

challenging religious privilege

national  
**secular**  
society

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY  
ANNUAL REPORT

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## ABOUT US

We campaign for a society in which all citizens enjoy equality of respect and freedom of conscience, regardless of religious beliefs, or lack of religious belief. Putting these principles into action requires the separation of religion and state and the removal of privileges traditionally enjoyed uniquely by religious groups. We promote secularism as the best means to create a society in which people of all religions or none can live together fairly and cohesively.

Founded in 1866, the National Secular Society is the only organisation working exclusively towards this goal.

Annual Report 2012 covers activities for the year to 30 September 2012.

**BRITAIN'S ONLY ORGANISATION  
WORKING EXCLUSIVELY  
TOWARDS A SECULAR SOCIETY**



## President's message

The National Secular Society remains at the forefront of one of the most important global debates of modern times – where does religion fit into our increasingly complex and diverse society? How do we accommodate it without bringing injustice to those who don't share it?

Blasphemy law has again raised its grotesque head, threatening free speech in the West and life and limb in the East. The newly-liberated nations of the Muslim world look more than ever inclined to reject secularism as a basis of their constitutions and instead embrace some form of theocracy.

In the United States, the determined and well-organised Religious Right has now just about completed its take-over of the Republican Party as part of a gradual but dangerous theocratising of the USA. The extremists have ruthlessly exploited the political system with their followers occupying central roles in Government and civil organisations. They have even set up universities whose sole purpose is to provide the next generation of pious politicians with the skills to complete the demolition of the wall separating church from state.

There are groups in Britain who have tried to emulate the success of the American politico-religionists. They are waging a continuing legal battle to enshrine Christian privilege in the workplace. Despite failing repeatedly in court, they have succeeded in their propaganda campaign to convince the nation – against all experience and common sense – that Christians are somehow being disadvantaged in Britain.

Despite it all, though, this country (and much of the rest of Europe) retains a resolute indifference to religion. You would never guess this from the way some politicians continue to talk of this being a "Christian nation".

"The Government is proud to do God" announced Baroness Warsi earlier this year; she is now Minister of State for Faith and Communities. The problem for her is that the people whom the Government governs resolutely do not "do God". And they do not want her to "do God" on their behalf.

And at last we have had an admission from one influential figure on the right (*Spectator* editor, Fraser Nelson, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*) that while most of Britain remains unconcerned about religion, it still manages to be a nation of good, compassionate and peaceful people. He wrote:

"This secular mood is shaping our culture, towns and language and so it must also shape our politics. But when Labour has tried religion before, it has got it badly wrong. Gordon Brown, a son of the manse, was roundly condemned when he quoted the Bible against his opponents. Douglas Alexander, Brown's protégé, sounded ridiculous when he claimed that the Church's mission was to afflict the comfortable, as if he had discovered a Dead Sea Scroll relating to class war. The most religious MPs have learnt that the safest strategy is to keep their faith a near-secret.

"When Mr Cameron argued that Britain was a Christian country, he must have thought that, on the face of it, there's a fair bit of evidence. We have a rich Christian heritage, some of the world's greatest churches, the best hymns and a Queen who is head of both Church and state. All we're missing, however, is the congregation, which is a difficult point to overlook."

The National Secular Society will always defend the right of religious people to freely embrace their faith and practise it in any way they want to, within the law. Where we have a clear common cause, we are happy to work with them, examples of which appear in the body of this Report. The persecution of religious minorities is carried out by larger more powerful religions, rather than by secularists.

We hope the faithful will eventually come to understand as well as we do that secularism is not their enemy. Indeed, it can be their best friend. And something they should join us in embracing.

*Terry Sanderson*

## SUCCESSFUL LEGAL CHALLENGE OVER COUNCIL PRAYERS

In February we won a legal challenge to prayers during council meetings against Bideford Town Council, who were supported by the Christian Institute.

Acts of worship in council meetings are a key secular issue concerning the separation of religion from politics. We consider it inappropriate for a group of publicly-elected members to appear corporately to subscribe to any religious beliefs, far less one in particular. For local democracy to be representative, it is imperative that the Council reflects the diversity of the community it serves and moves away from practices that deter full involvement of all sections of that community.

On 10 February 2012 the High Court in London [ordered](#) that the saying of prayers as part of the formal meeting of a council is not lawful under Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972, and there is no statutory power permitting the practice to continue. Bideford lodged and then withdrew an appeal.

In other words, holding prayers is not within the Council's legal powers, as it was ruled that they do not facilitate the discharge of any of the Council's functions, nor are they conducive or incidental to them.

The order is binding only in England and Wales. Nevertheless, s.111's wording also appears in s.69 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, so the order indirectly applies in Scotland too. Some Scottish authorities have taken this on board, including Edinburgh City Council; it now holds optional prayers before, rather than during, council meetings. That the optional prayers are significantly less well-attended suggests many councillors were not willing participants when they were part of the agenda.

More and more councils – indeed, all of them in Wales – have moved to practices such as Edinburgh's, or have abandoned prayers altogether. The National Association of Local Councils advocates following the Bideford court order.

Despite our compromise suggestion to Bideford Council of a period of silence during meetings or optional prayers before them, the Rt Hon Eric Pickles, MP, Communities Secretary (for England), described the challenge as “unreasonable”, “unBritish” and “bigoted”. Such epithets would more fittingly be levelled against himself as a Minister of the Crown for attacking an organisation seeking, in the public interest, the High Court's interpretation of the law of the land. This Minister, who asserts “... as a Government, we do do God”, is clearly motivated by displeasure at the direction of the court's ruling, which he denigrated as “judicial activism” – something Ministers should not do.





Such is Mr Pickles' anxiety to promote prayer in circumstances decided to be unlawful by the courts, he is happy to assure councils, without (as far as we are aware) formal legal advice, that the new Localism Act entitles them to say prayers. However, prayers were not mentioned during the passage of the Localism Bill, nor are they mentioned in the Act, which became law before our judicial review came to court.

Our success at the High Court produced massive media coverage and started a national conversation about secularism, which even involved the Queen, who, soon after the case, was moved to suggest: "... we should remind ourselves of the significant position of the Church of England in our nation's life. The concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated."

