

# Freedom of Expression

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, but equivalent laws remain in Scotland and 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 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 welcomed Irish voters' decision to [repeal](#) the blasphemy provisions in their country's constitution and have called for blasphemy laws in Scotland and 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.
- We have repeatedly drawn attention to the adherence of major media outlets, including the BBC and Channel 4, to Islamic blasphemy codes. Events have forced these issues into mainstream discussion, yet there is still significant reticence within the media to begin undoing the damage caused by the media-enforced 'taboo' of depicting certain forms of religious imagery (including satire).

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

## What you can do

[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.](#)

[Click to tweet](#)

## More information

- [Freedom of expression: FAQ](#)
- [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](#)