

EU Constitution and the Survival of a Secular Europe

As we go to press, Ministers from around Europe are gathering to give final consideration to the new European Union Constitution. The draft was thrashed out over many months by a committee headed by France's former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

The Vatican and other religious bodies have been agitating in recent months for a reference to God and Christianity to be

included in the preamble to the constitution. So far they have been unsuccessful, but Catholic countries such as Italy, Ireland and Spain are threatening to reopen negotiations on this issue when ministers meet in Rome. The ailing pope, meanwhile, continues to put pressure on politicians throughout Europe, perhaps trying to generate sympathy votes.

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Who will really be running Europe?

NSS Meets the Minister

Following protests about the establishment of a committee to consult with "faith communities" over government policy-making, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, was invited to the Home Office to meet Fiona Mactaggart, the minister for Race Equality, Community Policy and Civic Renewal on 24 September.

Ms Mactaggart is the chair of a recently established high-powered Working Group involving faith representatives (read more about it on page 3).

As she had already indicated in a letter to the NSS, the Minister was unwilling to invite any non-religious representatives onto the Group, even as observers. She justified this on the basis that the work of the Group was well

advanced and would, in fact, soon be completed. Nor did she want to reopen the membership of the Group, which had taken much effort to negotiate.

When we asked to be included in any ongoing group she assured us that there were no plans for a continuing standing committee of religious representatives. Mr Wood emphasised the powerlessness many non-religious people feel under this government.

The meeting was cordial and constructive and the minister agreed to respond, after consulting with colleagues, on some proposals Mr Wood had made. She also made a number of helpful suggestions on the main and wider issues that both her department and the Society will be following up.

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Fiona Mactaggart MP

NSS AGM — 29th November 2003

PRELIMINARY NOTICE

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"The pope has a very clear agenda of reinforcing support for traditional Catholic morality, expressed in law in countries like Slovakia before they move into the EU, because that is the way to preserve the Christian tradition in Europe. The pope's European agenda ... is to reinsert traditional Catholic morality into a unified Europe."

Timothy Byrnes, a professor of political science at Colgate University,



Paris 6th December - will you be there?

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Survival of Secular Europe

However, the controversy over the preamble could be seen as a distraction from something much more serious. Religious bodies have already negotiated a significant privilege for themselves in the constitution in the shape of clause 51, which reads:

1. The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the member states.
2. The Union equally respects the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.
3. Recognising their identity and specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organizations.

The NSS and other European secularist groups have been opposing this clause on the grounds that religions will use it as an excuse to interfere in secular law-making processes. Keith Porteous Wood wrote to the British Minister for Europe, Denis MacShane, asking him to oppose Article 51 and resist a religious reference in the preamble. Keith pointed out that the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan had made clear that his country – overwhelmingly Muslim but with a secular constitution - would prefer the EU to leave out all religious references so that it did not become "a Christian club". This was a significant development, as Turkey is hoping to open negotiations with the European Union with a view to becoming a member. Mr Erdogan said in Rome recently: "If the concept of religion is included in the constitution, it would contradict those principles and centuries of progress on the continent." The Society wrote to PM Erdogan to encourage him not to back down on this position.

Vatican Ambitions

Meanwhile, the Vatican is working hard to increase its influence as ten other countries join the EU next May. Five of

the ten new EU members - Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Slovenia - are majority Roman Catholic. The majority of Latvians and Estonians are Lutherans. The other three are the Czech Republic, Malta, and Cyprus. The Vatican has already negotiated "concordats" with several of the former soviet countries that will give it powerful influence over most of their domestic institutions, including education, the military and the government.

Article 51 of the new constitution will aid the pope in these ambitions. As Keith Porteous Wood wrote to Denis MacShane: "Those wishing even to question State religions, religious tax-raising powers, medieval blasphemy laws, or perhaps even legal settlements are likely to be barred from doing so by Article 51. The practical effect of Clause 51, therefore, will be to obstruct moves towards secularity, which will almost by definition mean also moves towards greater democracy."

The NSS has joined together with its French counterpart Libre Pensée to issue a statement upholding the principles of secularism in Europe. You can read it on our website at <http://www.secularism.org.uk/librepensee1.htm>, or if you don't have access to a computer, you can ask for a printed version by sending a stamped addressed envelope to: Joint Declaration, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Add Your Voice, in Paris

The NSS and Libre Pensée are organising a joint event to launch this statement in Paris on 6th December. Members are invited to attend and support this initiative. If you are interested in spending some time in the beautiful City of Light, in a country that is at the forefront of the secularist struggle against religious ambition, ask for more details by writing as soon as possible to: enquiries@secularism.org.uk, or Paris Event, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Vatican Power-Seeking at United Nations

The Vatican has let it be known on three occasions this year that it intends to begin the process of seeking full voting status at the United Nations. The Vatican currently enjoys permanent observer status, which allows it to attend and speak at meetings, but not to vote in full plenary sessions of the UN. Negative uses to which this power is directed include thwarting attempts to make contraception and abortion easier

in the developing world and retarding progressive legislation aimed at increasing the rights of women.