In passing judgement, the Head of the Administrative Court, Mr Justice Ouseley, directed:

***"I do not think the 1972 Act [...] should be interpreted as permitting the religious views of one group of councillors, however sincere or large in number, to exclude, or even to a modest extent, to impose burdens on or even to mark out those who do not share their views and do not wish to participate in their expression of them. They are all equally elected councillors."***

In his [judgment](#), Mr Ouseley approvingly cited an almost textbook secularist passage in the judgment by LJ Laws in *McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd* (2010):

***"The precepts of any one religion, and belief system, cannot, by force of their religious origins, sound any louder in the general law than the precepts of another. If they did, those out in the cold would be less than citizens and our constitution would be on the way to a theocracy, which is of necessity autocratic."***



Clive Bone



Just some of the hysterical press coverage



Gerard Phillips, Keith Porteous Wood and Afonso Reis e Sousa outside the High Court

## EDUCATION

Throughout the year the NSS has provided a strong voice in opposition to 'faith' schools and the increasing role of religion in state education. Such a voice can rarely have been so urgently needed.

In July, the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Revd John Pritchard, chairman of the Church's board of education, told the Church of England's General Synod that plans were being drawn up to overhaul the entire curriculum to reflect the Christian foundation "in every part". He also called for clergy to be trained to maximise their use of schools to extend the church's "mission". The bishop said church schools were under attack from all corners but the Church should respond to "creeping scepticism about religion" by using its schools as a tool for evangelisation.

Our criticism of the Bishop's plans was widely quoted by the national media, as was our reaction to a report, published by the Church of England in March, which made clear the Church's intention to intensify the religious input into lessons. The report directed that schools "must include a wholehearted commitment to putting faith and spiritual development at the heart of the curriculum and ensuring that the Christian ethos permeates the whole educational experience."

Evidence is emerging to suggest head teachers at church schools are wasting no time in putting the Church's plan into action. We have received reports of schools moving away from a single act of collective



**“The clergy ought to have a camp bed in [schools] for heaven’s sake! We don’t have to bemoan the fact that our Sunday school has collapsed if there are 200 children at the local church school.”**

The Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Revd John Pritchard, chairman of the Church of England's board of education, *Telegraph*, July 2012.



worship to ongoing classroom worship throughout the day with some schools even setting up 'faith zones' and 'worship corners' in every classroom.

Publicly-funded education in particular needs to be secular in order to be fair to everyone. We will therefore continue to question and challenge religion's assumed right to access impressionable children.

## Rebuke for Catholic Education Service

In April we wrote to The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, and his Welsh counterpart, Leighton Andrews, accusing the Catholic Education Service (CES) of abusing its authority by instructing Catholic schools to exert political pressure on pupils. The CES had required all Catholic state secondary schools in England and Wales to read out a letter by their archbishops which formed part of a political campaign against same-sex marriage legislation.

We complained that this constituted a major breach of sections 406-7 of the Education Act 1996 which proscribes "the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school" and requires "a balanced presentation of opposing views".

In June, the Secretary of State rebuked the Catholic Education Service (CES) in a letter expressing concern that their letter to the schools "unintentionally" blurred the distinction between discussing issues that are a matter of faith and promoting partisan political views". Far from being "unintentional" the CES letter clearly formed part of the Church's strategy to exert political pressure on the Government, while abusing their privileged access to pupils in publicly-funded schools.

Mr Gove's use of the word "unintentionally" speaks volumes about his relationship with the CES, as did his comment last year that "Catholic schools can avoid 'unsympathetic meddling' by secularists if they take up the Government's offer of academy status".

**"The Church is given this money in trust for education, not to act like a salesman with his foot in the door force-feeding increasingly unwilling children with its dogma."**

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS executive director,  
*Telegraph*, July 2012

## Protecting community school provision

This year we worked with local campaigners in Dagenham, succeeding in saving a community school from closure and amalgamation with a nearby Church of England school.

Even with a growing proportion of non-religious citizens, 'faith' schools account for around a third of our publicly funded schools in the UK. This drastically reduces the choice of parents who do not want their children to be educated in a religious setting. We are therefore keen to protect and strengthen community school provision which exists for all, regardless of religious background.

The campaign provoked almost certainly the first ever strike over the unfair employment provisions in religious schools.

The strike action was bolstered by NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans appearing on local BBC News along with teachers at Village Infants community school and a local NUT representative to criticise the council's actions.



Stephen Evans

The months of campaigning lead to an important victory in July, when Barking and Dagenham Council was forced to rescind its decision to close Village Infants, which would have forced local pupils into a faith-based education – against the wishes of a majority of parents.

Heather Douglas, outgoing head teacher at Village Infants, thanked the NSS for its help throughout the campaign and said she was "delighted" for the children, who can now remain at their own community school.



## MORE EDUCATION

### Free schools and academies

Following the introduction of the Education Act 2011, the expansion of the Government's free schools programme continues apace in England and Wales. As semi-independent schools, academies and free schools have much greater freedoms over their curriculum. Naturally, such schools have been of great interest to religious groups.

A third of the free schools approved by the government to open in the latest wave of approved free schools characterise themselves as 'faith' schools. While the law permits only 50% of free school admissions to be based on faith, few parents who do not share the faith of the school (particularly in the case of minority faith schools) will be prepared to have their children educated in such an overtly religious setting.

As new Church of England, Catholic and other Christian schools – as well as Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh ones – have all been given the go-ahead to open this year, religiously segregated schooling is set to increase.

### Creationism in schools

In 2011 the NSS was given firm assurances by the Department for Education (DfE) that any groups advocating creationism as a scientific theory would have their free school applications turned down. In January this year the Government kept its promise by amending the model funding agreement which provides the framework within which the free schools operate. The new clause states:

*The Academy Trust shall not make provision in the context of any subject for the teaching, as an evidence-based view or theory, of any view or theory that is contrary to established scientific and/or historical evidence and explanations.*

