

Annual 2021 Report

OUR MISSION

The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state and equal respect for everyone's human rights so no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs.

THE SECULAR CHARTER

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

- There is no established state religion.
- Everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief.
- The judicial process is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.
- Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.
- Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum setting, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices.
- The state does not express religious beliefs or preferences and does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine.
- The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
- There is freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion.
- Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief.
- Individuals and groups are neither accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.

The absurdity of religious privilege in Britain has once again been thrown into sharp relief this year. Christian observance continues to plummet – but religious influence has been in the ascendant in parliament and government.

The requirement on schools to hold daily acts of worship, for example, has long been an anachronism. But this year the Department for Education warned that it would “investigate” schools which breached this duty. It is unacceptable for schools to impose such worship on pupils in the face of United Nations and human rights objections. We again made the case, on various fronts, for the repeal of the law which requires them to do so.

Another example of the government’s religious deference was hugely more troubling: its cowardice in failing to confront the bullies calling for the scalp of the teacher at Batley Grammar School who had shown cartoons of Mohammed to his class. The school’s treatment of the teacher (who is still in hiding, fearful of his life) was a disgraceful appeasement of the Islamist activists who had concocted this controversy. This appeasement extended to a subsequent inquiry from the trust behind the school. No doubt the leadership feared doing otherwise risked the school’s future.

Throughout the process, we urged the DfE to show some national leadership and act to defend freedom of expression. But ministers meekly accepted a capitulation which has deeply damaging implications for liberal principles. And such was the terror this topic caused among politicians, that in a by-election soon afterwards not one candidate of any major party made a meaningful defence of freedom of expression.

The same few rabble rousers seen in previous education disputes in Birmingham and elsewhere called the shots. The government’s continued silence has resulted in this tiny band of extremists *de facto* re-introducing and expanding the blasphemy law, which was abolished in 2008 after more than a century of the NSS arguing for it. And the lives of the teachers concerned have been irreparably damaged.

Another cause for concern is the opening of yet more sectarian faith schools in England and Wales, with government backing – despite church attendance among the

young outside school hours being minimal. This year our research showed how baseless the common claims made for faith schools are, and how academisation is enabling greater religious control of schools in England. We also showed how many families are effectively forced into faith schools and made the case against publicly funded school inspections which are carried out by religious groups.

There were more encouraging signs from Northern Ireland, where an independent review will consider moving towards a more inclusive education system. That’s a necessary ambition in a country where over 90% of pupils attend religiously segregated schools. And in Wales, pupils will have access to a more pluralistic and objective education on religion and belief – a development which should prompt questions across the rest of the UK.

Meanwhile a procession of damning reports on endemic child sexual abuse in religious settings, and the failure to deal adequately with it, come so regularly they barely make news. Such is the power of these organisations – in Britain and abroad – that criminality has flourished with impunity. Mandatory reporting of abuse must be codified and diligently

enforced. It is the very least that victims deserve.

On a more positive note, it was a significant milestone to hold this year’s Bradlaugh Lecture in Manchester’s delightful art gallery, after we were unable to host any in-person events for more than a year. This year former prosecutor Nazir Afzal delivered the lecture and our delayed 2020 talk, online, was from Geoffrey Robertson QC. Both were wonderful lectures.

And once again I would like to express my gratitude, and that of the NSS’s council, to our members. Organised religion continues to hold a strong grip on political power in Britain, but your support enables us to continue the vitally important work of pushing back against it. Thank you.



THE FAITH SCHOOLS RESEARCH BANK

In February we published the Faith Schools Research Bank – a substantial new analysis of academic research which highlighted significant and myriad weaknesses in the arguments for state-funded faith schools.

The bank, which will continue to be expanded as further evidence emerges, has already brought together evidence from almost 200 sources.

It outlines evidence in five key areas: social cohesion; performance and selection; choice and admissions; values and morality; and opinion polls.

We also held a launch event in April with one of the co-authors of the report, Steven Kettell of the University of Warwick.

The research deconstructs the common claims that faith schools are socially beneficial, provide a superior moral foundation for children and improve choice.

THE RESEARCH SHOWS THAT FAITH SCHOOLS...

- Undermine social cohesion
- Claim educational advantages which are accounted for by pupil intake
- Undermine choice for many families
- Push values which often clash with equality
- Aren't popular



EXPOSING THE CHOICE DELUSION

We again helped to show the flaws in the claim that faith schools enable greater parental choice.

We found that three in ten families in England have little choice but a faith school at primary level, and thousands were forced into faith schools against their parents' preferences this September.

