

NSS welcomes Scottish government proposal to abolish blasphemy law

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The National Secular Society has welcomed a proposal from the Scottish government which would abolish the country's blasphemy law.

Ministers made the proposal in a [bill on hate crime](#) which has been published today, following its introduction to the Scottish parliament.

A government memorandum explaining the measure said it would remove an "outdated law that is no longer considered necessary or appropriate".

It added that it would remove the possibility of Scotland's law being cited by countries "which use such an offence for the purposes of persecution of their citizens".

The NSS, which has [argued](#) for the abolition of blasphemy laws since its founding in 1866, has often made similar points to the Scottish government in recent years.

New offence of 'stirring up hatred' on religious grounds

While the society strongly welcomed the government's proposal on blasphemy, it also sounded "a word of caution" on a new offence which is due to be introduced in the bill.

The bill would create an offence of "stirring up hatred" on the basis of religion. This would be defined based on a combination of the behaviour of the person involved, their intent and the likely outcome of the behaviour.

The person's behaviour would need to be "threatening or abusive" while either they intend to "stir up hatred" against a religious group or "it is likely that hatred will be stirred up" against one.

The bill also provides for an offence relating to the possession of inflammatory material.

A free speech protection in the bill says behaviour or material should not be considered "threatening or abusive" solely because it involves "discussion or criticism of religion".

NSS involvement and response

The NSS called for the abolition of blasphemy and argued for robust protections on freedom of expression in response to a Scottish government consultation on hate crime. The bill will now be put to another public consultation process.

In response to the bill's publication, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "Scotland's blasphemy law sends a damaging message that religious ideas deserve special protection and, as ministers have rightly recognised, undermines efforts to defend human rights internationally. Its repeal would be a very welcome step."

"But the government should also be cautious that any new hate crime offences introduced in this bill don't undermine freedom of expression on religion. They'd be well advised to ensure any such offences are narrowly defined and have a very clear justification.

"During the coming consultation process we will strongly welcome the proposal to abolish blasphemy. Meanwhile we'll also remind ministers of the value of free expression on religion and the risks associated with criminalising speech."

The NSS's historical role

- The NSS has campaigned for the abolition of blasphemy laws across the UK, and internationally, since its founding in 1866.
- The society's campaigning played an instrumental role in the repeal of the blasphemy law in England and Wales in 2008.

Ongoing hate crime review in England and Wales

- The Law Commission is currently reviewing hate crime laws in England and Wales. The NSS is lobbying the commission to ensure protections for free speech on religion.

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The Secular Charter outlines 10 principles that guide us as we campaign for a secular democracy which safeguards all citizens' rights to freedom of and from religion.

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