

SECULARISM 2019:

**RECLAIMING
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

Saturday 18 May 2019, Central London

Secularism 2019: reclaiming religious freedom

We've announced a major one-day conference to be held in May 2019, under the tagline 'reclaiming religious freedom'.

The conference will take place on Saturday 18 May at the Tower Hotel in central London.

It will highlight the disconnect between genuine religious freedom for people of all religions and none and the 'religious freedom' often erroneously claimed by religious lobbyists.

The keynote speech will be delivered by Rachel Laser of the US-based lobbying group Americans United for Separation of

Church and State.

Elsewhere we'll hear from: Sara Khan, the lead commissioner in the government's commission on countering extremism; Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the UN's special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Gita Sahgal, the executive director at the Centre for Secular Space; and Martin Rowson, one of the UK's leading satirists and cartoonists.

We're lining up other high-profile speakers, and we'll host panel discussions on subjects including pluralism and religious orthodoxy, freedom of speech and healthcare.

The conference is already shaping up to be an excellent opportunity to make the case for, and discuss how to advance, secularist principles in public life.

Too often in public debate we hear the term 'religious freedom' being misused to mean religious privilege. This conference will be a chance to make two key points which need to be heard more often: religious freedom is for everyone, and it's a qualified right.

NSS members get a 50% discount on the ticket price, so attending will cost you just £25. We hope you'll join us on 18 May.

Churches keep covering up abuse. We need a meaningful secular response

The NSS has for many years warned that religious organisations have shielded abusers from secular justice. They exploit their privilege, their often close relationship with the establishment and tend to see themselves as above the law.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's (IICSA's) recent report on the prestigious Catholic boarding schools of Ampleforth and Downside contained descriptions of such sustained depravity that newspapers hesitated to reproduce them in detail. The report suggested the institutions had failed to disclose this to the police because they thought they knew best how to handle it. This has been a constant theme across the churches.

In the last 20 years two major child protection reports (Nolan and Cumberledge) have been compiled on the Catholic Church in England and Wales. The NSS was practically alone in denouncing them as hopelessly inadequate. Only now do we learn that, while the leaders of these schools paid lip service to them,

privately they completely ignored them.

IICSA's report into convicted Anglican bishop Peter Ball will – certainly should – be similarly devastating. We have submitted evidence reminding the inquiry how persistently the Church of England hierarchy attempted to undermine due legal process. And it is all too predictable that the state has not yet charged anyone beyond Ball for malfeasance.

Both the Catholic and Anglican institutions remain tight-lipped about abuse in their midst. Both still fight claims from victims with all their considerable might – although we have supported some victims, with some effect.

The familiar defence, from both Catholic and Anglican churches, is that it “couldn't happen again now”. But there is no reasonable basis to accept this; so little of substance has changed. We are reminding IICSA that this self-serving tactic is intended to dissuade it from making swingeing findings and recommendations.



Keith Porteous Wood discussed the Catholic Church's failures on child abuse on Sky News

Encouragingly, the tide seems to be turning and these religious organisations may not continue to have it all their own way. The (Anglican) bishop of Oxford is to face police questioning over allegations of covering up sexual abuse. And at least internationally – where we are also active, for example at the UN – prosecutions and forced resignations of the most senior prelates are now so frequent in the Catholic Church they have almost lost the ability to shock.

And the prime minister of formerly devout Ireland has subjected the pope to a humiliating lecture on the virtues of secularism and the failings of his church. That is progress indeed.

Government callously disregards victims of caste discrimination

In July the government made a very disappointing announcement – it won't be legislating to outlaw caste discrimination.

The decision followed a lengthy public consultation ostensibly on how best to protect victims of caste-based discrimination.

The consultation asked whether it would be best achieved by developing case law or by outlawing caste discrimination through the Equality Act. We called for legislation when we submitted to the consultation.

Now the Government Equalities Office has said it would rely instead on “emerging case-law as developed by courts and tribunals” to tackle the issue. In justifying its decision, the government said this was an “exceptionally controversial issue” and “deeply divisive within certain groups”.