Our research also broke the figures down by local authority, providing an unprecedented level of detail. It was covered nationally, in *iNews* (*pictured*), and in the local press in Wigan, Ilford, Bradford and Torbay. We also used the research to lobby policymakers.

Addressing our concerns in parliament, the government admitted that it had no estimate of how many children are effectively forced into faith schools, or left unable to attend their local school because of religious discrimination.

Faith schools: Three in 10 families have little choice but a religious school, study finds

EXCLUSIVE

In some local authorities, including Westminster, Wigan, Dorset and Rutland, more than 60 per cent of all schools are faith schools

RESISTING PLANS FOR NEW FAITH SCHOOLS

We continued to work in local communities to argue against plans for new faith schools this year – as the government and some local authorities continued to approve them.

We argued against plans to open a new voluntary aided (VA) Church of England school in Kingston-upon-Thames, which gained approval from the Department for Education and then the local council.

VA faith schools can enforce a particularly exclusive religious ethos. This school is due to discriminate on religious grounds in a third of admissions if it's oversubscribed, and be able to increase that proportion at will.

This year plans to open new C of E schools also moved forward in Hartlepool, Wingerworth in Derbyshire, and Conningbrook Park, near Ashford in Kent.

Meanwhile, our head of education Alastair Lichten gave 15 talks to local groups around the country promoting our No More Faith Schools campaign this year.

SCRAP RELIGIOUS SCHOOL INSPECTIONS

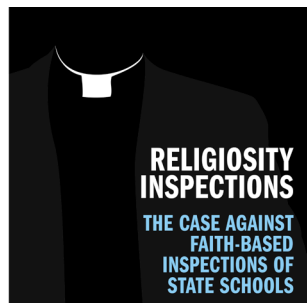
We made the case against publicly-funded inspections of state schools in England and Wales which are carried out by religious groups.

Our report, *Religiosity inspections: the case against faith-based reviews of state schools*, showed how the inspections give religious groups undue influence over children's education.

These inspections are legally required under sections 48 and 50 of the Education Act 2005, and are often known as SIAMS inspections.

Our report featured case studies, a review of academic literature and an in-depth analysis of SIAMS reports.

Our findings were reported in *iNews* and raised in parliament.



“After each SIAMS, a shift was happening. A lengthy end of the day prayer was added... Some staff found it difficult to separate their personal faith from lessons; or didn't seem to understand that being a 'church school' shouldn't mean proselytising.”

A TEACHER QUOTED IN THE REPORT

Key findings

We found that faith bodies use these inspections to promote their own interests and exert influence over the way education is provided.

The inspection reports we studied tended to frame widely held values as uniquely or fundamentally Christian – and most urged schools to be more explicit about this.

The inspections also promoted faith bodies' theological and evangelical approaches to RE and collective worship, while the reports tended to conflate successful RE with the promotion of Christian viewpoints.

KEY ARGUMENTS: RELIGIOSITY INSPECTIONS...

- Are educationally inappropriate
- Conflate religiosity with commonly shared values
- Divert public money
- Prioritise faith promotion
- Place an unnecessary burden on schools
- Mean publicly-funded schools are held to different standards

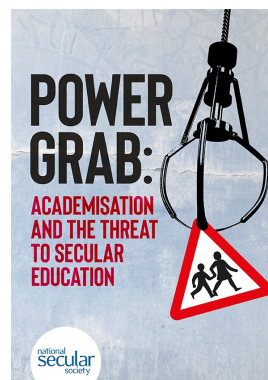
ACADEMISATION ENABLING GREATER RELIGIOUS CONTROL OF SCHOOLS

We revealed that religious groups are taking advantage of opportunities provided by academisation to extend their control over thousands of schools in England – including many which nominally have no religious character.

Our report, *Power grab: Academisation and the threat to secular education*, found that academisation has seriously undermined community ethos education in several ways.

The report also outlined a series of steps which ministers could take to protect the ethos of secular schools.

After publishing the report we met with Department for Education officials to urge them to take these steps.



“With little public attention or debate, large swathes of the education system have come under religious governance, at a time when secular oversight has diminished. Schools should be run by and in the interests of school communities, not faith interest groups.”

OUR POWER GRAB REPORT

RE REFORM SECURED IN WALES

A major reform of the teaching of religion and belief was passed into law in Wales this year – representing a significant step in the right direction, following years of NSS campaigning.

The reform came as part of a new skills-based curriculum which will apply from 2022.

