

Quotes of the Week

“The crucial point is that the sharpest young opinion-formers are atheists. This is a development that seems to have been missed by the old boobies who pass for bishops in the Anglican and Catholic Churches. It’s a rapid and startling change in our religious landscape and not one that is going to be reversed.”

(Damian Thompson, *Daily Telegraph*)

“For democracy to flourish, and to prevent it from degenerating into theocracy, there has to be sharp separation between faith and state.”

(Joe Jeerakathil, *Star Phoenix*)

Essays of the week

The war on Christians in the Muslim world

(Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Daily Beast*)

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/02/05/ayaan-hirsi-ali-the-global-war-on-christians-in-the-muslim-world.html>

Shrinking secular spaces in the UK

(*The Opinionista*)

<http://theopinionista.com/2012/02/03/shrinking-secular-spaces-in-the-uk/>

Victory! High Court rules council prayers unlawful

The High Court today ruled that “The saying of prayers as part of the formal meeting of a Council is not lawful under s111 of the Local Government Act 1972, and there is no statutory power permitting the practice to continue”.

The judgement follows a Judicial Review initiated by the National Secular Society to challenge the practice of prayers as part of the formal business of council meetings in Bideford Town Council (Devon).

The ruling will apply to the formal meetings of all councils in England and Wales, the majority of which are thought to conduct prayers as part of their meetings. It does not, contrary to a recent report, extend more widely to “the role religious worship plays in public places”, for example remembrance services, or councillors voluntarily attending them.

In passing judgement, the Head of the Administrative Court, Mr Justice Ouseley, directed: “I do not think the 1972 Act [...] should be interpreted as permitting the religious views of one group of councillors, however sincere or large in number, to exclude, or even to a modest extent, to impose burdens on or even to mark out those who do not share their views and do not wish to participate in their expression of them. They are all equally elected councillors”.

Commenting on the judgment, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said:

“Acts of worship in council meetings are key to the separation of religion from politics, so we’re very pleased with the judgement, and the clear secular message it sends – particularly the statement made about the 1972 Act (quoted in the preceding paragraph).

“We believe that council meetings should be conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all councillors, regardless of their religious beliefs, or indeed, lack of belief.

“The NSS is not seeking to deprive those who wish to pray the opportunity to do so; indeed, we fight to retain freedom of religion and belief. The judgement clearly states that religious freedoms are not hindered, as councillors who wish to do so are free to say prayers before council meetings.

“Our interest in this issue was prompted by a complaint from a Bideford Town Councillor, Clive Bone, who felt uncomfortable at having to sit through prayers, homilies and requests for divine guidance while carrying out his formal duties as an elected councillor. The only alternative to this discomfort was to walk out, unbidden by the mayor, which would look discourteous to those in the public gallery.

“We sought the Judicial Review only after Bideford had rejected compromises made by (now former) Councillor Bone and the NSS for prayers before the meeting, or a period of silence during the meeting. Bideford had also rejected legal advice from the National Association of Local Government and our lawyers that the practice could be unlawful. If Bideford had agreed to cease their practice of (Christian) prayers during the meetings, there would have been no basis for this action. Bideford was indemnified from costs and supported by the Christian Institute. There was no question of prosecuting councillors.

“The judgement echoed an admirably secular passage in the judgment by LJ Laws in *McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd* (2010), which a number of equality cases have also cited: ‘The precepts of any one religion, and belief system, cannot, by force of their religious origins, sound any louder in the general law than the precepts of another. If they did, those out in the cold would be less than citizens and our constitution would be on the way to a theocracy, which is of necessity autocratic.’”

Prayers have been the cause of tension in a number of local councils. When Portsmouth Council allowed a Muslim Imam to say a prayer, one Christian councillor walked out of the meeting, later saying “I do not believe we are praying to the same god”. Meanwhile, councillors in Shropshire called a fellow councillor “disgusting” when he wore headphones during prayers.

Putting the judgment in a wider context, Mr Porteous Wood added: “This judgment is an important victory for everyone who wants a secular society, one that neither advantages nor disadvantages people because of their religion or lack of it. This is particularly important for activities which are part of public life, such as council meetings.

“There is no longer a respectable argument that Britain is a solely Christian nation or even a religious one. An increasing proportion of people are not practising any religion and minority faiths are growing in number and influence. This underlines the need for shared civic spaces to be secular and available to all, believers and non-believers alike, on an equal basis.”