The NSS has joined together with others who are interested in stopping the Vatican's power-seeking at the UN under the campaigning banner "See Change", and will continue to lodge complaints with UN representatives when appropriate.

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More Government Involvement for Religion

Background to our meeting with the Minister

In a reply to a parliamentary question, Home Office Minister Fiona Mactaggart, revealed that a new committee had been formed by the Home Office "to consider the most effective means of achieving greater involvement of the faith communities in policy-making and delivery across Whitehall; to identify the specific policy areas where this input would be most valuable; to oversee the agenda of the Working Group, and to comment on and monitor its work." Ms Mactaggart said that the Group included a number of Ministers from departments with a particular interest, as well as a raft of religious appointees.

She said that Prime Minister, Tony Blair "attaches considerable importance" to the group, which included representatives from the Evangelical Alliance, Catholic organisations, the Muslim Council of Britain, National Council of Hindu Temples, Network of Sikh Organisations, the Chief Rabbi, Baha'is and, of course, the omnipresent and mandatory bishop - on this occasion the Bishop of Leicester.

Ms Mactaggart said: "It will lay the foundations for the effective long-term involvement of the faith communities' perspectives and needs in policy development across Government, building on excellent work that is already being done, for instance in

ensuring that Prison chaplaincy provision meets the needs of inmates from many faith communities. It also complements the work my Department is doing to deepen engagement with individual communities through ministerial visits and meetings."

This announcement, which no one noticed until the NSS uncovered it, sent shock waves through secularist circles. *The Observer* picked up the story and quoted the NSS's letter of protest to Fiona Mactaggart at length.

NSS honorary associate Alice Mahon MP wrote to the Prime Minister expressing her concern, saying: "I was deeply concerned to read the report by Kamal Ahmed in Sunday's *Observer* about your intention to allow Christian organisations and other 'faith groups' a central role in policy making at the highest level of Government.

"One of the huge strengths of our democracy has been the separation of religion and politics and along with many other democrats I believe this is a very dangerous path to take. Can I ask when this decision was taken, and by whom? As this involvement in Labour policy making is not included in our present manifesto, is there a proposal going to Annual Conference to ask the Party to endorse this major change?

"On behalf of the taxpayer, can I also ask who will be funding the expenses

"Because of its religious nature, the Holy See always stresses the primacy of peace. Because of its universal nature, it follows with concern all the critical situations in the world. And, finally, because of its humanitarian nature, it insists that all proper measures be taken in favour of civil populations" - Cardinal Sodano, making the case for the Vatican's upgrade at the UN.

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After the meeting at the Home Office, Keith Wood said: "We are frustrated that religious representatives seem to have almost unlimited access to government departments and ministers and are increasingly included in policy making bodies, while secularist representatives have to fight to be heard."

for what has been described as a 'new high-powered ministerial grouping'? It is stated in the article that religion will be injected across Whitehall. Would you spell out the implications of this statement? When Parliament returns on 8th September I believe it is vital that the PLP are given a full explanation of this change of policy. Finally, as a member of the National Secular Society, I feel very strongly that any privileges given to religious organisations are anti-democratic.

"I would always defend the right for any believer of a religion to worship freely and without fear of interference from the State. However, I also demand the right to live in a free and democratic society free from the value system of another's religion. This attempt to devolve our democratic process to unelected, often unrepresentative, faith groups is irresponsible at best and downright dangerous at worst."

The NSS then wrote to Fiona Mactaggart demanding a meeting to discuss this development. (The outcome of the meeting is summarised on page 1.)

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said: "Why are 'faith groups' being given a privileged access to the process of policy formation? Shouldn't this be the province of parliamentarians and civil servants? It is disgraceful and dangerous that these

religious people, unrepresentative of the population (and often even their own 'flocks'), and who are answerable to no one, are being invited to give their - predictable - opinions on policy proposals. They will also, we suspect, be called on to comment whenever there is a matter of 'morality' or 'ethics' on the agenda. No doubt they will be more than anxious to impose their own particular doctrines on any proposed laws or policies."

Mr Wood continued: "This is another of Mr Blair's little favours to his religious friends. He has made it clear often enough that he would prefer to have much more religious input in policy-making. But who are these religious appointees supposed to be speaking for? Some of the religious groups they supposedly represent amount to a few thousand people.

"It's completely unacceptable that they are right in the heart of government being invited to give privileged input into policy that potentially affects us all.

"We would much prefer that there were no such committee, but if there is to be, it adds insult to injury for there to be no representation for the non-religious. If the religious are to have yet another voice (and they already have far more influence in parliament than can be justified, including the bishops in the Lords), for the sake of balance, we should have some input, too."

