiring all women and girls over the age of 9 to wear a headscarf and loose-fitting clothing that disguises their figures in public.

Leaked Report

Less than 8% of respondents said they agree women must be made to wear hijab, less than half the 2015 figure of nearly 19%.

People who said they are not against women who break the hijab laws almost quadrupled,

increasing from just under 11% to around 38%.

Over 15,800 Iranians of voting age across 31 provinces took part in the anonymous study run by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. According to Iran International, the study was confidential but leaked to overseas Persian media outlets.

The polling is consistent with other studies of Iranian public opinion. In November 2022, a report found similar levels of support for a secular state and opposition to mandatory hijab laws.

Mahsa Amini

The findings suggest a significant shift in attitudes towards Iran's regime following widespread protests prompted by the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the regime's 'morality police' in 2022.

The poll indicated societal attitudes towards religious practices have also changed, with 85% saying Iranians have become less religious compared to 5 years ago. Only 7% said they have become more religious.

Universal Appeal of Secular Ideas

Eighty-one per cent anticipate a continued decline in religious observance over the next five years, with just 9% saying the population is likely to be more religious in future. National Secular Society campaigns officer Jack Rivington said:

"The strength of support for secularism amongst the Iranian people is heartening, and illustrates the universal appeal of secular ideas."



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Leicester Secular Society calls for a: 'FIXED' EASTER SCHOOL HOLIDAY

Ned Newitt

This year the Easter weekend starts on March 29, next year it will be April 18 and in 2026 it will be on April 3. This 'moveable feast' can vary by more than a month from March 22 at the earliest to April 25 at the latest.

This variation in the length of school terms can play havoc in schools, resulting in less time in school immediately prior to external examinations.

In Leeds, the school Easter holiday has been fixed since 2010. The two week Easter holiday in Leeds has always taken place during the first two full weeks in April, regardless of when Easter falls on the calendar. Now the Welsh government is consulting on decoupling the school spring break from the Easter public holiday in Wales.

Middle Ages

It seems nonsensical that the school terms in Leicester and Leicestershire are structured around Christian observances. The Secular Society think that basing the length of school terms on sightings of the ecclesiastical full moon on or after the day of the vernal equinox is a method that belongs back in the middle ages.

According to the 2021 census, Christianity is not the majority religion in either Leicester or Leicestershire (24.7% Leicester, 45.7% Leicestershire) In a diverse city like Leicester, structuring the school term around Christian observances is especially inappropriate.

1928 Act Never Implemented

The Easter Act 1928 was intended to fix the date of the Easter day as the

first Sunday after the second Saturday in April. Despite receiving the Royal assent it has never been implemented. This is because Christians have been unable to reach consensus on a fixed date.

In 1939, the Home Secretary, Samuel Hoare, told Parliament:

"I am afraid it is impossible to bring the Easter Act into force until there is agreement amongst the religious communities, and there appears to be no immediate prospect of such agreement."

Influence of religion

Despite falling church numbers and a growth in the observance of other religious faiths and those of no religion, the inability of successive governments to do something as simple as fix the date of a public holiday is indicative of the continued impact of religion on British life.

For this reason the Leicester Secular Society is calling on the City and County Councils to follow the example of Leeds and implement the spirit of the 1928 Easter Act by fixing the Easter school holidays to consistent period.

County's Response

Cllr Deborah Taylor, deputy leader of the County Council, has responded to our letter and said the Council will consult on this matter early in 2025. She wrote:

We can consider the points in the letter alongside the other considerations that need to be made when setting out proposals for a term pattern for consultation.

At the time of writing, no response has come from the City Council.