

3 February 2012

Quotes of the Week

“Church of England is an increasingly irrelevant clique of religious relics.”
(Trevor Kavanagh, *The Sun*)

“The power of the American system of republicanism lies in its capacity to allow religious belief to be a competing, not a controlling, factor in American life.”
(John Meacham, *Time*)

“Freedom of religion apparently means the freedom of the Catholic hierarchy to dictate decisions — for Catholics and non-Catholics alike — about child-bearing and reproductive health.”
(Editorial, *Milford Daily News*)

Essays of the week

[Gay marriage push will create a major conflict between church and state](#)

(Rosalind English, *UK Human Rights*)

[Practical effects of Islamic divorce in Britain](#)

(Charlotte Proudman, *Family Law Week*)

Majority of Britons want bishops out of the House of Lords

A Yougov poll for the *Sunday Times* has revealed that the majority of people in this country do not think Church of England bishops should be entitled to sit in the House of Lords.

In response to the question: “Currently, 26 senior Church of England bishops are entitled to sit in the House of Lords and vote on laws. Do you think bishops should or should not be entitled to seats in the House of Lords”, 58% said no, they should not be entitled, while 24% thought they should. 18% didn't know.

When asked “How in touch or out of touch with public opinion do you think the Church of England bishops are? 65% said they were out of touch, 21% said they were in touch while 14% didn't know.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: “The Government should take its cue on the Bench of Bishops in the House of Lords from the public, who overwhelmingly believe the Bishops should go. The time has gone for kow-towing to these out of touch bishops and vested interests in the Church. When reform of the House of Lords comes up for debate, the removal of the Bench of Bishops can now be considered with confidence with the knowledge that most of the country think it should go.”

Religious education GCSE will lose its appeal when the exam is toughened up

The Churches love to tell us how “popular” religious studies are in schools. According to one [story on a Christian website](#) young people are “clamouring” for deeper understanding of religious perspectives.

The website reports:

“The number of students taking the Religious Education GCSE had increased for the twelfth year in a row, according to figures out today from the Church of England. ... Some 188,704 took the RE GCSE this year, up

3.5 per cent on 2008 figures. Results showed that 73.1 per cent of the total RE candidates achieved a grade between A* and C. RE is in the top ten league table, measured by the number of students taking the course, and growing at a faster rate than mathematics and history.

“Nick McKemey, the Church of England’s Head of School Improvement, said the “relentless” growth of the RE GCSE course demonstrated a need for adequate resources and time to be invested in its teaching. Young people are clamouring for a deeper understanding of religious perspectives on issues of the day and how moral and ethical questions are considered by the major faiths,” he said.”

So that’s what it’s all about – getting more money from the taxpayer to train even more religious teachers for schools.

But is all this really because young people are fascinated by religion, or could it be anything to do with the course being ridiculously easy, and the ‘short course’ option taking only half the time of a regular GCSE and involving no homework?

Well, certainly the exams watchdog Ofqual thinks so. They are about to review GCSEs in English, geography, religious education and history – amid concerns that the subjects have become too easy.

The review follows an investigation by *The Daily Telegraph* which uncovered evidence of exam boards giving secret advice to teachers on how to achieve better grades for their pupils.

Ofqual want to “make sure that the standards set and the study requirements are what we expect” following suggestions that “some GCSE qualifications may permit narrowing of the expected course of study”.

Exam boards offering geography, history, RE and English literature must “make clear the full course of study required of candidates” and ensure that the assessments test pupils on the whole subject range, the watchdog warned. The syllabus in each of the four subjects could be re-written substantially in time for pupils beginning their courses in September.

Almost a quarter of papers graded A* or A last year, about three times as many as did so when the exams were introduced in 1988. Earlier this month, a senior official with the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, England’s largest exam board, admitted to MPs that grades may have risen in part because examiners are likely to give pupils “the benefit of the doubt”.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: “I expect we’ll see rather less ‘clamour’ among young people to include religious education in their exams if they can no longer achieve top results with minimal effort.”

Adverts claiming cures through prayer are banned

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has upheld a complaint against Healing on the Streets - Bath (HOTS) who claimed on their website that prayer could heal serious diseases.

The HOTS website stated “Our vision is to Promote Christian Healing as a daily life style for every believer, through demonstration, training and equipping. We are working in unity, from numerous churches outside the four walls of the building, In order to: ... Heal the sick ...”.