The defendant is seeking leave to appeal.

[Read a full report of the hearing held on 2 December 2011](#)

Editorial by Terry Sanderson

Council prayer case will bring much abuse on to the head of the NSS

As we contemplate the implications of the High Court decision that the saying of prayers as part of local council business is illegal, the National Secular Society is bracing for an absolute torrent of abuse, exaggeration, misrepresentation and hysteria from conservative sources.

There will be a repeat of the usual accusations that we have destroyed Christianity in Britain, trampled religious freedom, taken away the right to pray, discriminated against believers, hijacked the judicial system etc., etc. Already James Dingemans QC, who acted for Bideford Council, has said: "The Coronation Oath would need to be abolished; the council's involvement in services of remembrance would be prevented; and chaplains would not be able to serve in HM Armed Forces."

So, in anticipation of all this predictable stuff – which will flood the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph* – here are a few attempts at balancing the reaction.

1. Nobody will be stopped from praying. The only restriction will be on *when* they pray. Councillors who want to can still get together before the meeting and make their invocations. Otherwise, councils are secular institutions engaged in civic business, they are not churches, and prayers cannot be part of their official agenda.
2. This is a ruling about a breach of the Local Government Act. It applies therefore only to local government. Silly claims that the Coronation Oath will be illegal and prayers in Parliament will have to cease — and even that councillors will be banned from attending Remembrance Day Services — and even, as was claimed by one prominent evangelical Christian at the Oxford Union yesterday, that the saying of grace before meals will be outlawed – are all untrue.
3. Religious liberty is in no way compromised by this ruling. Everyone in this country is free to practise a religion in any way they want to – within the law. As this judgment shows, praying as part of council business is *not* within the law. Of course, if councillors want to pray during their duties, they can do it silently and who could stop them? Surely if a prayer is to an omnipotent God, it would be just as effective inside the head as one that is spoken? The problem comes from the way the phrase “religious freedom” has been redefined by the churches to mean not only that they are free to worship according to their lights, but that they are entitled to privilege and to impose their beliefs on others.
4. Studies show that huge numbers of people in this country have no religion, don't want any religion and, increasingly, are hostile to religion. Why — as a condition of serving their community — should they be forced to participate in an activity that goes against their conscience?
5. Members of other religions are also increasingly participating in our local democracies. We can no longer insist that only Christian prayers are said and, as we have seen in Portsmouth, attempts at multi-faith prayers can result in believers of other religions walking out because they don't want to participate. This could be catastrophic for community relations and is completely avoidable if prayers are said voluntarily away from the council chamber.

None of this will stop the Christian Institute and the Christian Concern people making outlandish claims about their religion being brutally murdered by heartless secularists.

But these same people will have to accept that not everyone is a Christian, not everyone wants to be a Christian and their selfish demands for Christianity to have special privileges sound more and more arrogant.

Bishops lie about NSS chaplains campaign at the General Synod

The NSS's campaign to get the church to pay the salary of their clergymen who are working in hospitals as "chaplains" was raised at this week's Church of England General Synod (parliament). Except the Bishop of Bristol, Rt Rev Mike Hill, claimed we were trying to "exclude" chaplains from the NSS. He said that the true value of chaplains "might only be appreciated if they were no longer present".

"Every effort ought to be made, and is being made, to resist secularist calls for chaplains to be excluded from the NHS. Our hospitals would be poorer places without them and patients would be denied comprehensive care if their services were removed," Mr Hill said.

In a report last year, based on Freedom of Information requests, the NSS found that £29 million is spent on hospital chaplains annually and argued that if the Church wants chaplains to visit hospitals then they should fund it themselves.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "Our research was carefully verified and our conclusion was that it was inappropriate for the National Health Service to pay the wages of clergy who should rightly be funded by the churches. We repeatedly said at the time that we were not looking to exclude chaplains, only to have them paid for by a more appropriate paymaster.

"It seems the bishops simply can't make a case without distorting the facts and completely misrepresenting our purpose."

Mr Sanderson said that he would not have expected anything else from a body like the General Synod. "This is vested interest speaking for its own interests. The Church is surely aware what parlous state the National Health Service is in. That it continues to insist that scarce resources are diverted to funding its representatives shows a lack of concern for those people — old and young — who are desperately in need of real medical attention."