Newsline

The NSS's weekly newsletter *Newsline* is garnering compliments from far and wide, including an endorsement from Richard Dawkins and one from Nigel Sinnott in Australia, who says that it is the best service the NSS has provided for the whole of the forty years he has been a member!

Are you receiving *Newsline* and being the first with the news of our campaigns and of relevant events from around the world? If you are on-line, simply send a blank email with "Subscribe to Newsline" on the subject line to enquiries@secularism.org.uk and the

next issue will be with you as soon as it is published.

If you don't have a computer, but would like to receive a printed version, please send a supply of C4 or C5 stamped and addressed envelopes (i.e. full or half A4 size) to Newsline by post, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. We'll let you know when your envelopes are running out, and then you can decide whether you want to send more to continue receiving the magazine. This service is only available to members.

New Secular Group in Plymouth

A new secular group has been formed in Plymouth and is looking for new members. If you're interested, please see their impressive website

<http://plymouth-secularists.org.uk/> or contact Jennifer Hynes for more details 01752 516272.

Consultation on Paranormal Programming

The Independent Television Commission launched a consultation on whether programmes featuring mediums, psychics and others claiming paranormal abilities, should be more closely controlled.

The NSS, in its submission, which was prepared by vice-president Terry Sanderson, said that the present plethora of programmes featuring alleged demonstrations of paranormal powers could disturb vulnerable individuals and lead to exploitation. We pointed out that television gave these "paranormalists" a spurious authority

and their claims to be contacting the dead or telling fortunes were not being presented as entertainment but as fact. Most people imagine that TV is regulated so that the vulnerable are protected from charlatans and conmen, but in the case of psychics and clairvoyants, ludicrous claims are being permitted without challenge.

We proposed that each appearance by a "psychic" or "clairvoyant" be accompanied by an on-screen notice warning that the TV company cannot guarantee that trickery or psychological manipulation is not being used as part of the demonstration.

"Thought for the Day" Legal Battle Abandoned

The NSS has withdrawn from legal action against the BBC over the Corporation's refusal to open up *Thought for the Day* to secularists and other non-believers. The Council of Management considered it would be a disproportionate use of the Society's time and funds if the case were to proceed through many more stages of the legal process. If unsuccessful, the Society would have faced a massive legal bill for the BBC's costs, but if the BBC lost, the Society's costs would, of course, simply come out of the licence fee.

Apart from generating widespread, largely positive, publicity, the legal action taken so far did pressurise the Corporation into taking the matter much more seriously. The BBC commissioned a lengthy report and considered the matter at a meeting of the full Board of Governors, something that it had previously avoided. We had hoped that these actions would cause the BBC to think again about the fairness of its stance. This optimism turned out to be misplaced.

However, our campaign is not entirely exhausted. We have new challenges for the BBC up our sleeve. Watch this space.

"Our recent success fighting off the atheist lobby

demonstrates that it is still very much a religious slot."

- Alan Bookbinder, Head of Religion at the BBC as quoted in Daily

Telegraph 23 July 2003

Media

The NSS has kept its usual high profile in the media. Recent examples include originating stories that were picked up by the *Times* (about the issuing of a book by evangelical Christians advising religious employers how to use the forthcoming employment regulations to dismiss atheists from their staff) and *The Observer* (about the formation of the religious advisory committee by the Home Office). We have also been quoted in the *Times Educational Supplement* and have had letters published in national and regional newspapers.

We have taken part in countless radio broadcasts (often using the invaluable ISDN equipment bought with members' contributions).

NSS honorary associate Evan Harris MP represented us on BBC2's day-time politics programme, talking about the rising influence of religion in politics. (He has also asked a significant number of parliamentary questions challenging religious privilege - he works closely with the Executive Director on these.)

Barbara Smoker appeared on the *Heaven and Earth* programme on BBC1, describing the NSS as "the trade union for atheists". Individual members around the country have also been active, writing letters to editors and campaigning on local issues. The Leicester Secular Society has been putting up formidable opposition to the formation of a Christian-run (but taxpayer-funded) Academy in the city.

Diary Date:

The Humanist Philosophers' Group discusses "Truth, Spin and Decision Making". One day conference on Sunday November 30 2003, 10 - 4 at the Literary and Philosophical Society, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle upon Tyne. Details 0191 281 2808.

'A Message from the President'

Do you remember Mary Whitehouse and the considerable exposure she had in the media over many years in her campaigns to "clean-up" and censor what BBC listeners and viewers would hear and see? She had some victories; but overall she did little to halt the move to free broadcasting from its Reithian influence.

The BBC even lampooned her in a Radio One programme – "The Mary Whitehouse Experience". There are lessons here for the NSS, which recently has achieved far greater prominence in the media than for a long time.

The membership and profile of the NSS is higher than for decades, as I proclaimed in our last Annual Report, and broadcaster Roger Bolton also suggested we were "on a roll at the moment".

