

Bulletin

national
secular
society

Issue 81 Summer 2022

challenging religious privilege

NORTHERN IRELAND: **LEADING THE WAY IN** **SECULAR EDUCATION?**

**NI ASSEMBLY BACKS
MORE INTEGRATED
SCHOOLS**

**TEACHERS IN NI TO
BE PROTECTED IN
EQUALITY LAW**

**NI POLITICIANS AND
ACADEMICS SPEAK OUT
AT NSS CONFERENCE**

**ALSO IN THIS
EDITION:**

■ Abortion
telemedicine
saved

■ Catholic school
slammed for
banning gay author

■ Nigerian humanist
imprisoned for
blasphemy



Separation of religion and politics is key to transforming Northern Ireland



“Despite recent advances, religion’s influence over the political and civil life of the country is still very much evident.”

Ten years ago, I was invited onto BBC Radio Ulster to discuss a National Trust decision to include references to creationism at its new Giant’s Causeway visitors’ centre in Northern Ireland. Scientific evidence suggests the famous Causeway stones were formed around 60 million years ago. Young earth creationists believe the Causeway was created just 6,000 years ago.

On the radio phone-in I said there was no problem with referencing the creationist view, but to suggest the formation of the volcanic columns was a matter of ‘ongoing debate’, as the National Trust had, was somewhat misleading. I was left bemused by a torrent of fury from fundamentalist Christians who called in to the phone-in show to put me straight.

Eventually, the National Trust amended the Causeway exhibit to give greater weight to the scientific view. But the whole episode provided an insight into the hold that fundamentalist religion still had over Northern Ireland.

Ten years on, there are significant

signs that religion’s stranglehold is loosening.

Two landmark education acts passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly give cause for optimism. The Integrated Education Act should pave the way for more children from Protestant, Catholic and other religion or belief backgrounds to be educated together. Meanwhile, the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act will end the blanket exception that allows schools to lawfully discriminate on the grounds of religious belief in the appointment of teachers. Both pieces of legislation were backed by the NSS.

Progress on integrated education has been painfully slow. At every step of the way the Roman Catholic Church and the Presbyterian Church, the largest Protestant denomination in Northern Ireland, have lobbied to protect their vested interests.

Despite recent advances, religion’s influence over the political and civil life of the country is still very much evident. The hand of fundamentalist religion can be felt in the Northern

Ireland Executive’s failure to roll out state-funded abortion services – leaving thousands of women having to travel unreasonable distances to access basic healthcare. Blasphemy and blasphemous libel remain criminal offences in Northern Ireland – the only part of the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland to have not yet repealed these laws. At the same time, over 90 per cent of school pupils remain divided along religious lines.

A greater separation of religion and politics is necessary to transform Northern Ireland into a freer, fairer, more tolerant, and rights-respecting country.

In this edition you’ll read about our work in trying to achieve this in Northern Ireland and across all parts of the UK.

With your support we’ll keep striving to ensure that religious power-seeking is kept in check, and we can all live in a society where no one else’s religious beliefs or practices influence how others must live their lives.

Christian charity reported for anti-vaccine memes

We made the headlines after reporting a Scottish Christian charity to the charity regulator OSCR for posting outrageous anti-vaccine and homophobic memes on Facebook.

East Kilbride Christadelphians made dozens of posts implying it is sinful to get a vaccine or wear a face covering.