Why is the Government consulting the Vatican on national policy?

A large delegation of Government Ministers is to visit the Vatican next week to consult about British Government policy with the Pope. Among the six ministers going to Rome are Jeremy Hunt, the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport; Alan Duncan, the Minister for International Development; and Greg Barker, the Energy and Climate Change Minister.

The delegation will be led by Baroness Warsi who will lecture at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy on the subject of the place of religion in modern political discourse.

The British delegation will reportedly discuss climate change, arms proliferation, religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue and the crisis in Somalia and the Horn of Africa with the Pope and Vatican officials.

The *Daily Telegraph* reports a "Vatican observer" as saying:

"It's a very strong delegation and it's a way of showing that the relationship with the Holy See didn't end in a blaze of fireworks when the Pope's visit finished. It's one of the most comprehensive British visits ever in terms of the range of interests represented."

The politicians will be accompanied by the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Archbishop Vincent Nichols.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "What on earth is a delegation of senior British politicians doing consulting the last theocracy in Europe on our Government policy? We are a democratic nation and we didn't vote for the Pope – so why are we involving him in policy-

making? Polls show that very few people in this country agree with his teachings – and that includes Catholics.

“This is an extremely undesirable development. The Government should be challenging the Vatican’s assumed and suspect power, not indulging it.”

NSS addresses EU secularist group on Church and Education in Europe

NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood has addressed a European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP) seminar on the relationship between Church and Education in Europe.

The meeting, held at the European Parliament on 1 February was hosted by Ms Sophie in 't Veld, Chair of the EPPSP. Other panellists included Mr. Jean Jacques de Gucht, Member of the Flemish Parliament and Mr. Lajos Molnar, Hungarian Network for the Freedom of Education.

The meeting heard disturbing examples of how children’s education is being impeded by religious interference across Europe.

Speaking from the platform, Keith Porteous Wood pointed out that education is the place where the lack of secularism impinges most harshly on the ordinary citizen. Keith said many of the problems need to be tackled on a Europe-wide basis and stressed the importance of making full use of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, its directives and its institutions to address problems caused by the often unhealthy relationship between church and Education.

[Read Keith’s contribution in full.](#)

Catholic and Episcopal churches shrinking

Statistics from the latest edition of the Catholic Directory of England and Wales reveal a picture of a shrinking church.

For four weekends each year, priests count the number of people actually in their churches. Between the 2009 and 2010 counts there was a drop of 1.5%. The number of people attending mass was 885,169 represented 1.6% of the national population and 21.9% of the estimated Catholic population.

The number of attenders fell in 14 of the 22 dioceses (and by as much as 10.0% in Northampton, 9.3% in Middlesbrough, and 7.5% in Leeds). Five dioceses (Birmingham, Clifton, Liverpool, Plymouth, and Southwark) returned identical figures for both years, and three (East Anglia, Salford, and Wrexham) reported modest growth (ranging from 0.4% to 1.9%).

Among the other statistics included in the Catholic Directory are estimates of the Catholic population, practising or lapsed, as known to and returned by parish priests. In 2010 the number was 4,034,069, 1.2% down on 2009 and equivalent to 7.3% of the population of England and Wales.

There was a decline in the same period of the number of diocesan priests – down by 7%, the number of churches open to the public went down by 3.8% and baptisms up to seven years old fell by 0.1%.

And across the Atlantic it’s an even worse outlook for the Episcopal Church (the Anglican Church in the USA), where official statistics show it declining at a catastrophic rate.

In the six years from 2004 to 2010, the Episcopal Church’s average Sunday attendance fell by 17 per cent and its total membership declined by 13 per cent. Of those still in the Episcopal Church as of 2010, 30 per cent were over the age of 65, whereas those over 65 comprise only 13 per cent of the total US population.

The statisticians, Dr C Kirk Hadaway and Dr Matthew Price, presented their findings to the churches Executive Committee, noting that to “get a broad-based sense of congregational vitality, we have used a number of measurements including church school enrolment, marriages, funerals, child baptisms, adult baptisms, and confirmations. These speak to a parish’s integration in the community and the possibility for future growth”.

