The logo for the National Secular Society, featuring the words "national", "secular", and "society" stacked vertically in a sans-serif font. "national" is in a smaller weight, "secular" is in a larger, bold weight, and "society" is in a smaller weight. The text is white and set against a circular white background.

national
secular
society

challenging religious privilege

Annual Report 2018

National Secular Society: Annual Report 2018

The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state and equal respect for everyone's human rights so no one is advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs.

The NSS sees secularism – the position that the state should be separate from religion – as an essential element in promoting equality between all citizens.

THE SECULAR CHARTER

The National Secular Society campaigns for a secular democracy, where:

- There is no established state religion.
- Everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief.
- The judicial process is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.
- Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.
- Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum setting, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices.
- The state does not express religious beliefs or preferences and does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine.
- The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
- There is freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion.
- Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief.
- Individuals and groups are neither accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.

Message from the president

The right to religious freedom is a human right. But 'religious freedom' is being redefined by many politically-motivated religious groups to mean more than just the right to worship freely and without interference. It has become a euphemism for the freedom to trample on the human rights of others.

Those most likely to be grievously disadvantaged by such religious impositions are women, sexual minorities and those in religious minorities. And 'blasphemy' laws can severely restrict freedom of expression in those parts of the world where they are still extant. However, the NSS strives constantly to oppose this misrepresentation of religious liberty as an oppressive political tool to control the life choices of others.

As recently as 2012 in Ireland, Savita Halappanavar tragically died during childbirth in a Catholic-run public hospital after being refused an abortion that would have saved her. Even contraception was unlawful there until 1980. Shockingly, in Idaho (US), Nixon-era 'religious shield' laws still protect parents who refuse life-saving treatment for their children on religious grounds from charges of child neglect.

The secularisation of society, particularly in western countries, has generally manifested itself in the repeal of the worst of such laws. We remain vigilant however; it is foolhardy to be complacent that progress is inevitable and gains are irreversible.

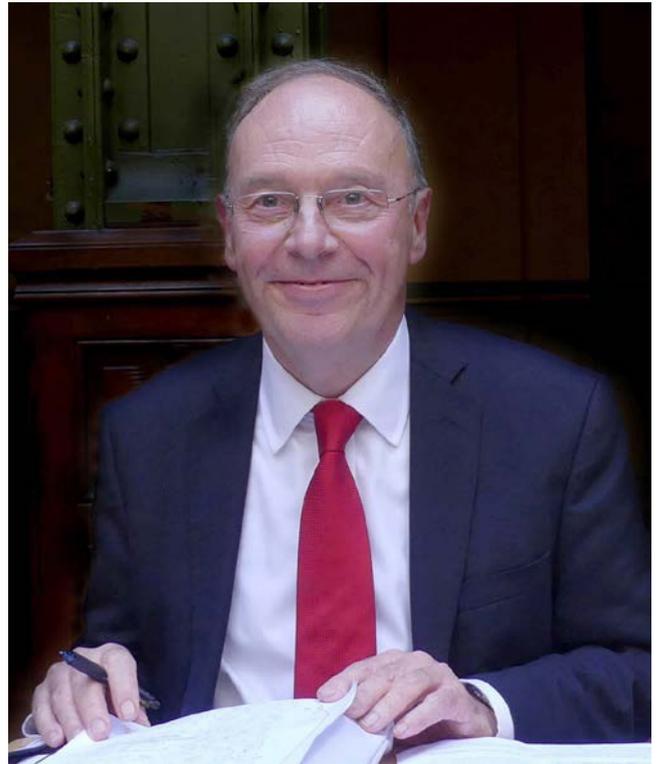
Religious lobbies are winning some battles. We worked for nearly a decade to make it unlawful to discriminate on grounds of caste in the UK. Yet this has been thwarted in defiance of all the evidence as a result of the prime minister's callous deference to Hindu nationalists, and possibly even to the wishes of the Indian PM.

Far worse is the systematic unravelling in the United States of gay rights protections and same-sex marriage, all done on a wave of religiously 'inspired' populism both encouraged and executed by well-placed advocates in politics and the media as well as massively wealthy American evangelical groups. I fear worse is to come. They are extending their reach into Europe and Africa, and also targeting international bodies.

But it is not all gloom. Our often ingenious and bold efforts set out in this and previous reports have had some success. Next year we are holding a conference to explore the issues surrounding religious freedom. You can find out more on page 11.

In some cases startling progress has been made. In Ireland – a country where contraception did not become freely available until 1992 – divorce, same-sex civil marriage and abortion in certain circumstances are now lawful, largely due to the near-collapse of the Catholic Church's moral standing. Similarly encouraging is India's recent decriminalisation of adultery and consensual same-sex activity.

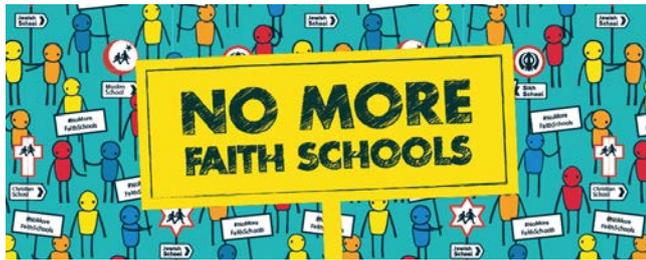
However, a note of caution. The UK is currently protected by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. We need to guard against our rights being compromised or even obliterated, perhaps by a vote of one, by the whims of political ideologues, as is happening



in the US. We have pressed, and will continue to press, for some form of human rights charter which the Supreme Court can police and which politicians cannot ignore or dismantle.

And more broadly, we need to be better prepared to counter the zealotry of those determined on religious grounds to restrict the human rights of others. Many of them choose to work in public life and institutions, at least in part, to further their religious agendas. Sadly, far too few of those who recognise secularism as an important protection of human rights similarly seek public office or careers of influence. And the few who do, particularly our honorary associates who are parliamentarians, are overburdened with the scale of the task they face.

So this is an appeal for secularists of all ages to engage with public life, including at local level, for example in school governing bodies and local councils, to fly the secularist flag and promote human rights for all.



No More Faith Schools campaign launched

In April we launched a new dedicated campaign to end the spread of faith schools.

The No More Faith Schools campaign highlights the widespread concerns and myths that surround faith schools of all types and urges the creation of inclusive, secular education across the UK.

Thousands have already visited our dedicated website – NoMoreFaithSchools.org – to sign our petition and write to their MPs in favour of “an open and inclusive education system, free from religious discrimination”. Supporters can share their stories and reasons for backing the campaign and get free campaign posters. We also produced a short launch video.

The site features a guide to challenging new faith schools, campaign materials and a myth buster addressing 10 common myths promulgated by the pro faith school lobby.

This year we’ve continued to highlight the damage done by faith schools. For example we revealed that more than 18,000 children were assigned to faith schools against their families’ preferences in England last year.

We wrote to the government to reiterate our call for the end of funding for religious inspections of faith schools after the Church of England announced plans to make them more rigorous.

We urged the government to amend the Equality Act to apply to faith schools after minister Anne Milton gave a misleading response to a parliamentary question on faith schools’ ability to discriminate against teachers.

And as you can read below, we had a major campaign success when the government U-turned on lifting a faith-based admissions cap.



We can limit faith schools’ ability to indoctrinate, discriminate and segregate. But the longer-term battle is over whether we should organise schools around faith identities at all. The No More Faith Schools campaign makes that simple but vital point.

Add your voice to the campaign at NoMoreFaithSchools.org.

Big victory on faith-based admissions cap

In May we achieved a significant victory on faith-based admissions. The government was forced into a U-turn on plans to scrap a 50% cap on religious discrimination in admissions to new academies in England following vigorous campaigning by the NSS, our supporters and others.

Had the policy not been abandoned it would have led to a new wave of 100% religiously discriminatory state-funded faith academies. For over a year the NSS helped lead opposition to the proposals, but we were far from alone. We were joined by former education secretaries, academics, faith and humanist groups and politicians across the political spectrum.



NSS supporters rallied against plans to scrap the cap outside parliament in February

Unfortunately the government sought to placate faith groups by announcing it would provide funds for local authorities to open new voluntary aided (VA) faith schools. VA schools are not academies and require a small capital contribution from faith groups. They can impose religious criteria on 100% of admissions, apply a religious test on all teaching positions and teach confessional religious education.

In a meeting with the Department for Education, Lord Agnew, the minister responsible for faith schools in England, told our chief executive Stephen Evans and faith schools campaigner Alastair Lichten that he expected few new VA schools to open.

We will be working tirelessly with local communities to ensure that they do not. Given the ambivalence of local authorities towards new VA schools, any proposals are likely to face protracted local opposition.

