

Blair Caves in to Religious Demands in Employment Directive

The NSS's long-running campaign to minimise the extent of religious exemptions being introduced into the new anti-discrimination employment regulations, introduced to give effect to the Employment Directive, suffered a major set back this month when the Government unveiled the final version of its plans. To our dismay, New Labour has caved in to religious demands and has included in the regulations new and far more wide-ranging exemptions than were in any of the previous drafts.

The new regulations will allow religious employers to continue to discriminate against those who do not share their beliefs or of whose lifestyle

they disapprove.

Major changes to the original draft, allowing discrimination against atheists or others who do not share the religious beliefs of their employer, were made following strong lobbying from evangelical groups such as the Christian Institute, Faithworks and the Evangelical Alliance. One of the biggest loopholes allows an employer to dismiss or fail to hire an individual "if the employer is not satisfied, and in all the circumstances it is reasonable for him not to be satisfied" that the employee fits the employer's own "ethos based on religion or belief".

Continued on p.2

Dr Anna Behan Co-opted to NSS Council

Dr Anna Behan has recently been co-opted to join the Council where her legal experience will be a particular asset. She has been a member for a number of years during which time she has worked with the Executive Director as a volunteer on the prisons campaign. Earlier this year they attended a meeting with the Society's solicitors and a barrister from some prominent Human Rights chambers at which recommendations for the future direction of policy in this area were established.

Anna has been an atheist for as long as she can remember. She spent six years as a lecturer in Classics in Dublin (where one of her former colleagues at University College Dublin was Dr Des Connell, the Cardinal Archbishop of Dublin!). On her return to the UK, she qualified as a solicitor and practised in Hampshire and London, where she now lives. She is bringing up children aged five and two, and had been spurred into joining the NSS by her sense of injustice at the religious discrimination in school admissions.



Dr. Anna Behan

An interview with Anna Behan on Woman's Hour is reported on page 11.

INSIDE

- Page 3 *Thought for the Day*
- Page 4 Prisons
- Page 6 President's Message
- Page 7 Animal Welfare
- Page 7 Easter
- Page 9 Ofcom
- Page 9 Lords Reform
- Page 10 Faith Schools

Summer Conference of the NSS
Saturday, 7th June, 2003 - See back page.



Rt Hon Barbara Roche MP.
Was she overruled by No. 10?

If you don't know how to put your hands together, you will not be able to insist on being appointed to a teaching job in a church school, even if you are manifestly the best candidate.

Stop Press!

Consensus is building among Human Rights lawyers that these exemptions are more extensive than is permitted by the Directive. A leading QC is planning to raise questions about this at a meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Statutory Instruments.

As this Bulletin goes to press, NSS is seeking to bring together interested groups and lawyers to make a challenge to the Regulations through a Judicial Review.

Jobs Denied

Our Executive Director has been pressing for complete equality for all employees, said: "Exemptions given to religious groups will allow them to deny jobs to people who don't share their faith, and to sack people who do not live according to their religious teachings, such as unmarried cohabiting couples and atheists and homosexuals. Organisations with a religious ethos control over a hundred thousand jobs, a high proportion of them paid for out of the public purse. There are around a hundred thousand teachers in religious schools, alone. The Government refused to restrict the definition of a religious employer as we asked, but instead made it as wide as possible."

"These new regulations institutionalise discrimination and give legal protection to bigotry. It is not right that teachers in church schools, for instance, should have to pass some kind of religious or morality test before they can teach subjects that have nothing to do with religion. Why do you have to be a Christian to teach French or maths? And why do you have to have religious beliefs before you can be a carer or a cleaner in an old people's home that happens to be run by Christians? These new regulations are legalising religious intolerance in the work place."

The Government has also given in to demands from the Church of England for the right for churches to deny jobs to homosexuals. The regulations specifically state that "organised religions" will be able to deny jobs to gay people and sack those they find out about. The Regulations on sexual orientation even state that an exemption applies on the grounds of sexuality when an employer acts "so as to comply with the doctrines of the religion – or so as to avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers." The wording of the clause is almost identical to that submitted to the Government by the Church of England's Archbishops' Council.

A Bigots' Charter

"This is a licence to hound gays in religious organisations from their jobs," said Mr Porteous Wood. "Whether or not the churches are planning to do that at the moment, they will have the complete backing of the law, if they do so in the future. It is a bigots' charter."