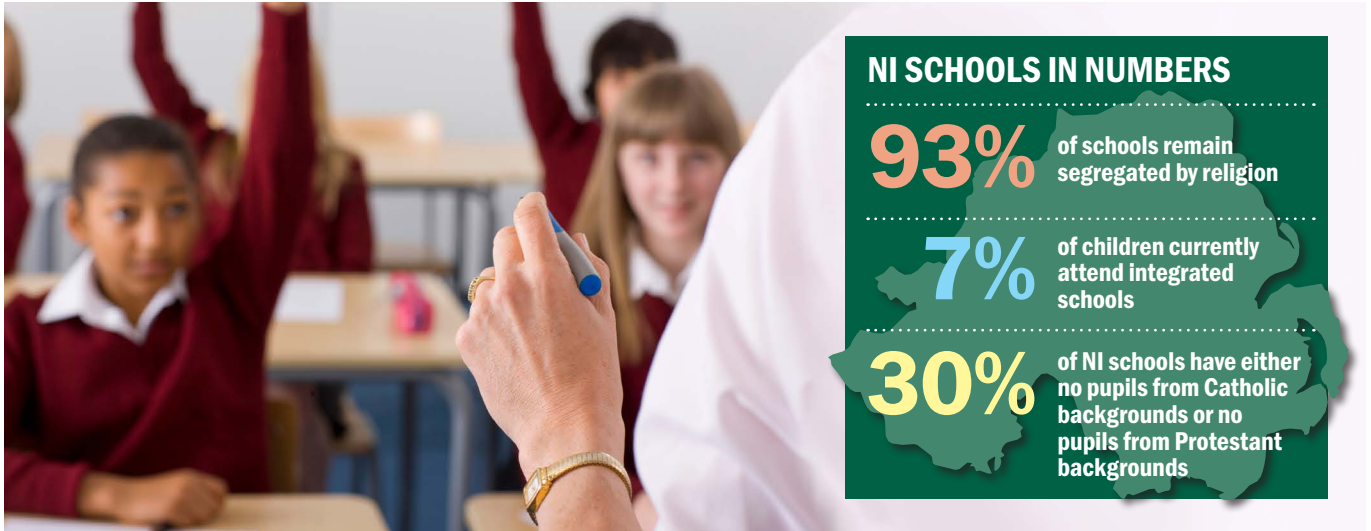
Another appeared to suggest Bible stories about God killing gay people should be taught to children as “LGBT history”.

Charities have a duty to serve a public benefit and to not cause harm. If the charitable purpose of ‘the advancement of religion’ can allow charities to easily promote messages that undermine public health and wellbeing, it must be called into question.

We hope OSCR will make it clear that ‘advancing religion’ isn’t a licence to spread harmful conspiracy theories and homophobia.



Significant progress for inclusive Education in Northern Ireland



The Northern Ireland Executive has passed two pieces of legislation that will hopefully pave the way for greater integration in the nation's schools.

The Integrated Education Act places a statutory duty on the Department of Education to provide further support to the integrated schools sector. Integrated schools educate pupils from Protestant, Catholic and all other backgrounds together in an inclusive approach.

This is sorely needed. Schools in

NI are notoriously segregated along religious lines, featuring alarming levels of religious discrimination and control even by UK standards.

Meanwhile, the Fair Employment (School Teachers) Act will end the religious exemption to anti-discrimination law in the recruitment of teachers. Previously, schools could select teachers according to their religious affiliation. But now, teachers in NI are in theory set to be better protected from religious discrimination than their counterparts in English, Welsh or Scottish faith schools.

Entrenched religious interests make reforms extremely difficult. We were therefore delighted to support the passage of these bills into law.

Broad, cross-community and

grassroots support for a more secular, integrated approach will hopefully bring about further reforms in the years to come.

Find out more and add your support to education reform in NI: secularism.org.uk/education/ni

NSS hosts inclusive education in Northern Ireland conference

In May we held an online conference to reflect on recent successes and discuss future challenges to a more secular education system in NI.

Our expert panel of academics, advocates and activists included Alliance MLA Kellie Armstrong; human rights lawyer Darragh Mackin; University of Ulster academic Dr Matthew Milliken; and sexual health charity worker, Megan Turner.

Campaigning against NI's blasphemy laws

Northern Ireland has the most restrictive speech laws in the UK. It's the only UK nation that retains blasphemy laws, and its highly subjective 'stirring up hate' offences criminalise "insulting" forms of expression deemed "likely" to stir up hatred or fear against particular groups.

And reforms to NI's hate crime laws proposed by the Department of Justice could make matters worse. They include expanding the 'stirring up' offences and removing the 'dwelling defence' protecting private speech within homes. We've warned the DoJ these reforms could further undermine free speech, and expressed disappointment that the reforms will not abolish the blasphemy laws.