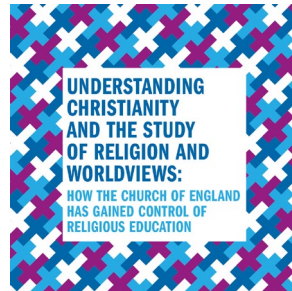
It will require secularism to be taught as a key concept and introduce a more objective way of learning about religion and belief. The new subject of religion, values and ethics (RVE) will replace religious education.

All children will have access to a more pluralistic and objective RVE curriculum. But faith schools will be required to offer it only as an option, for families who request it in place of faith-based RVE, meaning it risks being undervalued there.

Research highlights religious control of RE

Meanwhile we published an academic study which showed how the Church of England's theological approach to RE inappropriately dominates the subject in England.

Understanding Christianity and the study of religion and worldviews, by former RE teacher Chris Selway, was funded through our scholarship programme.



END COMPULSORY WORSHIP IN SCHOOLS

There were significant developments on collective worship in schools this year, as we continued to apply pressure for the repeal of laws requiring acts of worship.

We briefed peers ahead of a Lords debate on the subject after a private member's bill was introduced to parliament. A majority of peers then backed the bill, with several speakers articulating the concerns we'd raised.

The bill would end the requirement for non-faith schools in England and Wales to hold acts of worship, and replace them with inclusive assemblies.

We also raised the issue in a submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The committee then asked the UK government what steps it was taking to repeal laws requiring worship in schools.

Call for repeal, not enforcement

In contrast, the government suggested it would "investigate" schools which breached the collective worship law in England.

The Department for Education also told us it was "not permissible" for schools to replace their legal duty to provide religious worship with non-religious assemblies.

For years many schools have disregarded the law with the tacit acceptance of the government and inspectors – but the DfE's position suggests the potential for a tightening of enforcement.

55%

of Brits think teaching religious studies is not important

Only three out of 18 subjects are regarded as less important

(Source: YouGov)



“With this bill we have an opportunity to help all children, regardless of their background, to feel included and welcomed in the community of their school.”

LORELY BURT, THE PEER WHO PROPOSED THE BILL

RESISTING RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE IN HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION

We drew attention to the phenomenon of 'faith universities' and pushed back against Church of England efforts to gain influence in further education colleges, in two published opinion pieces (*pictured*).

In a piece for *Times Higher Education*, Keith Sharpe of our Secular Education Forum (SEF) argued that churches' control of 15 universities in the UK enables discrimination and undermines academic freedom.

He also warned that the Church of England appears keen to take the universities it controls in a religiously subservient direction.

“Publicly funded institutions of higher education should be governed and managed in the public interest, not in the interest of churches and the dogmas they seek to promulgate.”

KEITH SHARPE ON FAITH UNIVERSITIES, IN *TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION*

C of E further education plans

Keith and Chris Higgins – also of the SEF – issued a similar warning in a piece for *FE Week*. They responded to C of E plans on FE – an area where the church has historically had little involvement.

The church published a report entitled *Vocation, Transformation and Hope*, which was largely focused on what it could do to increase its membership among FE students.

That followed another C of E report on higher education, which said education and wisdom are achieved by “aligning all our ways – of thinking, acting, belonging – with those of God”.

Faith universities are an anachronism

Churches' grip on former religious teacher training colleges is incompatible with their remit as publicly funded universities, says Keith Sharpe

**The Church of England
offensive in FE colleges
must be resisted**

FE WEEK

THE

SIGNS OF PROGRESS FOR EDUCATION IN NI

We began making the case once more for substantial and necessary reform of education in Northern Ireland, as a major independent review prepared to get underway.

We outlined the key steps which are needed to roll back religious control of schools in NI and tackle the segregation and discrimination which are embedded in the education system. These will inform our response to the review.

This year we backed several campaigns for integrated education, which would bring together children regardless of their religious background.

And in September Seaview Primary School in Glenarm, in County Antrim (*pictured*), became the first Catholic school to reopen as an integrated one.



Image via Facebook

UPHOLDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN INDEPENDENT FAITH SCHOOLS

We continued to hold independent faith schools to account where they failed to uphold children's right to a broad and balanced education.

We helped to expose two schools which were teaching creationism as science and another which had a book in its library calling for gay people to be killed.

More than
nine in ten
children in NI attend schools
which are *de facto* segregated
on religious lines



Danny Lawson/PA Wire/PA Images

THE BATLEY GRAMMAR SAGA

This year brought a vicious campaign against a teacher who showed a cartoon of Islam's prophet Muhammad in class, with significant consequences for teachers' ability to do their jobs.