Keith Porteous Wood added: "If the exemptions themselves can't be changed, we will have to do our best to see whether we can help those fighting discrimination in industrial tribunals or court cases. So much is left unclear in these regulations

– such as what constitutes an "organisation with a religious ethos" or a "genuine occupational requirement" that will allow faith-based groups to reserve jobs for members of their own religion. Lawyers are going to have a beanfeast, and all because the Prime Minister is so anxious to satisfy the demands of religious extremists."

The religious exemptions have made a mockery of the original intention of the EU Directive to bring equal protection at work to everyone. Atheists and homosexuals have been made into second-class citizens if they happen to work in an organisation that claims to have a religious ethos.

The regulations are being introduced as secondary legislation, so they will not be open to amendment in parliament. There will only be a short debate, probably in early June, followed by a yes or no vote. The effective date of the Regulations is expected to be in December 2003.

This set-back has taken place despite campaigning extending over two years. An early success was the EU Directive being watered down, albeit not radically, in Brussels through the efforts of the Executive Director. Since then he has worked closely with the senior Department of Trade and Industry staff charged with drawing up the regulations under the direction of the politicians. He set out the NSS's case at a lengthy one-to-one meeting with the minister responsible, the Rt Hon Barbara Roche, MP at the Cabinet Office. Despite this, concessions were made to the religious at every stage. The CoFE's response ended with the phrase: "Given the importance of the issue we would also want the opportunity for discussions at a very senior level of Government." It is widely thought that the Prime Minister had a hand in the final document.

The politician most prominent in opposing the religious exemptions to the Employment Regulations was NSS Hon Associate Dr Evan Harris MP who is also the LibDem spokesperson on Equality. The *Independent on Sunday* featured the Society's opposition to the Regulations in a six column wide piece on its leading news page and the *Observer* also ran a story on it in which the Society was quoted. Opposition to the Regulations has been reported worldwide, especially in the US.

A Step Too Far

The Society is not alone in its perception that the degree of religious privilege granted by the Regulations was outrageous. The exemptions in the Employment Regulations given by the Government to religious bodies not only negate the spirit of the Regulations, they will also actually make employment less fair than it is now.

BBC Radio 4 Thought for the Day

Members will remember from the last Bulletin that the latest stage in the thirty-year dispute with the BBC over non-believers' exclusion from the *Thought for the Day* is being conducted through lawyers acting for former President Barbara Smoker.

There has been no change of heart from the Corporation over the substantive issue, nor has the slightest gesture of compromise been proffered. The legal process has, however, drawn attention to flaws in the BBC's procedures and put it under pressure to reconsider the matter, which so far has taken the form of the Corporation commissioning a Report. Had the objective been to appear even-handed, especially given the colourful history of the controversy, surely someone far removed from the dispute should have been selected to draw it up. Instead, the Corporation chose the Director of the BBC's Factual and Learning Department to report on the complaint, the very department that makes *Thought for the Day* for BBC Radio 4.

What was most striking about this detailed Report was that:

- it completely failed to address our key complaint - that the non-religious are being discriminated against and that there is no equivalent programme from which the religious are barred
- it did not address the fact that there is nothing absolute about *TftD* (which is not even called Religious *TftD*) having to be exclusively religious
- it referred to census figures (which have only recently been published) and asserted that 85% of the UK population claim a belief in God or describe themselves as "spiritual". In fact, the 85% quoted includes 7% who did not state their religion - so they could hardly be described as spiritual. And who is to say how many of the 72% "Christians" are spiritual? Surveys show significant proportions of "Christians" do not believe in God*, far less the resurrection. There are far more non-believers than there are Sikhs, who are frequently represented on *TftD*. In fact, though, numbers are not the key issue: this is a question of principle.

The BBC is subject to pressure from the Central Religious Advisory Council, whose terms of reference specifically allow them to lobby. The Council is chaired by an archbishop and its membership includes three bishops, a rabbi and a leading Muslim cleric. Needless to say, there is no specifically non-religious voice.

So, the dice are weighted heavily against the non-religious, quite apart from the fact that this complaint has been handled by the BBC in a manner which falls a long way short of what could be expected from a broadcaster of world-class repute with public commitments to fairness and diversity. The most plausible explanation for the behaviour for those opposing us could be that they consider that the non-religious are devoid of estimable thoughts.

BBC Employees have their say

The Corporation has remained intransigent in the face of widespread support for a removal of the ban on non-religious contributors to *TftD*, not only by the public, but also by readers of the Corporation's in-house magazine *Ariel* - some extracts of which follow.

