

Secular State Debate raises £420 for Charity

Over 140 people attended a lively public debate on the motion "Britain should become a secular state" hosted by Farnham Humanists at South Farnham School.

Lord Meghnad Desai, Emeritus Professor at the London School of Economics, was the first of four distinguished speakers introduced by local councillor David Munro. Speaking for the motion, Lord Desai highlighted that although the USA and India are secular states, this has not stopped them from being intensely religious. In 1956, Sri Lanka became a Buddhist state and this led to civil war as the religion favoured is not the religion of a large minority. He argued that if you want a society equal for all, then religions should be kept private. Currently the single established church discriminates against other Christians as well as other religions and non-believers. If even a potential King cannot choose his religion, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Opposing a secular state, a former Bishop of St Albans and previously Vicar of the Bourne for 14 years, the Rt. Rev. Chris Herbert described how, from a marriage in a small country church, to the Crown, the Christian religion is not just a private matter; it is communal and spiritual for society collectively. A secular state would treat people's religious beliefs as being of no more importance than the choice of supermarket. The Bishop quoted 75% of the population as being religious according to the 2001 census. He asked where the harm is in having a church that does so much for the community and costs the taxpayer nothing? He added "Over the centuries we have created a careful compromise that we unstitch at our peril."

Carla Revere, Vice-President of the National Secular Society and a Human Rights barrister, said that one effect of having an established church is that people can feel excluded and inferior. A marriage not held in a church can be regarded as not being worth so much as one in church. Every person should be included and treated equally. Today only between 3% and 6% of people attend church weekly and she underlined that it is this lack of wide support for organised religion that is relevant, not private spirituality. She emphasized how our values come from universal principles of fairness and fundamental human rights, not from just one religion.

Supporting Bishop Herbert, Dame Elizabeth Anson, a former local Mayor and immigration judge, said most reforms have been led by the church. She recounted how Farnham wanted to have a drop-in centre, but because the only group wanting to run it without charge was a church – this was refused and the centre had to be paid for out of rates. The popularity of the Christian ethos is illustrated by the number of non-Christian parents wanting to send their children to Church of England schools. She gave the forthcoming Venison dinner as an excellent example of how well the British partnership between Church and community works.

Contributions from the floor included concern that a secular state would prevent Christian views from being heard and that we currently "muddle along pretty well". David Savage, chair of Farnham Humanists, argued that there is nothing wrong with religious people providing public services, so long as there is no discrimination. "Bishops do represent the whole nation" commented the Rev Andrew Tuck, adding that much of the country's charity work is influenced by the established church.

Rounding up the debate, Carla Revere was saddened how faith groups continue to work for exemptions from European Directives on equal rights. She regretted that gay people cannot marry, "their status is different, they are second-class citizens". Lord Desai stated that the argument is not against religion or belief but is for equality. He pointed out that Britain has never

had a non-Protestant Prime Minister - Tony Blair only converted to Catholicism after leaving office, and the Jewish-born Disraeli had been christened as a boy.

On the other side, Dame Elizabeth re-emphasized the risk to church schools and community work. Putting the record straight, Bishop Herbert said he had voted for civil partnerships and that he believed all Humanist ceremonies are valid. He is truly looking for equality but this requires religious belief to be taken seriously institutionally, and this is best achieved with the established church.

The motion was carried by 12 votes, with three abstentions. Entry to the debate was free but a charity collection at the end raised £420 to be shared between Disability Challengers and WaterAid.