In March protesters gathered outside Batley Grammar School in West Yorkshire after the teacher used the cartoon in a religious studies lesson about blasphemy.

The school immediately apologised for the use of the cartoon; suspended the teacher, quickly followed by two of his colleagues; and promised to review its curriculum.

Politicians and public figures wrung their hands over the decision to show the cartoon, while the teacher faced threats and was driven into hiding.

From the start, we played a leading role in pushing back and standing up for freedom of expression in the classroom. As the row generated significant coverage and attention, we were widely quoted and featured on several news shows.

Fallout

The trust behind the school then launched an independent investigation – which it said would examine how the cartoon “came to be used”.

We put substantial pressure on the Department for Education to show some leadership, avoid ceding power to outraged Muslim ‘community leaders’, and ensure this episode didn’t undermine the freedom to teach. Our criticism was reported in *The Telegraph*.

The local investigation then said Muhammad cartoons wouldn’t be used again – imposing a *de facto* blasphemy code on the school. And the DfE meekly accepted this, in a capitulation which sent a chilling message to teachers who try to confront challenging topics in classrooms across the country.

“Teachers must have a reasonable degree of freedom to explore sensitive subjects and enable students to think critically about them. The school's weak response will fuel a climate of censorship, which is brought on by attempts to force society as a whole to accommodate unreasonable and reactionary religious views.”

OUR CEO STEPHEN EVANS'S RESPONSE AS THE STORY BROKE

This was just the latest example of ministers failing to stand up to reactionary religious protesters who attempt to impose unreasonable demands on schools.

The saga also came just a few months after a particularly brutal and shocking episode from across the Channel. In October 2020 the teacher Samuel Paty (*pictured*) was beheaded in France after showing a *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon in class.



So the last 12 months have provided another sobering reminder of the fragility of free speech on religion – and the vital role we have to play in defending it.

KEY AMENDMENTS SECURED IN SCOTTISH HATE CRIME BILL

A hate crime bill became law in Scotland after passing its final vote at Holyrood in May.

Scots could now be subject to prosecution if their behaviour is deemed “threatening or abusive” and intended to stir up hatred on various grounds.

We’re concerned that this will chill free speech on religion – but our lobbying helped to secure several key amendments which will go a long way towards protecting freedom of expression.

They included a test that a “reasonable person” must judge behaviour to be “abusive”, and that the prosecution must demonstrate intent in order to secure a conviction.

Crucially, an amendment also protects expressions of “antipathy, dislike, ridicule or insult” towards religion from the scope of the act.

We played a major part in a prolonged effort to defend free speech throughout the bill’s passage through parliament – as also highlighted in the 2020 annual report.

In the last months before the bill passed, our efforts included giving oral and written evidence to the Scottish parliament’s justice committee.



NAZIR AFZAL DELIVERS BRADLAUGH LECTURE

It was a big relief to host our first in-person event since early 2020 in September, as the former prosecutor Nazir Afzal delivered our 2021 Bradlaugh Lecture at Manchester Art Gallery.

Nazir, who worked as the chief crown prosecutor for the north-west of England, reflected on a range of significant moments from his career, including:

- Bringing prosecutions of 'grooming gangs' in Rochdale.
- Prosecuting the killers of Banaz Mahmood, a young British-Iraqi woman who was murdered in an honour killing in 2006.
- Being placed on an al-Qa'eda 'death list', after prosecuting those calling for the beheading of those who insult Islam on the grounds of inciting murder.

He also addressed subjects including:

- Forced marriage, honour-based violence and child sexual abuse.
- The abuse which Muslims often face, the racism which he faced growing up in Birmingham, and far right efforts to delegitimise his work.
- Home schooling, relationships and sex education, and safeguarding in the Catholic Church.

ON THE MURDER OF BANAZ MAHMOOD:

“It could have all been avoided if people had done their job.”

ON 'COMMUNITY LEADERS':

“Why does every agency and authority want to meet with community leaders?... Because the alternative would be to go anywhere where people congregate, and have proper conversations... I've wasted plenty of time talking to community leaders who lead nobody.”

ON THOSE IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY WHO CONSIDER IT 'TOO DIFFICULT' TO TACKLE THE ISSUES HE RAISED:

“It's only too difficult because you don't try it. It's only too difficult because you're quite lazy.”

