

A message from the chief executive

Posted: Wed, 22nd Dec 2021 by [Stephen Evans](#)

It's that time of year again, when we look forward to a break and reflect on the year that's been.

For all of us campaigning for a secular state in a country with such deeply entrenched religious privilege, it's easy to grow frustrated at the slow pace of progress. Organised religion still has a stranglehold over state education. And the Church of England remains established by law, a status that brings with it many unjustified privileges, not least representation as of right in our parliament.

But a look at the longer view reveals a path of clear progress for secularism, paved with a series of incremental gains (and a few setbacks) along the way. This year was no different.

In Wales, many years of campaigning led to major reform to the way religion is taught in schools. From 2022 RE will be [replaced](#) with a new subject of religion, values and ethics. Not only will all pupils now have the right to a more pluralistic and objective education about religion and belief, but secularism will also be taught as a key concept.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, the common law offence of blasphemy was finally [abolished](#). As originally drafted the bill to accomplish this would have potentially made things worse – by outlawing insults, and even expressions of 'ridicule' and 'dislike' towards religion. Fortunately, working in coalition with others, we secured vital amendments to the Hate Crime Bill to ensure free speech around religion is adequately protected.

Northern Ireland is now the only part of the UK with blasphemy on the statute books. But even there, the justice secretary has denounced blasphemy laws as "archaic", saying they have "no place in a modern society". We're lobbying assembly members there to support the legislation necessary to get rid of them, and [we encourage our supporters in NI to help](#)

Another ray of light from NI comes in the form of an [independent review of education](#). In a country where over 90% of pupils attend religiously segregated schools, we're lobbying for reforms to bring schools in line with equalities legislation and ensure children and young people there have access a secular education.

In England, we've been shaping public policy around marriage reform, animal welfare, speech laws, and conversion therapy – and leading the fight against faith schools. The [faith schools research databank](#) we published in August provides a solid evidence base against faith-based education and is a valuable resource for advocates for a more inclusive education system. Meanwhile, our [Choice Delusion](#) research has revealed the extent to which faith schools restrict families' options of a secular school – something every child should be entitled to.

The debate over assisted dying came into focus this year with Molly Meacher's bill to provide choice at the end of life. It came as no surprise when the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby [told](#) parliament that the bishop's bench was "united in their opposition". Other religious leaders also lined up to oppose the modest reform, despite most people of faith supporting it. This debate can be seen in the context of the ongoing battle between bodily autonomy and the controlling tendencies of religious authority. By supporting carefully regulated assisted dying, we're standing

up for your right to be free from other people imposing their religious beliefs on you and society.

Speaking of which, one of the more concerning episodes of the year was the alarming situation at [Batley Grammar School](#) where a teacher was suspended and forced into hiding after using an image of Mohammed as an educational resource to teach about freedom of expression and blasphemy.

The teacher hasn't returned to the school. The materials are no longer used. A new blasphemy code has effectively been established, imposed not by the law, but by intimidation and the threat of violence.

The unease of many liberals to stand up for basic liberal principles and support the teacher illustrated the reluctance many have about speaking out about issues involving Islam, through fear of accusations of racism or Islamophobia.

That's why we've continued this year to caution against use of the vague, double edged term 'Islamophobia', which does a much better job of silencing and derailing debate around Islam than it does of protecting British Muslims from bigotry and hatred. The government at least seems to recognise this.

But while standing up for the freedom to subject Islamic belief and practice to scrutiny, and even mockery, secularists must be ready to call out and tackle hatred and racism targeted at Muslims – and all other religious minorities for that matter. Secularism is nothing without a commitment to peaceful coexistence and freedom of religion or belief for all.

So, it's been a year of steady progress, but we know there is much more to be done.

As we come to the end of 2021, I'd like to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to all our members and supporters. Your contributions provide the financial backing necessary to face the challenges ahead. If you're not a member, please do [join the NSS today](#) and we'll put your principles into action.

With your support we'll continue to champion your right to live without people imposing their religious beliefs and practices on you.

Best wishes for the season. Stay safe, and we look forward to working for a freer, fairer and more tolerant society in 2022.

Stephen Evans

Stephen is the CEO of the National Secular Society. You can follow him on Twitter [@stephenmevans1](#). The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

What the NSS stands for

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.

- [Read the Secular Charter](#)

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