The [ASA ruled](#) that “A video on the website made claims that HOTS volunteers had successfully prayed for healing for people with cancer, fibromyalgia, back pain, kidney pain, hip pain, cataracts, arthritis and paralysis. We noted the testimonials on the website and in the video but considered that testimonials were insufficient as evidence for claims of healing. We therefore concluded the ads were misleading”.

The ASA also “noted we had not seen evidence that people had been healed through the prayer of HOTS volunteers, and concluded that the ads could encourage false hope in those suffering from the named conditions and therefore were irresponsible. We acknowledged that HOTS had offered to make amendments to the ads, and to remove the leaflet from their website. However, we considered that their suggested amendments were not sufficient for the ads to comply with the CAP Code.”

The ASA were concerned that “the ads could discourage people, and particularly the vulnerable or those suffering from undiagnosed symptoms, from seeking essential treatment for medical conditions for which medical supervision should be sought.”

HOTS is a registered charity, with praying for healing as part of their charitable objectives. They have [stated that](#) they will appeal against the decision. Their defence is that “All over the world as part of their normal Christian life, Christians believe in, pray for and experience God’s healing. Over that time the response to what we do has been overwhelmingly positive, and we find it difficult to understand the ASA’s attempt to restrict communication about this. Our website simply states our beliefs and describes some of our experiences”.

They also comment “It seems strange to us that on the basis of a purely ideological objection to what we say on our website, the ASA has decided it is appropriate to insist that we cannot talk about a common and widely held belief that is an important aspect of conventional Christian faith”.

Senior Campaigns Officer Tessa Kendall said: “We are pleased with the ASA adjudication. This was not a case of ideological objection as HOTS claimed, nor a restriction on their freedom of expression. They were actually claiming to be able to cure named diseases and conditions. The ASA response was a scientific, evidence-based approach to protect vulnerable people from unproven (and unproveable) claims”.

If you would like to report any religious groups making unfounded and potentially dangerous healing claims, the [ASA website](#) has clear instructions on how to contact them or the NSS office can help you.

London School of Economics brings back blasphemy

The London School of Economics Student Union (LSESU) has effectively made blasphemy an offence following protests from Muslim students about a Jesus and Mo cartoon posted on the LSE Atheist Secular Humanist Student (ASH) group’s Facebook page.

At an [Emergency General Meeting](#) the LSESU proposed ‘That Islamophobia is a form of anti-Islamic racism’. The motion passed by 339 votes to 179. The winning voting bloc contained people from Far Left groups as well as Muslims. The Union resolved:

- To define Islamophobia as “a form of racism expressed through the hatred or fear of Islam, Muslims, or Islamic culture, and the stereotyping, demonisation or harassment of Muslims, including but not limited to portraying Muslims as barbarians or terrorists, or attacking the Qur’an as a manual of hatred”,
- To take a firm stance against all Islamophobic incidents at LSE and conduct internal investigations if and when they occur.

The LSESU had previously told the group that unless it removed the cartoon from its Facebook page, it could be expelled from the Union – [read our news coverage](#) for the background to this.

In a statement on behalf of LSE ASH, its President Chris Moos said:

“There are no reasonable grounds for the LSESU’s instruction because we are in no way violating their policies or byelaws. The cartoons on our Facebook page criticise religion in a satirical way and we totally reject any claim that their publications could constitute any sort of harassment or intimidation of Muslims or Christians.

“That there was no deliberate intention to offend is illustrated by the fact that the cartoons were posted only on the LSESU ASH page and not in other spaces. But even if some people are offended, offence is not a sufficient reason for certain artistic and satirical forms of expression to be prohibited. A university should hold no idea sacred and be open to the critiquing of all ideas and ideologies”.

Tessa Kendall, NSS Senior Campaigns Officer, said: “The conflation of religion with race and the portrayal of the Muslim community as a homogenous entity is becoming a way to blackmail and manipulate, to stop any questioning of Islamists and their activities, even the most serious attacks on Human Rights. Freedom of expression is being held hostage by a minority of religious extremists who are manipulating well-intentioned but misguided liberals into silencing debate”.

