

Newsline

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secular
society

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Quote of the Week

“Secularism is very simple. No persecution or special privileges (handouts) based on religious beliefs. It’s not pro-atheism or anti-atheism. It’s not pro-religion, or anti-religion. It’s about individual rights and liberties. It’s about the law applying equally to everyone.”

James Kirk Wall, *Chicago Now*.

Essays of the Week

[Why I speak out against Islamism.](#)

Maryam Namazie, *Free Thought Blogs*.

[Stop the Jihadi Onslaught Against Atheists and Free Thinkers.](#)

Maajid Nawaz, *Daily Beast*.

NSS urges Education Secretary not to force Isle of Wight pupils into faith schools

The National Secular Society has written to Education Secretary Nicky Morgan objecting to plans to close down a non-religiously designated academy – leaving pupils with no option other than to attend a faith school.

In a letter expressing the Society's "deep concern" at the proposals, NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans urged the Secretary of State to ensure parents can continue to receive a state education for their children which does not run counter to their philosophical convictions.

Academies Enterprise Trust (AET), which runs Weston Academy, is seeking permission to close the school in December, claiming that falling pupil numbers will make it increasingly difficult to maintain the school. The Education Secretary had agreed in principle but a final decision is expected later this month.

However, the projected pupil numbers cited by AET to justify the closure are being robustly challenged by a parents' action group set up to fight the closure. Weston Academy Action Group (WAAG) say a forecast discussed at previous governors' meetings shows numbers increasing rather than decreasing, as claimed by AET.

The group has collected more than 1,500 handwritten signatures and almost [600 online responses](#) supporting their campaign to keep the school open.

Weston Academy is one of only two non-faith-based primary schools in West Wight, but with the next nearest being twelve miles away, and oversubscribed, parents face being left with no alternative to a religious school.

Isle of Wight Council, which is responsible for ensuring diversity of provision, told the NSS it was aware of the concerns but stressed that the decision rests with the Secretary of State and not the Council due to the Academy status of the school. Leader Jonathan Bacon said "The Council has been informed of the proposed decision rather than being the decision maker."

The school was [saved from closure](#) in 2011 by opting out of local authority control and gaining academy status after the National Secular Society supported local parents campaigning to keep the school open.

Since gaining academy status the school has been placed in special measures, but in May this year Ofsted reported that teaching and leadership at the school was improving.

Parent George Metcalf said: "Weston Primary is the only non-denominational school locally, and whilst its numbers are relatively small, it does not suffer from large over capacity as some others locally do."

Stephen Evans, National Secular Society campaigns manager, added: "It is clear that the closure of the only non-religiously designated school in the area will cause real and significant hardship to parents who wish their children to be taught in a non-faith school setting, and are simply not prepared to accept them being taught in a school with a religious ethos.

"The Secretary of State should not underestimate the strength with which many non-religious parents hold their convictions and should think very carefully before making a decision that will force children into faith schools against their parents' wishes."

SNP host Muslim group whose staff member calls for prosecution of anyone who criticises Islam

A Muslim activist has boasted of plans to ban criticism of Islam, days before his organisation is due to appear at the SNP conference.

A research assistant for Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), Amar Alam, has bragged on social media about his organisation's work to tackle hate crimes and the Government's specific recording of anti-Muslim hate crimes being the "first major step" in banning criticism of Islam.

Mr Alam boasted on Facebook that the group was using campaigns against anti-Muslim hate-crime and 'Islamophobia' as a cover to ban criticism of Islam. He said, "After years of groundwork by MEND, we have just heard that the government will make it a legal requirement for all police forces in the UK to record Islamophobic attacks as a separate hate crime like anti-Semitism."

Thanks to this work from MEND, he bragged, "This is the first major step in completely outlawing Islamophobia in the UK. Make du'a that just like anti-Semitism, anyone who writes or says anything malicious against Islam will be prosecuted in the future insha'Allah".

The remarks were publicised by secular activist Chris Moos, who posted a [screenshot](#) of Alam's Facebook comments on Twitter.

MEND [will appear at a fringe event](#) at the SNP conference on Friday 16 where representatives will discuss "representations of Islam and Muslims in print media and social media".