This language reinforces what we suspected all along – the consultation was designed to avoid legislation that would upset the increasingly powerful Hindu right.

Developing new precedents through case law is notoriously unpredictable and costly. And few of the victims of caste discrimination have the means to bring legal challenges.

After the government announced its decision, the Equality and Human Rights Commission said it had missed a “crucial opportunity” and left victims of caste discrimination with “limited legal protection”. And the UN has repeatedly called on the government to legislate as a treaty obligation. Our CEO Stephen Evans criticised the government for ignoring these calls in *The Hindu*.

Research suggests there are at



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least 50,000 (and perhaps in excess of 200,000) people living in the UK who are regarded by some as “low caste”, meaning they are at risk of caste discrimination. And conservative estimates suggest more than 260m people are affected by caste discrimination worldwide.

We've long been pressing for meaningful action to address this problem. We are now working with relevant groups to develop an alternative strategy to provide greater protection.

Public supports NSS position on religion in schools



Like many supporters I was drawn to the NSS for its principled and passionate opposition to religion's privileged influence in education.

In June, NSS-commissioned research showed just how unpopular this influence is.

The polling showed most Britons aren't particularly hostile to religion but they don't think it should get special treatment or justify discrimination in our schools.

Just 17% of respondents agreed that "publicly funded schools should be able to select pupils on the grounds of their religious beliefs", not much more than the 13% who thought they should be able to select on grounds of political beliefs. So why are schools banned from political activity, but able to proselytise? Why can a state school turn away a child because their parents go to the 'wrong'

church, but not based on who their parents voted for?

Most people (52%) thought assemblies should be about moral issues. But just 26% think they should feature religious worship. So why does the state still mandate daily acts of 'broadly Christian' worship?

Only 14% of respondents thought state-funded faith schools shouldn't be obliged to "teach RE in a way that is inclusive of all religious and non-religious belief systems". But certain faith groups are still able to circumvent requirements to teach about more than one religion.

It's clear that a sense of fairness and concern for genuine freedom of belief motivates many of our supporters. According to the latest British Social Attitudes Survey just

'Most' people oppose faith-based admission in schools

Secular campaigners claim school system is out of touch with public opinion

By John Roberts

11 June 2018

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Our research was covered in Tes

2% of young adults identified with the Church of England, yet it runs a quarter of English schools. This is neither justifiable nor sustainable.

To support an inclusive education system, free from religious control, please join our national campaign at NoMoreFaithSchools.org

Faith school bans internet and lycra at home

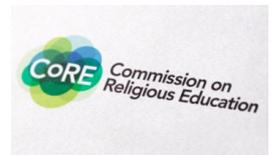
We raised objections with the government after a Jewish state school in London was told it wasn't breaching the school admissions code by restricting what families may do at home.

Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls School requires families not to wear leather or lycra, access the internet or use online entertainment.

The schools' adjudicator partially upheld an objection to these requirements – but only on the grounds of clarity and objectivity, not substance.

Yesodey Hatorah has a shameful record dating back several years. In June it was slated by Ofsted inspectors for deliberately undermining pupils' safety, teaching a narrow curriculum and failing to promote tolerance.

An end to RE as we know it?



In September, a report from the Commission on Religious Education proposed replacing RE with 'Religion and Worldviews'. Many of its recommendations echo those of our 21st Century RE for All campaign (ReformRE.org). It called for all pupils in every school in England to have the same national entitlement – addressing the variances and occasional absurdities of locally determined RE. Curriculum formation would be placed in the hands of panellists appointed for their educational expertise, not their favourability to religious organisations.

The commission recommends all pupils learn about a range of religious and non-religious worldviews including atheism, humanism and secularism. While secularism isn't an alternative to religion, it is essential in exploring the protections for and limits on the freedom to manifest beliefs.