“It is only through robust debate that Human Rights are protected, even if fundamentalist believers resent having their beliefs challenged. If there is no freedom of expression and open debate of ideas in an academic setting, this bodes very badly for the rest of society, especially when the media and politicians either can’t or won’t defend free expression”.

A spokesperson from the [National Federation of Atheist Humanist and Secular Student Societies](#) (AHS) said: “This is not the first time that an AHS member has been caught up in a row over published material. In 2008, Warwick Atheists caused controversy with a poster showing religious symbols being put in a bin. Leeds and Southampton Atheists have both experienced intimidation when they proposed showing material that some Muslims took offence to”.

You can listen to the debate at the EGM [here](#).

The blasphemy law was abolished in 2008 following a long campaign led by the NSS. We will be monitoring the situation at LSE very closely.

Vested interests delay scrapping of “faith school” transport subsidies

Protesting parents and churches have pressured Cheshire East Council into reconsider its plan to scrap transport subsidies to “faith schools.”

The council’s children and families scrutiny committee has now backed an alternative idea, proposed by Councillor Dr Louise Brown. It relies on computer mapping to plot where pupils live and tailor bus routes to their schools. This idea is being implemented in Cardiff, where the council has also renegotiated contracts and introduced set mileage rates for buses, minibuses and taxis.

Dr Brown said Cheshire East Council could combine this system with further efficiency measures, such as getting pupils from different schools to share buses.

Although the majority of the scrutiny committee members originally supported the complete scrapping of subsidised travel to religious schools, Dr Brown wrote her own ‘minority’ report and the committee has now changed its mind.

Dane Valley councillor Andrew Kolker — who thinks subsidised travel on religious grounds is unjust — said the original proposal of scrapping the subsidies would have saved the council £200,000. Now the cabinet will decide which report to implement.

Meanwhile, in Rochdale, the council has been forced to modify its own plans to scrap bus subsidies to faith schools. Now the cuts will be phased in over a longer period, but eventually they will be cut down to the statutory minimum.

The council had hoped to mollify opposition by announcing this delay in their plans, but Councillor Dale Mulgrew, who campaigned to keep the subsidies, said: “Although the original proposal has been softened, this change is nothing more than a clever political manoeuvre by the Council Leader and his Labour Cabinet. One which cannot hide the fact they still intend to scrap vital financial help to pupils who attend faith schools in the borough. It appears there is no alternative for hard pressed parents in the future under this Council Leader. He expects them to pay a tax for opting into the local faith education system.”

Leicestershire County Council is also considering cutting transport to faith schools. Lesley Pendleton, county council cabinet member for transport, said the authority had been forced to make some “tough decisions”.

“We have been funding these services above and beyond the national requirements,” she said, “however, faced with the further cuts to funding we are now having to look again at this and are asking people to have their say.”

See also: [Labour calls for an end to religious discrimination in schools in Ireland](#)

Ban lifted on *Visions of Ecstasy* after 23 years

Nigel Wingrove’s infamous film *Visions of Ecstasy* has finally been given a certificate by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC).

The 19-minute film’s notoriety came from it being the only film ever banned in Britain for blasphemy – or potential blasphemy.

The BBFC refused to give a certificate to Nigel Wingrove’s depiction of the erotic fantasies of St Teresa of Avila, which meant it could not be legally distributed.

The movie became the focus of anti-censorship and free speech activists and the ban was fought all the way to the European Court of Human Rights, which upheld the BBFC’s decision in 1996.

Blasphemy was abolished as an offense in 2008 and the film has now been rated “18”. The board acknowledged the film would be “deeply offensive to some viewers,” but was unlikely to cause harm, although it is likely to set off another chorus of complaint from Christians who feel they are being persecuted.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: “It will be surprising if we do not hear the usual anti-free speech voices raised over the next few days as they complain that an equally controversial film wouldn’t be made about Islam. In fact, such a film has been made, it was called *Fitna* and produced by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders. That, too, is dogged by controversy wherever it is shown. Another film about Islam, *Submission*, led to the murder at the hands of an Islamist fanatic of its producer Theo Van Gogh.”

Mr Sanderson said: “*Visions of Ecstasy* was never prosecuted for blasphemy, so no-one knows whether it really did break the law. The BBFC merely thought it might break the law and so banned it.”

All the same, Mr Sanderson welcomed the BBFC’s move as a “nod in the direction of society’s maturity.”

