

Secularism with Andrew Copson

Ailsa Davies, chair of Farnham Humanists and humanist celebrant, welcomed an audience of over 90 people to this year's public meeting organised by Farnham Humanists at South Farnham School on 21st November. They came to hear Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, talk about secularism,



Andrew first explained the difference between humanism and secularism. Humanism is a set of values forming a coherent, non-religious world view. It has three main beliefs. Humanists believe that this world is all there is and that we can discover more about it. They believe that morality is generated from within ourselves and that the meaning of life is intrinsic to ourselves, being created both in our own minds and together. This contrasts with religion beliefs that our lives are not all that there is, that morality is delivered to us and that the meaning of life is something within the nature of the universe, to be discovered.

He defined secularism as the separation of religion and state, with neither dominant. It requires freedom of religion and conscience for all people, with no state discrimination. He thinks that secularism is under threat, being less well-regarded than movements such as liberalism and democracy.

Andrew then looked at the history of secularism. In the West, secular ideas date back to pre-Christian times. For example, for ancient Greeks the aims of the state were those of ideal people. In modern times, France went from entrenched

Catholicism with a monarchy anointed by god to having secularism enshrined in law in 1705. Secularism prospered in America, but in a different manner as they did not have a state religion to rebel against. It was seen as protecting religion from the state, whereas the opposite was true in France.

In the East, secularism was established in Turkey by Ataturk, but it was an undemocratic secularism. This has meant it lacks public support. Outbreaks of democracy tend to produce Islamisation with the army defending secularism by mounting coups. India had an ancient diversity of religions, requiring the ate to be even-handed. British colonialism had no interest in changing this, being only interested in financial returns; they had different laws for different religions. This prevails to this day, though the state would like just one law.

Andrew then went though the arguments for and against secularism. Most humanists would agree that it produces freedom, fairness, peace, and democracy. In the East, some would argue that it is a modern practice. Perhaps more interesting to the audience were the arguments that are put forward against secularism. The religious argue that god has told us how to run the world, so we should just do it. Communists argue the same thing, but with Marx doing the telling. Other arguments revolve around disagreement that society is a collection of individuals - a greater identity is needed to bind it. This sees an established church as a good thing. Incidentally, the UK laws concerning the established church are extreme. Apart from Iran, we are the only state with clergy in government, and are one of only four states to allow restriction of school entrance by religion. England and Wales are the only places in the world to mandate an act of worship in schools.

There was a lively Q&A session. A muslim contributor agreed that people have a morality. Discussion took place on education, animal rights and halal slaughter, clothing, and rights of religious groups within state organisations e.g. prisoners. The questions revealed that much friction in society arises when states pass a secular law treating everybody equally but where some of the law cuts across some religious practice - Mormons and polygamy being an early example in the US. Andrew thinks that the UK won't pass a major law promoting secularism, but that secularism will be achieved here using a one step at a time approach.

The evening finished with Andrew signing copies of his book on secularism, published three weeks earlier. This included the copies of the three recipients of the book as a prize in the free raffle.