

NSS reiterates call for end of Anglican judges' service

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The National Secular Society has written to the justice secretary to reiterate its call for the end of the Anglican judges' services which mark the beginning of the legal year.

The main service, which took place at Westminster Abbey on Monday, sees senior legal figures pray for guidance at a service conducted according to the rites of the Church of England.

Attendees include the justice secretary (attending as lord chancellor), the lord chief justice and justices of the Supreme Court. Judges attend the service fully robed, in their official capacity and during working hours.

A similar service at York Minster features a procession involving high court judges, circuit judges, tribunal judges, district judges, queen's counsel and other members of the bar attending in robes.

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans told David Gauke the services raise "serious issues about the neutrality and independence – or at the very least the perceived neutrality and independence – of the judiciary".

"It cannot be appropriate in an increasingly pluralistic society for the judiciary to associate itself with, or appear to favour, one particular religious tradition or set of beliefs.

"Judges' services entrench the view that Christianity demands particular respect and exceptionalises it in a way that undermines the impartiality of the judiciary. It cannot be in the interests of justice that these services continue and we ask that you initiate their ending."

The NSS said the services undermine judicial neutrality on contentious issues such as assisted dying, abortion, civil partnerships, free speech, divorce and gender recognition. The Church of England has taken a public position on all of these.

The NSS wrote that "the time must be right to insist on a clear separation between the judiciary and the established church" in light of revelations about the C of E's cover-ups of child abuse. In July the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse [heard](#) that judges were among powerful figures who helped the bishop and convicted sex offender Peter Ball evade justice for decades.

Mr Evans added that the services are "an unnecessary burden on the taxpayer". Last year the Ministry of Justice refused to respond to an NSS freedom of information request on the cost of the services to the public purse.

Explaining the decision to write the letter, Mr Evans said: "The state endows judges with enormous responsibility to make decisions which have an impact on the lives of all British citizens.

"In return the state should expect judges to wield their power without fear or favour, including when judging on the conduct of individuals involved in the Church of England or making decisions which may displease its leaders. The Anglican judges' service undermines that.

"The service also entrenches deference to the Anglican faith and religion in public life more generally. And it's particularly unedifying to see it go ahead after the series of recent revelations about the Church of England's appalling handling of child abuse allegations."

The NSS [wrote to](#) Gauke's predecessor, David Lidington, to call for the services to be scrapped last year. Lidington, a Christian MP who opposed gay marriage and has advocated for a greater role for religion in public life, did not respond.

Judges' services date back to the Middle Ages, when the High Court was held in Westminster Hall and judges prayed for guidance at the beginning of the legal term.

The NSS's position has previously gained support from legal commentator Joshua Rozenberg. In 2013 Rozenberg [wrote](#): "It is not very edifying to see independent judges taking part in religious rites which are, at best, meaningless to them and, at worst, offensive to their actual beliefs".

The NSS has called on the new justice secretary to consider an alternative to the judges' service that marks the opening of the legal year in a solemn and engaging but secular and inclusive way. The Westminster Abbey service is followed by a breakfast hosted by the lord chancellor, which the NSS did not object to.

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