But we also see the CofE score yet another privilege for employers in obtaining religious exemptions. Also a government working party has been set up to afford "greater involvement of faith communities in policy making". And our case to lift the ban on non-religious speakers to Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* has been rebuffed by the BBC Board of Governors, with the comment that it is inappropriate for the non-religious to contribute.

These are just three examples - there are many others - to remind us that we cannot rest on our laurels. Making a noise about infringements of secular rights is one thing - getting something done is another! Despite reduced attendances and activity, the religious minority still wield considerable power and influence. At the NSS conference this summer, some of our members proposed that we need more local action. To achieve this we not only need more money for our campaigns nationally, but also members who will be prepared to join their local secular-humanist groups and ensure that action is taken on secular issues.

Denis Cobell

President



Colin McCall

Obituary — Colin McCall

The death at 84 of former NSS General Secretary Colin McCall on 27 June removes from the scene a man who has been an outstanding figure in the secularist movement. He was "born into" the NSS, his parents being activists in the Manchester area, so not even in his youth did he have any involvement with organised religion.

Colin was a man of contrasts. He was a polymath but was unassuming, gently spoken and modest. He was very well read in science and the arts, but he was also keen on sport. He hated injustice or unfairness and would do anything in his power to eradicate it, but he had a quiet charm and encouraged others in the movement, especially younger successors.

Following an impressive track record of voluntary work for the Society, Colin was appointed General Secretary in 1955, a post he held until 1963. From 1957 he doubled as editor of the (then weekly) *Freethinker*.

As a talented writer, speaker and administrator he personified versatility and dedication. His encyclopaedic knowledge and pleasant personality opened many doors. He encouraged the involvement of academics like Margaret Knight, whose two broadcasts on morality without religion in the 1960s shook the churches and enlightened the public.

Unsurprisingly with such talents, and perhaps weary of the internal politics, Colin McCall became a full-time journalist, doubtless also providing a better living for his young family. But from 1990 until shortly before his death he resumed writing for the *Freethinker*, having his own column and writing impressive book reviews. He also served on the NSS Council 1997-1998 when his wise counsel was greatly appreciated once more.

His passing is a great loss to the movement and our deepest sympathies are extended to his widow June.

Employment Regulations

Wide-ranging exemptions in the new employment discrimination regulations allowing religious organisations to continue discriminating against non-believing and gay workers are under fire from unions, MEPs, secularist groups, civil liberties and gay rights organisations. Those leading the attacks in Parliament against the regulations were NSS honorary associate Dr Evan Harris MP in the Commons and Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC, ably assisted by Lord Avebury, in the Lords.

The Executive Director had briefed the speakers and other parliamentarians and was on hand throughout, almost taking up residence in the Houses of Parliament for the duration of the debates.

Hopes had been high that the Government would heed some of the criticism, especially a report by a parliamentary scrutiny committee (following a complaint by the NSS and others) raising deep concerns about the validity of the regulations under EU law. The Committee had felt so strongly about this issue that it had held a meeting in public for the first time in five years. At the meeting it cross-examined Government officials in public.

Despite this the Government swept aside all opposition and the regulations were approved by parliament and will come into effect in December.

One of the most contentious exemptions included was demanded by the Church of England's Archbishops' Council. They got what they demanded, practically *verbatim*, and this was clandestinely inserted by the Government after the public consultation had closed, precluding the possibility of protest before the regulations were tabled. This

exemption does not apply to the Religion and Belief regulations, and was inserted solely into the Sexual Orientation regulations, and applies where employment is claimed to be "for the purposes of an organised religion". Any employer purporting to be "an organised religion" can require all its workers to be heterosexual in order to "comply with the doctrines of the religion" or "to avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers". Which groups would be able to claim this exemption is unclear, and the legality in EU law of applying such criteria is questionable. This alarming blanket exemption in the discrimination regulations is being conceded to the very employers most likely to discriminate, and has provoked the TUC to mount a judicial review to challenge it.

Employers claiming a "religious ethos" (which could even include commercial firms) are given another opt out if they claim jobs have a "genuine occupational requirement". Jobs so defined could be denied to those of the wrong faith (or none) or sexuality if employers could prove that being of a particular belief or sexual orientation "is a genuine determining occupational requirement and it is proportionate to apply that requirement."

The Society is now working on various other avenues of appeal and will keep members informed. Council member Anna Behan and member Sue England (both of whom have legal backgrounds) are working hard on this, in conjunction with the Executive Director.

We would like to place on record our deep gratitude to Dr Evan Harris MP and Lords Lester and Avebury.

Employment Regulations - Guidance Notes

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) are preparing guidance on Employment Regulations in co-operation with the Department for Trade and Industry and so will be widely used by employers and employees. The guidance will influence how the regulations operate in practice.

The Society made representations at an early stage in their development which we believe have had a positive impact, nevertheless some examples given in the consultation draft are misleading and potentially harmful.

The Society has made a detailed submission in response to the draft guidance, but was constrained by the regulations as passed by Parliament, rather than as we would have wished them to be.