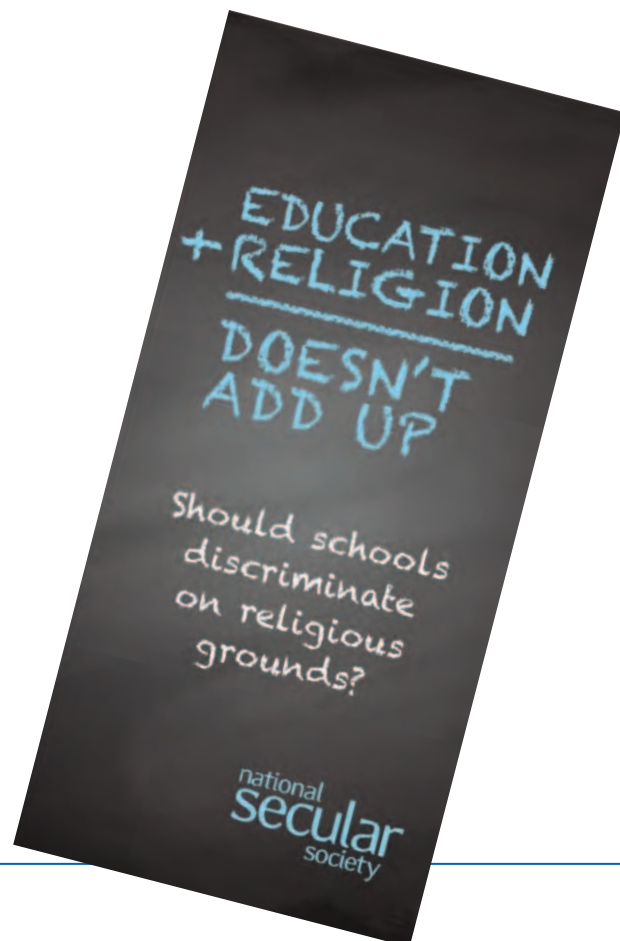
There is however still cause for concern. Three schools with known creationist backers have this year gained approval from the Government to open fully state-funded free schools. All of the schools have given assurances that they will not teach creationism as "evidence based". We have called on the DfE to closely monitor such schools when they are up and running to ensure that neither creationism nor other extremism is allowed to creep in later in contravention of the assurances given at the outset. We will be monitoring this situation carefully in 2013.

### Religion + Education doesn't add up

This year we published a new leaflet to highlight some of our concerns about 'faith' schools. Copies for distribution are available by contacting the NSS office.

**"There's something very wrong with an education system that has become a feeding frenzy for groups hell bent on targeting children with religious propaganda."**

Stephen Evans, NSS campaigns manager,  
*Huffington Post*, July 2012





## SCOTLAND

### Alistair McBay has joined the NSS team

Alistair McBay will be advancing NSS campaigns in Scotland on issues unique to north of the border, and working closely with Keith Porteous Wood and Stephen Evans on issues in the UK, Europe and beyond.

### Education

Whether or not Scotland becomes an independent country, there are serious issues to tackle, mostly in education. We need to address our sectarian school system, religious observance in non-denominational schools and unelected religious representatives in every local authority education committee. The more parents abandon religion, the harder the churches try to convert their children, and it seems that schools are all too ready to be accessories to this process by permitting religious groups across a wide spectrum of belief to target children unchecked, even in publicly funded schools. There is much to do to reverse this insidious trend.

### Other activities

We have held three meetings in the last year for NSS members in Scotland, and the president or executive director have spoken at each. Two have been at the Scottish Parliament by the kind invitation of honorary associate Patrick Harvie MSP, who has also addressed the meetings. In one, the president led a discussion on the Secular Charter, and in the other Edinburgh-based NSS Council member Norman Bonney outlined the substantial Scottish dimension to the work of the NSS in the past year and the considerable challenges in promoting a secularist agenda in Scotland and its Parliament. In Glasgow in

March, Keith combined a presentation and question-and-answer session on Scottish campaigning issues and organisational structure.

We have responded to two significant Scottish Government consultations on the rights and protection of children, [drawing attention](#) in particular to the Catholic Church's ongoing breaches of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We also responded to the Scottish Government's consultation on the implementation of EU Regulation 1099/2009 on the welfare of animals at time of slaughter.

In November (2011), Keith Porteous Wood and Norman Bonney met Cabinet Minister for Education (in Scotland), Mike Russell MSP, to raise concerns over sectarianism in relation to faith schooling and the law permitting discrimination against teachers not 'of the faith'. We contended that this aspect of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 was grossly unfair and was almost certainly in breach of EU law.

We are also beginning to tackle the unwarranted intrusion of organised religion into the civic space, questioning the Time for Reflection in the Scottish Parliament, the need for Kirking ceremonies of local councils (to "mark local politicians' affirmation to serve God and their fellow citizens" with a service and procession including school children), and the (similar) so-called Red Mass for the Scottish judiciary. This appears to breach the Scottish judiciary's own guidelines on judicial independence.

### Getting the message out there

NSS members in Scotland are increasingly proactive in getting the secular point of view publicised in the local and national media, especially by getting letters published. Recurrent topics are the ease with which, sometimes extreme, religious groups have access to non-denominational schools without any apparent vetting and parents not being informed of their rights to withdraw their children from religious observance.



Norman Bonney, Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson meet NSS members in Scotland at the Scottish Parliament

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Freedom of expression has been a major focus of our work this year.

In February the NSS took part in a day of action for free expression following an increased number of attacks on freedom of expression in the UK, including a 17 year old student being forced to remove a satirical *Jesus and Mo* cartoon from his Facebook page or face expulsion from his Sixth Form College, and demands by the University College London Students Union that the atheist society remove a similar cartoon from its Facebook page.

NSS executive director Keith Porteous Wood addressed a rally for free expression outside Parliament with council member Anne Marie Waters, who is also a spokesperson for One Law for All, which organised the rally. Other speakers included NSS honorary associates Nick Cohen, Prof. Richard Dawkins, Jim Fitzpatrick MP, Prof. A C Grayling and Maryam Namazie.

The rally followed threats of violence and the subsequent cancellation of a meeting at Queen Mary College where Anne Marie Waters was to deliver a speech on Sharia. Undeterred, the event was rescheduled and went ahead, regardless.

## Global blasphemy law threat

Throughout the year, we have continued to raise awareness of the threat posed by attempts at the United Nations by some Islamic nations, under the auspices of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), to introduce an international blasphemy law.

It was therefore concerning to us that one of the first actions of Baroness Warsi in her other new post of Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, was to pledge new co-operation with the OIC by signing a 'Memorandum of Understanding' between it and the UK. We have offered to meet Baroness Warsi to clarify her understanding of what is meant in the Memorandum of Understanding by "religious freedom", and specifically how this is to be balanced with freedom of expression.

The campaign for a worldwide ban on "religious defamation" was revived in September, after fury spread amongst some of the global Muslim population over the anti-Islam film the *Innocence of Muslims*, made in the USA. However, in October the Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, revealed that it has abandoned plans to introduce a global blasphemy law through the United Nations. He said his 57-nation body would not try again for United Nations support to ban insults to religion, saying that Western opposition — particularly from the USA and Europe — made the prospect of success very remote.



In August we joined a protest to highlight the need for a change in the law that criminalises "insulting words or behaviour"

## Reform section 5

In May, we collaborated with the Christian Institute and the Peter Tatchell Foundation to launch a major [new campaign](#) to increase the pressure on Home Secretary Theresa May to reform a controversial section of the 1986 Public Order Act. Mounting evidence suggests the Act is a serious impediment to free speech.