Nigel Wingrove was present at the NSS’s celebration for the end of blasphemy law in 2008, when it became clear that the BBFC was ready to change its mind. He told reporters: “I don’t believe it should have been banned in the first place. No one in the church thought it was blasphemous. Some believed it could be viewed as offensive but that it fell well short of blasphemy.”

Cheddar Parish Council vote to continue praying

A row has erupted at Cheddar parish council in Somerset over prayers at council meetings.

Cheddar parish councillor Peter Gawthorpe wants the saying of prayers moved to ten minutes before official council business. But the council has voted to say prayers immediately before council business begins, although not as part of the official agenda.

Councillor Gawthorpe says having prayers during a meeting is 'unlawful and inappropriate'. He told the local *Mercury* newspaper: "Summons to prayer may happen in a theocracy but we live in a democracy, a system for everyone, irrespective of creed, gender or politics. We should guard this jealously, it is our heritage. I don't mind people having the prayer, but it should not be part of the meeting, it should be ten minutes before."

He said the praying could stop potential new members of council putting themselves forward.

Despite the council removing prayers from the official agenda, councillor Gawthorpe said this was still unfair to those not wishing to participate. "Some maintain that the prayer should be kept as a tradition from 1895 when the council began. If we maintain traditions from that era then we would not allow women the vote and child labour would still be acceptable. The world has changed and we need to recognise that."

Cllr Andrew Bosley said: "This is tosh. What does it matter? Is this all the council has to do with its time?"

Cllr Nigel Taylor also attacked the proposal. He said: "Are we going to scrap Christmas next because it is religious? It is political correctness gone mad."

Councillors voted against the proposal to move the prayer, which will continue to be held just before the meeting begins.

The National Secular Society's [legal challenge](#) to prayers during council meetings was recently heard at the High Court and a judgement is expected shortly.

Sarkozy's smoke and mirrors promises to religious leaders

As soon as politicians start sucking up to religious leaders, you can be sure there is an election in the offing. This is certainly the case in France, where President Nicolas Sarkozy is suddenly very enthusiastic for religion to play an important role in "public life". The fact that he is lagging in the polls may also have something to do with it.

But he's walking a bit of a tight-rope here because he knows that the French people value their secularism above almost everything else. And so, although he offers emollient words to the various priests and mullahs, he actually offers them nothing new at all.

At a traditional New Year meeting on January 25, he told a gathering of religious leaders that although the country has a secular constitution it doesn't mean that religion shouldn't be closely involved in public policy.

He said: "A secular society is one which has decided to separate churches from the state, so the state doesn't have to account for its choices to churches, and churches don't depend on the state to live and organise – this is secularity, a secular republic," he told religious leaders.

"But this doesn't mean churches, respecting the law, are forbidden from speaking. Nor does it mean your words shouldn't go beyond the walls of your places of worship. That would be a strange idea of democracy: Everyone has a right to speak, except you," he told the leaders, including Paris Cardinal Andre Vingt-Trois.

Sarkozy said France's status as a "secular and social republic" was "written in black and white" in its constitution, along with its guiding principle of "laïcité," or secularism.

However, he added that the country's religions should also participate in national debates and in "creating our cultural identities". He said it would be a "strange schizophrenia" to preserve France's religious heritage while insisting religions had "nothing more to say, offer and impart."

"The spiritual richness you animate, the depth of thought you embody, the values you bear all have a vocation to address themselves to those who never cross the threshold of your churches, mosques, synagogues and temples," the president told the religious leaders.

The Church claims that two-thirds of the French population is Catholic, although less than one in ten goes to Church or has anything to do with Catholicism. 40 per cent declare themselves unambiguously to be atheists. So why does Mr Sarkozy feel the need to make such meaningless abasement to the churches?

In a similar bid to win favour with religious voters before the May 2007 election, Sarkozy (himself a Catholic) pledged to improve ties with religious communities. During a December 2007 visit to Rome, he said he believed "laïcité", set out in a 1905 church-state separation law, should be interpreted "more positively" to enable religion to be seen "not as a danger, but as an advantage."

After another Vatican visit in October 2010, the president was accused by opposition politicians of violating the secularism principle by taking part in prayers at Rome's Basilica of St. John Lateran.

In his January speech, Sarkozy defended a controversial April ban on Muslim veils, which he said were "incompatible" the country's values and the "dignity of women".