National Secular Society spokesperson, Stephen Evans, said, "well-meaning people who use the phrase 'Islamophobia' need to think very seriously about why that term is used instead of anti-Muslim bigotry. Comments like this highlight what many have known for a long time; that the term 'Islamophobia' is being used as a front for eroding free speech and banning criticism of Islam.

"In addition to attacking freedom of speech, conflating anti-Muslim violence with criticism of Islam fundamentally undermines important efforts to stamp-out rising anti-Muslim violence.

"Senior politicians and most media organisation now use the word 'Islamophobia' without question, there are repeated calls to 'ban Islamophobia' and there is worrying vagueness about what is meant by these pleas."

The SNP fringe event will feature Sufyan Ismail, MEND's CEO, and an unnamed SNP MP. Ismail has said that British society "hates" Muslims and complained that "it's perfectly OK under UK law to hate Islam and Muslims".

Ismail said that David Cameron would not have the "audacity" to prosecute Muslims who fought for the Islamic State if MEND "landed those 20 seats or 30 seats" in the election.

MEND campaigns against anti-Muslim bigotry but serious concerns were raised about its activities by Andrew Gilligan in the [Telegraph](#), who wrote in April that the organisation was a "front group for Muslim extremists". He warned that it had built links with both major parties and that it had been chosen as an "official partner" by the Electoral Commission in the run-up to the 2015 General Election. He reported that MEND has links with CAGE, and the organisation claimed before the poll in May that it was a "kingmaker" in the election.

MEND has also been [criticised](#) recently by other groups working to tackle anti-Muslim violence.

After being criticised for his remarks, Alam subsequently claimed his comments were only his personal view, but maintained that "malicious hatred" against religion should be "condemned".

Mr Evans added; "This group should be completely free to speak out and campaign – no matter how strongly we reject their agenda - but the SNP may wish to reconsider its association with MEND and whether offering them such a high profile platform is in line with the values of the party."

Before the election MEND published a "Muslim manifesto" which called for the protection of free speech "while developing good guidelines to tackle hate speech online" and "primary legislation to deal with social media offences and hate speech online."

In February, the NSS [called for](#) better statistics and monitoring of hate crime to tackle religiously-motivated violence.

See also: [The encroachment of reactionary Islamism in academic life.](#)

The unreasonableness of 'reasonable accommodation'

Calls to introduce a new workplace duty of 'reasonable accommodation' for religion and belief are a flawed solution to a problem that doesn't really exist, argues Stephen Evans.

The UK has some of the most comprehensive anti-discrimination laws in the world. Britain is rightly regarded globally as a tolerant nation; one where everyone, within reasonable limits, can usually

enjoy freedom of religion or belief and is legally protected from discrimination on the grounds of their religion or belief.

But not everyone is happy.

This is because the law protects the right to manifest your religion only insofar as it doesn't impinge disproportionately on the rights, freedoms or dignity of others. For some, this isn't good enough.

The latest hobby-horse of campaigners determined to ensure that people of faith have an unfettered right to manifest their beliefs in the workplace is the concept of a 'duty of reasonable accommodation'.

One of the [leading advocates](#) for the introduction of a new legal duty to accommodate religion is the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey. Carey has convinced himself that Christians in the UK are being "persecuted" and "driven underground" by "homosexual activists".

Another former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has rightly criticised such rhetoric and told Christians who complain about persecution in Britain to "[grow up](#)".

But Carey was left frustrated when the UK and European Courts rejected legal challenges to anti-discrimination rules which suggested that Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) required that religious individuals be given an exemption from compliance with anti-discrimination norms protecting people from discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. These included the cases of the civil registrar, Lilian Ladele, and Relate counsellor, Gary McFarlane, both of whom objected on religious grounds to dealing with same-sex couples in the same way they would with opposite-sex couples.

The National Secular Society [intervened](#) in those cases to argue that the exemptions claimed by applicants were impossible to grant without undermining anti-discrimination law altogether. In the cases of Ladele and McFarlane, we argued that the rights of gay people would be placed at risk if it were decided that 'reasonable accommodation' is acceptable when religious people provide (or refuse to provide) services to them. We argued that such accommodations are humiliating and unacceptable. The courts agreed.

Now, groups pushing for their religious convictions to be privileged in the workplace are seeking the introduction of a new 'duty of reasonable accommodation' for religion or belief, similar to the 'duty of reasonable adjustment' which requires employers to make workplace adjustments to mitigate genuine disadvantages faced by disabled people.