Section 5 of the Act outlaws “insulting words or behaviour”, but what exactly constitutes “insulting” is unclear and has resulted in many controversial police arrests. In 2008, a 16-year-old boy was arrested for peacefully holding a placard that read “Scientology is a dangerous cult”. The law has also been used to charge human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell for shouting slogans and displaying placards that condemned the persecution of LGBT people by Islamic governments, and to convict an elderly Christian street preacher for displaying a sign which said homosexual conduct was immoral.

Under the slogan “feel free to insult me”, the campaign has brought together people from all walks of life; from the religious to the secular and from right across the political spectrum.

A Government consultation on the removal of the word “insulting”, to which we [responded](#), closed in January. The official deadline for publication of results of the consultation was in April, but they have still not been published. In August, to remind the Government that the issue hadn’t gone away, we helped organise a protest outside Parliament in which protestors carried placards alluding to the “insults” for which members of the public have been arrested under the Section 5 of the Public Order Act.

In defending free expression, the NSS seeks to ensure that the law is fair to everybody and argue equally for the right of religious and non-religious people to freely criticise and exchange opinions without fear of the law – unless they are inciting violence. Free speech is not free if it not available to all. We therefore hope the Government will be persuaded that a change in the law is necessary.

**REFORM  
SECTION 5  
FEEL FREE TO INSULT ME!**



### NSS intervention in European court 'discrimination' cases

The decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) is awaited following a hearing in Strasbourg on 4 September over the four Christians who have claimed that the UK has failed to uphold their freedom of religion. They involve crucifixes at work (for a BA check-in clerk and a nurse) and discrimination at work against gay people (for a marriage/civil partnership registrar and a *Relate* counsellor). Applicants Chaplin, Eweida, Ladele and McFarlane had all earlier lost their cases against UK employers.

If the UK Government loses these cases, it could severely compromise the UK's equality provisions, which are probably the most comprehensive in the world. The NSS successfully sought permission to intervene in these cases. As far as we can ascertain, the NSS's intervention is the only one that takes the position that all four cases were correctly rejected by the UK courts, without having breached the applicants' human rights. This is also the Government's position. But even the Government's own defence of its stance appeared to be weakening, perhaps because of growing back bench pro-religious pressure. We are also up against extravagantly-funded lawyers and a multiplicity of interveners taking opposing stances.

There has been systematic misinformation over this case peddled by the right wing press. The vast publicity for the hearing gave us the opportunity to set the record straight, in blanket media coverage for more than two days worldwide, plus BBC Breakfast TV, Radio 5 Live, regional and local stations.

Legal commentators think we have cause for optimism, but whatever the court decides, no organisation will have done more to fight for the correct, secular, outcome than the NSS.

A webcast of the hearing can be viewed at <http://bit.ly/echrwebcast> and our submission to the court can be read at <http://bit.ly/echrsubmission>.



We thank Lord Lester (left) and Dr Ronan McCrea (right) for their assistance with our intervention

### RC child abuse: progress at the United Nations

As already reported, the executive director criticised the Holy See in plenary sessions of the UN Human Rights Council in 2009, 2010 and 2011 for wholesale breaches of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in connection with child rape/abuse carried out by those working on behalf of the Catholic Church. The most visible and blatant failure of the Vatican to comply with its obligations under the Convention was its failure to publish five-yearly reports on the measures taken to give effect to its undertakings under the Convention.

On the last occasion Keith Porteous Wood referred to this at the UN (in 2011), he concluded (quoting Geoffrey Robertson QC) that the Vatican's "contempt for its reporting obligations over the past thirteen years, should ... justify its expulsion." Keith observed in the previous NSS Annual Report that "from the reaction of their representative [to our 2011 intervention] they are starting to feel the heat". We are pleased that a few months later the Vatican belatedly published the report, albeit fourteen years late. Predictably, their report is grossly unsatisfactory; however it appears to be a very important development, perhaps marking the start of a new stage.

### Tackling caste discrimination

We assisted with the preparation of an oral intervention at the UN Human Rights Council condemning the UK Government for refusing to trigger a power contained in the Equality Act 2010 enabling caste to be included as a protected characteristic. The NSS was one of the groups that fought for this.

The power was to be triggered if research showed evidence of discrimination that would be prosecutable under the Act if caste were to become a protected characteristic. The research uncovered such discrimination in employment, social and health care, worship and politics.

The Government has nevertheless resolutely refused to trigger the power. It has shamelessly defended its refusal on the outrageous pretext that: "[the power's] coverage would therefore be significantly wider than simply alleged discrimination against people of the Dalit communities by other, higher-caste Hindus or Sikhs."

## Religious threats to human rights

The executive director spoke out in March at the United Nations Human Rights Council about religious threats to human rights.

He quoted Heiner Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief: “It seems difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of an official ‘State religion’ that in practice does not have adverse effects on religious minorities, thus discriminating against their members.”

Keith Porteous Wood maintained we need to hold religious minorities to the same standards of human rights observance as everyone else. A more lenient application of the law to minorities foments resentment in the majority community.

We must never allow democratically-determined, Human Rights-compliant law to be supplanted by any rivals such as religious “law”.

No-one, and especially no ideology or religion, has the right not to be offended; and both religious ideas and religious leaders should be open to criticism like anything or anyone else.

Keith was speaking in a seminar organised by NSS life member Roy Brown of the International Humanist & Ethical Union (to which the NSS is affiliated) and was a member of a discussion panel which included several religious participants. Keith was particularly impressed by a [speech](#) given by fellow panellist Raheel Raza, a Pakistani-born Muslim women’s rights activist from Toronto.



Keith Porteous Wood and Raheel Raza speaking at the UNHRC

## European Union

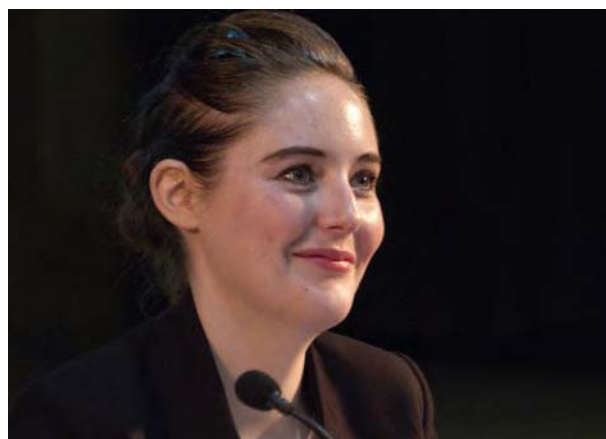
Much of the work in EU institutions this year has been undertaken by Keith Porteous Wood and vice president Elizabeth O’Casey. They have been fighting for a much fairer representation in them of those who are not religious or who are religiously unconcerned. The majority of those in the pews are disenfranchised too, given that in most countries their views seem so much more moderate than those of the clerics who purport to represent them.