He added, however, that he was also deeply concerned by recent "aggressions against religious symbols," including attacks on Jewish and Muslim cemeteries, and said the country would guarantee all citizens "the right to practise their chosen faith." But who, other than competing religionists, are carrying out these attacks?

"Not only does our republic guard against intervening in the religious sphere – it will always be ready to defend those who are attacked or threatened because they believe, pray or witness publicly to their faith," the president said.

"Our republic will intervene immediately if citizens start affronting each other and will [act strongly against] all those who seek even once to inflame the furnace of religious hatred on its territory. This ravaging hatred has sometimes been on the point of sweeping France away. Let [us] be clear: It will not do so again."

French newspapers said Sarkozy's speech was a response to a call on 22 January by Francois Hollande, his main Socialist challenger in April-May presidential elections, for the 1905 separation law to be written into the national constitution. The separation law, however, makes an exception for Alsace-Lorraine (formerly in Germany), because this was agreed in a Vatican concordat. The secularist group La Libre Pensée therefore oppose Mr Hollande's proposal because it would make it much harder to reverse the Alsace-Lorraine exception in future.

Cardinal Vingt-Trois also criticized Hollande's proposal, presumably because of the provisions it makes for the remainder of France, as have Orthodox, Muslim and Jewish leaders.

In his speech, Sarkozy said he felt "truly comforted" by the presence of religious leaders, who demonstrated France had "created conditions for peaceful, harmonious and friendly coexistence between religions."

He added that Christianity had become a target in the country, and he praised Cardinal Vingt-Trois for “showing French Catholics are not living in an isolated camp and can respond to provocation with communion. As I’ve said many times, freedom of conscience is perhaps the most precious good guaranteed by our republican laws,” the president said. But he added: “No religion will impose dogmas and precepts in France on those who wish to avoid them. But nothing can prohibit the idea of transcendence from being present in our society. The concord and harmony governing relations between the different religious currents here and irrigating the social body provide an excellent guarantee of peace,” he said.

Reading between the lines it is quite clear that Sarkozy is offering religious bodies absolutely nothing new. There is no restriction on them joining in national debate at the moment. The fact that nobody listens to them is another matter entirely.

Have you renewed your subscription to the NSS? If not, please do it today

January is the annual renewal date for NSS membership and we hope very much that you’re going to stay with us for what promises to be a very full and eventful year.

We need your support more than ever as religion becomes increasingly noisy and demanding. We see free speech restricted because of religious sensibilities with often only the NSS speaking out in protest. More and more public money is being pumped into religious initiatives and yet more concessions are on the cards from this Government that thinks it can harness religious groups to do its dirty work.

Without an effective voice in opposition, extremist religion will reinforce its grip on all our lives.

But the NSS is entirely dependent on the support of its members. It receives no outside funding and because of its vigorous political activism it does not have charitable status.

We want to keep that independence that allows us to pull no punches, but we can do it only with your help. In a very real way, the NSS is its membership and the membership is the NSS.

So, if you haven’t already done so, please renew your membership today. The membership of those who joined during or after September 2011 will be good until next January (but you might like to make a donation before then!)

Many members are now paying by standing order, which is simple and saves hassle for everyone concerned. If you sign up for £5 a month, this would include your membership and also help us plan more accurately what our income will be.

If you’d like a standing order form, please write to enquiries@secularism.org.uk and one will be sent to you.

From the web

You can see the IQ2 debate “The world needs religion even if it doesn’t need God” [on Youtube](#).

Nick Cohen book competition winners

The competition to win a copy of Nick Cohen’s new Book *You Can’t Read This Book* was won by members Nicola Sherry and Jane Colkett. The answer was John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. If you were not one of the winners and would like buy a copy, using [this link](#) will give the NSS a percentage of the cost at no extra charge to you.

Secularist of the Year – 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

NSS Speaks Out

Terry Sanderson had a [blog](#) about Archbishop Sentamu's challenge to gay marriage on Huffington Post.

Rally for Free Expression – 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.

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](#).

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.

[Read Maryam Namazie's recent speech on how bogus accusations of offence and Islamophobia act similarly to secular fatwas](#)

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.