We expressed our unhappiness with an example in the draft guidance implying it would be unreasonable not to employ a Muslim in a large supermarket on the grounds that they did not want to "handle pork products". It was not however clear whether this referred to touching these products (only likely to be relevant to work on the meat or delicatessen counters) or whether it even referred to handling packaged pork products. We made our view clear that the latter case was plainly unworkable.

We were also disturbed by ACAS's suggestion that it would be reasonable to deny jobs to "a waiter who is a Humanist, Sikh or Secularist [who] may not be prepared to serve meat which has not been slaughtered in a manner

Extracts from the Debates on the Employment Regulations

Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC:

"I predict with the utmost solemnity—one does not lightly do so in public—as a practising lawyer of almost 40 years' standing that the Government will face ultimate defeat and humiliation in the courts after costly and effective litigation."

Dr Evan Harris MP: *"The National Secular Society, which has strong concerns about the impact of the regulations, both for protection and lack of protection, has raised concerns with me... I should like to pass those concerns on to the Minister."*

(Winding up) *"We must ask the Government why they did not take the opportunity to withdraw the amendments in light of unprecedented criticism from several sources. It is not too late for the Minister to do so, if he feels that he cannot answer some of the questions that will be raised because they are unanswerable..."*

Volunteers Thanks

The Society is very grateful for the voluntary help given by Fiona Weir in despatching our merchandise, to Peter Hearty for sending out Newsline each week and to Julian Blake for keeping our databases up to date, and everyone who has helped the Society.

Keith Porteous Wood would like to thank the volunteers have been working closely with him by lending their practical, technical and professional skills. They include Tim Boyce, Sue England, Dr Paul Stevenson, Barry Thorpe and Liz Thompson.

The Society would welcome additional volunteers for day-to-day administrative tasks and archiving. This is an office based volunteering job so ready access to central London is essential and reasonable travel expenses can be claimed.

Please phone the office 020 7404 3126 or email enquiries@secularism.org.uk for discussion.

We would also like to hear from members, whether within travelling distance of the office or not, who have special skills or knowledge from which they think the Society could benefit. We are especially seeking accounting, legal, educational and team building skills. We are also hoping to improve our fund raising and membership development.

he or she considers to be humane". This may be appropriate for kosher or halal restaurants. We pointed out, however, that it would not be in a general restaurant that very occasionally buys in a specialist meal for an individual diner. We proposed major clarifications to both examples.

We also criticised the implication that Christian schools would be at liberty to select all teachers on purely religious grounds. Unacceptably, legislation already permits this, but only for some posts. The regulations do not make it clear whether in practice their effect will be to extend this permitted discrimination to all religious schools. This issue can only now be clarified in the courts, and we have protested about the wide interpretation of the exemptions to the

regulations adopted in the ACAS example.

We understand that our interventions will lead to the withdrawal of this example and an overhaul of the examples above.

A further practical point arising from the guidance was that it seems that those requiring vegetarian food for religious reasons will be in a better position legally to require an employer to provide it in a canteen than those not doing so for religious reasons. We pointed out how offensive this was, whether it follows from the regulations or not.

Maybe there will be a test case claiming that vegetarianism is a religion for the purposes of the regulations – it would be more logical than any of the others!

BBC Preparing a History of Atheism

One of the NSS's honorary associates, Dr Jonathan Miller, is fronting a new series being made for the BBC called, "A History of Faith and Doubt" about "the subject of disbelief". Sir Jonathan has already interviewed Arthur Miller and Oliver Sacks in New York and, naturally, has been making some of the documentary in Conway Hall, where he filmed a long discussion with Council members Jennifer Jeynes and Norman Bacrac. Another of his visits there was to Barbara Smoker's 80th birthday party, where he interviewed not only Barbara herself but also Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson.

How much of what they filmed makes it into the programme and how much ends up on the cutting room floor will be in the hands of the director, Richard Denton.

The series is scheduled to be shown next year on the Corporation's digital TV channel, BBC4. The BBC's Religion department appears to think that this will be sufficient to silence critics who say it spends too much of its resources on religious programming and none on programmes for non-believers. It does not, however, satisfy the NSS, which has been pushing for more time for the non-religious viewpoint after the *Thought for the Day* campaign.

Social Cohesion

The Government considers the concept of social cohesion to be an integral part of how they wish society to develop. The ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee has been appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It is a select committee that has recently taken evidence about the way social cohesion is defined and can be achieved.

The Society prepared evidence and submitted it to the Committee. The secular nature of the way the Society would define Social Cohesion was presented as evidence noting in particular how important it is to consider the views of people of no faith.

The Society provided practical examples of the need for a secular approach to social cohesion in Human Rights and Equality Issues, Planning Procedures,

Education, Faith based Services and Religious Hatred Laws.