Keith made this point at a small formal luncheon given by presidents Barroso, Buzek and Van Rompuy (of the European Commission, Parliament and Council of Ministers, respectively). He advocated opinion polls as a much more reliable way of establishing the varied views of EU citizens than asking clerics.

A vice president of the Parliament, László Tőkés, is not only a bishop of the Reformed Church of Romania as well as an MEP, but had also been appointed by president Buzek with overseeing dialogue with “non-confessional” organisations. He did so in such a biased manner at a meeting that he was criticised by two NSS honorary associates and MEPs (Michael Cashman and Sophie in ’t Veld), and our executive director.

President Buzek favours what he describes as the mutual autonomy of religion and state, rather than their separation, and has openly attacked secularism. Mr Buzek’s replacement as President of the Parliament by Martin Schulz (from Germany) gives some cause for optimism that the religious hegemony will recede; but how far, it is too early to tell.

Elizabeth and Keith have continued to play an active role on the Advisory Board of the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics by assisting Chair Sophie in ’t Veld and raising topics of concern. We look forward to working with the Advisory Board’s new chair, NSS member Alan Frommer, and the European Humanist Federation’s new president, Pierre Galant, a former Belgian senator.



Elizabeth O’Casey, NSS vice president



## Secularism Conference

In September we hosted this year's Secularism 2012 conference in London, which featured a full day of speakers, stalls and workshops. Six hundred delegates packed out the conference hall to hear some of the most prominent and engaging speakers in the secular movement give their take on one of the most important issues of the age: what is the place of religion in a modern, democratic and secularised society?

Speakers included Prof. Ted Cante CBE, Nick Cohen, Prof. Richard Dawkins (keynote speaker), Maryam Namazie, Pragna Patel and Peter Tatchell.

Special thanks go to NSS vice president Gerard Phillips, who organised the conference, assisted by Council member Peter Revell, and the staff and volunteers who helped to make the day such a resounding success.

Helen Palmer, Dr Antony Lempert, Gerard Phillips, Robert Stovold



Peter Tatchell



Questions from the floor



David Walter



Pragna Patel



Nick Cohen



The Camp Quest stall



Professor Ted Cante





**“I’ve met more interesting people here today than I have in the whole past year put together. It’s been so exciting. Roll on Secularism 2013.”**

Secularism 2012 delegate



## March for a secular Europe

Hundreds of secularists joined the annual march for a secular Europe through central London in September calling for equality, respect for human rights and an end to religious privilege.

NSS president Terry Sanderson addressed the crowds and urged politicians to lose their fear of the supposed power of religious leaders to deliver votes and recognise that the UK is ready for secularism.



## EVENTS

### Secularist of the Year

This year's winner of the Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year was Human Rights campaigner Peter Tatchell. He was presented with the £5,000 prize by journalist and free speech campaigner Nick Cohen at a special event to mark the occasion in March.

We also recognised the achievements of NSS member Clive Bone, the councillor at the centre of our council prayer victory in the High Court, who was awarded the Simon Biber Memorial Prize (of £1,000).



Keith Porteous Wood, Terry Sanderson, Dr Michael Irwin, Peter Tatchell, Dr Ronan McCrea, Professor Richard Dawkins



Clive Bone



Nick Cohen



Magical Neil Edwards dumfounds NSS Treasurer Claire Wadd and Lord Avebury



Peter Tatchell – the winner!



## OTHER CAMPAIGNING

### National Trust drops creationist exhibit

In July we were among the first to draw public attention to a controversial exhibit at the Giant's Causeway, a UNESCO World Heritage Site run by the National Trust, which suggested there was an "ongoing debate" over when the famous rocks were formed. Within hours of our doing so, there were 42,000 visits to our website.

The National Trust had been under pressure from evangelical Christians to give equal prominence to their Young Earth Creationist views in the new £18.5m visitor centre on the north Antrim coast, which was partly funded by public money.

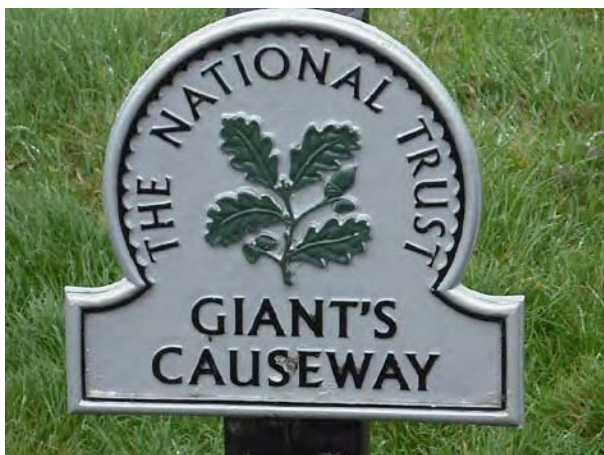
NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans raised concerns on BBC Radio Ulster about the close links between the evangelical Caleb Foundation, a small Biblical fundamentalist pressure group, and prominent members of the Democratic Unionist Party – which is currently the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As well as championing the excellent local Facebook campaign group, we sent a formal complaint to the National Trust and urged supporters to make their views known directly to the Trust.

Under considerable pressure, the National Trust decided to review the material, which eventually resulted in new wording for the exhibit which now makes clear that the scientific evidence, supported by the National Trust, completely contradicts the creationist view.

We thank our members and supporters who complained to the Trust.

Another positive outcome of the affair is that many of secularists in Northern Ireland have come together and intend to continue campaigning for a secular Northern Ireland. We are assisting them.



### Equal marriage: Government has no right to legislate, say primates

Both Catholic and Protestant hierarchies have strongly criticised the governments of both England and Scotland over proposals to legalise same-sex marriage. In Scotland, Cardinal O'Brien, the most senior Catholic cleric in Britain, went to the absurd extreme of announcing he was breaking off relations with the Scottish government over the issue, while in England the Anglican archbishops even suggested that proceeding with same-sex marriage threatened the future of Establishment. Such behaviour and threats of this kind, which were predictably ignored, betray the extent of these senior clerics' delusions of self-importance.

Tellingly, Catholic and Anglican hierarchies are attempting to suggest that elected governments don't have the right to make these changes – a blatant attempt to undermine democracy.