Vatican back in charge in Spain as Government promises to roll back abortion reforms

Spain's new right-wing government, headed by the People's Party, has announced that it will seek to reform the nation's abortion law, which permits abortion on demand during the first 14 weeks of pregnancy, and allows minors to obtain the procedure without parental permission.

According to Minister of Justice Alberto Ruiz-Gallardon, the previous legislation, enacted during the secularist Zapatero era, was approved “without consensus and with the unfavorable opinion of the agencies that were consulted.”

But Senor Ruiz-Gallardon was unable to say how far the abortion laws would be rolled back – but Catholic anti-abortion groups are hopeful that there will be a major repeal of women’s right to choose.

The news of the new initiative was greeted with glee by Spain’s largest pro-life organization, Right to Life (Derecho a Vivir), which sees this as a step towards its (and the Vatican’s) ultimate goal of making abortion completely illegal.

The Coordinator of Right to Life, Gador Joya, says the new initiative is “good news” because “it seeks to restore parental authority, which is violated by the current law,” wrote,. However, he added, “the proposal is still very vague, so we will be very attentive to what happens, because we are not renouncing our fundamental objective, which is the complete elimination of abortion.”

See also: [*The forked tongues of the anti-choice campaigners*](#)

Events

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 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.

Weird Science: An Introduction to Anomalistic Psychology. Lecture by Professor Chris French presented by Chiltern Humanists, Wendover Library, Tuesday 14th February 2012, 7.45 for 8.00. All welcome. More information www.chilternhumanists.org.uk

Bristol Reason Week. Bristol University’s Atheist, Agnostic & Secular Society is holding a Reason Week from 6–11 February. All events are free and open to members of the public at the [H.H. Wills Physics Lab on Tyndall Avenue](#). They include a talk on belief in public life, another from Dr Antony Lempert of the Secular Medical Forum and a discussion of religion, secularism and education. A full list of events is [here](#) .

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 Ian Swindale:

I wonder if the editorial in last week's *Newsline*, "Misguided liberals are playing us all into the hands of the Islamist tyrants", could be turned into a position statement and circulated more widely in the secular and atheist movement to be endorsed by as many well-known secularists and atheists and their organisations as possible. If this were to be done there could be no doubt about our opposition both to discrimination against people on the basis of their religion and also our opposition to attempts to place organised religions and religious ideas outside the area of acceptable public discourse, regardless of the possibility that some people may claim that their feelings have been hurt. What is going on at the LSE at the moment is deeply disturbing.

From Alan Loughlin:

As a member, I wish to point out to you an ongoing complaint I have with Sainsburys; I saw halal meat being sold and was horrified, I complained and was told this was not so; text copied below:

We purchase some of our meat from suppliers that are halal licensed abattoirs. However we have never requested in our specifications that halal practices, such as a blessing, be followed. Our suppliers are explicitly aware of our requirements and these do not include any blessing practice. It would therefore be misleading to label our meat as halal.

I have been back and photographed the halal meat in the fridge and sent them another complaint; we need to bring this more to the attention of the public, most people would be horrified to know the true situation.

From Peter Arnold:

Many of the public have gradually become aware that a scientific statement is a challenge to other scientists to find fault with it. It has a good level of probability until an error is found. This attitude to truth as probability must have become difficult for the faith of many people who obey what they believe to be the truth of their religion. It may induce in them anxiety and anger at what seems to them to have been designed to undermine their feeling of certainty that their particular religious beliefs are the only ones that are true.

This seems to be the case with most religions, but it may be interesting to note that Quakers in Britain at least tolerate people of any religious faith, so long as they aim to live by the usual 'golden rule', so two or more attendees at my Quaker Meeting are atheists, others are Christians of one kind or another and we used to have a Buddhist. We care about behaviour not belief.

If a religious belief causes unacceptable behaviour we expect leaders of the religion to make an attempt to correct that belief.

From Harry Perry:

Tessa Kendal's [piece on assisted dying](#) – I believe the stance of the NSS is wrong in emphasising the factor of being terminally ill in campaigning for the legalisation of assisted suicide.

We call for the legalisation of assisted suicide on the grounds of the right to personal autonomy. We each should have the right to determine our own fate.

All able bodied people, including those who are terminally ill, have this right already through the capacity to commit suicide at any time. To afford legal assistance only to those who are terminally ill would grant them a privilege over others who wish to commit suicide but who must use one of the traditional and usually messier methods.