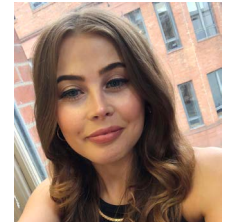
Alliance Party MLA Kellie Armstrong opened the conference with her account of how she succeeded in passing her integrated education legislation – despite strong opposition from all NI churches and unionist parties.



Dr Matthew Milliken spoke about the significant factors still driving religious segregation of teachers in NI.



Human rights lawyer Darragh Mackin discussed his work challenging compulsory collective worship and Christian bias in religious education in NI schools.



Megan Turner from sexual health advice charity Common Youth spoke about the need for inclusive, accurate and rights-based relationships and sex education (RSE) in schools.

"I believe in a shared society, where everyone is treated fairly and with respect."
KELLIE ARMSTRONG, MLA

Catholic school slammed for banning gay author

State-funded faith schools are permitted to teach about relationships and sex according to the tenets of their faith. We've long argued this conflicts with schools' duty to promote inclusivity, including of LGBT people. A widely-reported incident at a Catholic school in March may have proved our point.

Southwark Archdiocese instructed John Fisher School in Croydon, which it oversees, to cancel a visit by award-winning children's author Simon James Green (pictured). The diocese objected to the fact Green's books feature gay characters. But the school's leadership team decided to go ahead with the visit, with support from the governing body.

In response, the diocese sacked the governors supportive of the visit and attempted to unlawfully install a new governing body. A separate visit by Green to St John's Primary School in Gravesend, which is controlled by the same diocese, was also cancelled. The talk was to be about Green's books for younger children which contain no LGBT references.



"All I do with my books and school events is encourage reading for pleasure, acceptance of difference and celebrate being who we are."
SIMON JAMES GREEN

We've been backing Green throughout, raising the case in the media and with the Department for Education. The Secretary of State,

'Reconsider religious school funding' call after gay author's visit is cancelled

Our response was covered by *The Independent*

Nadhim Zahawi, has told us his department is "in the process of considering next steps" on the issue.

Meanwhile, National Education Union staff members at John Fisher School have held strikes to protest against the diocese's actions. Southwark Archdiocese was also criticised by Ofsted, which said its actions "unnerved and upset many in the school community".

Teachers' desires for their school to be an inclusive place of learning were brutally undermined by the diocese's religious agenda. This could lead to a chilling effect on other faith schools that want to be more inclusive. The only way to ensure such tensions do not arise again is for all state-funded schools to have an inclusive, secular, community ethos.

Greater powers to tackle illegal 'schools'

We've welcomed a bill that will give the government new powers to tackle 'schools' that are unregistered and therefore operate illegally.

The Schools Bill will:

- Give Ofsted more powers to crack down on unregistered schools.
- Establish compulsory registers for children not in school to ensure they receive adequate education.

We've long campaigned for these measures. Some religious groups operate unregistered schools in order to prioritise religious inculcation while avoiding scrutiny under the independent school standards.