The (Anglican) Archbishops' Council told the Government: that there are *not* "two categories of marriage, 'civil' and 'religious'"; and that the Government's proposals would lead to their churches being forced to conduct same-sex religious marriages by the European Court of Human Rights. We countered this misinformation by sending the Government a [detailed critique](#), written by a top lawyer.

The NSS's main submission to the Government declared our support for its proposal.

In Scotland, we worked with honorary associate Patrick Harvie MSP on this, and his was by far the most effective dissenting voice.

The Scottish consultation went a step further to include religious same-sex marriage for consenting bodies and celebrants, and an amendment may also be proposed along these lines for England and Wales. Seeking to prevent those of other denominations and faiths who want to be able to celebrate same-sex marriages in their places of worship (as senior clerics have) constitutes an unacceptable restriction of religious liberty.

### Non-stun slaughter challenged

In October we again called on the Government to end the religious exemption from animal welfare laws that permits animals to be slaughtered without pre-stunning. In a [submission to Defra](#) we argued that as long as religious groups retain such an exemption, the Government should ensure that meat from non-stun slaughter is clearly labelled as such, so that consumers are able to choose whether to buy it or not.



## OTHER CAMPAIGNING continued

### Lords Reform

The proposals for reform of the House of Lords collapsed in acrimony within the Conservative/Lib-Dem coalition Government in August.

Of all the outward manifestations of religious privilege embedded in the United Kingdom's legislature, the presence of an unelected bishops' bench in the House of Lords, comprising two archbishops and 24 bishops of the Church of England, is one of the most archaic, unfair and undemocratic. It is the only parliament in the world to give bishops seats as of right. Our submission to the House of Lords Reform Committee called for the removal of the bench of bishops from the House of Lords and for the new second chamber to have no specific religious representation.

However, when the Coalition published proposals to reform the Lords in June, instead of removing them, the Government proposed to retain the automatic right of bishops to sit in Parliament. Even the proposed reduction in the number of bishops from 26 to 12 would not have diminished their influence, as their proportion of seats would have remained broadly unaltered in a much slimmed-down new chamber.

In the debates that preceded the collapse, most of the strongest speeches opposing the bishops' bench came from Labour MPs representing Scottish and Welsh constituencies. Our new honorary associate Nia Griffith MP (Llanelli) opposed the Coalition plans telling MPs it was "high time that we separated Church and state".

### Child rape/abuse in religious settings

Lawyers who are members of the NSS are closely involved with key cases relating to the RC Church currently being considered by higher UK courts. The rulings are likely to become precedents that could have implications beyond the UK. It is hoped that they will result in religious organisations being held civilly (financially) liable for the misdeeds of those working under their aegis, even if they are not technically employees. Needless to say, the Catholic Church has gone to enormous, and shameless, lengths to evade responsibility. Their last consideration has been the best interests of children/victims. This is despite the Church's HQ (the Vatican), from which all major instructions emanate, being a voluntary signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The NSS is in contact with lawyers in these cases and has offered its assistance.

We continue to exercise a watching brief in the UK and continue to expose poor child protection provisions operating in the Catholic Church, including in their schools. The Church, however, is determined to leave loopholes so that parents can be pressured

into keeping quiet. It is similarly insistent on those with a vested interest in maintaining secrecy still being allowed to be child protection officers.

### Religious rites or children's rights?

In September, we formally requested that the Minister of State responsible for the UK's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to investigate whether male infant circumcision, when carried out for religious rather than medical reasons, is a breach of UK children's rights. We presented the Government with a dossier setting out widespread concerns on legal and medical grounds as well as Human Rights ones. The Ministry of Justice has now taken responsibility for dealing with our request.

Our actions were prompted by the Cologne (Germany) district court recently deciding that this procedure was harmful, and our legal advice confirms this. We wrote to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and have also raised this in the UN Human Rights Council with a written statement and a short speech, both of which the executive director prepared. He has collaborated with the Secular Medical Forum on this project.

The lawfulness of such circumcision is being increasingly questioned. Furthermore, medical opinion in a number of countries is turning against the historic *carte blanche* afforded to infant (and therefore also non-consensual) non-therapeutic circumcision. Parents' freedom of religion must not be the only consideration. It is now being recognised more widely that this irreversible procedure for which there are numerous medical complications, some of which are very serious, is a breach of children's rights.

### NHS for all faiths and none?

Together with the Secular Medical Forum, we assisted the General Medical Council pursue a complaint against Dr Richard Scott of the (NHS) Bethesda Medical Centre in Margate, Kent, where patients are asked "Please tell the doctor ... if you do not wish to speak on matters of faith."

The BBC reported he "told a suicidal patient 'the Devil haunts people who do not turn to Jesus' [and] has been given a formal warning at a medical hearing".

## Religious arbitration tribunals

We have been working closely with Baroness Cox who has introduced the [Arbitration and Mediation Services \(Equality\) Bill](#) into the House of Lords. It would impose Human Rights restrictions on the use of the Arbitration Act, when it is being used to enforce decisions arrived at by religious tribunals or “courts”. We have helped build support for the Bill, for example by identifying high profile lawyers to lead meetings to promote it to peers. The Bill is being enthusiastically received by a growing number of peers concerned about the vulnerability of women and children to religious rulings. Given, however, that this impinges on minority religions, the Government is predictably doing its best to impede the Bill’s progress through Parliament. We have, nevertheless, succeeded in securing a Second Reading in October.

We are convinced that this is rooted in a grossly exaggerated fear all political parties have of the number of votes that can be delivered by any religious group. Sadly, though, electoral considerations seemingly outweigh any concerns about the plight of the vulnerable, who are mainly women. Anne Marie Waters and Keith Porteous Wood have also worked alongside both religious and other specifically secular organisations, such as Muslims for a Secular Democracy, on this important and growing problem.

## Scouting for all?

We [directly challenged](#) the Scout Association over equality in March, when Chief Scout Bear Grylls, who has marketed the Alpha Course (a strongly evangelical course on the basics of the Christian faith), asserted in the media that scouting is for everyone regardless of their religion, ethnicity or belief.

Although youngsters can attend Scouts informally, no one can join them and be promoted without making a Promise that includes an oath to god. In a letter to the Scouts, we called on the organisation to fully open itself up equally to all and make the religious oath optional.

Our challenge received media attention but unfortunately the intransigency of the Scout leadership was again made clear when Chief Commissioner for England, Wayne Bulpitt, responded to the NSS saying that the organisation has no intention of changing its policy.