“In today’s society, it is more important than ever that our children can enjoy a diverse and fair education, and have the chance to learn from each other’s differences. The National Secular Society’s No More Faith Schools campaign is an important step in this direction and provides a platform for those who want an inclusive education to show their support for that.”

Historian and broadcaster **DAN SNOW**

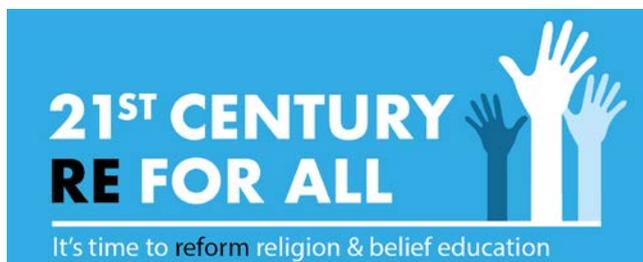
Helping to shape a major rethink of RE

This year we've been engaged in significant conversations and debate over the future of religious education in schools. And our 21st Century RE For All campaign has continued to call for every pupil to have the same entitlement to high quality, non-partisan education about religions and beliefs.

Throughout the year we've argued that all schools should prepare young people for life in modern Britain by teaching pupils about:

- The diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews.
- How people's worldviews may influence their thinking on philosophical, moral and cultural issues.
- Worldviews and rights: how the freedom to manifest religion and belief interacts with the rights of others.

We want to see confessionalism and religious instruction separated from this subject and only taking place in a voluntary, non state-funded environment.



As 2017 drew to a close we met with the Department for Education (DfE) to discuss the reforms we'd like to see made to RE.

In April we held a one-day conference bringing together RE professionals, activists and reformers to discuss the topic. (You can read more about this on page 11).

And in September, a major report from the Commission on Religious Education proposed replacing RE with 'Religion and Worldviews'. We were actively involved throughout the commission's consultation and many of its recommendations echo our own. Our qualified welcome for the report was quoted by the BBC and *Sunday Telegraph*.

The report 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 panels whose members would be appointed for their educational expertise, rather than their affinity to religious organisations.

The commission recommends that all pupils learn about a range of religious and non-religious worldviews including atheism and humanism. It further recommended the teaching of concepts such as 'secularism' and 'secularity'. Secularism is essential in exploring the protections for and limits on the freedom to manifest beliefs – and pupils should understand it.

Unfortunately the report doesn't place enough focus on the necessity to teach impartially about religion and belief. 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 this way.

But if adopted, the recommendations could represent a significant step in the right direction and signal a break from RE's confessional past.

Polling we conducted this year indicates strong public support for our position on reforming religious education.



Stephen Evans (right) and Keith Sharpe, the chair of our Secular Education Forum, discussed RE with the DfE

“I wholeheartedly support the No More Faith Schools campaign. Education should level the playing field despite background and give access to the latest advances in science and human progress and encourage freethought and inquiry. Children are not extensions of their parents but individuals with human rights.”

MARYAM NAMAZIE, human rights campaigner

Unsafe sex education report

In May we published a major report, *Unsafe Sex Education: The risk of letting religious schools teach within the tenets of their faith*, which examined the sex education policies of every faith-based secondary school in England (an annex looked at Wales). We found that 77% of faith schools with a policy were teaching the subject in accordance with religious scripture.

Our report came as the government considered how to implement the new requirement on all secondary schools in England to teach relationships and sex education (RSE).

Our research revealed that many faith schools are failing to provide clear and accurate information on important sex education topics. Many explicitly teach that same-sex relationships are wrong and criticise divorce, masturbation and sex outside marriage. Some condemn contraceptives and abortion and teach taboos around menstruation. Thirty years after the repeal of Section 28 (which proscribed the “promotion” of homosexuality by local authorities and in schools) we found its language was still widespread in faith schools.

The report prompted meetings with several MPs. We wrote to the education secretary to highlight our findings and urge him to resist pressure from religious groups for leeway on the teaching of the subject as it becomes compulsory. We also raised the subject at our meeting with schools minister Lord Agnew.

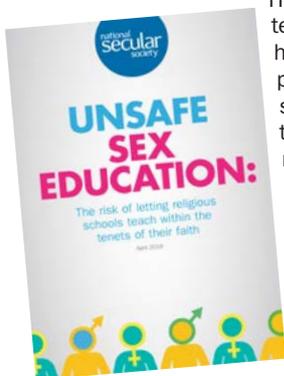
We also found all Welsh faith schools which had a policy were teaching the subject within the tenets of Catholicism or the Church in Wales. Following the report, education and schools officer Alastair Lichten met with education officials in Cardiff to discuss religious accommodations in the new curriculum for Wales.

In February we responded to a DfE consultation on Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). We called for teaching to be “underpinned by a strong human rights framework”. We criticised proposals that would continue to allow schools to teach RSE “in accordance with the tenets of their faith” and parents to remove their children from RSE teaching.

We asked that regulations on how schools teach RSE should not include “an option simply not to teach that subject”. We highlighted concerns that Charedi Jewish ‘community representatives’ were reportedly refusing to compromise with ministers on “alternative lifestyles and recently legitimised forms of marriage”.

We drew attention to some religious groups that were ignoring young people’s rights and arrogantly abusing these publicly funded faith schools to indoctrinate religious dogma without concern for equality, accuracy or children’s best interests.

We thank members who responded to the consultation on proposed guidance for RSE. The introduction of compulsory RSE in English schools has been delayed until at least 2020, but we’ll continue to make the case for all children to receive age-appropriate relationships and sex education – whatever type of school they attend.



Protecting children’s rights beyond the state system

In May we gave evidence on and broadly welcomed revisions to the standards for independent schools. The proposed guidance currently under consultation includes measures to prevent schools from “shielding” pupils from modern technology, teaching creationism, partisan political teaching and gender segregation.

This guidance strikes the right balance between protecting children’s educational (and other) rights and the freedoms of independent schools. Schools with narrow curricula, aiming to prepare pupils only for life within a specific religious community, critically undermine children’s rights to be prepared for life in an open society.

We discussed the scourge of unregistered and illegal schools during a meeting with the minister responsible for faith schools, who assured us that the government is committed to tackling the problem.

Throughout the year we’ve also reported on dozens of independent faith schools failing to prepare children for life in modern Britain. Ofsted has reported a “stark” increase in failing independent faith schools since enhanced independent school standards were introduced in 2014 – a change we lobbied for.

We’ve also been campaigning to ensure elective home education (EHE) isn’t used as a cover for illegal unregistered schools. Some of these ‘schools’ have links to extremist organisations, and many fail to teach any secular or English education. There is also evidence that they expose children to homophobic and misogynistic teaching material.

In July we submitted evidence to a government consultation on EHE. We argued that the government’s proposals would be a “minimal imposition” which would help to safeguard children’s rights without unduly undermining the autonomy of families who choose to educate children at home.

Our research found that local authorities were taking an inconsistent approach to EHE and unregistered schools. Some have failed to issue school attendance orders, which require parents to register children at school, when they knew a child was attending an illegal school.

We also noted that we’d encountered a small number of cases where parents have felt pressured into EHE because a lack of religiously neutral school provision.

Meanwhile this year NSS honorary associate Lord Soley proposed creating a home schooling register. There are plenty of examples of good practice in home schooling. But if children are raised and educated only within a religious community they are left unprepared for life in modern Britain.

“Children from all faith and belief backgrounds should be educated together and allowed to develop their own beliefs independently and within the rich communities in which we all have to live.”

LORD (MICHAEL) CASHMAN CBE, politician and former actor

Resisting the Scottish government's commitment to sectarian schools

We wrote to John Swinney, the deputy first minister and cabinet secretary for education in Scotland, after he and first minister Nicola Sturgeon gave long-term commitments to Catholic schooling.

The Scottish government has sung the praises of Catholic schools this year to mark the 100th anniversary of the state funding them in Scotland.

We urged the Scottish government to reconsider its position and roll back sectarian schooling so Scottish children are educated together.

Elsewhere we expressed support for a motion at the Scottish Liberal Democrats' conference in September calling on ministers to pursue a "single secular model of state-funded education".

And we called on the Scottish government to end compulsory religious observance in schools after it said it would enshrine a child's rights convention which guarantees freedom of conscience into law.

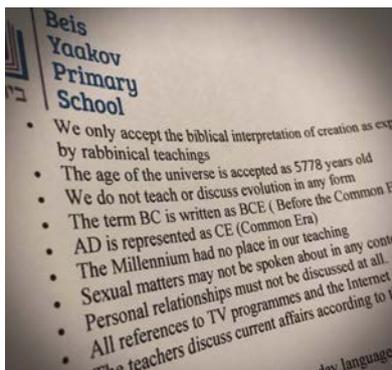
Exposing creationism in schools

In October, a state-funded Jewish primary school was held to account after our research uncovered its policy of refusing to discuss evolution

– despite its legal obligation to teach the topic in the primary science curriculum.

