

Beware religious harms to mental health and wellbeing, NSS warns

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Religious imposition in healthcare, education and public services can harm mental health, the National Secular Society has warned.

The NSS highlighted how religious privilege may undermine the government's [new 10-year plan](#) for mental health and wellbeing for England in [response](#) to a consultation by the Department of Health and Social Care.

The NSS's recommendations included:

- **Pastoral care:** Pastoral care in a number of public institutions, including the NHS, the armed forces and prisons, is often provided in a religious context ([chaplaincy](#)) and is often discriminatory against non-Christians. The government should ensure all those who need pastoral care in these institutions have equal access, regardless of their religion or belief.
- **Public services:** The government has been increasingly keen to [fund religious organisations to provide public services](#), including those linked to mental health and wellbeing, while protections to stop these groups from proselytising to vulnerable people are being stripped away. It should ensure any religious groups given public money provide services without imposing their beliefs.
- **Forced genital cutting:** The government has "failed to acknowledge" the physical and mental harms [non-consensual religious and cultural circumcision](#) can have on boys and men, and should work to extend the laws protecting girls from genital cutting (FGM) to boys.
- **Abuse:** Those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse within religious communities or institutions have faced "extraordinary barriers" to justice and accessing the mental health support they need. The government must hold all religious groups that have enabled or covered up abuse to full account and implement mandatory reporting laws on child sexual abuse.
- **Insular religious communities:** Individuals born and raised in high-control, insular religions that are difficult to leave without serious consequences may suffer worse mental health and wellbeing outcomes. The government should ensure all those leaving such communities are given the necessary support, and that harmful religious communities cannot benefit from the [charity sector](#). Religious organisations promoting [misogyny](#), [homophobia](#) (including ['conversion therapy'](#)) and other ideologies that can harm mental health and wellbeing should also be barred from charity status.

- **Assisted dying:** The lack of a legal framework for [properly regulated assisted dying](#) is driving "atrociously high" numbers of people suffering terminal illnesses to suicide. The government should legislate to allow the choice of assisted dying to end such suicides.
- **Education:** The government should work to end compulsory [collective worship](#) and [discrimination at faith schools](#), which leave children feeling "stigmatised", "upset" and "distressed". It should also end faith school opt-outs from teaching inclusive and objective [relationships and sex education \(RSE\)](#) which may contribute to worse mental health outcomes for female and LGBT+ pupils in particular. The government should support all provisions in the [Schools Bill](#) to tackle illegal unregistered schools, where children's wellbeing is especially at risk.

The response included [testimonies](#) from individuals who have shared how religion has harmed their mental health or wellbeing with the NSS.

NSS: Care should be "underpinned by secular values"

NSS head of campaigns Megan Manson said: "It is true that for many people, religion is an important source of wellbeing. However, it is also true that for many others, religious imposition in many aspects of public life has caused serious harm to both their mental and physical health.

"It is extremely important that potential religious harms to mental wellbeing are identified and addressed without fear of accusations of 'religion-phobia' or 'religious illiteracy'.

"The government's mental health and wellbeing plan should be underpinned by secular values: human rights, equality, fairness and care based on the best scientific, medical and psychological evidence. It should also ensure all mental health care is delivered in a secular fashion, without the imposition of religion and without discriminating against anyone on the basis of religion or belief or on any other protected characteristics."

If you are struggling to cope, please call Samaritans for free on 116 123 or contact other sources of support, such as those listed on the [NHS Help for suicidal thoughts webpages](#)

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