**“It is quite clear from the declining and ageing church congregations that the Church can survive only a few more decades in any meaningful way as a national church.”**

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS executive director, *Telegraph*, July 2012

## COMMUNICATIONS

There was unparalleled media interest around our successful High Court challenge to prayers during council meetings and during the ‘religious discrimination’ cases heard by the Court of Human Rights, to which we made an intervention. In both instances our executive director appeared on national BBC News and Radio 4’s flagship *Today* Programme, and in the latter case on BBC World programmes around the globe. Throughout the rest of the year the NSS has maintained a high media profile. We have been quoted extensively in the press and have made regular appearances on international, national and local television and radio broadcasts – often thanks to the executive director and president making themselves available at all hours.

Directors and staff have taken part in debates and spoken at numerous events and local groups and student meetings all around the country.

Stephen Evans has been masterminding further development of our website. We’ve seen a 51% increase in visits to the site since a new design was implemented in early 2012. The site has received 1.8 million page views in the last twelve months. We continue to maintain our popular daily ‘media round-up’ of news and opinion relevant to secularism. *Newsline*, our weekly email newsletter, also continues to go from strength to strength. We continue to increase our social network with 7,500 followers on Twitter and 5,200 Facebook friends. Both are growing steadily at about 100 followers each week.

We have maintained our printed communications: the *Bulletin* and Annual Report continue to be distributed well beyond our membership base and we have published a new leaflet this year highlighting our opposition to ‘faith’ schools. We have strengthened our portfolio of promotional items and have sent a range of badges, bags and leaflets to a number of student groups as part of freshers’ week.

Our campaigns team continue to develop campaign briefings, shown on our website. These reports contain a summary of the key issues and facts related to our campaigns and are created to inform and empower supporters to get involved with campaigning.

We continue to invest in our communications and are pleased to welcome Rebecca Sharkey to the team to assist with this important area of our work.

## Other council activities

A round-up of council activities not mentioned elsewhere

**Terry Sanderson** (president) analyses media coverage of secularism and produces the daily media round-up. He also edits *Newsline* and acts as principal spokesperson for the NSS.

**Gerard Phillips** (chair of council) In addition to being chair of council and organising the Secular Conference, Gerard appeared on Channel 4's *4thought.tv* talking about the role of religion in public life and gave a talk to Farnham Humanists.

**Dan Bye** spoke to North Yorkshire Humanists on *Why I am not a cultural Christian* and to Leeds Atheist Society about faith schools.

**Ray Newton** is the council minutes' secretary. He took part in the commemoration of (founder) Charles Bradlaugh MP in Northampton and has taken on the planning for our 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

**Afonso Reis e Sousa** has led our review of the Articles of Association over the last two years.

**Peter Revell** assisted with the organisation of the secular conference, the Lawyers Secular Society and media training and spoke on secularism to Wimbledon High School for Girls and to Farnham Humanists.

**Robert Stovold** gave a talk to Brighton & Hove Humanists about his successful challenge to misleading advertising claims made by Christian Scientists through the Advertising Standards Authority. He also spoke at the Gulf Cultural Club and spoke at the Brighton Science Festival.

**Adrian Tippetts** spoke about faith schools at a meeting to mark the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) on fighting homo/transphobia in and through education.

**Peter Vlachos** spoke at Bristol University's Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Society conference and to the Brighton and Hove Humanist Society. He was interviewed on Sky News on the Bideford campaign success.

**Anne Marie Waters** gave talks covering sharia law, human rights and free speech at Queen Mary University of London, the National Atheist Secularist and Humanist Student Society Conference, Kent Critical Law Society Conference and Wimbledon High School. She spoke about secularism to a London school, at Birmingham University Reason Week and at the rally in defence of free speech. Anne Marie gave a talk on the burka at London's Conway Hall and debated on sharia law and women with a Muslim student group at Croydon College. She also spoke on our behalf at the Abortion Rights AGM.

**Staff sub-committee:** Ray Newton, Gerard Phillips and Clare Wadd

**Investment sub-committee:** Gerard Phillips, Clare Wadd and Keith Porteous Wood

**Committee to review the Articles:** Dan Bye, Elizabeth O'Casey, Afonso Reis e Sousa, and Terry Sanderson

## Honorary associates

Graham Allen MP  
Prof. Peter Atkins  
Lord Avebury  
Iain Banks  
Prof. Colin Blakemore  
Edward Bond  
Nick Brown MP\*  
Prof. Ted Cante CBE\*

Michael Cashman MEP  
Nick Cohen  
Prof. Richard Dawkins  
Lord Desai  
Angela Eagle MP  
James Fitzpatrick MP\*  
Michael Frayn\*  
Baroness Flather

Ricky Gervais  
Lord Goodhart QC  
Prof. A. C. Grayling  
Nia Griffith MP\*  
Dr. Evan Harris  
Patrick Harvie MSP  
Prof. Ted Honderich  
Mary Honeyball MEP

Kelvin Hopkins MP  
Virginia Ironside  
Dr Michael Irwin\*  
Prof. Steve Jones  
Baroness Kinnock  
Stewart Lee  
Graham Linehan



Nick Brown MP



Professor Ted Cante



Jim Fitzpatrick MP



Michael Frayn



Nia Griffith MP



## YOUR COUNCIL serving from 2011 AGM

### President

Terry Sanderson

### Vice presidents

Elizabeth O'Casey

Gerard Phillips (Chair of Council)

### Honorary treasurer

Clare Wadd

### Other council members

Norman Bonney

Dan Bye

Ray Newton

Afonso Reis e Sousa

Peter Revell

Robert Stovold

Adrian Tippetts

Peter Vlachos

Anne Marie Waters

At the 2011 AGM, honorary treasurer Stephen Dunkling and Martin Perry stood down; we thank both of them for their contribution.

New council members joining at 2011 AGM: Peter Revell, Adrian Tippetts, Anne Marie Waters and honorary treasurer Clare Wadd.