Having failed to make significant gains in the courts, the aim is to re-negotiate the threshold of what is considered 'reasonable' and win extended rights to disregard workplace rules on account of having a strong religious faith.

In their mission to "advance God's Kingdom in our nation" groups such as the Christian Legal Centre have taken on often hopeless legal cases of Christians who have supposedly "suffered for their beliefs" in hope of creating a disingenuous but nevertheless compelling narrative of persecution against Christians in the UK.

Their dissembling statements and overblown rhetoric, often parroted by the Daily Mail but dismissed by the courts, have had a certain degree of success in convincing some people that there's a problem here and 'something must be done'.

To address the 'problem' of Christians receiving equal treatment, UKIP this year released a [manifesto for Christians](#), promising to offer special protection to those who wanted to object to gay marriage or express other matters of religious conscience in the course of carrying out their jobs. The manifesto vowed to "extend the legal concept of 'reasonable accommodation' to give protection in law to those expressing a religious conscience in the workplace on this issue."

But Ukippers aren't the only ones entertaining this idea. The Deputy President of the UK Supreme Court, Lady Hale, also called for an [exploration](#) of 'reasonable accommodation' in a 2014 lecture on Freedom of Religion and Belief to the Law Society of Ireland. Even more worryingly, the Equality & Human rights Commission are right now considering 'reasonable accommodation' as part of a report on the adequacy of the laws protecting religion or belief to be issued later this year.

But the current law on [indirect discrimination](#) already provides similar protection to that which a duty of reasonable accommodation would. Employers are already obliged to take religion and belief requests seriously and under a new duty employers would still be able to turn down requests if they had a sound basis for doing so, so the situation is unlikely to change for the small number of people who think their faith isn't given due prominence by their employers.

But as a recent EHRC [research report](#) points out, whether or not any such duty did have any substantial impact would largely depend on where the threshold of 'reasonable' was set. There would still need to be a balancing exercise when competing rights clash and it's hard to see how disputes would be resolved any differently to how they have been until now.

What a new legal duty would do, however, is give the perception of privileging religion or belief over other protected characteristics and mark religion or belief out as having special status – thereby raising expectations that having a strong religious belief gives you enhanced workplace rights. Such an approach is likely to lead more workplace conflict, not less.

It is also likely to create even more uncertainty for employers. Take for example, a request to take time off work for religion or belief reasons. At the moment every employee has the statutory right to request flexible working; why are we now making a special case for religious requests? Under a new legal duty employers may feel under a greater obligation to accommodate a request for time away from work for Friday prayers or Sunday worship than they would to accommodate a request for time away to do voluntary work or pick a child up from school?

We all take our multiple identities into work – female, male, old, young, black, Asian, white, gay, straight and so on. Some of us may be religious, some of us may be parents, musicians, carers, football supporters, environmentalists, real-ale enthusiasts, volunteers, drag queens, bakers, clubbers, runners, dancers, political activists. These things all form part of our identity and can't be expected to completely separate those things from who we are at work. But when we are at work, these things take a back seat and our primary focus should be on the work we're there to do.

Nobody should expect religious people to completely 'leave their faith at home'. Any decent employer has an interest in creating a work environment where all staff are recognised as individuals and can come to work and be themselves.

In most cases it's also not necessary to require people to keep their beliefs entirely private, but we all must take responsibility for the beliefs we choose and respect the fact that other people may not share them or even respect them. There are many situations where proselytizing in the workplace is simply unacceptable. Our right to hold our beliefs is absolute, but in the interests of achieving some sort of harmony and equality of esteem for all, our right to manifest them may be subject to certain limitations. In this way, with a little give and take, we can all get along.

Civility needs to be encouraged and prejudice tackled. We all have a stake in ensuring that pluralism and religious diversity in Britain becomes a strength and not a constant source of tension. But fetishising faith and pandering to every religious demand is unlikely to lead to a more harmonious society. Demands for 'respect' and patronising religious literacy programmes warning us against [microwaving sausage rolls](#) in shared kitchen spaces are unlikely to foster greater cohesion. Neither would the creation of a hierarchy of rights, with religion at the top.

Given that the Equality and Human Rights Commission's role is to promote and enforce the laws that protect everyone's right to be treated with fairness, dignity and respect, it would be highly

surprising and deeply regrettable if it recommends we go down the 'duty of reasonable accommodation' route.