Over the same period, Church school enrolment has declined by 33 per cent. The number of marriages performed declined by 41 per cent. The number of burials fell by 21 per cent. The number of child baptisms declined by 36 per cent. The number of adult baptisms declined by 40 per cent. The number of confirmations declined by 32 per cent.

“While these numbers may not capture the totality of what is happening in the Church, we do not have a measure that is moving in a positive direction,” the Church’s statisticians reported.

In addition to the Church’s sharp decline in its pastoral health, the number of churches reporting financial difficulties rose sharply: by 2010, 72 per cent of congregations reported they were in “financial stress”.

Consultation on future of “faith school” transport in Leicester

Leicester County Council is consulting on modifying its home to school transport provision. This will affect the amount of taxpayers’ money ploughed into transporting children long distances to attend “faith schools”. The consultation ends on 2 April and can be accessed here:

www.leics.gov.uk/home_school_transport_concessionary_travel_consultation

Meanwhile, Bath and North East Somerset Council has set up a working party to look at cutting denominational transport. At present it spends £245,000 on getting children who have proved that they are baptised to “faith schools”. The Council considered cutting these subsidies last year but backed off after pressure from churches and parents. But now, because of continuing budget cuts, the issue is to be revisited for next year.

Religious proselytisers move into academy school

An organisation that lends out resources for religious education and provides training for religious education teachers has moved into the Oasis Academy in Shirley Park, Croydon.

The Croydon Faith Education Resources has moved its operations into the school with the blessing of Croydon’s education director and Councillor Vidi Mohan who is cabinet secretary for the Big Society.

The religious library has been operating in Croydon for over 20 years, sometimes with the financial support of Croydon Council.

Library resources manager Fauzia Ali said: “After much hard work and support from Croydon Council and the faith communities of Croydon, we have been relocated to a very suitable new premises.”

The Oasis Academy – a taxpayer-funded school operated by Rev Steve Chalke – is part of a raft of academy schools that are now promoting religion above everything else in the school.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: “When were we asked whether we wanted our taxes — paid, we thought, to educate our children — to be doled out to religious groups on an evangelising mission? It is utterly outrageous that education funds are being used not only for blatant religious promotion like this, but increasingly to pay the wages of clergymen or chaplains to work in the schools.”

See also: *Australian parents seek to end religious education*
<http://www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=29926>

Miracle Soap claims lead to £25,000 fine for religious TV channel

A religious TV channel has been fined £25,000 by the media regulator Ofcom after it permitted a televangelist to claim that his "Miracle Olive Oil Soap" could cure cancer.

Believe TV, operated by The Light Academy Ltd and broadcast on the Sky platform, broadcast a number of "testimony" programmes with members of churches claiming that they had been cured of serious illness or had financial worries resolved by miraculous means. Many of these programmes were already sailing close to breaching the Ofcom code of practice and eventually some of them went over the line.

A series of programmes broadcast by the channel between December 21, 2010 and February 1, 2011, televangelist Paul Lewis preached directly to the camera about the healing power of using his "Miracle Olive Oil Soap".

Another sequence featured Bishop Climate Irungu producing "testimonies" from his flock that were presented in such a way as to "encourage" viewers to believe that treatment of serious illnesses such as cancer, diabetes and heart problems could be boosted by "being anointed with a product such as olive oil soap, Ribena or oil".

In a statement, Ofcom said:

"Given that the content was also soliciting a response from viewers and such individuals experiencing serious illnesses may be vulnerable to the healing claims being made, Ofcom found there was a material risk that susceptible members of the audience may be exploited by the material broadcast on Believe TV. The finding also referred to previous decisions by both the Advertising Standards Authority and Ofcom concerning content containing similar claims by Paul Lewis which had been broadcast on other channels. When Ofcom had previously recorded breaches against Paul Lewis content broadcast on other channels in 2007 and 2008, Ofcom stated that the breaches... were very serious because the promotions of the Paul Lewis products improperly exploited the susceptibilities of vulnerable viewers of these religious channels."

The regulator criticised The Light Academy for allowing previous breaches to be repeated, and said that the licensee showed "overall very poor compliance" which "placed vulnerable viewers directly at risk of harm and exploitation".