Terry Sanderson



Elizabeth O'Casey



Gerard Phillips



Clare Wadd



Norman Bonney



Dan Bye



Ray Newton



Afonso Reis e Sousa



Peter Revell



Robert Stovold



Adrian Tippetts



Peter Vlachos



Anne Marie Waters

Executive director: Keith Porteous Wood FCCA  
Campaigns manager: Stephen Evans

Baroness Massey of  
Darwen

Jonathan Meades

Sir Jonathan Miller

Baroness Murphy

Maryam Namazie

Taslima Nasrin

Lord O'Neill of  
Clackmannan

Lord Peston

Sir Terry Pratchett OBE

Philip Pullman

Martin Rowson

Joan Smith

Dr. David Starkey

Lord Taverne QC

Baroness Tonge\*

Polly Toynbee

Baroness Turner of  
Camden

Sophie in 't Veld MEP

Lord Warner of  
Brockley\*



Dr Michael Irwin



Baroness Tonge



Lord Warner

\*Honorary associates we have been pleased to welcome over the last year (all pictured, left)

## THANK YOU

**As a non-profit campaigning organisation, we are not eligible for charitable status – and neither seek nor receive funding from publicly-funded bodies. We are therefore reliant on members' subscriptions, donations and legacies to fund our campaigning work. We are immensely grateful for this support. The more generous it is, the more campaigning we can achieve.**

**The NSS would also like to thank everyone who has donated money in the last year or remembered us in their wills. If you would like to take out a direct debit or standing order (or increase an existing standing order), please contact the office. If you would like to leave a legacy to the NSS to help secure secularism for future generations, the executive director will be pleased to assist.**

There are many people who donate their time, expertise and advice to the NSS. Our volunteers assist us in campaigning, with office work and at our events.

We particularly grateful to the lawyers who worked for us *pro bono* on our European Court of Human Rights intervention. They are Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC, Dr Ronan McCrea and Max Schaefer.

We also thank Catriona Stirling, James Chegwidan, Christopher Smith, and Carla Revere for their legal assistance. Thanks also to Charlie Klendjian for his work with the Lawyers Secular Society, and Dr Antony Lempert for his with the Secular Medical Forum.

We are grateful to Bideford member Clive Bone who as our co-applicant at the High Court enabled us to pursue our judicial review into council prayers at the High Court.

Throughout the year Barry Thorpe has given his time to assist with research and his work is greatly appreciated.

We are immensely grateful for the work of Claudine Baxter, who regularly assists us with membership administration in the office.

Thanks also go to all of the volunteers who helped us at the Secular Conference and the AGM. Special thanks go to Shaun Joynson for his part in making the conference such a success.

Thanks also to all those who spoke at our events – Paul Blanchard, Prof Ted Cattle CBE, Nick Cohen, Sue Cox, Prof. Richard Dawkins, Nia Griffith MP, Maryam Namazie, Pragna Patel and Peter Tatchell.

We are very grateful to Trevor Aston, Tim Jones and Blue Popovic for photographing our events.

Thanks to James O'Malley and Liz Lutgendorff at the Pod Delusion for podcasting our events.

Thanks also to all those who run stalls at local events and get involved with campaigning on a local level as well as alerting us to issues.

We also thank Paul Blanchard for his media advice and training.

We are immensely grateful to Dr Michael Irwin for again sponsoring the £5,000 prize for Secularist of the Year. Thanks also to Stephanie Biber for sponsoring the £1,000 prize in memory of her father, Simon Biber.

## Lawyers Secular Society

An enjoyable autumn social event brought legal professionals of all specialisms from far and wide together to discuss matters of common interest and agree on strategies to work together to increase the secular voice in legal matters. If you would like to join or support the group or learn of future events, please email

[lawyers@secularism.org.uk](mailto:lawyers@secularism.org.uk)



## The Secular Medical Forum

The Secular Medical Forum is an autonomous group campaigning for a secular approach to current major health issues. If you would like to join or support the group please email

[antony@secularmedicalforum.org.uk](mailto:antony@secularmedicalforum.org.uk)



## Groups affiliated to the NSS

Bedfordshire Humanists; Belfast Humanist Group; Birmingham Atheist, Secular & Humanist Society; Birmingham Humanists; Bradford Atheist & Humanist Society; Brighton and Hove Humanist Society; Bristol Atheist Agnostic Secular Society; Bristol Secular Society; Cambridge University Atheist and Agnostic Society; Chester Humanists; Chiltern Humanists; Cornwall Humanists; Cotswold Humanists; Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists; Devon Humanists; East Kent Humanists; Essex Humanists; FLASH (Leicester Freethinkers); Greater Manchester Humanists; Hampstead Humanist Society; Humanist and Secularist Liberal Democrats; Humanist Society of West Yorkshire; Isle of Man Freethinkers; Kings College AHSS; Lancashire Secular Humanists; Leeds Atheist Society; Leicester Secular Society; LSE SU Atheist Secular Humanist Society; Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group; North East Humanists; North London Humanist Group; Nottingham Secular Society; NU-Think (Newcastle University Skeptics Society); Oxford Atheists, Secularists & Humanists; Oxford Humanists; Queen Mary Atheism Secularism and Humanism Society; Reading Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Society; Sheffield Humanist Society; South East London Humanist Group; South Hampshire Humanists; South Somerset Humanists; St. Andrews University Atheist Society; Suffolk Humanists and Secularists; Sutton Humanist Group; UCL Atheist, Secularist, and Humanist Society; University of Lincoln Secular Society; University of Nottingham Secular Society; Welsh Marches Humanist Group; West Glamorgan Humanist Group; West London Humanists and Secularists.

# BRITAIN'S ONLY ORGANISATION WORKING EXCLUSIVELY TOWARDS A SECULAR SOCIETY

## Join us

**If you believe, as we do, that a secular Britain is our best way to achieve true equality for all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs, then please join us and become part of what is possibly the most important debate of the 21st century. Together we can create a fairer and more equal society.**

You can join us online at [www.secularism.org.uk/join.html](http://www.secularism.org.uk/join.html) or by contacting the office at [admin@secularism.org.uk](mailto:admin@secularism.org.uk) or by calling **020 7404 3126**

Annual membership is £29, £17 for unwaged and £9 for students.

Joint membership, for two people at the same address, is £45 and overseas membership is £51.

“I joined the NSS because I believe in religious freedom and freedom from religion. I want Britain to be a forward-thinking, fair and rational place to live for everyone and for future generations.”  
— Richard, Southampton

“In our multi-faith society, secular values are for me more relevant than ever.”  
— Anne, Bradford

“I have come to appreciate that the NSS is often a lone voice of rationality in the wilderness that is dominated by religious dogma, bigotry and political manipulation.”  
— David, Shropshire

## NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY'S SECULAR CHARTER

The National Secular Society campaigns for a secular state, where:

- a) There is no established state religion.
- b) There is one law for all and its application is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.
- c) Individuals are neither disadvantaged nor discriminated against because of their religion or belief, or lack thereof.
- d) Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.
- e) Neither the state, nor any emanation of the state, expresses religious beliefs or preferences.
- f) Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment discrimination.
- g) The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
- h) Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion or belief.
- i) There is no privileged position in society or advantage in law for any individual or group by virtue of their religion or belief, or lack thereof.
- j) The state does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine or the running of religious organisations.



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