We urged the DfE to investigate Beis Yaakov Primary School, which insisted the universe was 5,778 years old and forbade any discussion of "personal relationships".

The school claimed our findings were based on an "outdated visitors' guide", despite the policy only being updated and posted on the school's website in October 2017.



Resisting religiously-imposed gender segregation

In November we called on the DfE to act after our research found a number of state-funded Jewish schools where pupils are segregated and receive different religious education lessons according to their gender. In June we criticised the DfE after guidance on gender segregation in mixed-sex schools failed to address gender-segregated RE which implies students are being prepared for different roles based on dogma, rather than being educated about religion and beliefs.

This followed the conclusion of a court case on gender segregation which we reported last year, when the Court of Appeal ruled that an Islamic school's policy of segregating boys from girls in a mixed faith school amounted to unlawful sex discrimination.

Faith schools imposing on family life

In August we called on the DfE to act after the schools adjudicator ruled that Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls School in north London was not breaching the admissions code by restricting children's families' behaviour at home. The school's restrictions include bans on parents wearing leather or lycra, accessing the internet and using online entertainment.

The adjudicator only partially upheld a complaint against the school on the grounds of clarity and objectivity, rather than in substance. Our education and schools officer Alastair Lichten's response was quoted in *Tes*. The school has been at the centre of several scandals in recent years.



Faith school OK to ban mums from wearing lycra

Secular campaigners criticise adjudicator's ruling on Jewish girls' state school, which also approves internet ban

Our education and schools officer Alastair Lichten's response was quoted in *Tes*

School reorganisations

In January our research revealed the impact of faith-based provision being treated preferentially during school reorganisations.

We found that 61 schools had closed and re-opened with a different religious character between 2010 and 2017. Out of these, 70% of all schools that changed their status between 2010 and 2017 went from being religiously-neutral community or foundation schools to faith schools, usually under the control of the Church of England.

When a religious school merges with a non-religious one, the usual result is for the new school to be given a religious character despite opposition from families whose children will be directly affected. Current rules, which we have campaigned against for many years, continue to privilege religion by explicitly protecting faith school places and leaving community schools vulnerable to religious takeover.

The figures in this study did not include schools in which the designated religious character did not change on paper, but the ethos changed in reality – for example when non-faith schools are taken over by faith-based academy chains.

We have called on the government to amend the guidance to protect inclusive school provision.

"If we are aiming for an inclusive society, the fewer divisions we can impose on our growing children the better."

VIRGINIA IRONSIDE, journalist, agony aunt and author

Making the case for disestablishment

We published a comprehensive report making the case for the disestablishment of the Church of England and sent it to every MP.

In *Separating Church and State: The Case for Disestablishment*, we outlined the inequalities created by the C of E's establishment. We explained how disestablishment would make Britain a fairer society where public policy had a more rational basis. We tackled the pro-establishment lobby's arguments head-on and exposed their flaws.

We suggested that Prince Charles's accession to the throne would be a particularly opportune moment to press the benefits of disestablishment – a line which led the coverage of our report in the *Guardian*.

A series of polls have shown that the British public shares our concerns about the established status of the Church of England. The government, however, appears to be more inclined to entrench religious privilege, rather than roll it back. In September the 'minister for faith' (a job which should be abolished altogether) said the seats currently reserved for C of E bishops could be extended to other faith leaders.



The C of E's anachronistic privileges should be abolished. Trying to accommodate them by extending religious representation would undermine social cohesion and privilege religion, further enabling religious groups to lobby selfishly and competitively for special treatment. We'll resist such moves vigorously.

Defending children from abuse

Throughout the year the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) has heard evidence of abusers being allowed to commit appalling crimes for decades, many of them with impunity because they have been shielded by religious organisations.

Our president Keith Porteous Wood and others have worked closely with survivors and their organisations to assist them in their pursuit for justice. And our vice-president Richard Scorer, who works as a lawyer for many of the victims, has repeatedly given evidence to the inquiry. He's been urging it to recommend measures which secure justice for survivors and abusers, and those who shield them.

In particular, he's been pushing for a law requiring mandatory reporting of child abuse to the statutory authorities – without exceptions on religious grounds, such as one which the Catholic Church wants for abuse which is admitted in the confessional. The inquiry must prioritise child protection and confront the fact religious groups and their friends in high places keep giving abusers cover.

The hearings have proved chastening for the Church of England and the Catholic Church. An examination of former archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey and a report on top Catholic schools Ampleforth and Downside have been especially shocking. And in his evidence to the inquiry, the current archbishop of Canterbury admitted how "ashamed I am of the church for what it did".



Richard Scorer delivered key speeches at the IICSA inquiry

Further bruising hearings and reports are in the pipeline. More attention needs to be paid to abuse within non-Christian religions, but IICSA has not yet agreed to tackle this.

Time and again the religious institutions have put their own reputation ahead of the need to protect children. We'll keep pressing for IICSA and parliament to take effective action.

PUBLIC OPINION ON RELIGION AND POLITICS: THE STATS THIS YEAR



62% of British people think religious clerics should have no automatic right to seats

(YouGov / The Times)



65% of British people think political figures should keep their religious beliefs separate from their decision making

(YouGov / The Times)



60% of adults in the UK say religion should be "kept separate from government policies"

(Pew Research Center)



52% of British people have no religion; **14%** belong to the Church of England

(British Social Attitudes survey by NatCen)



2% of young adults identify with the C of E

(BSA survey)



62% of Brits under the age of 65 think religion does "more harm than good"

(Ipsos)

Calling the wealthy C of E out on its financial demands



This year saw the Church of England step up its lobbying efforts for more public money to pay for maintenance of its buildings. In response, we urged the government to take the Church of England's vast wealth into account before handing out money.

In December an official review called for local authorities and central government to provide more funding for the care, maintenance and repair of church buildings, many of which we accept are a key part of our architectural heritage and should be preserved. Our treasurer Ed Moore, president Keith Porteous Wood and chief executive Stephen Evans met the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and expressed our concerns.

They advised government officials against handing out more money without properly assessing the church's financial need. At least £810m of public money has been channelled into the church since 1999, despite the fact the church's realisable assets are estimated to be in excess of £15bn. We told a government initiated, but in reality church-led, review on the sustainability of churches and cathedrals in England that the Church of England should be responsible for its own sustainability. We said it should not be supported with public money while it was easily able to fund such repairs itself.

We also reiterated our call for the abolition of chancel repair liability (CRL) – a medieval relic which requires some landowners to pay for repairs to Anglican churches – when we lobbied the Law Commission. We've long been calling for this liability to be scrapped, and we'll keep pushing for that as the commission considers CRL's future.

Resisting the promotion of faith in the civil service

We pushed back against the civil service's appointment of a 'faith and belief champion'.

Last November the service appointed the 'champion' as part of a 'diversity and inclusion strategy', which is supposedly designed to make it "the UK's most inclusive employer" by 2020. The strategy put an increasing focus on faith, saying it would "improve faith and belief literacy in order to create a truly inclusive culture where people of all faiths and beliefs, and none, are able to bring their whole selves to work".

We wrote to the cabinet secretary to question the wisdom of the appointment. Our CEO Stephen Evans and our campaigns officer Megan Manson then met the 'champion', Clare Moriarty. They outlined our concerns that the promotion of faith would undermine workplace harmony, waste public resources and reinforce the special protection from criticism given to religious ideas.

They also criticised the civil service for marking an event called 'world hijab day', which celebrates Islamic headscarves, in February.

Stephen also met Jazz Bhogal, deputy director of civil service diversity and inclusion at the Cabinet Office, to discuss religion in the workplace more generally.

Protecting judicial neutrality

Secular neutrality is an essential element of any justice system that everyone can have confidence in. With this in mind we again called on the justice minister to bring to an end the centuries-old annual judges' service in Westminster Abbey, and other similar Christian services, which mark the start of each judicial year.

These outdated services entwine what should be an independent judiciary with a particular strand of organised religion – the established church – and undermine at least the perception of a clear separation between the judiciary and the established church.

We said this was particularly pertinent given revelations this year of the apparent failure of the justice system to be impartial in the case of former Anglican bishop Peter Ball, who evaded justice for sexual abuse for decades.

We have also challenged a judge who repeatedly told terrorists in court that their behaviour had nothing to do with Islam.

At the conclusion of the trial of the Parsons Green bomber in March, Mr Justice Haddon-Cave made lengthy, inappropriate remarks towards the defendant Ahmed Hassan. Haddon-Cave told Hassan that Islam was a "religion of peace" and the Koran was a "book of peace". He also said Hassan would have "plenty of time to study the Qur'an in prison".