Unfortunately the report doesn't place enough focus on teaching about religion and belief impartially. Reform shouldn't prioritise balanced advertising space for different religious and non-religious worldviews. A subject which descends into an increasingly diverse list of sales pitches wouldn't serve pupils well.

We've been actively involved in the commission's consultation and our qualified welcome for the report was quoted by the BBC and *Sunday Telegraph*. If adopted, the recommendations could represent a step in the right direction and signal a break from RE's confessional past.

But the perceived need to appease religious groups has led to a fudge, particularly as the report would allow faith schools to keep teaching about religion from their biased perspective. We'll continue to lobby for faith schools to lose the ability to teach in a confessional style.

Calling for rethink of Scotland's commitment to Catholic education

We're urging the Scottish government to reconsider its commitment to Catholic schools.

In June Nicola Sturgeon called her government "an unequivocal supporter of Catholic schools" and announced a 450% increase in funding for a Catholic teacher training programme.

This followed the deputy first

minister, John Swinney, giving an "absolute assurance" of the government's commitment to Catholic education. In response we wrote to him to put the case for rolling back sectarian schools.

The Scottish government has been banging the drum for state-funded Catholic schools this year to mark the 100th anniversary of their

existence. But religious affiliation is continuing to decline in Scotland. In August the Scottish Social Attitudes survey revealed that almost 60% of Scots were non-religious, including almost 70% of 18-24 year olds.

We'll keep pressing politicians to put children's interests above their cosy relationship with the Catholic Church.

Confirmed: public turned off by *Thought for the Day*



A poll we commissioned from Censuswide found that fewer than one in five British people back the current format of BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*.

When asked whether they agreed or disagreed that BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* should always feature religious content, just 18% of people agreed.

The survey also suggested *Thought for the Day* is widely seen as an irrelevance. More than half of respondents (54%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement: 'BBC Radio 4 should still broadcast a daily *Thought for the Day*'. One in 10 disagreed with the statement.

We responded to the poll by writing to James Purnell, the director of radio and education at the BBC, pointing out that the exclusion of non-religious voices reinforces prejudice and discrimination.

The philosopher AC Grayling, one of our honorary associates, voiced his support for reform so the slot contains "secular and inclusive discussion and debate".

A petition we've been running on the issue received a surge of signatures, with 700 people adding their names in just one weekend.

Last year *Today's* most senior presenter, John Humphrys, described the slot as "inappropriate" and "deeply, deeply boring". His colleague Justin Webb said the content was "all roughly the same".

At one point incoming editor Sarah Sands said it should be opened up to non-religious voices, but the BBC quickly responded by saying there were "no plans" to change the format of the slot.

NSS recommends reform of marriage laws

NSS research revealed that those seeking same-sex or non-religious weddings faced more barriers than those seeking religious ceremonies in England and Wales.

We found that over 80% of places where people can get married are religious. But just 26% of weddings involving opposite-sex couples and 0.7% involving same-sex couples were religious in 2015.

Same-sex couples can get married in only 16% of registered marriage venues – almost all of which are civil venues.

We also found that registering a venue for religious marriage is easier and cheaper than registering a venue for a non-religious marriage. In some parts of the country the discrepancy is very large: Manchester City Council charges £900 for a civil wedding licence, which needs to

be renewed every three years. Registering a religious building for marriage costs a one-off fee of £123.

In response to the findings our CEO Stephen Evans wrote to the government to highlight the "deep inequalities" the current system causes and call for the institution of marriage to be "fully secularised".

He proposed a remarkably simple solution. All couples should be allowed to marry anywhere they wished, providing an approved registrar oversaw the legally-binding part of the ceremony. Marriage would become a civil matter; couples would be free to conduct their religious or other rituals as it suited them.

Under current laws a legally-binding wedding must take place in either a registered place of worship or an approved premises for civil

weddings and civil partnerships. The only exceptions to this are for Jewish and Quaker weddings, which may take place anywhere.

