

Tags: [RE](#)

- [1](#)
- [2](#)

Ep 63: Christian education challenged in court – a Northern Ireland case

Posted: Tue, 21st Dec 2021

A ground-breaking case on the right to a pluralistic education in Northern Ireland is currently being considered by the High Court.

A father of a seven-year-old girl at a primary school in Belfast has brought judicial review proceedings against the school and the Department of Education. He argues that the school's collective worship and Religious Education provisions are narrowly Christian, being effectively designed to indoctrinate children and denying their right to a pluralistic education, in which no one worldview is privileged over others. The case was heard by the High Court of Northern Ireland on 22-23 November.

In this episode, [Darragh Mackin](#), solicitor for the applicants, discusses the case with [Emma Park](#). Darragh is a partner at Phoenix Law, a firm of solicitors in Belfast that specialises in human rights. He describes how the girl's family, who are non-religious, discovered her praying late into the night. This led them to investigate the way that her school was imposing Christianity on young children through religious assemblies and RE lessons.

Darragh outlines the main issues in the case and the human rights principles involved. He explains how Christianity is embedded into the legal framework governing education in Northern Ireland. He also argues that proselytising religious instruction can reinforce the divisions at the heart of the region's historic troubles, and that it is therefore all the more important to ensure that children are brought up with open minds.

Follow-up

- [Christianity being 'wrongly promoted and privileged in the classroom', court hears – Irish News](#)
- [Laws requiring exclusively Christian RE to face court challenge in NI](#)
- [Bill to replace worship with inclusive assemblies heads to Commons](#)

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Ep 61: Books for Secularists

Posted: Tue, 16th Nov 2021

Looking to explore the currents of thought behind secularism? Here are nine books to begin with.

In this episode, [Emma Park](#) and two guests discuss books that help contextualise Britain's secularist intellectual tradition, tracing a route through classical, Enlightenment, freethought, and humanist history. Each speaker proposes three books which, in their view, embody these interconnected currents of thought in one way or another, and which celebrate free speech and open enquiry.

[Bob Forder](#) is the National Secular Society's historian, and the great-great-grandson of Robert Forder, its first paid secretary.

[Maddy Goodall](#) is Humanist Heritage Coordinator at Humanists UK and in charge of the [Humanist Heritage Project](#).

Got a suggestion for more 'books for secularists'? Email us at podcast@secularism.org.uk or tweet to [@NatSecSoc](#) with [#BooksforSecularists](#).

Nine books for secularists, in order of publication:

- [Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*](#) (mid-first century BC). Prose translation e.g. by [R. Latham](#).
- [Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason*](#) (1794-5)
- [The Trial of the Rev. Robert Wedderburn for Blasphemy](#) (1820)
- Edward Fitzgerald, [Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám](#) (first edition 1859)
- [Charles Bradlaugh, *Speeches*](#) (1890)
- [Florence Dixie, *Towards Freedom*](#) (1904)
- [Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree*](#) (1975)
- [Caroline Fourest, *In Praise of Blasphemy / Éloge du blasphème*](#) (2015)
- [Barbara Smoker, *My Godforsaken Life*](#) (2018)

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Schools aren't there to save the church - Opinion Out Loud

Ep 012

Posted: Tue, 17th Aug 2021

The Church of England's new evangelical missional strategy should lead us to question its entitlement to proselytise in schools, argues Stephen Evans.

Ep 50: The Church of England's influence over education

Posted: Tue, 25th May 2021

What does it mean for a school to be 'C of E'? And how far does the Church of England's influence extend over state-funded education?

The NSS has recently published two reports dealing with the Church of England's influence over schools. The first, 'Religiosity inspections: The case against faith-based inspections of faith schools', examined the ways in which the Church of England uses such inspections to impose its own agenda on the schools within its remit. In 'Understanding Christianity and the study of religion and worldviews: How the Church of England has gained control of Religious Education', former RE teacher Chris Selway examined the structure of RE in England and Wales.

In this podcast, Emma Park speaks to Chris Selway along with Matthew Hill, a former headteacher who contributed to the 'Religiosity inspections' report. Both speakers draw from their own experience of teaching to explore the ways in which some schools are being pressured to encourage proselytising, and the effects which this can have on students as well as teachers. The speakers argue that the C of E must be held to account, and that the way RE is taught needs fundamental reform.

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Follow Emma on Twitter: [@DrEmmaPark](#)

Notes

- [Understanding Christianity and the study of religion and worldviews: How the C of E has gained control of religious education](#)
- [Religiosity inspections: the case against faith-based reviews of state schools](#)
- [Faith groups have no business inspecting schools – Stephen Evans](#)

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Ep 47: Blasphemy in the classroom – The Batley Grammar case

Posted: Tue, 13th Apr 2021

A Yorkshire secondary school recently decided to suspend and investigate a teacher for using a cartoon of the prophet Muhammad in an RE lesson on blasphemy, amid protests outside the school gates.

In this episode, Emma Park speaks to Fiyaz Mughal and Khadija Khan about the case.

Fiyaz Mughal is a British Muslim and director of Faith Matters, an organisation that works to resolve conflicts and strengthen relationships between faith communities. He explains why, as he wrote in the *Spectator*, the Batley protesters do not represent him. He and Emma discuss how material like the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons or *The Satanic Verses* might be used in the classroom to enable pupils to see different points of view and make up their own minds. They then explore the reasons why liberal Muslims' views are often ignored by politicians and much of the media.

Khadija Khan, a journalist and commentator of Pakistani Muslim heritage, talks about the threat which a small number of Islamist extremists poses to freedom of speech in our society, and why this freedom is particularly important to those from minority communities. Khadija also describes her own experience of being threatened by extremists who wanted to silence her.

Finally, Emma is joined by the NSS's Stephen Evans to consider why freedom of expression and critical debate in the classroom are so important for secularists.

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Notes

- [Teacher suspended after using Muhammad cartoon in class on blasphemy](#)
- [The National Secular Society's letter to Batley Grammar School](#)
- [Fiyaz Mughal, 'The Batley protestors don't represent me', *Spectator*](#)
- [Khadija Khan, 'Lessons to Learn', *sister-hood*](#)
- [Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, 'Western liberals' weakness on blasphemy is letting down Muslim dissenters'](#)
- [Bob Forder, 'There is nothing new about cartoons which mock religion'](#)

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[Ep 44: Post-Christian Britain and religion in schools](#)

Posted: Tue, 2nd Mar 2021

This episode is about the place of religion in Britain today, both in society in general and in schools in particular. Emma Park interviews Linda Woodhead, professor of religion at Lancaster University.

In May this year, Linda will be giving a lecture series at Birmingham University entitled 'Values are the New Religion: Britain's post-Christian Culture'. The first part of her interview deals with her research into the decline of Christianity in Britain over the last 100 years, the reasons why this has

happened, and to what extent non-religious people look for analogous systems to give their lives meaning and structure. During the pandemic, the NHS may even have become a surrogate for organised religion.

If Britain is becoming less religious, this raises the question of what its place ought to be in our education system. The admissions procedures commonly used by faith schools can unfairly discriminate against non-religious children. There are also many problems with the way Religious Education is currently taught. The Welsh government is reforming its RE provision: there is a strong argument for doing the same in England, but successive administrations have dragged their feet.

Emma is then joined by Alastair Lichten, head of education at the NSS, to reflect on Linda's words and give the NSS's perspective.

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- [21st Century RE for All – NSS campaign](#)
- [RE shouldn't be a vehicle for the Church of England's interests](#)
- [Professor Linda Woodhead](#)
- [1](#)
- [2](#)

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