In response we wrote to the lord chief justice to ask him to ensure judicial office holders refrain from theological interpretation. The case was referred to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office which unfortunately dismissed our concerns, readily accepting Haddon-Cave's highly dubious claims.

We appealed to the judicial ombudsman, but he said he'd found no "maladministration" within his remit. We have now taken this up with the justice secretary, David Gauke, shortly before going to press. We await a reply.

We also wrote to the Bar Standards Board and the Solicitors Regulation Authority to urge them to investigate a Christian campaign group's conduct during the case of the toddler Alfie Evans.

The Christian Legal Centre (CLC) purported to give Alfie's parents legal advice but judges said its advice was "misleading" and had been "comprehensively rejected". In one case a judge said a CLC 'lawyer' had come close to committing contempt of court. We asked the boards to investigate the CLC's conduct.



The judges' service, as reported by The Times

“You will have plenty of time to study the *Qur'an* in prison in the years to come. You should understand that the *Qur'an* is a book of peace; Islam is a religion of peace. The *Qur'an* and Islam forbid anything extreme... You have violated the *Qur'an* and Islam by your actions.”

The remarks from MR JUSTICE HADDON-CAVE which we objected to



Our CEO Stephen Evans (right) joined campaigners calling for caste discrimination to be explicitly outlawed outside the Conservative party conference

Supporting victims of caste discrimination

In July the government announced that it would not introduce legislation against caste discrimination following a lengthy consultation on the issue.

The Government Equalities Office said it would rely instead on “emerging case-law as developed by courts and tribunals” to tackle the issue. This amounts to virtually no action being taken at all. Cases developing new precedents are notorious for their unpredictability and huge cost, which means they are rare.

We responded to the consultation, outlining the impact of caste discrimination, pointing out how inadequate case law would be and including a comprehensive dossier drawn from UN, EU and legal sources making an overwhelming case for legislation.

The government’s decision brought a serious rebuke from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, while the UN has repeatedly instructed the government to legislate as a treaty obligation.

Our chief executive Stephen Evans told *The Hindu* the government’s intransigence “seriously tarnishes” its human rights record.

But it appears the consultation was little more than a cosmetic exercise and a stalling tactic, as legislating would have upset the influential Hindu right. In justifying its decision, the government said this was an “exceptionally controversial issue” and “deeply divisive within certain groups”.

We are working with anti-caste organisations to find other ways of outlawing caste discrimination.

Promoting fairer marriage laws

June, the traditional month of weddings, saw the launch of our campaign to reform marriage laws for greater equality and fairness. This came after we published original research that revealed deep imbalances in the marriage system in England and Wales.

Our research revealed that the Church of England’s grip on the marriage laws makes it harder and more expensive to arrange same-sex weddings, non-religious weddings and legally-binding weddings within some minority faiths.

In response to the findings we wrote to the government to highlight the “deep inequalities” the current system causes and call for the institution of marriage to be “fully secularised”.

We suggested reforming the law to allow couples to be free to marry where they like. At the moment, the legal status of the marriage is tied to the building where it takes place, an arrangement which helps the C of E to keep people using its churches.

A state-approved registrar should oversee the legally binding part of a marriage and couples should be free to hold whatever religious or secular ceremonies they wish around that process. The registration could easily form part of a religious service if they wished, but no religious ceremony should automatically result in legal recognition.

The prime minister has expressed her intention to legalise opposite-sex civil partnerships. We will attempt to take this opportunity to call for the secularisation of the marriage laws.

In some cases, the complexity of the current marriage laws creates cover for diminished rights. Last year a Channel 4 documentary revealed that six in ten Muslim women in Britain who had taken part in a ‘nikah’ (religious marriage) were not legally married.

Secularising the marriage laws would also simplify them and mean everyone entering a marriage agreed to a common set of rights and responsibilities. And we’re also promoting better citizenship education so nobody is left unaware of what constitutes a legal marriage or for want of one finds themselves unwittingly left with no rights if the relationship breaks down.

We’re also continuing to push politicians in Westminster and Belfast to legalise same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. In April a poll by Sky Data revealed that 76% of people in NI now support legal marriage equality – with just 18% opposing it. But same-sex couples still cannot get married and theocratic politicians, particularly in the DUP, are blocking reform.

MARRIAGE IN ENGLAND AND WALES: WHAT WE FOUND OUT



26% of opposite-sex weddings were religious in 2015



0.7% of same-sex weddings were religious in 2015



Only 7,500 civil wedding venues are registered to hold marriages in England and Wales, as opposed to around 40,000 places of worship



Same-sex couples can only get married in 16% of registered marriage venues



Just 0.5% of the places of worship which can hold weddings are registered to conduct same-sex marriages.

Checking the power of sharia ‘courts’

We welcomed the Home Office’s rejection of proposals to regulate sharia ‘courts’, which were made in an official review published in February. The review, which was chaired by Islamic theologian Prof Mona Siddiqui, proposed the state creating a body which would “design a system of self-regulation of sharia councils, including a code of practice”.

The Home Office dismissed these recommendations, saying regulation could “present councils as an alternative to UK laws”. We welcomed its decision: regulation of sharia ‘courts’ will only lend them legitimacy whilst doing nothing to ensure compatibility with anti-discrimination and human rights law.

In August our chief executive Stephen Evans signed an open letter to the Ministry of Justice calling on the government to withdraw divorce guidance encouraging women from minority religious backgrounds to turn to religious ‘courts’. The guidance says it is “important” to contact a “relevant religious authority” to dissolve “the religious part of your marriage”.

The letter, coordinated by women’s rights group Southall Black Sisters, pointed out that this undermines the validity of civil divorces and women’s rights. It also called for an urgent review into sharia and civil marriage and divorce laws and to guarantee access to justice for all.

Counter-extremism

The NSS’s principled yet moderate voice continues to play an important role in the increasingly polarised debate around religion and extremism. Throughout the year we have highlighted and challenged manifestations of extremism that threaten others’ fundamental rights and freedoms.

In January we welcomed the appointment of counter-extremism and women’s rights activist Sara Khan to lead the government’s new Commission for Countering Extremism. Within hours of her appointment a number of Muslim organisations were calling for her to be sacked, insisting they would not work with her.



Sara Khan

In March our CEO Stephen Evans met with Sara to discuss the commission’s work. Stephen praised her commitment to free speech and highlighted the need to make clear that religious freedom is a qualified rather than unlimited right. Sara thanked us for the public support we gave her following her appointment. We look forward to a fruitful ongoing relationship with the commission.

Standing up for human rights

We’ve continued to work with parliamentarians, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) and the Repeal Bill Alliance to protect human rights as the UK prepares to leave the European Union.

We’ve warned parliamentarians that efforts to prevent the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights being codified into UK law could lead to religion being elevated above other protected characteristics.

Our recommendations include:

- Protecting UK human rights from erosion by simple parliamentary majorities. Most countries guarantee human rights in their constitutions, which are deliberately difficult to amend.
 - Incorporating the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights into UK law, as no alternative has been proposed. A consequence of not doing so could be unfettered discrimination against the employment and dismissal of non-religious teachers in faith schools.
 - Finding realistic alternatives to EU agencies and reporting requirements on governments which help to ensure human rights are monitored and enforced as quickly as possible.
 - Restricting the government’s use of statutory instruments – a form of secondary legislation which the government can draft as it pleases – when they lead to a depletion of human rights.
- Our president Keith Porteous Wood is leading our work on this.



“The government urgently needs to examine its own complicity in keeping religious fundamentalists in business. Sharia ‘courts’ have been actively tolerated in Britain by being given charitable status and treated as partners by the police and local councils.”

Letter coordinated by SOUTHALL BLACK SISTERS and signed by our CEO Stephen Evans

Secularist of the Year

We were delighted to name Phil Johnson and Graham Sawyer as the 2018 Secularists of the Year in March. Human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell presented Phil and Graham with the £5,000 prize at our awards ceremony in central London.

Both were honoured for their work campaigning on behalf of survivors of child abuse in the Church of England. Phil has worked as the chair of Minister And Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors, a support group for those who have been sexually abused by ministers or clergy. Graham, the vicar of St James' Church of Briercliffe in Burnley, has been a crucial voice for change in the C of E.



Graham Sawyer (left) and Phil Johnson have worked to hold the Church of England's abusers to account

“Two exceptionally courageous, tenacious and determined men who simply refused to give in to the lies and deceit of the church hierarchy.”
 PETER TACHELL on Phil Johnson and Graham Sawyer

Both our winners gave devastating evidence on the church's handling of abuse to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse this year. They highlighted the shocking abuse they and others had suffered within the church, the attempts to cover it up and the failure of the C of E hierarchy to come clean to the secular authorities.



Campaigners paid tribute to the Iranian activist group My Stealthy Freedom

Graham's address to the Secularist of the Year event also included a call to disestablish the church to create a fairer, more equal Britain.