Secularising the marriage laws would be good for everybody and help to deal with a series of challenges. Two-thirds of Muslim women 'married' in Britain are not in legally recognised marriages. Humanists have called for recognition of their marriages in England and Wales. The number of same-sex marriages is rapidly rising. And in June the Supreme Court ruled in favour of a couple who wanted an opposite-sex civil partnership.

The current messy marriage laws are mired in religious privilege. Addressing them would safeguard everyone's rights while reinforcing the civil responsibility and commitment involved in marriage.

Bradlaugh Lecture: Gita Sahgal warns of the rise of Hindu nationalism



Gita Sahgal with the gallery's portrait of Charles Bradlaugh

In September we gathered at Manchester Art Gallery to hear Gita Sahgal issue a warning about the rise of Hindu nationalism in our second annual Bradlaugh Lecture.

Gita criticised politicians in India for fuelling the rise of Hindutva and politicians in the UK for appeasing its proponents.

She linked the ideology's recent rise to outbreaks of violence against religious minorities, riots and lynchings. She said it had inspired attacks on free expression and science and undermined the rights of minority groups.

She warned that it was becoming more "dangerous" as the ruling party in India, the BJP, failed to deliver a strong economy as it had promised.

She addressed the long history of Hindutva organisations



All images © Stephen Knight

Our CEO Stephen Evans introduced Gita's speech

and compared the secularism of India's constitution to the secularism advocated by NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh, citing a common determination to address the suffering of "the most marginalised and the most oppressed".

This was a fascinating exploration of an under-explored topic and a timely reminder of the need for policies based on individual citizens' rights rather than their religious identities.

For those who didn't make it, a video of the lecture is available on our YouTube channel.

Blue plaque for Holyoake



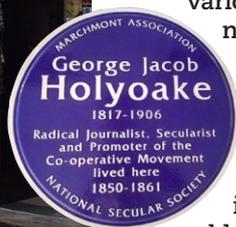
Stephen Evans unveils the plaque alongside Maryam Eslamdoust

We sponsored and unveiled a blue plaque in central London commemorating George Jacob Holyoake, who coined the term 'secularism' in 1851.

Our CEO Stephen Evans unveiled the plaque alongside the deputy mayor of the London Borough of Camden, Maryam Eslamdoust, in September. The plaque is outside 4 Woburn Walk in the Bloomsbury area.

Holyoake founded and edited various progressive newspapers, championed a free press and the rights of women and served as our vice-president. In 1842 he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for blasphemy.

We hope the plaque will promote a greater awareness of both Holyoake and the secularist cause.



Remembering Chapman Cohen

We commemorated the 150th anniversary of the birth of Chapman Cohen – the longest-serving president of the NSS – with talks at Leicester Secular Hall and Conway Hall in London.



NSS council member Bob Forder said Chapman Cohen was 'the people's philosopher'

Holding ‘theologian’ judge to account

We’re pursuing a case against a judge who acted as an Islamic theologian during the trial of the Parsons Green bomber.

In March Mr Justice Haddon-Cave sentenced Ahmed Hassan and told him “the Qur’an is a book of peace”, “Islam is a religion of peace” and “the Qur’an and Islam forbid anything extreme”.

Haddon-Cave told Hassan that perpetrating terror to “cause corruption in the land” is “one of the most severe crimes in Islam” and his actions had “violated the Qur’an and Islam”.

As we mentioned in the summer Bulletin, we initially appealed to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office

(JCIO). We said the comments had undermined the principle of neutrality and impartiality and may have given rise to the perception Hassan was being treated differently for religious reasons.

The JCIO dismissed our claim with a highly unsatisfactory response. It said Haddon-Cave’s reference to the Qur’an being “a book of peace” was “founded on case law”. It accepted his claim there was “a legitimate public interest” in making such statements to “address Islamophobia”.

The judicial ombudsman then dismissed our claim on the grounds that he couldn’t find maladministration. We are now taking this up with the Ministry of Justice.

Success: NHS withdraws faith-based fasting advice

In June we convinced NHS Choices to withdraw from its website advice on fasting during Ramadan which drew heavily on Islamic theology.