Nazir Afzal stands in front of Walter Sickert's portrait of Charles Bradlaugh at Manchester Art Gallery

LAUNCH EVENT FOR HOLYOAKE BIOGRAPHY

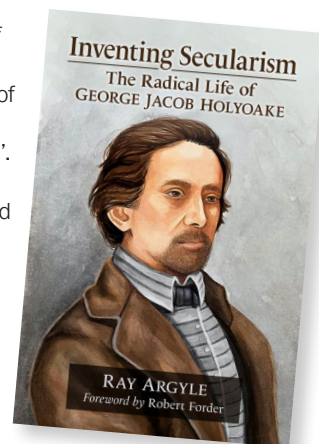
In April we hosted an online book launch for *Inventing Secularism: the radical life of George Jacob Holyoake*, by Ray Argyle.

The book is the first modern biography of Holyoake, the 19th-century radical who's credited with coining the term 'secularism'.

Ray had a wide-ranging conversation with our podcast producer Emma Park and read from a section of his book. Our council member and historian Bob Forder also introduced Ray, Holyoake and the book.

“His vision, I think, rings more true than ever... We need to do better, and the legacy of George Holyoake encourages us to do so.”

RAY ARGYLE ON HOLYOAKE



OUR FIRST VIRTUAL AGM

The Covid pandemic forced us to make new arrangements for our AGM in November 2020. We were able to hold the event online for the first time.

DISESTABLISH THE C OF E, SAYS GEOFFREY ROBERTSON

Our 2020 Bradlaugh Lecture was delayed by Covid, but as the year drew to an end we had the privilege of hosting human rights barrister Geoffrey Robertson in an online lecture.

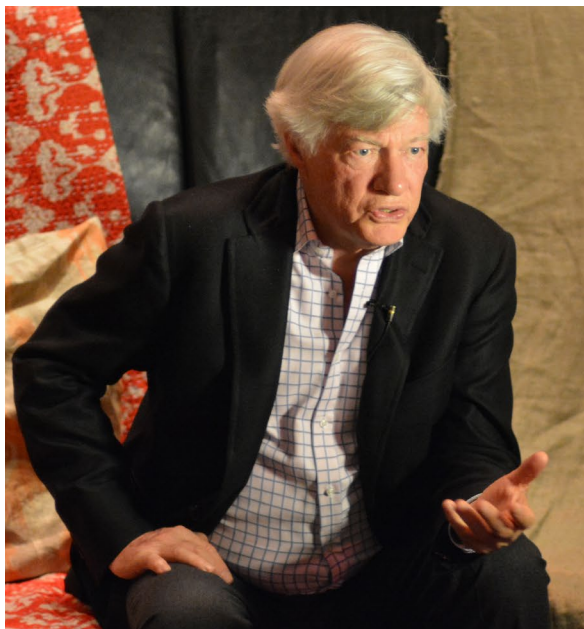
His talk, *The ultimate blasphemy: disestablishing the Church of England*, made the case for severing the formal ties between church and state.

He called for the end of the lords spiritual – the 26 places automatically reserved for C of E bishops in the House of Lords – and questioned the monarch’s role as head of the church.

He addressed issues including the C of E’s failure to deal with child abuse and its bishops’ hostility to women’s rights, same-sex marriage and the decriminalisation of assisted dying.

His lecture covered the historical background behind the church’s establishment and the blasphemy law. He also reflected on his own role in the famous *Gay News* blasphemy trial in the 1970s and resisting an attempt to prosecute Salman Rushdie over *The Satanic Verses*.

And he paid tribute to the battles fought in the 19th century by Charles Bradlaugh, the NSS’s founder whose name was given to the lecture.



“I was hired by the British Board of Film Censors for an opinion on whether *The Life of Brian* was blasphemous... I said it wasn’t because, of course, Brian was not the messiah – he was a very naughty boy.”

ON MAKING A LIVING BY ADVISING ON BLASPHEMY IN THE 1970S

“These bishops are given a privileged place in our legislature. Would we miss them if the church was disestablished? I don’t think so.”

ON THE LORDS SPIRITUAL

“It is quite extraordinary, isn’t it? This king comes forth as bound only by the unknowable laws of god, and a full-blooded devotion to the doctrines and teachings of the Church of England.”

ON THE OATHS WHICH PRINCE CHARLES IS SET TO SWEAR AT HIS CORONATION

THIS YEAR...