It pointed out that giving privileges to faith-based initiatives in these areas was very likely to be divisive and discriminatory; it could be an infringement of freedom and freedom of expression. The Society considered that the seemingly increasing interest of the Government in encouraging faith-based initiatives under the guise of social inclusion would in the long term adversely effect social cohesion.

Our own evidence is reproduced in full at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmopdm/1060-ii/1060we05.htm>

Largely because of the skills of specialist volunteers, the Executive Director was able to draw on a huge amount of relevant information while preparing this response and the Society is particularly grateful them.

Relentless March of Religion in Education

The Church of England is moving quickly to carry out its plan to open a hundred new secondary schools and is taking over community schools up and down the country. The Government is so keen to help this process that it is putting obstacles in the way of those who might protest by making it more and more difficult to find out about these projects until the brief mandatory "consultation" period is over.

According to the media, the CofE is paying next to nothing towards these schools despite giving the impression that it is spending millions of pounds. It is applying discriminatory entry criteria at most of the Voluntary Aided establishments, rendering them almost private schools for Christians (or people purporting to be Christians), but paid for by those of all faiths and none.

In the *Times Educational Supplement* on 19 September Rowan Williams was reported to have called for Anglican schools to "act as small churches" and "hold confirmation and communion services". The Archbishop said: "More is needed in terms of religion in schools than clergy visits and choral services in nearby churches." He is determined that church schools should have a "mission" and that any idea of a multi-religious ethos should be ditched. This man, hailed to be of great wisdom, maintains that this will make schools more "inclusive".

The NSS has contradicted these ideas in the same *TES* article and several other forums. Vice-president Terry Sanderson wrote in the *Times*:

"The Archbishop of Canterbury's defence of church schools was self-serving and as wrong as it could possibly be. To claim that such schools promote unity in divided communities defies logic.

"How will children from different religious backgrounds ever come to understand each other if they never meet because they have been hived off to 'faith schools'?

"And to say that such schools are not engaged in the business of indoctrination



Cartoon reproduced with kind permission of cartoonist Martin Rowson (Honorary Associate of NSS)

is also a transparent untruth. What possible purpose can there be for a specifically Catholic or Anglican or Muslim school other than to promote those denominations and religions?

"Secular schools are not perfect (and faith schools are no guarantee of success, either), but at least children in community schools come to meet and befriend people of all races and beliefs during this formative time, and have the opportunity to form some kind of relationship with those who are from different backgrounds.

"Dr Williams is obviously trying desperately to save the Church of England from rapidly approaching oblivion. If children will not go to church, then he will bring the Church to them in a setting in which they are captive. This is an abuse of their rights. Religion should not be permitted to perpetuate itself through our education system. Schools are for teaching, not preaching."

Further evidence that church schools were engaged in proselytising was provided in a report by Canon Peter Bruinvels, a member of the CofE's general synod. He recently told *The Observer*: "We should be in our schools. They are today's and tomorrow's future. It's all about frontline evangelism. As we close churches we need to help schools. If we don't want to see the Church die, then we must target the young."

Message Board

A new message board has been set up for secularists and other interested parties to communicate and converse on-line. If you are on the Internet and interested, find out more at

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/secular_newsline/>

NSS Conference - Summer 2003

A Report by Council Member Jennifer Jaynes

If it's the first Saturday in June 2003 then it must be the NSS Summer Conference. "Secularism and the Future" was held at Conway Hall at the request of members at last November's AGM. We have been referring to this event as the first ever but we cannot be absolutely sure it is a complete innovation.

The Conference was organised by Council Members Ian Andrews and Jennifer Jaynes together with member Sue Lord and the NSS Research Officer.

Joan Smith Keynote Address

The organisers were delighted that Joan Smith, the celebrated columnist, polemicist and NSS Honorary Associate accepted their invitation to be the Keynote Speaker and that she proceeded to reveal, "I've seen the Future and it's Secular!"

She concentrated on the importance of the link between secularism and civil society - in the absence of the latter, especially in repressive regimes in the Middle East, political dissent got diverted and distorted into religious extremism of the type represented by Osama bin Laden. The aspiration to be engaged in and to shape society, through organisations like political parties and trades unions, she was sure was universal, as we could see from the risks people took to engage in them, even in countries where they were banned or non-existent. But in countries like Saudi Arabia, where 15 of the 9/11/01 hijackers originated, the only channel for dissent was the mosque and the madrassa. Therefore we had to stand up for secular modes of affiliation and the right to free expression and assembly, if we were ever to have a chance of getting rid of the wave of religious fundamentalism that was currently making the entire world unsafe.

Within this broad message Joan highlighted some specific issues, not least the situation in Uzbekistan, where flagrant abuses of human rights were an everyday occurrence despite, or perhaps because of, huge quantities of American aid.

This most stimulating address was supported before and after by the great and the good of the NSS, starting not least with the President's opening remarks.