A page on the site purported to advise people on fasting during Ramadan. It included lines such as “children are required to fast when they reach puberty”. On the question ‘Can I use an asthma inhaler during Ramadan?’ it said “Muslim experts have differing opinions on this issue”.

It said breastfeeding mothers should make up for their lack of fasting at a later date, people on dialysis should “perform fidyah” (pay ‘compensation’ for missing the fast) and it was “a good idea” for children to “practise fasting for a few hours at a time”.

NHS Choices initially said the advice was “put together by medical experts and Islamic scholars and researchers”.

We said it breached the NHS’s standards of impartiality and commitment to providing evidence-based information.

NHS Choices took down the page and told us it would consider how it could “better meet user needs around this topic”.

Standing up to blasphemy codes in pubs

We named and shamed two pub chains who took down the Saudi Arabian flag from their World Cup bunting to avoid causing offence.

In June Greene King removed the flag, saying displaying it would be “inappropriate” as it contains an Islamic symbol. A few days later Mitchells and Butlers followed suit.

We wrote to the breweries to ask them to stop enforcing Islamic blasphemy codes.

Greene King replied to tell us its intention was “to celebrate the World Cup and not to offend anybody”. Mitchells and Butlers didn’t bother to write back, but over Twitter it said it was “inappropriate” to display the flag “where alcohol is sold”.

Islamic blasphemy codes pose an acute threat to free expression. But we’re also wary of competitive victimhood involving other religious groups. In September, for example, a council in London removed an advert from a toilet after an objection from a Hindu group.

We all have a stake in ensuring it doesn’t become the norm to acquiesce to demands for censorship.



London councils’ discriminatory coroners’ service

We revealed that five north London councils are collectively spending £56,000 per year on an out-of-hours coroners’ service exclusively designed to accommodate religious requests for fast treatment.

We submitted a freedom of information request to the councils in Haringey, Barnet, Brent, Enfield and Harrow. The response highlighted the amount being spent and the discriminatory nature of this premium service.

Row over out-of-hours coroner service ‘designed exclusively for the religious’

Our findings were covered in London’s Evening Standard

We’ve also continued to push back against religious bullying of Mary Hassell, the coroner in a neighbouring area who refused to prioritise religious requests for special treatment.

We submitted evidence to a consultation on her new protocol for prioritisation after her defeat in the High Court (reported in the summer Bulletin). Her new protocol says “the sitting coroner will take all known factors into account”. We’ve welcomed this as “fair and equitable”.

But meanwhile Camden Council, which is in inner north London, has announced plans to spend £80,000 on a new out-of-hours coroners’ service – a lot of public money to appease religious interests.

Defending women against influence of sharia ‘courts’

We backed calls for the government to withdraw divorce guidance which encourages women from minority religious backgrounds to turn to religious ‘courts’.

Our chief executive Stephen Evans signed an open letter to the Ministry of Justice calling for “an urgent review into sharia and civil marriage and divorce laws and to guarantee access to justice for all”.

The guidance reads: “If you entered into a religious marriage as well as a civil marriage, these divorce proceedings may not dissolve the religious part of your marriage. It is important that you contact the relevant religious authority and seek further guidance if you are unsure.”

The letter said the government should withdraw this guidance, saying it undermined the validity of civil divorces and women’s rights.

It added that religious fundamentalists’ power and control over Muslims had grown



“enormously” over the last 30 years. It also welcomed a recent High Court decision to declare a Muslim ‘marriage’ void, rather than a non-marriage, which enabled the woman to receive a financial settlement on separation.

We can’t allow the bigotry of low expectations to drive women into the hands of unforgiving religious ‘courts’. We’ll continue to campaign to protect the principle of one law for all.

The campaigners were led by Southall Black Sisters, which campaigns for women’s rights in minority communities.

Council creates secular remembrance space

Our advice helped to convince City of Edinburgh Council to create a remembrance space without religious symbols.

