

Freedom of Expression

Northern Ireland is the only remaining UK nation with blasphemy laws on its books. It's time to repeal them. [Join our campaign...](#)

Our vision for a secular democracy is underpinned by the fundamental human right to free speech. Without this, democracy cannot exist.

We played an [instrumental role in abolishing](#) the "blasphemy" and "blasphemous libel" laws in England and Wales in 2008, in addition to campaigning on Scotland's [hate crime bill](#) that abolished its blasphemy law in 2021. "Blasphemy" and "blasphemous libel" continue to be offences under the common law of Northern Ireland. Other threats remain; not least from those who seek to impose their blasphemy taboos on others through violence and intimidation.

Without free speech no search for truth is possible; without free speech no discovery of truth is useful; without free speech progress is checked... Better a thousand fold abuse of free speech than denial of free speech.

NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh

What's the problem?

Laws prohibiting blasphemy remain on the statute books in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. While blasphemy is no longer explicitly outlawed in England and Wales, free speech is still threatened. One of the major concerns we have is over 'backdoor' blasphemy codes which conflate hate speech and criticism of religion, making satire, criticism or mockery a criminal act akin to racial hatred or inciting violence.

We are further concerned by a developing 'culture of offence' in which any speech or action deemed likely to offend religious sensibilities is considered taboo. This is chilling free speech, leading to self-censorship, enforced by a toxic mix of terrorism and religious deference.

Being offended from time to time is the price we all pay for living in a free society. Rather than trying to silence those we disagree with, we believe the answer to speech we don't like is more speech. We therefore campaign to protect and preserve freedom of expression, including offensive, critical and shocking speech.

Freedom of expression around the world

Around the world blasphemy laws continue to be used to target religious and political minorities, particularly in Islamic theocracies. These are sometimes described as 'misuse of blasphemy laws', but the NSS contends that there are never any legitimate uses for blasphemy laws.

What are we doing?

We continue to monitor cases where freedom of expression is under threat from religion and to take appropriate action.

Some of our milestones and victories:

- We were instrumental in the repeal of blasphemy laws in England and Wales in 2008, and continue to campaign against blasphemy laws around the world, including 'backdoor' blasphemy codes that restrict the criticism or mockery of religion.
- We lobbied the Scottish government and MSPs throughout the drafting of the Hate Crime Bill, and played a major part in securing several major amendments to protect freedom of expression - particularly free speech about religion. The bill, which was [voted through](#) in 2021, also abolished Scotland's blasphemy law.
- We are [campaigning](#) for Northern Ireland to become the final UK nation to repeal its blasphemy laws.
- We are [opposing efforts](#) to define 'Islamophobia' as "a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" on the basis that it has negative consequences for free speech.
- We are [campaigning](#) for Nigerian humanist Mubarak Bala to be safely released, following his arrest for 'blasphemy'.
- We welcomed Irish voters' decision to [repeal](#) the blasphemy provisions in their country's constitution in 2018 and have called for blasphemy laws in Northern Ireland to also be repealed.
- We are a founding member of the [Defend Free Speech Campaign](#). Together with a coalition of other free speech advocates we work to ensure efforts to combat extremism do not come at the expense of our right to free speech.
- In 2005-6, the NSS campaigned against the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill and the Government's attempts to substantially lower the prosecution threshold for incitement to religious hatred. We campaigned in parliament for freedom of speech safeguards and for intent to be a necessary component of the offence.
The Bill was eventually defeated. This was the Government's third attempt in five years to introduce these measures.

News stories relating to our campaign for free expression can be found [here](#).

What you can do

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Let us know if you support this campaign

Messages of support help inform our future work on this issue.

Name*:

Email*:

Your message of support:

Please leave a message of support for the campaign. Responses may be used in accordance with our supporter comment policy.

Postcode:

Would you like to join our newsletter to be kept up to date with this and our other campaigns?

Yes

Do you want to receive local updates based on your postcode?

Yes

Count me in

[Religious restrictions on speech are incompatible with pluralism and human rights. I support the NSS campaign to promote free speech and end all forms of blasphemy laws.](#)

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More information

- [Freedom of expression: FAQ](#)

[Read More](#)

- [Abolish Northern Ireland's blasphemy laws](#)

[Read More](#)

- [Freedom of Thought Report](#)

The Freedom of Thought report provides an overview of blasphemy laws around the world.

- [Selected 'blasphemy' cases](#)

While you're here

Please consider a donation to enable us to continue challenging religious threats to free expression.

- [Support us from just £2 a month](#)