

## Response to Kathleen Skerrett

Trust in Freedom of Religious Expression Panel Discussion  
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1) Of course people should be free to express their religious beliefs and to participate in public life on the basis of their religious beliefs. If there are any impediments to their expressing themselves, let us work to remove them. Do religious people in fact find it hard to express their beliefs or to perform their rituals in public? Are the barriers they encounter any other than that of their own embarrassment or their sense that they risk being mocked? Well, we should not mock people, at least not habitually. But we ought not be restricted from mocking people. That would be to deny people the freedom to express themselves.

2) Currently, calls to censor, suppress, and punish expression often come from religious people. Some religious people would like to be legally or quasi-legally exempt from criticism or mockery. But it's not only some religious people who would like us to be less free to express ourselves. There continues in our society to be a general deference to religion and to religious sensibilities. Part of the task of creating a secular society is to insist that while a person's religious beliefs and practices are important to that person, they are of no more importance socially, legally, or politically than anything else that matters to people. That a belief is a religious belief or that a practice is a religious practice does not give it any particular authority.

3) Religious influence in the public sphere is of two sorts. On the one hand, we find that some offices outside religious organizations are still controlled by religious groups. For instance, here at Saint Mary's six members of our board of governors are appointed by organizations within the Catholic Church, and the Archbishop of Halifax has an official role as an advisor. This influence is unfortunate and harmful; we secularists have a lot of work remaining.

4) On the other hand, we find people appealing to their religious beliefs and texts and traditions when discussing the social and political issues of the day and advocating certain policies or programmes on the basis of their fit with these beliefs, texts, and traditions. That's all fine and well, of course. There ought be no impediments to their doing so. We should listen politely to them, though we might have to struggle to do so, but eventually we will have to draw them back to the topic at hand.

That a policy or programme has religious backing is entirely irrelevant to whether it is a sound or desirable policy or programme. That God disapproves of Xing is no reason not to X; what we need to know is why God disapproves of Xing. Then we can evaluate these reasons to see whether they are indeed good reasons for our disapproving of Xing.

5) Our project of creating a secular society has two aspects, then. The first is to abolish religious privilege in the public sphere. The second is to point out to religious people the irrelevance to public discussion of the religious bases of their social criticism and advocacy.

Kathleen is wrong that secularism demands that religious people be deep and sincere. Secularism doesn't demand anything of religious people, not even that they keep their beliefs and practices at home.

6) We atheists would like religion to disappear. We want it to disappear either through people's abandoning their religious beliefs as false and foolish, or through people's growing indifference to religion as they find other projects and pursuits through which to live happily. In working toward a secular society we might well create conditions under which religion becomes less and less a part of people's lives, and that's terrific, but the project of creating a secular society and the project of disabusing people of their religious beliefs are two separate projects. The secular society we wish to create is not one in which people are unable to use public spaces or public money to worship or to express their beliefs. But it is one in which public spaces and public money are allotted fairly, and that means that public officials do not count religious purposes more deserving than other purposes, nor take seriously religious objections to other people's purposes.

7) Strong advocate of freedom of expression though I am, I don't trust freedom of expression. Maybe that's just because I don't know what we're supposed (or not supposed) to trust it to do. Freedom of expression can help to promote a better society, mainly because candour in public discussion can help us to identify problems and to seek solutions, but this sword has two edges.

I love freedom of expression just because I like that we—both you and I—can say what we want how we want. Certainly, as well, we are not respectful of the autonomy of others if we are prepared to silence them. Now not everyone who values social equality, prosperity, and the means by which people can live lives they find meaningful also values expression or respect. So, to those left cold by the main reasons for which I favour wide freedom of expression, I would point out that the alternative to freedom is dreadful, even from their own perspective. The alternative, we know, is authoritarianism and all its ills, including, these days, identity politics and the cult of victimization. In my optimistic moods, I think that those who act against freedom just don't realize what evil they are fostering. In my pessimistic moods, though, it occurs to me that these people are fully aware of what they are doing.