This year's nominees also included: Amina Lone, of the Social Action and Research Foundation; My Stealthy Freedom, which encourages Iranian women to discard their hijabs in public; counter-extremist campaigner and radio host Maajid Nawaz; Meena Varma, the director of Dalit Solidarity Network UK; and the Western Isles Secular Society, which has organised to oppose Sabbatarian control of life in the Western Isles.

We thank all those who attended – and we are particularly grateful to our anonymous donor who sponsored the prize.



Nominee Amina Lone backed our No More Faith Schools campaign

Bradlaugh Lecture

We held our second Bradlaugh Lecture in September at Manchester Art Gallery. This year human rights activist Gita Sahgal presented to a full house on the rise of Hindu nationalism (Hindutva).

Gita criticised politicians in India and the UK for joining and fuelling Hindu extremist movements and compared the secularism of India's constitution to the secularism of our founder Charles Bradlaugh. Both Bradlaugh and India's secularists, she said, had a common determination to address the suffering of “the most marginalised and the most oppressed”.

Gita linked the rise of Hindutva to outbreaks of violence against religious minorities and riots in India, including mass killings and lynchings, particularly of those thought to deal in beef.

She highlighted a lengthy history of the Hindutva movement's links with European fascists and British imperialists and contrasted that with the approach of the rationalists who led the campaign for Indian independence.

Gita strongly criticised the Charity Commission in the UK for failing to act on groups linked to Hindu fundamentalists and criticised both Labour and Conservative politicians for indulging India's prime minister Narendra Modi when he visited.



“If universalism is rejected as a principle then the only way of working out where you stand is to decide between your tribe and the tribe of the other.”

GITA SAHGAL

21st Century RE For All conference

In April we held a conference bringing together panellists from educational backgrounds, teachers, NSS supporters and members of the public to discuss how religion and belief should be taught in schools.

The keynote speech was delivered by philosopher and NSS honorary associate AC Grayling. He called for teaching to look broadly at “the history of ideas”. He said education about religious traditions should be “one but only one component” of teaching about how humans have tried to make sense of the world.

The conference also brought together four panellists: Keith Sharpe, of our Secular Education Forum; Kate Christopher, a national RE adviser; Martha Shaw, a senior lecturer in education at London South Bank University; and Alan Brine, a former national adviser for religious education.

Attendees also took part in round-table discussions.



From left: Keith Sharpe, Martha Shaw, our council member Dorothy Smith, Kate Christopher and Alan Brine



AC Grayling said in “too many schools” children are given “education in a religious outlook rather than education about religious outlooks”

Celebrating NSS history

In August we were proud to sponsor and unveil a blue plaque commemorating George Jacob Holyoake, who coined the term ‘secularism’ in 1851, in central London.

Our CEO Stephen Evans and the deputy mayor of the borough of Camden, Maryam Eslamdoust, unveiled the plaque outside 4 Woburn Walk in the Bloomsbury area. The plaque is part of the Marchmont Association’s commemorative plaques scheme which raises awareness of the area’s social history. Holyoake was the last person in England to be imprisoned on a charge of atheism.

In September our council member and historian Bob Forder delivered talks about the life and legacy of Chapman Cohen, our longest-serving president, in Leicester and London.



Stephen Evans and Maryam Eslamdoust unveiled Holyoake’s plaque



Secularism 2019

We announced a major conference to take place next year on Saturday 18 May in central London. Tickets are now available – and thanks to our generous 50% discount for members, they will cost members just £25.

The conference will be on the theme of ‘reclaiming religious freedom’. It will highlight the disconnect between genuine religious freedom for people of all religions and none and the ‘religious freedom’ commonly claimed by religious lobbyists.

The keynote speaker will be Rachel Laser, president and CEO of the US-based lobbying group Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Panel discussions will focus on subjects including pluralism and religious orthodoxy, freedom of speech and healthcare. We’ll also be presenting the 2019 Secularist of the Year award at the conference. This is not an event to miss!



Standing up for free expression

We submitted evidence to an inquiry by the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) on free speech at universities. In our submission we said free speech should be protected “not only as a legal concept, but as a positive value” on campuses. We raised particular concerns that student unions had commonly made critics of religion the target of unjustified censorship in universities.

The JCHR took what we said on board: in its report it said “incidents in which free speech is restricted often revolve around discussion of key controversial or divisive issues” including “humanist/secular groups critiquing religion”. As we advised it highlighted legitimate concerns while spurning the competing sensationalised media narratives about the threat posed by over-zealous protesters and the counter-extremist Prevent strategy.

In August we again met with the new head of the government’s counter-extremism commission, Sara Khan, to urge her to oppose attempts to legislate extremism away. Our president Keith Porteous Wood joined other members of the ‘Defend Free Speech’ coalition to highlight concerns about proposed measures to combat individuals and organisations the government deems to be ‘extreme’, that we believe would be harmful to free speech.

We are encouraged that the commission appears to want to reinvigorate a civil society movement based on shared values to push back against extremists – and create a space where people can call out extremists without being branded bigots themselves.

We’re reiterating our call for the repeal of the blasphemy law in Scotland after the Scottish National Party made it party policy to do so. And we’re resisting attempts to impose blasphemy codes through appeals to sensitivity in wider society.

In June we named and shamed two pub chains who removed the Saudi Arabian flag from their World Cup bunting because they decided it was offensive for an Islamic symbol to be on display in a place where alcohol is sold. We wrote to Greene King and Mitchells & Butlers to highlight the impact such decisions have on free expression for everyone.

We also stood up for the rights of people in the Western Isles of Scotland to do as they please on Sundays. We broke the story of a business owner who was harassed by Sabbatarians for daring to open her shop, prompting coverage in the national press. And we spoke out against Sabbatarianism after Stornoway Free Church criticised a decision to open an arts venue on a Sunday.

Freedom of expression is the ultimate value on which liberal societies are based, and we’ll continue to defend and promote it both in the UK and internationally.



We highlighted the case of Leona Rawlinson, who faced harassment over her decision to open her shop on Sundays

Challenging non-stun slaughter

We’ve been pressing for an end to the religious exemption to the animal welfare laws at a national level, campaigning locally on the issue where appropriate and highlighting the impact of the religious exemption.

In October official data showed a significant rise in meat from animals which had not been stunned before slaughter. In response we wrote to the environment secretary, Michael Gove, urging him to remove the exemption that allows animals to be killed without stunning if the meat is intended for consumption by Jews or Muslims.

The government told us it was considering introducing clearer labelling requirements on non-stun meat. We’ll keep lobbying for the full repeal of the religious exemption, but will welcome any progress which helps to stem the supply of non-stun meat and improve consumer confidence that they aren’t eating unethically sourced meat.

In October 2017 Lancashire County Council voted to stop the supply of non-stun halal meat to schools. The council’s leaders then reviewed the decision under pressure from Lancashire Council of Mosques (LCM). In July the council’s cabinet reaffirmed the original decision. And as we went to press the full council voted to uphold it after we briefed all councillors.

We’ve been active at every stage of these proceedings. Our initial lobbying helped councillors to realise that the facts and weight of expert opinion were on the side of stopping the supply. Our response to the council’s decision was widely covered in the national press. During the review we submitted a response to the council’s consultation. And we’re continuing to press councillors to defy LCM’s bullying and delaying tactics.

Our research also revealed that non-stun meat is widespread in UK supermarkets. We analysed the policies of 11 supermarket chains and their online produce range and found that several sold non-stunned meat. Only two – Marks & Spencer and the Co-op – credibly committed to selling meat only from animals that are pre-stunned.



“The freedom to display a symbol without regard for religious restrictions is an essential component of freedom of speech, which itself is a liberty at the heart of a democratic nation that values human rights such as the UK... We worry that these actions will further embolden religious groups into making further demands and put other establishments under greater pressure to acquiesce to those demands.”

NSS campaigns officer MEGAN MANSON, in our letter to Greene King and Mitchells & Butlers

Holding the BBC to account

A poll we commissioned revealed how little the public supports BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* in its current format. Fewer than one in five Britons agreed that the slot should always feature religious voices, as it currently does, while more than half were apathetic towards its continuing existence.

In response we wrote to James Purnell, the director of radio and education at the BBC, to point out the discriminatory nature of the slot as it currently stands and to suggest reforming it. Earlier in the year our president Keith Porteous Wood also discussed *Thought for the Day* on the BBC's *PM* show.

We also challenged the BBC's deference to the Church of England after it broadcast an entire episode of the *Today* programme live from Lambeth House, the C of E's headquarters, in December last year. The programme frequently portrayed the church in a positive light without highlighting its faults or its enduring constitutional privilege. We wrote to the BBC's complaints department to ask for a justification for the flouting of its guidelines.