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "This kind of thing is not unusual in the outer reaches of these manipulative religious TV channels. A quick flick through the 'Religion' section of the Sky platform will soon reveal many others who push the limits of acceptability in the claims they make. Believe TV has been caught out repeatedly. A fine is not enough. Its licence to broadcast should be revoked if it cannot be stopped exploiting its viewers in this way. Many others slip under the net because it is impossible to monitor them all, 24 hours a day."

The Ofcom ruling also states that 'In this instance, there are no direct precedent cases because this is the first case involving faith-based treatment for serious medical conditions'. We hope that this case will set a precedent for future Ofcom rulings and will also deter other TV companies from making such claims.

You can see the reasoning that led up to Ofcom's decision here:

<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb192/obb192.pdf> and here: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/enforcement/broadcast-bulletins/obb188/obb188.pdf>

See also: *Why should religion be exempt from advertising rules?*

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tomchiversscience/100135398/why-should-religions-be-exempt-from-advertising-rules/>

And predictable claims that *If Christians are not free to say 'God heals', then there is no religious freedom in this country*

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/brendanoneill2/100135253/if-christians-are-not-free-to-say-god-heals-then-there-is-no-religious-freedom-in-this-country/>

Secularist of the Year: don't miss out – get your ticket today!

Nominations are now closed for Secularist of the Year and the nominees will be considered by the NSS council. The winner will be presented with the £5,000 Irwin Prize at a glittering lunch time event in central London on Saturday 17 March 2012. It's a fun afternoon, where you can meet other secularists from around the country as well as some of the NSS's honorary associates. It's also an occasion when we can honour our activists.

Tickets are now on sale and they include a welcome cocktail, a three-course lunch with tea or coffee and all the entertainment. They cost £45 and can be bought from www.secularism.org.uk/tickets or by post from NSS (SoY), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

The Catholic War on Democracy

By Terry Sanderson

At a Vatican meeting with Catholic bishops from the USA last month, [the Pope told them](#) that they had a duty to apply pressure on Catholic politicians to get Catholic doctrine written into law.

Ratzinger said: "The Church has a critical role to play in countering cultural currents which, on the basis of an extreme individualism, seek to promote notions of freedom detached from moral truth."

He noted US bishops' efforts "to maintain contacts with Catholics involved in political life and to help them understand their personal responsibility to offer public witness to their faith...". That was especially important with regard to "the great moral issues of our time: respect for God's gift of life, the protection of human dignity and the promotion of authentic human rights," he said.

The bishops had to ensure that American Catholics had the courage "to counter a reductive secularism which would delegitimize the Church's participation in public debate about the issues which are determining the future of American society."

No sooner were they back home than the bishops saw an opportunity to put the Pope's orders into effect. They launched an all-out attack on President Obama's new health insurance plan that would make it possible for women to gain contraception free of charge. Even in Catholic institutions.

The great wail went up: "Obama has launched a war on religion!"

This cry was taken up by the right-wing press and was, of course, a gift to the Republican politicians battling it out for the presidential candidacy. Mitt Romney said: "Remarkably, under this president's administration, there is an assault on religion – an assault on the conviction and religious beliefs of members of our society." Gingrich and Santorum — both Catholics — have similarly launched broadsides at the President.

In their usual overstated, hyperventilating way the bishops have presented President Obama as variously destroying religious freedom, breaching the constitution, attacking the Catholic Church and maybe even eating the babies he permits to be aborted.

The Catholic Church started its campaign at screeching pitch and is increasing the volume from there.

So, is there a war on religion? Or is religion waging a war on democracy?

After all, Obama was elected on the promise of health care reform. He didn't pull it out of the bag as a surprise. The American people wanted him to do it.

And [polls are now showing](#) that most American Catholics — and everyone else except white evangelicals — support Obama's plans to give women birth control.

So who are the Catholic bishops speaking for when they demand exemption from the law? Not their congregants, that's for sure.

These polls are inconvenient to the American right, religious and secular, so there will be an attempt to quickly bury them.

But the truth of this fracas is that the Pope is trying to run American politics and bring it in line with his own teachings. And like all theocrats, it doesn't matter what the people want, what matters is what he says God wants.

See also: [Liberal religious leaders start the fightback against the Catholic bishops](#)

[It's not about religious freedom](#)

[Kathleen Sebelius: Contraception rule respects religion](#)

[Religion vs the American Government](#)

[How the birth control fight could help Obama](#)

France considers denying citizenship to women in veils

France's immigration minister said on Wednesday that he wants the wearing of Muslim veils that cover the face and body to be grounds for denying citizenship and long-term residence.