Just one *Ariel* letter opposed our stance. "This item is of a religious nature and atheism is an anti-religious viewpoint. I do not recall seeing members of the Flat Earth Society on *The Sky at Night*, or pro-hunting positions on wildlife programmes, or those who wish to ban boxing on the BBC's sports output, so why should those who are opposed to God expect space in programmes expressing spiritual values? ... The rest of the BBC's message is generally anti-Christian, atheists getting the last word, the best questions, and the most heroic positions. God is usually left with only the halt, the lame, the mentally confused and the inadequate to speak for him. ... I can't see despair or defeatism or self-pity going down too well at that hour in the morning."

This drew quite a few responses, which included phrases such as:

- [this] sour and mean-minded attack on

Are your subs overdue?

Membership subscriptions are due every 1st January. Unless your membership has already been paid or you are a life member, we will have included a renewal form with this *Bulletin*.

Please send your subscription and any donation to the office as soon as possible.

Donations will be especially welcome; we can only continue to operate at this level with the aid of a generous level of donations.

* For example, "45% of those who claim affiliation to the Christian Churches do not believe in God", according to a recent survey of 30,000 young people (The Fourth R for the Third Millennium Ed LJ Francis J Astley and M Robins Publ. Lindisfarne Books, 2001)

Continued on p.4

atheists is another great argument for our inclusion in *Thought for the Day*

- How sad that people like [the opposing writer quoted above] and the producers of *Thought for the Day* are still fighting the battles of the Middle Ages
- May I humbly suggest that [making *TftD* less trite] could be achieved by inviting contributors who have to think hard about their morals, rather than those who have them dictated by a very old book
- Atheism is an empowering philosophy which values reason over ignorance, enquiry over acceptance. That's why

theists have always striven to devalue and censor it

- The newly published Values Framework [Précised] states that the BBC should "make sure our output tests all points of view, and gives voice to a wide range of opinions". Will the programme makers be changing their policy [on *TftD*] in light of these values?

The Next Steps

The BBC has asked for extra time to consider the response that Barbara Smoker and the lawyers made to their Report. We can only hope that this will be spent reflecting and reconsidering in the light of the representations made to them.



Kainos Evangelisation in Prisons

Policy Review

We have been fortunate in benefiting from the services of leading human rights lawyers who have assisted us in reassessing our policy objectives over prisoners and prisons in the light of the latest legislation and case law. As reported above, this was undertaken by the Executive Director and recently-co-opted Council member, Anna Behan. The Society's prisons campaign is focusing mainly on the Kainos communities which exist in several prisons. They are run by a Christian charity and in theory are open to all, but in practice there is a real risk that non-believers will find the intense evangelising oppressive. This could have dire consequences on prisoners given that attendance on the Kainos course is likely to count towards remission of their sentences.

We had hoped to bring a Human Rights case on the grounds of diminished opportunity for courses bringing enhanced prospects of remission on behalf of a member who joined us while in prison. We were advised, however, that as a result of recent case law holding that no prisoner has a right to be selected for any specific course, such a case would now fail at the first hurdle.

Disturbing Home Office Report

Our lawyers drew our attention to a lengthy Report on Kainos prepared for the Home Office. It was intended to be

objective, and Home Office experts contributed to it. So too had staff from Kainos, which had also paid for the Report's compilation.

The superficial impression was given that all was well but a closer look at the Report's 140 pages revealed evidence of Human Rights abuses in connection with Kainos, although we are convinced that these were treated much too casually. One example of these abuses was of prisoners' sentence remission being withdrawn because they had abandoned their Kainos course (presumably in many cases because they could not stand the relentless proselytising). Another example given of abuses was of prisoners being routinely almost press-ganged into taking up vacant places on Kainos courses. They were either given no idea about what was entailed, or had been given a falsely appealing account of it. (Presumably however, as a result of these practices being catalogued in the Report, they will have been curtailed.)

A further Human Rights concern dealt with in the Report is that Kainos is Christian-based but there are very few remotely equivalent non-Christian courses for the prisoners who cannot stomach the Kainos ones. The Report acknowledged this concern but took the position that this did not constitute discrimination under the Human Rights Act as long as the prison authorities would be prepared to entertain a non-Christian equivalent to Kainos. This is

certainly a convenient position for Kainos, but we have not yet established whether it would stand up in court. The fact remains that it is highly unlikely that the prison service will be offered any other similar non-religious courses, especially ones providing volunteers.

