

Geoffrey Robertson calls for CoE's disestablishment in NSS lecture

Posted: Thu, 19th Nov 2020

Leading human rights barrister Geoffrey Robertson has called for the disestablishment of the Church of England in the National Secular Society's 2020 Bradlaugh Lecture.

During the lecture, *The ultimate blasphemy: disestablishing the Church of England*, he argued for the separation of 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.

He questioned the monarch's role as head of the church, arguing that the C of E's establishment will seem particularly "antediluvian" during the next coronation.

He also noted that:

- A recent report from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse had criticised the C of E's failure [to take action](#) to deal with abuse.
- The only other country with automatic places reserved for clerics in its legislature is Iran.
- The lords spiritual had been hostile to women's rights, same-sex marriage and the decriminalisation of assisted suicide.
- The C of E's establishment means prayers are held before parliamentary hearings, effectively forcing MPs to attend Anglican prayers to reserve seats at busy times.
- Attendance at Anglican churches had long been in decline, making the C of E less representative of the country. He added that disestablishment may give the church the "independence" to reconsider its role.
- The Church of England's ties to the state were now unique within the British Isles.

He also paid tribute to Charles Bradlaugh, the NSS's founder whose name is behind the lecture, describing him as a "courageous freethinker" who had "made life easier for all of us".

History of the C of E's establishment

Part of the lecture also explored the history of the C of E's founding and establishment. Robertson noted the role played by "the lust of a pathological monster", as Henry VIII broke with Rome so he could marry Anne Boleyn.

He also noted that the blasphemy law which protected the established religion was used to silence criticism of Anglicanism and undermine gay liberation efforts. He addressed challenges it faced in the 19th and 20th centuries – including cases which he was personally involved in.

The blasphemy law was abolished in England and Wales in 2008.

Comments

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans thanked Geoffrey Robertson for his lecture, describing it as "a colourful, comprehensive and engaging journey through religious privilege" which had "persuasively" made the case for disestablishment.

After the lecture, Robertson said: "The National Secular Society stands for sanity and reason against the power of superstition and theocracy.

"Although it has existed, thanks to Charles Bradlaugh, for over 150 years, there is no time at which it has been more necessary than now."

History of the Bradlaugh Lecture

The NSS launched [the Bradlaugh Lecture](#) on the 151st anniversary of its foundation. The lecture provides a space for a distinguished speaker to explore a secularist topic in depth.

In previous years the lecture has been held at Manchester Art Gallery in September. It was delayed and moved online this year as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

Watch the lecture on YouTube

While you're here

Our news and opinion content is an important part of our campaigns work. Many articles involve a lot of research by our campaigns team. If you value this output, please consider supporting us today.

- [Support us from just £1 a month](#)

- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)

Tags: [Disestablishment](#)

Related Campaigns

-

[Disestablish the Church of England](#)

A state religion has no place in a 21st century democracy.

[Read More](#)

Related Articles

New extremism definition may put free speech at risk, NSS warns

Proposed definition could 'label secularists as extremists'. [Read More »](#)

A state Church is no bulwark against extremism – but secularism is

With its commitment to the separation of religion and state and safeguarding the rights of all individuals, secularism can provide an effective defence against the spread of extremism, says Stephen Evans. [Read More »](#)

Report: CofE safeguarding “below standards” of secular institutions

Most victims and survivors unsatisfied with safeguarding approaches, while safeguarding 'weaponised' to remove those "seen as a nuisance", report finds. [Read More »](#)

Resist calls for £50m a year for churches, NSS urges minister

Churches trust also calls for churches to host NHS services. [Read More »](#)

Review: CofE leaders mainly to blame for sacking safeguarding body

"Extreme time pressure" imposed chiefly by archbishop of Canterbury caused "serious design flaws" in safeguarding board, review finds [Read More »](#)