53%

of the British public opposed bishops in the Lords

Just
20%

said being a Christian was
“important for being truly British”

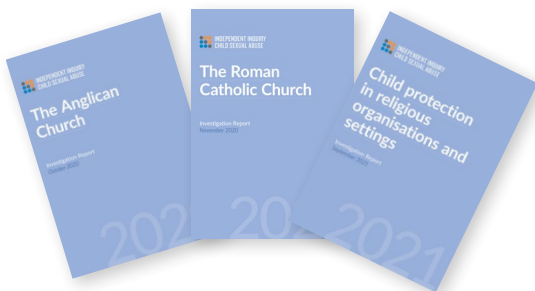
Fewer than
2%

of people in England regularly worshipped at C of E churches

(Sources: YouGov, Gallup, C of E statistics for mission)

MANDATORY REPORTING NEEDED AFTER RELIGIOUS FAILURES ON CHILD ABUSE

This year the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse released its findings into the handling of abuse in the Church of England, the Catholic Church, and a range of other religious organisations and settings.



“The culture of the Church of England facilitated it becoming a place where abusers could hide.”

[REPORT ON THE C OF E](#)

“Child sexual abuse was swept under the carpet. Resistance to external intervention was widespread.”

[REPORT ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH](#)

“We have seen egregious failings by a number of religious organisations.”

[REPORT ON RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS AND SETTINGS](#)

The reports highlighted far-reaching failures and a pattern of religious groups prioritising their own reputations above children’s interests. Deference to the authority of religious organisations and leaders was another common barrier to disclosure.

Religious groups’ failures on abuse have helped to show the need for a law mandating the reporting of suspected abuse – without religious exemptions – and the independent oversight of religious groups’ safeguarding arrangements.

In his professional role as a lawyer representing victims of abuse at the inquiry, our vice-president Richard Scorer continued to work tirelessly to secure such change.

We also helped to highlight criticism of the inquiry for being too deferential in some instances, particularly in the case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

CALL FOR LEGAL REFORM ON ASSISTED DYING AND MORE

We urged the Law Commission to draft a framework for assisted dying, to guide potential legislation, after the commission asked what should be included in its latest programme of legal reforms.

Our call came as a bill to legalise assisted dying was set to receive its second reading in the Lords.

We also urged the commission to consider:

- Laws requiring collective worship in schools.
- The provision in charity law which makes ‘the advancement of religion’ a charitable purpose in its own right.
- The lack of effective protection for boys in laws on genital cutting.
- The religious exemption to animal welfare laws that allows non-stun slaughter.

GIVE COUPLES MORE FREEDOM OVER WHERE THEY MARRY

We continued to press for change to wedding law in England and Wales after the Law Commission published encouraging proposals for modernisation.

The commission’s proposals would include the introduction of an officiant-based system for the legal recognition of marriage, to replace the restrictive current building-based system.

The change would mean more couples could legally marry outdoors if they chose to do so, and would be in line with existing law in Scotland.

We lobbied the commission in support of the proposals.

We continued to argue that couples should have greater freedom and flexibility over their wedding ceremonies, and a law that is still fundamentally structured around Christian wedding ceremonies in places of worship should be overhauled.

Only
one in five
marriages in England & Wales
was religious in 2018

(Source: Office for National Statistics – revealed in 2021)

WOMEN'S HEALTH: ALLOW ABORTIONS AT HOME PERMANENTLY



We called for measures allowing women to have early medical abortions at home, which were introduced as a response to Covid, to be made permanent.

We responded to consultations on the future of policy in England, Wales and Scotland. We also added our name to an open letter to ministers, coordinated by the reproductive healthcare charity BPAS, which made a similar call.

We also expressed support for proposals to allow the supply of the 'mini-pill' in pharmacies in response to another consultation. We said this would make it easier for women and girls from religious communities which disapprove of contraception to access it. The proposals have now been taken forward and the mini pill is available to buy over the counter.

“The primary consideration in any changes to abortion law should be the safety and welfare of women seeking abortion services... Religious ideology should not be permitted to determine healthcare policies.”

OUR SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Meanwhile there was continued wrangling in Northern Ireland as the UK government decided to direct NI's Department of Health to commission abortion services. We continued to argue that women in Northern Ireland should have the same abortion rights as those elsewhere in the UK.

Government commits to 'virginity testing' ban

The government also brought forward plans to ban 'virginity testing' after we recommended it as part of our submission to a proposed strategy for women's health in England.

Our submission warned that women in religious communities often face significant barriers to accessing information and education relevant to their health.

WORKING TO END 'CONVERSION THERAPY'

We responded to a consultation from the Scottish government on 'conversion therapy'.

We said the government should legislate against forced conversion therapy, including any attempts on those under 18.

We also recommended that:

- Those harmed by conversion therapy should be able to seek proper redress.
- Ministers should formulate a “clear definition” of conversion therapy.
- The law should be “proportionate” and “prioritise individual human rights”, but shouldn't include any blanket religious exemptions.