Eric Besson said he planned to take "concrete measures" regarding such veils, which are worn by a small minority of women in France but have become the object of a parliamentary inquiry into whether a ban should be imposed. He spoke during a hearing before the panel of lawmakers as their nearly six-month inquiry draws to a close.

Besson said a formal ban on veils that cover the face and body seemed to him "unavoidable," with a ban on veils in public services as a minimum step.

NSS Speaks Out

NSS Council member Norman Bonney was quoted in *The Scotsman* about the over-weening influence of religion Scottish schools

http://www.scotsman.com/news/education/atheists_urge_city_leaders_to_cut_religion_from_school_1_2096934 This was followed up by another article to which Norman contributed

http://www.scotsman.com/news/cartoon/is_it_time_for_schools_in_city_to_lose_their_religion_1_2099992

Keith Porteous Wood was on BBC Radio Lincoln talking about faith schools.

Terry Sanderson had this blog on *Huffington Post* "Bishops, too, are entitled to their unpleasant opinions" http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/.../terry-sanderson/bishops-too-have-a-right-_b_1256752.html

Rally for Free Expression tomorrow – be there!

The One Law for All 11 February rally for Free Expression is being held in London from 14:00–16:00 hours at the Old Palace Yard opposite the House of Lords.

The call for action follows an increased number of attacks on free expression in the UK, including 17 year old Rhys Morgan being forced to remove a Jesus and Mo cartoon or face expulsion, threats of

violence, police being called, and the cancellation of a meeting at Queen Mary College where One Law for All spokesperson Anne Marie Waters was to deliver a speech on Sharia and the LSE Student Union's call for the atheist society to remove its affiliation due to the posting of a Jesus and Mo cartoon.

Some of the confirmed speakers at the London Rally are Nick Cohen (Writer), A C Grayling (Philosopher), Kenan Malik (Writer), Gita Sahgal, (Centre for Secular Space), and Terry Sanderson/Keith Porteous Wood (National Secular Society).

In addition to the London rally, there will be actions and acts of solidarity in other cities, including Australia, France, Gambia, Germany, Poland and South Africa. To see the list or to add your own action or event, [click here](#):

The Day of Action has been endorsed by countless groups and individuals including Jessica Ahlquist, Richard Dawkins, Equal Rights Now, Taslima Nasrin, National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies, National Secular Society, Salman Rushdie, Southall Black Sisters, and Peter Tatchell. To see the list and add your own endorsement, [click here](#):

[To read Maryam Namazie's recent speech on how bogus accusations of offence and Islamophobia act similarly to secular fatwas, [click here](#).]

Clearly, the time has come to take a firm and uncompromising stand for free expression and against all forms of threats and censorship.

The right to criticise religion is a fundamental right that is crucial to many, including Muslims. 11 February is our chance to take that stand. You need to be there.

Events

The State, Religion and Education. Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, presented by the Nottingham Secular Society, Friday 24th February, 2012. 7:30pm for 7.45pm prompt start. A rare opportunity to hear one of the UK and Europe's foremost Secular campaigners. At The Nottingham Mechanics, 3, North Sherwood Street, NOTTINGHAM. NG1 4EZ. Members £1. Supporters/visitors £3.

Marlene Dietrich – the world's most glamorous atheist. Terry Sanderson reprises his popular show looking at the life and times of Marlene Dietrich, using generous clips from her movie career, then accessing rare archive newsreel he pays a moving tribute to her medal-winning war work as an anti-Nazi during WWII. The show culminates with a screening in full of her fabulous one-woman show recorded in Sweden in 1963 and featuring Burt Bacharach and his orchestra. The evening is presented as a fundraiser for the NSS. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, Tuesday 28 February 2012, 7.30pm. Tickets £10 from www.secularism.org.uk/tickets.

Letters to *Newsline*

Please send your letters for publication to letters@secularism.org.uk. We want to publish as many letters as possible, so please keep them brief – **no more than 250 words**. We reserve the right to edit. Opinions expressed in letters are not necessarily those of the NSS. You can also join in live debates on our Facebook page.