Before Joan spoke there had been a delightful interlude, described as "Secular hors d'oeuvres", when Derek Lennard provided recitations from the writing of the American Freethinker, Colonel Robert Ingersoll. Derek nobly struggled with a

throat infection and an American accent, but as usual Ingersoll's careful account of the timings necessary for the various animal pairs to trek to the Ark from their natural habitat, particularly the sloths that started from South America before the world began, provoked much amusement.

Afternoon Sessions

The afternoon session was almost entirely made up of short presentations. These included a rousing call to PCs by Sue Lord who described how the movement could and should be using IT to get its message across. That some may still not believe this cannot be due to a lack of enthusiasm on Sue's part, either in her talk or in the more individual tutoring given in the library during the intervals. She provided an exhibition on one board of secularism internet sites as did Ian Andrews of related sites of interest on another.

Keith Wood then gave members an interesting presentation on the developments in Europe vis-à-vis secularism and religion, many of which must cause us concern.

The current Acting Treasurer, Ian Andrews, then gave the conference his considered views, based particularly on demography, as to the future course of Education in this country. He particularly pointed out the major impact that the current decline in the birth rate would have on the school population across the country. This gloomy prediction did, however, lead into an outline of how the NSS and more particularly NSS members might respond to local issues.

The final presentation was from the NSS Vice-president Terry Sanderson and dealt with the media. Fortunately, this was before Terry chose to walk under ladders for the benefit of a television item on the prevalence of superstitions on Friday 13th, so we were able to enjoy his informative presentation. We were encouraged to use local media opportunities as often as we could.

An Open Forum question and answer session with the speakers from the afternoon proved a satisfying ending. Sixty persons attended and had enjoyed a sandwich lunch for the modest £5 fee as well as intellectual nourishment. Council was particularly pleased to be able to invite the unseen volunteers that toil in the NSS office so conscientiously during the year.

Our New Merchandise Will Make Excellent Seasonal Gifts

Our six "Heroes of Atheism" were chosen by our members in a poll and now you can enjoy their specially drawn portraits reproduced on a variety of high-quality merchandise. Why not collect all six mugs for a stylish set - and get a discount at the same time?

There is a matching tea towel featuring all six "Heroes". Manufactured to a high standard in pure cotton, the art work makes this towel good enough to frame.

Our handy notelets are printed with the same design as the tea towel. They come in packs of ten with matching envelopes.

When ordering, please remember to include your name and address, the reference numbers and quantity of the items you are ordering.

Mugs cost £5.99 each (including postage and packing).

Ref: HA1: **Charles Darwin**, author of *On the Origin of Species*.

Ref: HA2: **Richard Dawkins**, the modern-day proponent of Darwinism and an honorary associate of the NSS.

Ref: HA3: **Carl Sagan**, a well-loved defender of science and popular author.

Ref: HA4: **Bertrand Russell**, the philosopher and author of *Why I am Not a Christian*.

Ref: HA5: **David Hume** who dared to challenge religious hegemony.

Ref: HA6: **Charles Bradlaugh** Radical MP and founder of the NSS in 1866.

Ref: HA7: Full set of six different mugs £29.95 - a saving of £5.99!

Ref: HA8: Matching tea towel in 100% superior cotton featuring all six portraits, size 76cm x 48cm approximately. Guaranteed colourfast and individually presentation packed. £4.99 each, or two for £8.99 - a saving of 99p.

Ref: HA9: Our fabulous notelets featuring a montage of all the above can also be used as greetings cards or for sending special messages (when an email just isn't sufficient), printed on high-quality paper and complete with envelopes. Pack of ten £4.99, or two for £8.99 - a saving of 99p.

Ref: PC: "Our Pagan Christmas" the NSS's ever-popular booklet by RJ Condon about the pagan origins of the festival that has now been hijacked by Christianity. Would make an excellent alternative greeting card for someone who needs to know the truth! £2.50 (including post and packing).

You can order these gifts either using our secure online credit card ordering service at www.secularism.org.uk/merchant.htm. Or, send a cheque or postal order for the full amount, together with your name and address and a clear indication of the quantity and reference numbers of the items you would like to NSS Merchandise, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.



Charles Bradlaugh



Notelets, Tea-towels and Mugs sport the same line drawings as shown on this Notelet.

Empowering Women - A Conference

The International Women's Conference, organised by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, will address needs expressed by Humanist women in Europe, Africa, Asia and in the Americas...

15th and 16th November 2003. Venue: the Library of Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

The conference fee is £75 and the formal deadline is 10 October, but IHEU has agreed to extend this to 24 October. further details are available from IHEU, 1 Gower Street, London WC1E 6 HD. Tel 020 7631 3170.

<http://www.iheu.org/EmpoweringWomen.htm>.

NSS AGM - Saturday 29 November 2003

at 2p.m. in the Library, Conway Hall, London WC1R 4RL
Closing date for nominations and motions

Friday 31 October 2003.

REFRESHMENTS - will be served at the AGM

Form of nomination for NSS Council member - 2003 Election (Please complete remainder of form overleaf.)