We said it should be a criminal offence for healthcare professionals to practise, promote or make a referral for conversion therapy.

We also called for wider changes in charity law and education to tackle religious homophobia – and made a similar case in response to an LGBTQ+ action plan from the Welsh government.

Meanwhile the UK government said it would lay out plans on conversion therapy after a public consultation.

HOLDING RELIGIOUS CHARITIES TO ACCOUNT

We continued to hold unscrupulous religious charities to account this year.

We prompted an investigation into a charity which promoted deeply misogynistic messages on its website, including in a leaflet which explicitly blamed women's fashion choices for rape.

The website of Holiness Revival Movement Worldwide Europe – also known as Horemow Europe – also carried lengthy tirades against women who wear trousers.

Homophobic charities

In January we exposed a newly-registered Islamic charity which had carried homophobic and misogynistic lectures on its website.

One lecture said same-sex attraction was “a disease” which “needs to be cured”. Another said it was acceptable for a husband to “punish” his wife if she challenged his authority, provided he didn’t “leave any sign of wound” on her.

In March we revealed that the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland had refused to take action against Core Issues Trust, a Christian organisation which promotes “change orientated therapy” for gay people.

Our revelations in both cases prompted widely-shared coverage in *Pink News*.

Misleading on Covid

We also urged the Charity Commission for England and Wales to look into the relationship between a Christian charity and a TV channel which repeatedly broadcast misleading statements about the Covid pandemic.

Meanwhile the regulator appointed an interim manager to another Christian charity whose bishop sold bogus ‘plague protection kits’ during the pandemic, after we’d raised concerns in 2020.

Why do religious groups that spout vile views while doing no public good get charitable status?

Can it still be argued that promoting religion is a public benefit?

Mirror

Our findings on Horemow Europe were reported in the *Mirror*

PROTECTING SECULAR PUBLIC SERVICES

We pushed for the protection of secular public services as the government looked to form closer partnerships with religious groups.

The government launched a review of its engagement with faith organisations in England, which appeared designed to reach a conclusion that would please religious interest groups.

We urged ministers to pause and re-launch a consultation on the review, to ensure the public was fairly and impartially consulted.

INTERNATIONAL WORK

In various submissions to United Nations officials this year, we highlighted human rights concerns including:

- Barriers to freedom of thought.
- The need to protect victims of caste discrimination in the UK.
- The role of conservative and fundamentalist religion in ongoing anti-LGBT laws in former British colonies.

Meanwhile the UN Human Rights Committee pushed Ireland to act over accountability for human rights violations in religious settings and access to secular schools. The committee highlighted several concerns which we’d raised in a submission.

We also urged the authorities in the UK and abroad to take action in several human rights cases.

And we joined the UK freedom of religion or belief forum. This brings together civil society groups, faith or belief organisations, and human rights NGOs to advance the cause of freedom of religion or belief around the world.

We backed campaigns to secure the freedom and safety of ex-Muslim campaigner Zara Kay (left), who was arrested on politically motivated charges in Tanzania, and Maira Shahbaz. Maira had fled into hiding after being abducted, raped, and forced to convert to Islam and marry one of her abductors, and a court ordered her to return to him



© Zahra Abbas Parviani [CC BY-SA 4.0], via Wikimedia Commons

PRESS COVERAGE THIS YEAR

Government has 'washed its hands' of teacher who showed Mohammed pictures

Ministers urged to step in to ensure imams do not 'unduly influence' investigation into Batley Grammar Religious Studies tutor

The Telegraph

UK-based Muslim charity hosts sermons insisting gay people are diseased and need to be cured

PinkNews

Ministers have been urged to act over a private Christian school teaching creationism in science classes

EXCLUSIVE

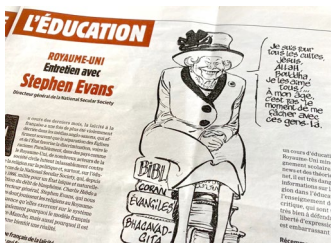
The Vine Christian School declares on its website that 'science is taught from the Biblical perspective of creation'



Our work on issues including free speech, education and religious charities continued to gain coverage in the national, local and special interest press



Our CEO Stephen Evans addressed issues including the constitutional privileges granted to Christianity and the Batley Grammar affair in TV and radio appearances this year



CHARLIE HEBDO

Charlie Hebdo interviewed Stephen about secularism in Britain, in an edition to mark the sixth anniversary of the 2015 attack on its staff

OUR PODCAST

We published 24 more episodes of our podcast this year. A range of well-informed and often high-profile guests have explored topics including:

- Secularism internationally, including in America, France and Hungary, and the Catholic Church's role in the Canadian residential schools scandal.
- Education, including an in-depth look at the campaign against the first state-funded Catholic school to open in England for a decade and a response to the Batley Grammar affair.
- The difficulties of challenging deeply insular religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.
- The early history of secularism and the long history of religious obstruction to campaigns for LGBT rights.