There are only two logical stances for secularists who support assistance to die to take:

1. That assistance should be available to all. I disagree with this as it would allow all sorts of cases where the suicidal impulse derives from temporary setbacks and difficulties;
2. That assistance should be allowed only for those who are incapable (usually physically incapable) of committing suicide under their own steam. I support this position as it achieves the right to exercise personal autonomy for people who are otherwise physically incapacitated and unable to exercise their right to die by their own hand. Thus people like 'Martin' who has locked in syndrome would be covered while many of those who travel to Dignitas would not. Thus, being terminally ill would not be a sufficient or necessary qualifying condition – though many terminally ill people would qualify on the basis of their incapacity.

This position derives essentially from equalities legislation and is not based on emotional responses like sympathy, empathy or compassion. It challenges the Churches to recognise the importance of equal human rights and to drop their opposition to assisted suicide for this category of people.

Appropriate checks etc. would still be needed, but under equalities legislation people who are incapacitated would have a right to medical assistance, just as they have a right to 'reasonable adjustments' throughout the rest of society.

From Robert Tee:

I in the 1960s I was a lecturer in Physics and also Personal Tutor to a student who was charged with providing cannabis to another student.

He asked me to be a character witness. When I told his lawyer that I intended to affirm he said that the magistrates would almost certainly dismiss my evidence and it would not help the student's case. By thus declaring my lack of religion my opinion of his character would be worthless. I therefore agreed to take the oath. My evidence possibly lessened his punishment, but it worried me for months. It shows the attitudes towards atheism of that time.

From Gordon Drummond:

Simple solutions, or if not solutions, some ideas. Film the nasty man and give the film to the police. Supply Mo masks at the door for all those who come in. Have you seen the film where someone gets busted with a bunch of guys wearing Eric Cantona masks? How about Hijabs for all? Make sure the press come as well. We have to think out of the box.

Robust is all very well, but funny wins hands down, let's not insult, let's think how we can make extremists look just plain silly.

From Ken Broughton:

Apropos swearing and attesting, surely no christian should be swearing anyway. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is alleged to have said (Matthew 5:34 et seq.):

34 "Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths:

34 but I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:

35 nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.

36 Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.

37 But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."

The last line says it all and what is it about "Swear not at all" that they refuse to understand?

From Charlie Klendjian:

Archbishop Sentamu's comments on gay marriage prompted a number of discussions and analyses on television, radio and in the press.

Arguments on both sides of the debate were made with equal vigour (but not necessarily equal merit). However, I do not recall anyone discussing the only fair and workable solution to balancing the right of homosexuals to live free from discrimination with the right of others to freedom of religion: the secular solution whereby the state does not concern itself with religious matters and religion does not concern itself with matters of the state.

From Alan Jones:

May I offer my support to Terry Liddle (*Newsline*, last week) for a monarchy debate, and possibly a website vote to see where we all stand on this matter.

From James Russell:

Your correspondents John Dowdle and Pat Marsh-Stefanovska both, in addressing the interruption and cancellation of the One Law For All event at Queen Mary College, state that the video camera belonging to the man who interrupted the event should have been confiscated. Mr Dowdle goes further and says that the contents should have been deleted and that all such events in future should ban cameras.

Any attempt to confiscate a camera, and in particular any attempt to delete data from it, is illegal under UK law and can constitute common assault. Deletion of photographs can only be permitted by a Court Order. Aside from the legal issues, I'm unsure why we should fear having the meetings of secularists recorded by anyone. Our ideas can survive on their merits and deserve as wide an audience as possible. Banning recordings could easily be construed as an attempt to shut down debate, rather ironically in the circumstances.

None of this, of course, should be read as being in support of anyone interrupting a meeting by threatening those present, as in this case. Such occurrences should be dealt with appropriately by security personnel and the Police, who should be on the side of citizens exercising their rights to free assembly and expression.

From Roger Dinsdale:

A TV programme on the history of botany ([Botany: a Blooming History](#), BBC4, 31 Jan) is not the place one expects to find a reminder that religion (that triumph of ignorance over knowledge) should never again be allowed to hold sway over our lives, but there it was. The members of the NSS hardly need such a reminder, I am sure, but if you missed it and need a top-up you will find it in the first ten minutes or so.

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