

NSS urges repeal of Northern Ireland blasphemy laws

Posted: Wed, 17th Mar 2021

The National Secular Society has called on the Northern Ireland executive to repeal its "archaic" blasphemy laws.

In a letter to NI's justice minister, Naomi Long, the NSS said it was a matter of "deep shame" that blasphemy and blasphemous libel continue to be offences under Northern Ireland's common law and called for their repeal to "uphold freedom of expression".

The letter follows Scotland's [landmark abolition](#) of its blasphemy laws on Thursday as part of its Hate Crime and Public Order Bill. Northern Ireland remains the only nation in the UK with blasphemy laws on its statute books.

An [independent review](#) of hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland, completed in 2020, made no mention of repealing blasphemy laws.

"Unacceptable in the 21st century"

In the letter, the NSS said blasphemy laws are "illiberal, anachronistic and incompatible" with rights to freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief.

It said England, Wales and Scotland abolished their blasphemy laws "largely in recognition of the human rights abuses they cause throughout the world."

It also said Northern Ireland's blasphemy laws carry the risk that they may be "invoked to silence criticism or ridicule of religion".

NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "The presence of blasphemy laws in Northern Ireland undermines efforts to repeal blasphemy laws worldwide."

"Until all blasphemy laws across the UK are repealed, we are hamstrung in our efforts to speak out against blasphemy laws in other countries.

"Abolishing its obsolete blasphemy laws would send a message that Northern Ireland is a modern rights respecting nation committed to the values of free speech, tolerance, democracy and freedom of conscience.

"It would also send a message to other countries that employ blasphemy laws that such laws are unacceptable in the 21st century, and so help to end global persecution in the name of religion."

Notes:

- Blasphemy laws were [abolished](#) in England and Wales in 2008. The NSS played a significant role in lobbying for their abolition. Blasphemy laws were also repealed in the Republic of Ireland in 2020 following a [referendum](#).

- In 2014 Newtownabbey Borough Council [banned a play](#) about the Bible on the grounds that it was "blasphemous".
- According to the [End Blasphemy Laws campaign](#), blasphemy laws exist in 75 countries and carry the death penalty in eight.

[Discuss on Facebook](#)

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

Tags: [Free speech](#)

Related Campaigns

-

[Protect freedom of expression](#)

We promote free speech as a positive value.

[Read More](#)

Related Articles

[Response unit needed to tackle blasphemy flashpoints, report says](#)

Recommendations echo NSS calls for more support for schools facing religious intimidation and threats. [Read More »](#)

[NSS address urges UN to call for government action on human rights](#)

Religious privilege is undermining rights of UK citizens, NSS tells UN committee. [Read More »](#)

[Anti-blasphemy extremism “gaining momentum” in UK, report warns](#)

Counter-extremism report recommends review of religious charities linked to anti-blasphemy activism. [Read More »](#)

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 »](#)