We also launched a new series, Opinion Out Loud, which features some of our opinion pieces in audio form. We published 12 audio blogs this year.



Our podcast presenter and producer Emma Park

“If we cannot continue to inform, and sometimes to laugh about what scares us, then we are lost.”

FORMER CHARLIE HEBDO JOURNALIST CAROLINE FOUREST, IN EPISODE 51, ON LAÏCITÉ AND FREE SPEECH IN FRANCE

2021 IN NUMBERS

We appeared in the press

118 times

37,700 people follow us on Twitter

19,485 people follow us on Facebook

COUNCIL



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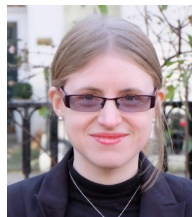
STAFF



Stephen Evans
Chief executive officer



Alastair Lichten
Head of education



Megan Manson
Head of policy and
research



Helen Nicholls
Head of operations



Chris Sloggett
Head of communications

THANKS

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Keith Sharpe, Chair of the Secular Education Forum and all forum members. Special thanks to Christopher Higgins and John Mapperley for their work on education.

Sadikur Rahman, Chair of the Secular Legal Forum and all forum members.

Antony Lempert, Chair of the Secular Medical Forum and all forum members.

Afonso Reis e Sousa and Peter Revell, who will be retiring from Council at the AGM. Both are longstanding council members who have made valuable contributions to the NSS. We thank them for their dedication and service.

If you are interested in volunteering, please see secularism.org.uk/work-with-us for more information.

AFFILIATED GROUPS

We would like to thank our affiliated groups for their support. Affiliated groups are independent of the NSS. Any group that supports the NSS can apply for group membership. Please see secularism.org.uk/groups for more information.

We would like to thank all the groups who have hosted NSS speaking engagements. If your group would like to request an NSS speaker, please email membership@secularism.org.uk



Leicester Secular Society had a stall at Leicester Pride

MEMBERS

We would like to thank our members for their support. The pandemic has limited our opportunities to engage with members in person, but we were pleased to host a successful online 'meet the team' event this year and we hope to have more events in 2022.

We would especially like to thank those members who have donated or remembered us in their wills. If you have any questions on membership, donations or legacies, please contact membership@secularism.org.uk.

WHY SUPPORT THE NSS?

“It is very important to me that there is a separation between church and state and that there are no privileges or discrimination for those with a faith or those with none.”

RICHARD, BRISTOL

“I dislike and sometimes fear the influence that religious belief systems have on public life. The NSS recognises, articulates and challenges this in a far more reasoned and informed way than I ever could. I am encouraged and educated by its approach.”

MEL, LEEDS

“I’m concerned about power and privilege accorded to religious groups and their influence on legislation.”

SARAH, SHEFFIELD

“I have a strong desire for humanity to learn to live together based on our shared human values, supported by facts and reason.”

ZIAD, LONDON

“I’d like to help children grow up with a refuge from religion in their education and get logical reasoning skills to defend themselves from long term indoctrination.”

ROBERT, SWITZERLAND

“To join the fight for the vital removal of religion from the public sphere. The Batley affair is the final straw.”

JEREMY, SHEFFIELD

“I strongly believe in the NSS’s vision of a society where there is no privilege or discrimination, no advantage or disadvantage, based on faith and beliefs.”

GIANNI, MIDDLESEX

“The British constitution so desperately needs to be dragged out of the Middle Ages.”

SIMON, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

“The older I get, the more tired I get of seeing religious privileges being demanded, granted, and forced upon all citizens of this country, irrespective of belief or the lack of it.”

STEPHEN, DERBY

“The NSS is a small shining light in a vast sea of intolerance, complacency and ignorance. You do a fantastic job.”

PAUL, KENT

“I feel strongly that the only way to be a truly fair and inclusive society is through secularism.”

DANIEL, OXFORDSHIRE

“Having recently looked at school options for my first child, I was incredibly disappointed by the pressure to baptise children to improve their chances of gaining a place at a ‘good’ school. I wholly support the idea of removing discrimination based on faith.”

HOLLY, LONDON

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