Unfortunately, the BBC appears committed to entrenching its deference to religion. In December it pledged to increase its religious programming and it has announced that it will make 2019 'a year of beliefs'. We'll be keeping a close eye on its editorial decisions and push for it to handle religion in a fair, proportionate, critically-informed way.



'Thought for the Day should feature exclusively religious content'
– Just 18% agree

For common citizenship

In March the government invited views on ways in which it might support building stronger and more integrated communities. Our response to the integrated communities strategy green paper criticised recent multiculturalist and multifaithist approaches to dealing with Britain's increasingly pluralistic society, arguing that they give unjustified power to group leaders. We stressed the importance of treating all citizens equally as individuals rather than as members of 'communities' to be spoken for by 'community leaders'. We also urged the government to prioritise tackling the faith-based segregation caused by faith schools.

We also submitted evidence to a House of Lords select committee on citizenship and civic engagement. We said secularism was an essential feature of a fair, open society where people can engage on the basis of equal citizenship regardless of religion. We again warned about the risk to common citizenship posed by faith schools and the emergence of parallel legal systems.

For secular, sustainable public services

We publicly supported a coroner in north London who received a barrage of abuse and criticism for refusing to give religious groups special treatment.

Inner north London coroner Mary Hassell introduced a 'cab rank' policy, meaning no death would be prioritised for religious reasons, after her staff became overwhelmed by religious requests. A Jewish burial society launched a judicial review against her policy.

We wrote to the chief coroner, lord chancellor and lord chief justice to highlight concerns about political interference after a series of high-profile politicians weighed in on the religious groups' side. We emphasised that the independence of the judiciary is a fundamental principle in the constitutional separation of powers and the rule of law and that it is vital that the judiciary is not unduly influenced by politicians siding with those who shout the loudest.

The High Court eventually ruled that Hassell's policy was too inflexible. We were consulted on a new protocol for prioritising deaths, which has since been published. The new policy says coroners should consider the religion of the deceased when deciding on which cases to prioritise.

But we're pleased that it also makes clear religion should not be the *sole* factor in the coroner's decision and a number of other factors should come into play. And the chief coroner has made clear that coroners in England and Wales are not obliged to give automatic priority to requests based on religion.

Our principled position generated extensive media coverage in the local, national and specialist legal press.

Camden Council, which has jurisdiction in Hassell's area, has since announced that it would spend £80,000 on an out-of-hours coroners' service. We also revealed that five councils in a neighbouring area were spending £56,000 per year on an out-of-hours coroners' service which was explicitly designed for religious groups.

The councils said the service was for everyone, but a briefing paper which we uncovered revealed that it had been built exclusively with religious interests in mind. Our findings were reported in London's *Evening Standard*.

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

Our findings on five London councils' spending were reported in the *Evening Standard*

Elsewhere we urged the minister for civil society to ensure faith groups did not evangelise when providing public services. We wrote to Tracey Crouch, the minister for sport and civil society, after she told church leaders to "challenge anyone in government who makes you feel you need to suppress your faith". In response she said services must be delivered "on an equal opportunities basis" but without making clear that public services shouldn't be used as a platform for proselytising.

We criticised Surrey Police for engaging in evangelism after it accepted 1,000 bibles branded with the Surrey Police badge for distribution amongst officers and staff. We also drew attention to Christians Against Poverty's practice of seeking to convert clients who turn to the charity for debt advice.

"In today's society, it is more important than ever that the British public engages with important ethical questions. Secularists are keen to support this, but it can only be done by exploring these issues through secular and inclusive discussion and debate."

AC GRAYLING, NSS honorary associate, on *Thought for the Day*

Ritual genital cutting

Throughout the year we have continued to speak out against children being subjected to non-consensual and non-therapeutic religious surgery.

In February, Iceland's Progressive party proposed a bill to ban the cutting of boys' genitals for non-medical reasons. Later in the year a citizens' initiative to introduce a gender-neutral age of consent of 18 for non-medical genital cutting was launched in Denmark and gained enough support to force a parliamentary vote. Unfortunately legislators look set to reject the measure.

Dr Antony Lempert, chair of our Secular Medical Forum, argued for an age of consent in the UK on BBC *Newsnight*, in an episode of the *Godless Spellchecker* podcast and at a conference in California. Our CEO Stephen Evans voiced support for measures to protect children's bodily integrity on Radio 4's *The Moral Maze*.

Amid all this, a YouGov poll revealed that the public largely agrees with us. The Child Rights International Network (CRIN) has also called the ritual circumcision of infant males for non-medical reasons a "violation of bodily integrity" in its 2018 report.

The law offers no protection for boys subject to genital cutting for non-medical reasons. And although FGM is explicitly outlawed, we're concerned that no successful prosecutions have yet been brought for it in Britain.

As 2017 drew to a close we struck a significant blow which highlighted the harm caused by forced genital cutting when we persuaded Amazon UK to withdraw 'infant circumcision training kits' from sale. The kits included mock torsos of baby boys with genitals, scissors and scalpels. The sales pitch on the Amazon website, which came from a third party seller, said the kits were "made with soft, lifelike material, which is pliable, delicate, and realistic to the touch".



We convinced Amazon to withdraw its 'training kits' for genital cutting

Dr Lempert pointed out in a letter to the UK branch's chief executive that Amazon risked normalising unnecessary and risky surgery by allowing a third party to sell the kits on its site. In response, Amazon UK stopped listing the product on its site at the end of December.

Amazon's decision was covered in *The Independent* and then very widely across a range of media in the UK and internationally, helping to publicise the lack of regulation around infant circumcision and the need to end it.



62% of Brits support a law to make it illegal to circumcise boys for non-medical reasons

13% of Brits oppose one

(Source: YouGov)

Keeping theology out of the NHS

We successfully reminded the NHS of its duty to provide objective, impartial and evidence-based information on healthcare when it published advice drawing heavily from Islamic theology.

In June the NHS Choices website published an advice page on fasting for Ramadan. The page included statements such as "children are required to fast when they reach puberty". It said "Muslim experts" had "differing opinions" on whether it was acceptable to use asthma inhalers during Ramadan.

We told NHS Choices that it was not the NHS's role to dispense religious teachings. We said we had no objection to the NHS issuing health advice on fasting at a time when many British citizens choose to fast, but we asked NHS Choices to review the document and remove references to theology.

In response NHS Choices removed the page and told us it would consider how it could "better meet user needs around this topic", including by possibly producing new content.

LGBT+ 'conversion therapy'

For many years we have spoken out against the harmful pseudo-medical practice of 'gay conversion therapy'. We therefore welcomed the government's announcement in June 2018 to explore ways to end the practice in the UK. We'll be keeping an eye on what these proposals will be. Any bill must strike a balance between protecting the freedom to offer and receive counselling related to sexuality and protecting vulnerable people from abuse.

Reproductive rights

Following the Republic of Ireland's historic vote in May to overturn its constitutional ban on abortion in almost all circumstances, we've reiterated our call for reform to Northern Ireland's abortion laws. We've long campaigned for women in Northern Ireland to be able to access abortions, arguing that decisions on upholding human rights should not be devolved.

We've also welcomed plans to allow women to take early abortion pills at home in England, Wales and Scotland, with a court rejecting objections to the Scottish government's plans.

Clerical abuse: the UN and France

The UN periodically examines countries around the world to show how well they adhere to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This year our president Keith Porteous Wood and council member Josephine Macintosh submitted reports to help its investigations into countries with significant clerical abuse problems.



The reports mainly focused on predominantly Catholic countries. We emphasised the need for mandatory reporting of abuse to the secular authorities and the relaxation of time bars on bringing cases.

The Catholic Church, and the pope himself, have been plunged into crisis by a series of devastating reports on clerical abuse, as well as mass episcopal resignations, defrockings, prosecutions and convictions of senior figures for abuse or covering it up. We are pushing the secular authorities to ensure perpetrators and their facilitators are held to account and to bring justice to victims.

We called last year for the prosecution of France's top cardinal, Archbishop Barbarin, for failing to report multiple abuse by a priest in his charge. We worked through our affiliate the International Association of Free Thought (IAFT) and the French Libre Pensée to place pressure on the French minister of justice.

A hearing was scheduled but aborted on spurious grounds. It has now been re-scheduled for early 2019.

“There are dark aspects of the Catholic Church’s history. Failures of both church and state and wider society created a bitter and broken heritage for so many, leaving a legacy of pain and suffering. Far too often there was judgement, severity and cruelty, in particular, towards women and children and those on the margins.”

LEO VARADKAR, Irish prime minister

European Court of Human Rights

We were invited to a conference in Athens about the influence of religion on the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) as a result of our previous successful interventions at the court. While there Keith Porteous Wood set up a consortium to systematically identify court cases where interventions could lead to more secular rulings being established.