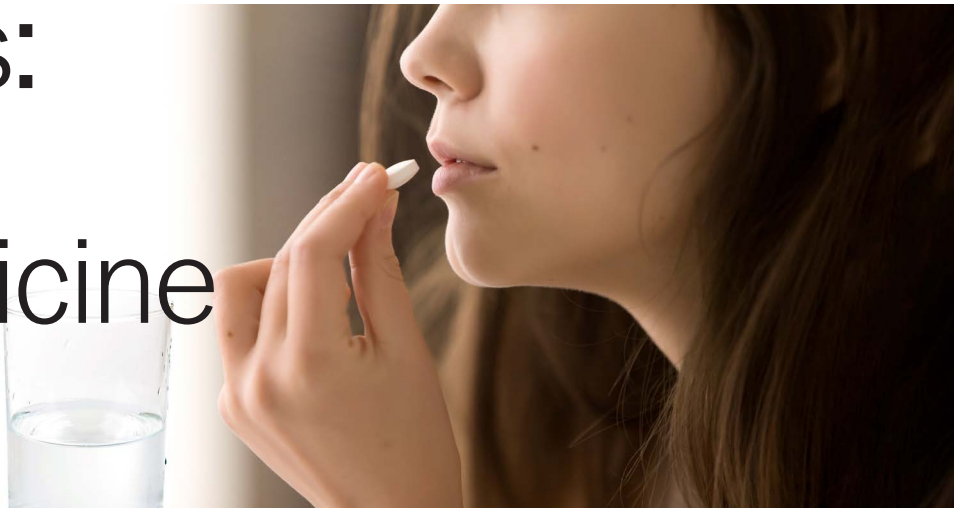
Unregistered schools expose children to harm, including unsafe conditions and corporal punishment. The most disturbing and shocking case involving an illegal school happened in May, when arrests were made over concerns that female genital mutilation had been taking place in an unregistered setting in Birmingham.

Children's rights raised at the UN

Faith schools, collective worship laws and unregistered schools were among the child rights issues we raised with the United Nations as part of the UN's universal periodic review process, which monitors the human rights records of all UN member states. Despite the UN repeatedly raising these issues, progress has been painfully slow – in part thanks to the institutional influence wielded by religious groups.

We also raised concerns about clerical child sexual abuse in Canada and Chile. These countries have demonstrated an unhealthy culture of acceptance of clerical child abuse, and in some cases of deference to religious institutions.

Success: Abortion telemedicine to stay



Startling news that the legal right to an abortion may be revoked in the US has naturally sparked fears over reproductive rights around the world. But in Britain, pro-choice campaigners have secured one victory that affords greater freedom and control to women over their reproductive health.

In 2020 the government relaxed rules to allow women to receive all medication by post for abortions before 10 weeks' gestation following a telephone consultation, instead of visiting a clinic. The initiative, prompted by the pandemic, was a success: it proved safe and effective, and a study published last year found that 80 per cent of women preferred telemedicine.

But in February, the government announced this policy would be scrapped in England. This followed intense lobbying from anti-abortion groups – including a direct intervention from the Church of England.

We joined forces with a number of medical organisations and women's rights campaigners backing proposals to make the 'pills by post' provisions

permanent. We wrote to health secretary Sajid Javid warning that religious ideology should not influence healthcare policies. We also signed a joint letter by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives and the British Medical Association to Boris Johnson, saying removing the service "would indicate a deep distrust of women and an institutional disregard for their reproductive rights".

And thankfully, in March MPs voted in favour of keeping the provision. The governments in Scotland and Wales have also said temporary arrangements allowing early abortions to be carried out at home will be made permanent.

This outcome represents a real step forward for improving women's reproductive rights and healthcare choices.

"I am pro-life: I am pro the people who live being able to make choices. I am incredibly pro-life – I am just also pro-choice. I hate the terminology that suggests somehow one side is pro-life; what is the alternative?"

JESS PHILLIPS MP, in support of keeping telemedicine for early abortions



UK Parliament (cropped)

Protecting women's rights from religious imposition

We've warned the Northern Ireland Executive that conservative religious teachings may play a role in abuse and violence against women and girls.

In response to a consultation, we said women and girls in conservative religious communities may be especially vulnerable to abuse due to religious teachings that subordinate women and impose strict gender roles. Furthermore, some forms of

violence against women and girls, including forced marriage, 'honour crimes', female genital mutilation and 'witchcraft' abuse, are directly linked to religion.

We also warned the requirement for schools in NI to develop relationships and sex education (RSE) curricula based on their religious ethos can result in schools teaching stigmatising ideas about

contraception, gender roles and same-sex relationships.

Meanwhile, the UK government reported on its consultation on women's health, which the NSS responded to last year. Respondents to the consultation included organisations and experts who said religious exemptions from sex education at schools should be removed to protect women's health.