We wrote to the council after we discovered the ashes of babies who had shared cremations were interred at a garden of remembrance with a large cross.

We told the council it was failing to meet its own policies of meeting “all

religious, secular, ethnic and cultural needs” and respecting “the wishes and needs of parents”. We urged it to make sure secular cremation arrangements were provided as standard.

The council said it plans to create a new garden of remembrance for the interring of babies’ ashes after consulting with other local authorities, the Scottish government and the regional NHS branch.

Funeral arrangements for very young babies are naturally extremely sensitive. Grieving parents’ anguish mustn’t be exacerbated by unwanted religious symbols in remembrance grounds.

We’ll keep campaigning locally where we need to, but we’ve long been calling for a national solution on this. In 2016 we asked the government to make sure all state-owned crematoria were religiously neutral, with relatives being allowed to add religious symbols as they wished.



OTHER CAMPAIGNING

■ We intervened when Barry Town Council announced plans to hold prayers in the council chamber just before the start of meetings. We said it was reasonable for attendees to expect the chamber to be available for a fair interval before meetings start so they could prepare.

■ We said the government should treat citizens as individuals and clamp down on the segregation caused by faith schools in response to a government consultation on social integration.

■ We urged the Irish prime minister to force the Catholic Church to pay a €7m shortfall in compensation owed to clerical child abuse survivors. We also called on him to stop his government’s stonewalling of requests from a UN committee to pursue prosecutions against those responsible for forced labour in the Magdalene laundries.

■ Our education and schools officer Alastair Lichten met civil servants at the the Welsh government’s education directorate to discuss the development of RE and RSE in Wales’s new curriculum.

■ We backed a successful campaign to prevent a town hall in west London used by charities and community organisations from being leased out to a local Hindu temple. We said the plans highlighted the need to preserve secular community assets.

■ Our campaigns officer Megan Manson gave a talk on secularism at Chatham Unitarian Church in Kent.

Secularism 2019

Religious lobbyists commonly misuse the term 'religious freedom' to demand privileges. But what does 'religious freedom' truly mean? This conference will ask how best to defend freedom of belief for people of all religions and none.

It will also explore the limits of religious freedom when it adversely

affects others' human rights, including bodily autonomy, the right to equal treatment and freedom of expression.

Confirmed speakers include:

Rachel Laser, CEO, Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Sara Khan, lead commissioner for countering extremism

Ahmed Shaheed, special rapporteur

on freedom of religion or belief, UN office of the high commissioner for human rights

Gita Sahgal, executive director, Centre for Secular Space

Martin Rowson, editorial cartoonist and writer

Find out more and get your tickets at secularism.org.uk/events



Healthcare & Secularism Conference

Saturday 27 October 2018; Radisson Blu Holloway Circus, Birmingham

Religious groups influence many issues in medical ethics, from the right of women to access abortion and contraception to the right of the terminally ill to die with dignity. But to what extent can religious concerns be accommodated in healthcare? And how can we ensure patient care takes priority?

Join us for a chance to discuss the most pressing secularist medical issues today, including conscientious objection, ritual circumcision, pastoral care and assisted dying.

This is a rare opportunity for doctors, healthcare professionals,

researchers, campaigners and others interested in medical ethics to meet, network and discuss how we can protect the human rights of patients of all faiths and none.

Confirmed speakers include:

Dr Antony Lempert, chair, Secular Medical Forum

Professor Michael Thomson, Leeds Law School

James Chegwidan, Human Rights Lawyers Association and Lawyers for Liberty

Dr Brian Earp, the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics



Ann Furedi, chief executive, British Pregnancy Advisory Service

Dr Jacky Davis, Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying

Dr Michael Irwin, former United Nations medical director

Find out more and get your tickets at secularism.org.uk/events

New honorary associates



Dr Susan Blackmore (philosopher & memeticist)

Tom Brake MP (Liberal Democrat)

Stewart McDonald MP (SNP)

Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP (Labour)

Tommy Sheppard MP (SNP)

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