The court is selective in accepting interventions, but has accepted one of ours in a case concerning religious education kindly brought to our attention by a kindred organisation. Council members Josephine Macintosh and Sadikur Rahman and other lawyers from the Secular Legal Forum have kindly provided assistance and help with intervention drafting.

EU institutions

Keith Porteous Wood spoke several times at the European Parliament and European Commission, at meetings attended by those bodies’ presidents and vice presidents. At one meeting he was invited by European secular colleagues to make the case about the extent of discrimination against the non-religious. The EU’s envoy on religious freedom was next to him on the platform. The envoy’s perspective on religious freedom did not entirely accord with the NSS’s.

At another particularly contentious meeting about implementing the EU’s ‘social pillar’ Keith argued that efforts to balkanise public services along religious lines were divisive and discriminatory. He was responding to the chief rabbi of Rome, who called for money for public ambulance services and cited a service in north London as a precedent. The rabbi had misleadingly implied the north London service was open to all. Keith received warm support for his words.



Keith Porteous Wood (back row, second left) discussed artificial intelligence at one meeting with European Commission officials

Affiliates’ conferences

Keith Porteous Wood attended IAFT’s annual conference in France this year. Keith heads the association’s campaigning on clerical abuse and spoke on this topic. His reference to our interventions on Cardinal Barbarin were particularly well received. Keith also took the opportunity to renew acquaintances with delegates from organisations around the world, including Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

Keith was the most senior person from the UK attending the European Humanist Federation’s AGM and annual conference, this year in Nürnberg, organised impeccably by the German Humanists.

Gender equality and UNESCO

We wrote to UNESCO to express our concerns over its awarding of World Heritage Status, a prestigious certification that a site is of “outstanding value to humanity,” to religious sites that exclude women.

Communications

This year we have again provided a voice for secularism in the national media on a vast array of issues, including faith schools, disestablishment, and religious cover-ups of child abuse.

We appeared in the media over 200 times. We made 60 appearances in the national media: 40 in national papers, 13 on national radio and seven on national TV.

We made 64 appearances in the local media, 11 in the international media and 66 in the special interest press. NSS representatives also wrote opinion pieces for publications including *The Huffington Post*, *Tes*, *Conatus News* and *New Humanist*.



Our president Keith Porteous Wood made five appearances on Sky News

On top of our media appearances our representatives have also appeared on podcasts, including on the prominent *Godless Spellchecker* podcast, about faith schools and genital cutting.

Our revelation that 'training kits' for infant genital cutting were on sale on Amazon proved a particularly popular story, generating coverage in 18 news outlets. Several of these were national papers in the UK; some of them were highly respected international publications.

This year the number of people visiting our website rose to more than 400,000 and we generated more than one million page views. In April we also launched a separate campaign website dedicated exclusively to ending state-funded faith schools across the UK. By 1 October the site's No More Faith Schools petition had generated more



Dr Antony Lempert discussed ritual genital cutting on Newsnight

than 4,700 signatures and enabled hundreds of supporters to email their MPs.

On Twitter our number of followers grew from 31.8k to 33.2k. Our Facebook page has 17,700 likes. Almost 18,000 people subscribe to our weekly newsletter, *Newsline*, and the number continues to grow.

In November 2017 we began sending our long-running daily media round-up as an email bulletin to subscribers each morning. If any member would like to receive this, please visit secularism.org.uk/get-your-daily-media-briefing.

Our staff and members of our council have also given talks to local groups of interest, groups of students and conferences both in the UK and internationally.

Case work

This year we provided expert advice and assistance on subjects including evangelism in schools, collective worship and employment in faith schools. Beyond education, we tackled issues including public services, religious charities, religiously-driven discrimination and government prayers.

Parliamentary outreach

Throughout the year we have undertaken a programme of parliamentary outreach work, providing MPs and peers with relevant briefings detailing NSS research and campaigning priorities. These have generated numerous meetings with MPs which have broadened our parliamentary support and raised our profile in parliament.

NSS scholarship

This year we launched a scholarship to support students who conduct research relevant to secularism and the promotion of human rights. Winners will be expected to share their findings with NSS members and supporters.

IN THE MEDIA THIS YEAR:

Disestablish and be damned

The Church of England continues to hold incredible constitutional power, to the detriment of the UK. Can this be challenged?

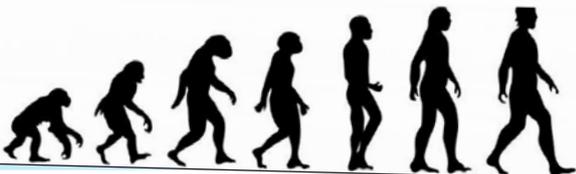
— by Richard Scorer —

Amazon pull 'irresponsible' infant circumcision training kits from sale over child safety fears

Exclusive Secular and medical groups 'concerned' the kits could put infants at risk

Creationist state school 'unfit to teach', say secularists

Will Hazel
31st October 2017 at 16:25



The state-funded faith schools that say gay sex is 'unacceptable', masturbation 'wrong' and tampons 'inappropriate'

Sex and relationship education policies of state funded faith secondaries highlighted by National Secular Society

By Will Hazel
03 May 2018



Prince Charles accession 'could trigger debate on disestablishment'

National Secular Society report says coronation could throw up questions about relationship between Church of England and state



Religious Freedom Isn't A License To Violate Others' Rights

Religious liberty is too important to leave to zealots to defend

28/02/2018 16:13 GMT | Updated 28/02/2018 16:13 GMT

It is now 38 years since Monty Python's Life of Brian was released in November 1979, despite protests. But are we truly free to engage in blasphemy today?

By Chris Stoggett, Communications Officer, National Secular Society

Honorary associates

Graham Allen
Prof Peter Atkins
Joey Barton
Dr Susan Blackmore*
Baroness Blackstone
Prof Colin Blakemore
Crispin Blunt MP*
Edward Bond
Tom Brake MP*
Nick Brown MP
Prof Ted Cantle CBE
Lord Cashman CBE
Nick Cohen
Prof Richard Dawkins
Prof Lord Desai
Angela Eagle MP
Baroness Falkner
Jim Fitzpatrick MP

Baroness Flather
Caroline Fourest
Michael Frayn
Lord Garel-Jones
Ricky Gervais
Prof AC Grayling
Baroness Greengross OBE
Nia Griffith MP
Dr Evan Harris
Lord Harrison
Julia Hartley-Brewer
Patrick Harvie MSP
Prof Ted Honderich
Mary Honeyball MEP
Sophie in 't Veld MEP
Virginia Ironside
Dr Michael Irwin
Prof Steve Jones

Baroness Kinnock
Stephen Kinnock MP
Lord Knight
Stewart Lee
Graham Linehan
Baroness Massey
Kerry McCarthy MP
Stewart McDonald MP*
Jonathan Meades
Sir Jonathan Miller
Baroness Murphy
Maryam Namazie
Taslima Nasrin
Maajid Nawaz
Lord O'Neill
Pragna Patel
Şafak Pavey
Philip Pullman

Raheel Raza
Geoffrey Robertson QC
Martin Rowson
Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP*
Gita Sahgal
Tommy Sheppard MP*
Joan Smith
Dan Snow
Lord Soley
Dr David Starkey
Peter Tatchell
Lord Tavne QC
Baroness Thornton
Polly Toynbee
Lord Warner
Baroness Young

*Honorary associates we were pleased to welcome this year

New honorary associates



Dr Susan Blackmore:
philosopher & memeticist



Crispin Blunt MP
(Conservative)



Tom Brake MP
(Liberal Democrat)



Stewart McDonald MP
(SNP)



Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP
(Labour)



Tommy Sheppard MP
(SNP)

Asma Jahangir and Baroness Turner

This year two fine NSS honorary associates sadly died. On 11 February Asma Jahangir, a former UN special rapporteur on religion and belief, died aged 66. She worked courageously both in Pakistan and internationally for decades to prevent the persecution of religious minorities and women and the exploitation of children. She gained great respect for her outspoken criticism of Pakistan's militant Islamist groups. On 26 February Baroness (Muriel) Turner died aged 90. Muriel was a Labour party peer and one of our most loyal supporters in parliament. She helped us fight many battles, especially over the role of religion in publicly funded schools. She will be remembered particularly fondly for her efforts as a champion of gay rights.



Asma Jahangir



Baroness Turner

President

Keith Porteous Wood



Keith Porteous Wood

Vice-Presidents

Terry Sanderson

Richard Scorer



Terry Sanderson



Richard Scorer



Ed Moore

Treasurer

Ed Moore

Council

Judy Audaer

Robert Forder

Josephine MacIntosh

Sadikur Rahman

Afonso Reis e Sousa

Peter Revell

Dorothy Smith

Patricia Wallis



Judy Audaer



Robert Forder



Josephine MacIntosh

Chief executive officer

Stephen Evans

New president and CEO

At our 2017 AGM in November Terry Sanderson stepped down as our president after 11 illustrious years at the helm of our society. That period featured a shift in our focus as we placed a much greater emphasis on human rights. He also served for four years as vice president and many more years editing *Newsline*, which he founded long before joining council. We are grateful to Terry for continuing to serve us as a vice-president.