From John Wilks:

I have been told that the lead Muslim OFSTED Inspector for a local state school let it be known that he would not be shaking hands with female members of staff.

What do we think of this? Should we uphold the right of everyone to practise their religion? Or should someone refusing to shake hands with women teachers be barred from acting as an OFSTED Inspector on the grounds of sexism? I will be writing to Michael Gove for his view!

From Eric Willoughby:

I heard something this week that bothers me very much, and I wondered if the NSS knows about this kind of thing.

The Neturei Karta discussion group in Aberystwyth decided to ask a local rabbi to come and give a talk on Judaism and Zionism, to try and understand the correlation. Being Wales, the group's meeting hall has its own choir, the Cor Gobaith, which is mixed male/female.

It is customary at these meetings for the choir to give a musical interlude, and this was taken as normal. Until...one of the organisers mentioned it to the Rabbi, who was not best pleased. He said that his religion does not allow him to hear women singing. If it was just a male choir, that would be OK. Or, he would just have to sit outside while the mixed choir sang.

Of course the choir-leader refused to co-operate, and though the meeting will go ahead, there will be no singing.

Can anyone confirm that this sexism is actually illegal, as some have suggested? If not, it should be. But either way, it is outrageous that a grown man can look someone in the eyes and say he cannot hear women sing, because of his religion. And Judaism is supposed to be one of the more liberal of all the daft creeds and sects.

Ed Writes: Eric, I'm afraid it is legal. Religions have certain exemptions under the Equality legislation. I think the only answer is to say: "If you don't want women to take part, we don't want you to take part." Unfortunately, due to misguided kow-towing to "religious sensibilities" we let them get away with such insulting behaviour.

From Clifford Crisp:

Alan Loughlin (Letters to Editor) was horrified to find Sainsbury's selling halal meat. If he really wants to do something about the massive scale horrific suffering of, and cruelty to, animals may I suggest that he stops eating them. The meat industry is consumer driven.

From Richard Seaton:

The short answer to Garry Marlowe's question: "Just why do most Christians seem to prefer a 'more tea, vicar' branch of Christianity..?" (20th Jan) is that it's easier.

As GBS put it, one cannot tell whether Christianity would have been a success because it has never been tried.

Speaking as a regular church-goer (by reason of being an organist) and an atheist, I detect a worrying trend within the CofE recently of including God in the picture, which really just messes everything up. Alan Bennett said in an address to the Prayer Book Society "Of course in the

Anglican Church whether or not one believes in God tends to get sidestepped. It's not quite in good taste. Someone said that the Church of England is so constituted that its members can really believe anything, but of course none of them do."

That statement used to hold good, and over the years I have attended church meetings, compiled music lists and been invited to vicars' tea parties without ever a whiff of the mention of God from anybody, but now I find myself in an increasingly uncomfortable position as evangelicals, fundamentalists, etc. have taken over; people who would be more at home in churches without such good taste. Perhaps it is time to start an Anglican Atheist Association. My guess is that there would be more potential members than you think!

From John Earle:

I was a little confused by the title used on the BBC website report about a mars meteorite <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-16943200> . It uses section titles: "Rare Martian meteorite given to science", "Prospects for life" and "Works of God".

As this report was in the science and environment section, I fail to see why this title would be used. I understand that they use something from the report as a title, but fail to see why it would have to be that little snippet from all the text within.

Name and address supplied:

Having just attended the weekly meeting of the London School of Economics Students Union — despite not being a current LSE Student — I wonder how valid their vote to reintroduce blasphemy really was?

Finding myself in Houghton Street this lunchtime, I was able to walk unchallenged into the LSE and — as my video footage shows — straight into the Old Theatre where the student union meeting was taking place. No one challenged me or asked me for ID. And, though I could not stay long, it was long enough to realise that had any votes been taking place, I would have been able to partake in them.

I thus wonder if the votes at the EGM that passed the 'blasphemy motion' were conducted in a similarly tawdry manner? And, of course, if they were, what was to stop those in favour of the motion from packing the hall with 'ringers' — a well known tactic often used by extremists of all hues?

Perhaps when the LSE Student Union starts introducing the correct security measures for its meetings, we might be able to take their votes seriously. Until then, perhaps we should regard their motions as being examples of the 'wind and water' utterances LSE students are sometimes quite well known for.

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