Please use block capitals, except for signatures. NB The nominees' section overleaf (in which the nominee signifies their agreement to nomination) must be completed for nominations to be valid.

We, the undersigned, support the nomination of: (nominee's name)

for the post of: (e.g. Council member, Hon Treasurer, etc.)

Proposer's Name: (BLOCK CAPITALS) Address:

..... Postcode:

Signature:

Telephone and email contact details (where possible)

Seconder's Name: (BLOCK CAPITALS) Address:

..... Postcode:

Signature:

Telephone and email contact details (where possible)

NSS AGM- 2003- Preliminary Notice

Members are advised that this year's AGM will be held on **Saturday 29 November 2003** at 2 p.m. in the Library at Conway Hall, London, WC1R 4RL (Holborn tube). **Only paid up members can attend.** The Annual Report will be circulated prior to the meeting. Those wishing to submit motions for the meeting, or nominations for Council members or officers, should do so in writing. A proposer and seconder are required for both nominations and motions, which must reach the Executive Director, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL by 4 p.m. on **Friday 31 October 2003** (see form below).

This date is necessary to enable preparation of the formal notices of the AGM that will be sent out well in advance of the meeting, which may need to be preceded by a meeting of the NSS Agenda Committee to consider motions.

Council Resolutions and Motions

In accordance with the discussion at the 2002 AGM, the Council will propose changes to the Memorandum and Articles of Association so that references to "he/him/himself" may be replaced with gender-neutral references. These follow consultation with Dr A E L Davis. Full details will be sent with the formal notification of the AGM.

Nomination of Officers and Council Members

The Officers of the NSS comprise the President, up to two Vice Presidents and an Hon Treasurer. They are elected annually. Together with the remaining council members (whose terms extend to two or three years) they form the board of directors of the Society which is called the Council. All are directors under the Companies Acts, under which the Society is registered.

The existing office holders (President Denis Cobell and Vice-Presidents Jim Herrick and Terry Sanderson) have indicated their willingness to stand again for office.

As notified in the last Bulletin, Alan Lord stepped down during the year as Hon Treasurer and, consequently, Ian Andrews (our Council member from Rochdale), has been acting as Hon Treasurer - covering the vacancy until the AGM. Council is therefore now looking for potential candidates for this critical officer role.

Council members Jennifer R Jeynes (London) and Daniel Bye (Sheffield) are retiring by rotation and have indicated their intention to stand for re-election. Barry Duke is also retiring by rotation and, due to increased business commitments following his move to Brighton is not seeking re-election, but he is continuing as Editor of the *Freethinker*. Dr. Anna Behan (a non-practising solicitor from London) was co-opted on to the NSS Council during the year and, in accordance with the Articles, will offer herself for election to the Council at the AGM. Other Council members who have served throughout the year are Norman Bacrac (London), Surendra Lal (London), Bill McLroy (Brighton) and Malcolm Trahearn (Litchfield, Staffs.).

Members can nominate further officers or members of the Council. The Executive Director will be happy to provide further information and answer any questions from those considering putting their names forward. He can be reached by telephoning the office on (020) 7404 3126.

Council or officer nominations are especially welcome from those who have relevant knowledge or experience. Candidates may be asked to indicate the

extent to which they will be prepared to undertake campaigning or administrative work as well as attending monthly Council meetings, which are held on a weekday evening in London WC1.

It is a requirement that a proposer and seconder sign nominations. Nominees, proposers and seconders can only be paid up members. Nominations must also be signed by the person nominated to indicate that they are willing to stand for the relevant office or position. It would be helpful if the names of nominees, proposers and seconders could also be shown in block capitals, preferably with telephone numbers and (if available) email addresses.

A "tear off" nomination form is provided below, although its use is not mandatory.

Nominations (and motions) should be sent to the Executive Director (who is also Company Secretary) at NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL by post. They may also be faxed to 020 7404 3126 (if necessary to meet the closing deadline), but the originals of any faxed documents must also be sent concurrently by first class post.

As last year, members are invited to socialise over refreshments which will be provided in the Library after the AGM.

Dates To Remember

AGM - **Saturday 29 November 2003** at 2p.m. in the Library, Conway Hall, London WC1R 4RL
Closing date for nominations and motions **Friday 31 October 2003**

Form of nomination for NSS Council member - 2003 Election (Please complete remainder of form overleaf.)

(Please use block capitals, except for signatures.)

NB Nominations are not valid until the Proposers' and Seconders' section overleaf are completed.)

Nominee's name: (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Post: (e.g. Council member or Treasurer) Address:

..... Postcode:

Telephone and email contact details: (where possible)

Signature indicating your willingness to act: Date: 2003

Before putting themselves forward, we ask nominees to read carefully through the AGM - PRELIMINARY NOTICE printed in this bulletin.

**Completed slips should be returned to: Executive Director and Company Secretary,
NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL by Friday 31 October 2003.**