Terry was replaced as president by Keith Porteous Wood on his retirement from being our executive director for 20 years. He was unanimously elected at the AGM.

Meanwhile council was delighted to announce the appointment of Stephen Evans as our new chief executive officer.



Sadikur Rahman



Afonso Reis e Sousa



Peter Revell

Departing council members

The following council members stepped down this year:

Alistair McBay, who joined council in 2014, served as vice president for two years and represented us for many years in Scotland.

Chris Moos, who was elected to council in 2016.

Gerard Phillips, who joined council in 2009 and served as vice president for three years.

Adrian Tippetts, who joined council in 2011 and served as vice president for two years.

We are most grateful to them all for their valuable input over many years.



Dorothy Smith



Patricia Wallis



Stephen Evans

Affiliated groups

Local, student and special interest groups are a great way of raising local awareness of secular issues, running localised campaigns and socialising with like-minded secularists. Below is a list of groups affiliated to the National Secular Society.

These groups are independent of the NSS.

Basingstoke Humanists

Bedfordshire Humanists

Belfast Humanist Group

Birmingham Humanists

Bradford Atheist & Humanist Society

Brighton Humanists

Cambridge Humanist Group

Cambridge University Atheist & Agnostic Society

Chester Humanists

Chiltern Humanists

Cornwall Humanists

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists

Dorset Humanists

Durham Atheist Secularist and Humanist Society

East London Humanists

Edinburgh Secular Society

Essex Humanists

Farnham Humanists

Freedom Centre Uganda

Gloucestershire Humanists

Greater Manchester Humanists

Humanist and Secularist Liberal Democrats

Isle of Man Freethinkers

Kent Humanists

Kings College London Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society

Lancashire Humanists

Leeds Atheists Society (University of Leeds)

Leicester Secular Society

Ludlow and Marches Humanists

Milton Keynes Humanists

Norfolk Humanists

North East Humanists

North London Humanist Group

Oxford Humanists

Plymouth Humanists

Queen Mary Atheism Secularism & Humanism Society

South East London Humanist Group

South Hampshire Humanists

South London Humanists

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists

UCL Atheist Secularist & Humanist Society

University of Birmingham Atheist Secular and Humanist Society

University of Bristol Atheist Agnostic Secular Society

University of Leicester Atheist, Humanist and Secular Society

University of Lincoln Secular and Humanist Society

University of Nottingham Secular Society

University of Surrey Atheist Humanist and Secularist Society

University of York Atheist, Secularist & Humanist society

Watford Area Humanists

West Glamorgan Humanist Group

West London Humanists & Secularists

In addition, the National Secular Society has three internal groups: The Secular Education Forum, Secular Legal Forum and Secular Medical Forum. These groups provide advice and support to the NSS in their respective fields. Find out more at secularism.org.uk/groups.

Student groups can affiliate to the NSS without charge. Students and student societies play a vital role in campaigning for secularism, and we're always keen to expand our support for them.

Find out more at secularism.org.uk/student.

Fundraising

As an independent campaigning organisation, the NSS does not have charitable status and we do not seek funding from public bodies. We therefore rely on the generosity of our members and supporters.

Last year we launched the 2020 fundraising campaign, which has raised nearly £50,000. This campaign aims to expand the NSS's campaigns and resources significantly. Thank you to all who have donated to the campaign or have responded to fundraising letters by increasing the donations made with their regular membership payments.

We would also like to thank everyone who has remembered the NSS in their wills. A substantial portion of our income comes from legacies and this allows us to raise our campaigning and events to a new level. We greatly admire the dedication of members who make our work part of their legacy. The treasurer and president are happy to speak to those considering taking this step.

Finally, thank you to all our members. Everything we have done this year was possible because of your continued support. We were pleased to welcome many new members this year and are working to expand our membership further as we reach a wider audience.

If you would like to donate or remember the NSS in your will and need any assistance, please call the NSS office or email membership@secularism.org.uk.

Volunteering

Our volunteers support the NSS by giving us their time and expertise. We are very grateful for all the work our volunteers put into helping the NSS and plan to increase volunteering opportunities. If you are interested in volunteering, please see secularism.org.uk/work-with-us for more information.

Thanks to:

Barry Thorpe for parliamentary research and copy-editing work.

Alan Paton for compiling useful statistics for the NSS website.

Dave Copland for providing invaluable data on religious charities.

William James Altoft, Fiona Fall, Shaun Joynson, Neil Smith, Rachel Robertson and **Peter Witchell** for their research into student societies.

Stephen Knight and **Cam Gow** for event photography and filming.

Bob Baxter, Claudine Baxter, Anthony Loraine, Alison Meek, Paul Orton and **Susannah Rosenberg** for events assistance.

Bradley Davis of WhiteLight for his graphic design work on the Bulletins, Annual Report and other NSS publications.

Claudine Baxter – our longest serving volunteer, who regularly travels into the office to assist us with member administration and other office tasks.

Antony Lempert, chair of the Secular Medical Forum, and the professionals that have assisted him during the year.

The lawyers of the **Secular Legal Forum**, chaired by Sadikur Rahman, for their extensive work.

Keith Sharpe, chair of the Secular Education Forum and all of the teaching professionals who assisted us throughout the year.

Our **anonymous donor** who made it possible to award the 2018 Secularist of the Year prize. This year the prize helped to fund the work of campaigners striving for justice for victims of clerical child abuse.

Peter Revell, Alistair McBay and **Keith Porteous Wood** for their important work on the sub-committee monitoring our investments.

WHY I JOINED THE NSS

"I want a more open and secular society which is more compatible with the times we live in. I want to move on from a world where religion is used to deny people basic human rights and controls the way people think. Ultimately I want a better world and I believe secularism enables that."

– NIALL, Edinburgh

"I believe that for a democratic society to move forward and develop with all individuals being equal, the state and religion should not influence each other. Everyone, whether they have a religious or political association, or indeed non-belief, should have the same human and legal rights."

– LINDA, Somerset

"I oppose the rise of religious influence in all spheres of public life, including religious education in state-funded schools, bishops in the House of Lords etc. The existence of a reasoned opposition in the form of the NSS is fundamentally necessary."

– ARCHIBALD, France

"Religious influence and privilege appears to be on the rise again and I want to help resist this."

– PAM, Wiltshire

"Concern about growing religious fundamentalism and a desire to protect our secular beliefs. I am particularly and deeply concerned about Islamist attacks on writers, film-makers and cartoonists. I feel we were able to criticise and question religion much more freely when I was a student in the 1980s than we are able to do today. I feel that we have shaken off the shackles of religion in this country but are in danger of allowing them to be re-imposed simply by being too complacent."

– ANNETTE, Yorkshire

"Disgust at the amount of influence religion holds over national and global public life and decisions."

– JAMES, London

"To continue the fight for religious and non-religious freedom and separation of religion from state."

– STEPHEN, Hertfordshire

"I strongly believe that the state should treat its citizens equally regardless of their faith or absence of faith. I particularly object to state schools being allowed to practise religion-based discrimination in their admissions policies. I also object to bishops being granted seats in the House of Lords by reason of their office."

– MADELEINE, Yorkshire

"We have finally decided to formalise our position by joining an organisation which embodies our beliefs. We firmly believe that the church and state should be separated in the UK, that faith schools should be abolished, and that religion should play no part in government."

– SARAH, Surrey

"It seems so odd to me when all data suggests a significant decline in religious belief that the influence of religion in daily life appears to be on the rise. Someone needs to do something. As an individual I feel powerless but I can support the NSS."

– GEOFF, Devon

"I'm a Humanist and want to see greater tolerance of difference and, specifically, an understanding that in public policy, others' organised religions shouldn't automatically mean preferential treatment before the country's laws."

– VANESSA, Buckinghamshire

"I believe a secularist society is the best route to protecting the rights of the individual regardless of race, religion or gender. In recent days the Foreign Office has promoted World Hijab Day which encouraged women only to wear one for the day so that this person could experience the 'liberation, respect and security' it provides. Meanwhile, in Iran women are being arrested for not wearing one. 100 years since women's suffrage in the UK we cannot be complacent and allow any gains in equality to be undermined by well-funded campaigns promoting restrictive religious or cultural practices."

– VERONICA, London



 www.secularism.org.uk
 admin@secularism.org.uk
 @NatSecSoc
 facebook.com/NationalSecularSociety
 020 7404 3126

Published by National Secular Society
25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL
Company limited by guarantee. Registered in England No. 1418145

Design by WhiteLight
www.wlight.com