The law as it stands works well. Guidance from the [EHRC](#) and [ACAS](#) is at hand to help us all to negotiate the sometimes thorny issue of religion and belief in the workplace. If guidance can be made clearer, then all the better. But let's not try and fix what isn't broken.

Stephen Evans is the campaigns manager of the National Secular Society. Views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

God “is the man who saves people” - a parent discovers what Religious Observance in school has taught their child

A parent writes of their shock at discovering Religious Observance in the non-denominational Scottish school attended by their daughter, and gives their perspective on the problems caused by archaic Religious Observance rules in Scottish schools.

Towards the end of my daughter's first year of primary school, I was shocked to discover that it is mandatory that Religious Observance is offered in non-religious state schools in Scotland and in the rest of the UK. Coming from the United States, where this type of thing is not allowed in non-religious state-funded schools, I was left even more unprepared as the handbook for my daughter's school failed – even once – to mention the existence of Religious Observance.

The Easter performance prompted me to ask my daughter if she knows who God is. Her reply – “He is the man who saves people” – started me on a quest that continues more than a year later. I immediately withdrew my child from Religious Observance that year and have been meeting with the school and the local council to try and find answers. Why is there a section in the prospectus on Religious and Moral Education but not one on Religious Observance? Why is the RME overwhelmingly focussed on Christianity? Why haven't they let me come to a religious assembly to see what goes on? These questions have been hard for me to ask, but answers have been even harder to get.

At my daughter's school, I have been told that it is nearly impossible to withdraw a child from RME as it is intertwined with all the other subjects. I have been told that, even if my child is withdrawn from RME, she will still remain in the classroom while the lesson is conducted. She will just presumably not be taking part. When she is withdrawn from RO, she and any other withdrawn children currently sit in an adjacent room with the door open – still exposed to the messages I explicitly opted to keep her away from. My suggestion that they be withdrawn to a room in the main school building where they can have direct adult supervision and can avoid being further stigmatised by being forced to listen to the “fun” they are missing out on is rejected.

I view RO in schools as an archaic stab at indoctrinating our nation's most vulnerable and trusting people. I have talked to many other parents on the playground and beyond, and very few of them think the existence of RO is a good thing that should remain in our schools. Some view it as “just the way things are and it never did me any harm” while others go along to get along but actively teach at home against any religious messages their children pick up at school. Still others are against RO entirely but don't want to stigmatise their children or raise a fuss by complaining.

I think the bulk of the problem lies with the fact that head teachers have so much power and discretion in deciding how RO and RME are conducted at individual schools as well as how much information is or is not shared with parents. They have the absolute authority to decide what messages are given, how children are withdrawn. The religious temperature can vary widely from school to school.

I believe that Religious Observance should be a thing of the past at nonreligious state schools. While I see a lot of merit in Religious and Moral Education, I feel the guidelines for it should be explicitly stated and that all religions should be given equal weight alongside atheistic and humanist beliefs. Above all, parents shouldn't have to beg for information and transparency where their children are concerned. We have every right to know what the schools are teaching our children.

The author of the article is the parent of a pupil at a primary school in Scotland. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the NSS.

Secular Medical Forum rebukes NHS for advertising £22,000 spiritual healing job

Doctor Antony Lempert of the Secular Medical Forum (SMF) has strongly criticised an NHS Trust for advertising a "Spiritual Healer" post to work with breast cancer patients.

The advertisement from the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust says: "The therapist will provide Reiki/Spiritual healing to patients to enable them to cope with the emotional, physical and spiritual issues of dealing with their cancer journey.

"Epping Breast Unit is one of the largest breast cancer research facilities north of London. The unit takes [a] holistic approach to patient care."

To apply for the role applicants must have a "Reiki Master Usui System qualification".

Dr. Lempert said: "To suggest, as this advert clearly does, that spiritual healing has a place in the mainstream care of breast cancer patients is misguided.

"Should patients wish to access spiritual healing then good luck to them. There are plenty of private facilities where people can access all manner of non-evidence-based complementary therapies such as this. Some people facing cancer may feel better for using complementary therapies, though the risk is that people desperate for a 'cure' will end up chasing costly shadows.

"For the cash-strapped NHS to employ a dedicated spiritual healer is a step in the wrong direction and the resources could be much better spent.