Nigerian humanist sentenced to 24 years in prison for ‘blasphemy’

The Nigerian government has sparked worldwide outrage after sentencing a humanist to 24 years in jail for ‘blaspheming’ on social media.

Mubarak Bala (pictured), president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, was arrested in 2020 after a petition from a group of lawyers, sent to local police, said he called the Islamic prophet Muhammad “all sorts of denigrating names” on Facebook.

He was held without charge for 462 days and was denied access to a legal team for over five months. His court hearing had been subject to repeated adjournments.

At his trial in April, Bala pled guilty to the charges in court, which was not part of the agreed legal strategy. Humanists International, who have been campaigning for his freedom, said it is likely he was subjected to intimidation, and there have been unconfirmed reports of threats against his family members.

We’ve joined Humanists International’s campaign to release Bala, and in 2021 urged authorities

in Nigeria to release him after he had spent a year in detention. We also joined a protest organised by Humanists UK outside the Nigerian High Commission calling for his release (pictured).

Nigeria has some of the harshest blasphemy laws in the world. In some cases they may carry a death

penalty, which can also encourage mob violence against those perceived to have ‘blasphemed’. This is what happened to Nigerian student Deborah Yakubu who was brutally beaten to death by fellow students after objecting to Islamic evangelism on a WhatsApp group in May.

As long as blasphemy laws remain in place, we are likely to see more people brutally oppressed or even murdered for speaking their mind about religion.



Stephen Evans and Megan Manson from the NSS at the protest outside the Nigerian High Commission

BLASPHEMY LAWS AROUND THE WORLD

■ We wrote to the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office urging them to intervene in the case of an Ahmadi Muslim woman prosecuted for ‘blasphemy’ in Pakistan. Kaneez Bibi, 65, was arrested in February after a far-right Islamist political party spuriously accused her of destroying an anti-Ahmadi propaganda poster with verses from the Quran on it. Ahmadi Muslims face widespread discrimination and persecution in Pakistan.

■ In March we welcomed the release of Saudi secularist blogger Raif Badawi (pictured), who was jailed and flogged for “insulting Islam”. Badawi was sentenced to 10 years and 50 lashes a week for 20 weeks in 2014, after advocating an end to religious influence on public life in Saudi Arabia.



PEW International

DEFENDING FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF THOUGHT IN THE UK

■ We’ve said any reform to the Human Rights Act must not dilute freedom of religion or belief, in response to a Ministry of Justice consultation on proposals to replace the act with a “Bill of Rights”. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion must be carefully balanced as there is often a tension between the right to follow one’s religion and beliefs and the rights of others not to have those beliefs imposed on them. We’ve also said any proposed bill of rights must include explicit protection for

speech that “offends, shocks or disturbs” to prevent the introduction of a *de facto* blasphemy law.

■ We’ve expressed concerns about press regulator IMPRESS’s proposed revised standards code and guidance, as they would restrict free speech and distort reporting through pro-religion bias. We were particularly baffled that the guidance prevents publishers from saying female genital mutilation is a religious practice, but explicitly allows them to say groups such as gay people will “burn in Hell”.

A step forward to better marriage laws: outdoor weddings legalised

We've been campaigning to reform the unfair and restrictive laws governing weddings in England and Wales. Now the campaign has moved a step further, as a relaxation in the law allowing civil weddings to take place outdoors during the pandemic has been extended indefinitely. The government also plans to grant these provisions to religious weddings.

Previously, laws in England and Wales permitted weddings to take place only indoors at approved premises for civil ceremonies, or places of worship registered for marriage. The only exception was for Jewish and Quaker weddings, which for historical reasons can be held anywhere.

We've consistently backed proposals allowing outdoor civil and religious weddings as stepping stones towards broader reforms to wedding law that give all people, whatever their religion or belief, the same level of freedom to have a wedding that's right for them.

We've also backed proposals to enable non-religious 'belief marriages' and crack down on forced marriage in Northern Ireland.



CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY SUPPORTS "CLEAR LINES" BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE

A citizens' assembly on democracy convened by University College London's Constitution Unit indicated support for secular democracy among the UK public. According to their report published in April:

96%

agreed democracy should be underpinned by the principles that "there are clear lines between the church, state and judiciary" and that rules of law should apply equally.

70%

agreed no unelected bodies should make political or policy decisions.

98%

agreed democracy should be underpinned by freedom of thought and speech.

93%

agreed respect for the fundamental human rights of all people should underpin democracy.

Revised police guidance addresses NSS concerns

Following the murder of David Amess MP by an Islamist terrorist, parliamentarians attempted to enshrine the right of religious clerics to access crime scenes in law. This followed reports that a Catholic priest had attempted to access Amess to administer last rites but was denied entry to the crime scene by police.

We advised a joint working group on police guidance that police must not undermine priorities to protect the integrity of evidence and to safeguard public security at crime scenes. We also said it would be highly distressing for all involved if clerics were allowed on scene, but not family or friends.

The new guidance says priests and family members may be allowed to access a crime scene, but the decision maker "must balance medical and investigative priorities and requirements".

Religiously slaughtered meat supply outstrips demand

Animal welfare legislation requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter to minimise suffering. The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim religious dietary preferences for kosher and halal meat.

But the total meat supplied from non-stun religious slaughter methods is about four times greater than the proportion of Muslims and Jews in the UK, analysis by the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation found.

The total oversupply of non-stun meat could range between 32% to 278%. This represents between 34 and 99 million animals unnecessarily slaughtered without stunning each year.

At the same time, the government has backed an amendment to an animal welfare bill that compels advisors to respect "religious rites" when making recommendations on issues regarding animal welfare. The move has been welcomed by representatives of the kosher and halal industry as it could make it more difficult for the committee to recommend removing religious exemptions from slaughter regulations.

We think religious beliefs should not trump animal welfare law, and will continue to campaign for an end to religious exemptions from slaughter guidelines.

Secularist campaigner Pragna Patel to deliver Bradlaugh Lecture

We are delighted to welcome veteran campaigner and secularist advocate Pragna Patel as our guest speaker for the 2022 Bradlaugh Lecture, which will take place on **Saturday 1 October at Manchester Art Gallery.**

Named one of the top 100 Women Activists and Campaigners in 2011, Pragna was a founding member of Southall Black Sisters (SBS), established to defend the rights of black and minority women. Pragna and SBS have led campaigns against religious fundamentalism in the UK, including supporting Salman Rushdie during the 'Satanic Verses' affair.

In this talk, Pragna will reflect on her decades long work, which has required her to engage in a multi-directional struggle: a simultaneous resistance against all forms of oppression based on race, class and patriarchal and religious community norms strengthened by flawed state policies on multi-culturalism and multi-faithism. She will argue the denial of women's everyday struggles for freedom, secularism and human rights spells profound danger, not only for the lives of individual women, but for the survival of feminism and progressive politics itself.

Book your place at www.secularism.org.uk/bradlaugh-lecture-2022.html



WHY I SUPPORT THE NSS

"I want to live in a society where people are free to believe without fear, and where I can tell them that they're wrong without fear – or without being silenced by their claims of being offended."

"I long for a world where no child has to go to a faith school, or be prevented from learning about other faiths and worldviews. A world where children's curiosity is valued and they are encouraged to ask awkward questions and look for evidence."

SUE BLACKMORE,
British writer, lecturer,
sceptic and broadcaster



RECENT NSS EVENTS

■ In April we held a networking event at Toynbee Hall in London for activists, campaigners and members of the public from the Bengali diaspora (pictured). We discussed how to promote secularism in the face of increasing extremist religious identity politics within the community.

■ And in June we held an online discussion to launch a new NSS-supported report calling on the United Nations to protect all children from religious and cultural genital cutting.



Hello...

We're delighted to welcome **Buddha Halder** to the team. Buddha will be enhancing our digital communications and membership engagement.



...and goodbye

And we're saying farewell to our head of education and schools **Alastair Lichten**, who is moving on after eight years with the NSS. We wish him the best of luck for the future!



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