"That an NHS trust might consider it acceptable to employ NHS staff on the basis of religious or spiritual belief or practice may reflect the confusion caused by the existing NHS chaplaincy situation. All NHS-employed hospital chaplains come from a recognised faith community. The NHS should instead be offering high quality evidence-based treatments and support which don't presuppose a belief in one or other faith or version of spirituality."

The SMF "campaigns for a secular approach to current major health issues".

It was reported this month that NHS trusts in England have a deficit of nearly £1 billion, accumulated in just three months.

“Phenomenal” growth of churches in UK linked to child witchcraft accusations

The Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) has warned of the "phenomenal" growth of churches in the UK that "promote the idea that children can be witches".

Gary Foxcroft, Executive Director of WHRIN, warned that the large spike in crime related to witchcraft accusations reported by the [BBC](#) was due to "the practices of faith leaders, often in Pentecostal churches."

Figures from the Metropolitan Police recorded 60 cases of crimes related to exorcism and witchcraft accusations in London so far in 2015, up from 23 in 2013, but the BBC reported that many local authorities were unable to provide any figures.

WHRIN, which campaigns for "a world where all people can live freely without fear of their rights being abused due to the belief in witchcraft", has said that the Government must do more to protect children from violence related to witchcraft accusations.

Mr Foxcroft said that there is "a complete lack of regulation of the people and practices that are behind these cases" and he added that "most cases of abuse primarily arise due to the practices of faith leaders, often in Pentecostal churches. These churches are growing at a phenomenal rate across the UK and most are branches of large mega churches from Africa. Some of these churches are known to promote the idea that children can be witches. Indeed the head of one of the biggest churches in Africa was captured on YouTube slapping a young woman and calling her a witch."

The National Secular Society [successfully campaigned](#) to prevent the church of the pastor in question, David Oyedepo, from opening a school in the UK. The Department for Education confirmed in August that the application by Winners Chapel International to register Kingdom Heritage Model School in Kent had been withdrawn.

WHRIN argued that "There is currently no regulation in place to stop such people from entering the UK and establishing churches. This is clearly something that the government needs to address."

"Whilst the Home Office has been focusing strongly on preventing Islamic or far-right extremists from entering the UK to spread their hate speech, more needs to be done to prevent such pastors entering the UK and spreading their messages of hate that lead to acts of terror being carried on children and vulnerable people.

"Preventing such people from entering the UK therefore needs to be prioritised. Additionally, any places of worship found to be promoting such beliefs and practices in the UK should be shut down and have their assets seized. The Charity Commission in particular needs to show stronger leadership here.

"Finally, at the local level awareness and understanding is lacking amongst frontline staff. Most practitioners that we have trained express how they find the beliefs in witchcraft and subsequent methods used to deal with them, such as deliverances or exorcisms, deeply challenging issues to work on. Much more needs to be done to address this gap and WHRIN believes that all social workers, police and child protection should receive training on these issues if more cases are to be prevented."

Upcoming Events:

[Cults and Brainwashing – Talk by Alexandra Stein, Ph.D](#)

Date: Tuesday 20 October | 7.00 pm

Venue: Reason Coffee Shop & Bookstore, 116 The Parade, Watford, WD17 1BD.

Tickets: £5.00 (includes tea or coffee and biscuits)

Watford Area Humanists is hosting a talk by Alexandra Stein, Ph.D., writer and educator specializing in the social psychology of ideological extremism and other dangerous social relationships. She will cover her time in a cult, her escape, and how she now educates the public on the signs of cult activity and brainwashing techniques used by cults. She has appeared in television

documentaries including Channel 5's recent 'Trapped In A Cult'.
Please RSVP by emailing john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk.

Political skulduggery: what kept Charles Bradlaugh MP from taking his seat in Parliament?

Date: Sunday 25 October | 11:00 and 14:00

Venue: Conway Hall Library, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

Tickets: Free but booking essential

Elected as a Liberal MP for Northampton in 1880, Charles Bradlaugh was kept from taking his seat in Parliament for six years. Speaker Deborah Lavin believes that Bradlaugh deserves attention, not only for his atheism, republicanism and struggle to take his seat, but for his 10-year working relationship with Annie Besant and their joint trial in 1877 under the Obscene Publications Act for publishing a pamphlet about birth control. Contact parliamentinthemaking@parliament.uk.

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