The Report did not find any evidence to support a key Kainos claim that those who have undergone their courses are less likely to re-offend. Nor was there any other evidence in the Report to show statistically significant levels of improvement of Kainos prisoners' behaviour over non-Kainos ones, except in increased religiosity - which appeared to be seen as positive. The Report also sets out, but sought to play down, privileged treatment enjoyed by many Kainos prisoners compared with others. One of the most blatant of these relates to their intense evangelical weekends, at the climax of the Kainos course the proceedings of which are kept secret. So-called "godparents" who come in from outside to befriend (and probably also to evangelise) prisoners are permitted not only to break prison rules and bring in food for their favoured inmates, but they do so in such quantities that searching routines have been abandoned, which compromises security. During these weekends, staff are drafted in from other parts of the prison causing the prisoners there to be locked up for longer than would otherwise be the case.

Staff Difficulties

Albeit they come without cost, there are drawbacks with the volunteers. Worryingly, most are not qualified for the demanding environment in which they are working – and the prisoners may well suffer as a result. The Report also gives details of power struggles between the regular officers and volunteers and of them being difficult to control. Their very presence must complicate the chain of command in the prisons.

It is thought that excessive enthusiasm displayed by some senior management for Kainos will have resulted in some prison staff less keen on Kainos feeling that their promotion prospects will be marred unless they support Kainos projects.

To Sum Up

It is especially galling that the many virtues of what Kainos seeks to take credit for (e.g. building self-esteem and respecting fellow prisoners and staff) are hardly exclusively Christian, or religious.

Other, secular, courses have similar objectives, but prison money is scarce, and the provision by Kainos of volunteers seems to be a powerful inducement for the prison authorities to keep Kainos on. The one positive item to report is that the prison service used to pay for Kainos courses, but now refuse to do so - largely because of doubts over Kainos's claims for reduced recidivism.

And After Kainos, What Next?

Despite these difficulties, while Kainos continues to provide the volunteers, we suspect that the prison service will welcome them with open arms. So, having created this unfortunate and dangerous precedent, would the prison service accept a similar proposal from the moonies or the scientologists, we wonder? If one were made and they rejected it, this might result in legal action.

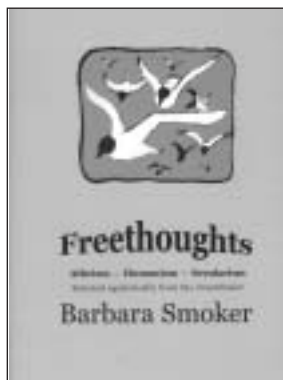
The very existence of an exclusively Christian Kainos is already fomenting resentment among the rising proportion (now around 7¹/₂%) of the prison population that is Muslim. Muslim participants on Kainos courses interviewed by the Report's compilers begged for anonymity, worried for their lives if news of their participation became public.

We can't imagine the prison service turning down a Muslim equivalent if it were offered, however. And then, it would only be matter of time before our prisons would be segregated down religious and therefore also racial lines, like the fate New Labour education policies will soon be inflicting on our schools in metropolitan areas.

Legal Challenge?

We now believe the best prospect for a successful legal challenge would be one for damages brought under the Human Rights Act by a prisoner directly affected by Kainos within the last year. They would need to have suffered by having had to compromise their beliefs in order to remain on the course, or having been forced (actively or constructively) to leave as a result of their beliefs. With a view to pursuing an action, we are already seeking an appropriate prisoner through several channels with a view to pursuing an action, but this is likely to be difficult. So, if any member has any knowledge of such a prisoner or a suggestion as to how to find one, please contact Keith Porteous Wood or Anna Behan via the office.

It may only be a matter of time before our prisons are segregated down religious and therefore also racial lines. In the same way like New Labour education policies will soon be inflicting on our schools in metropolitan areas.



NSS Council member Jennifer Jeynes with NSS President Denis Cobell at H J Blackham's 100th birthday celebration.

'A Message from the President'

In the last Bulletin the NSS sent congratulations to Harold Blackham for his 100th birthday on March 31 2003.

H J Blackham was the first Director of the British Humanist Association and a NSS supporter. In addition to Jim Herrick, a NSS Vice-president, I spoke at the commemorative luncheon party organised in part by my predecessor as President of the NSS, Barbara Smoker. To mark the occasion, Barbara also published a revised edition of her collection of clippings from Blackham's writings - *Blackham's Best**, this is in addition to her own collection *Freethoughts**.

Blackham's work has been scoured somewhat randomly but there are some good quotes: on religion, 'one is inducted into a faith through the experience of another's experience'. On obscenity, 'war is the great obscene ... one is forced to add those other forms of political indecency, torture and terrorism, by governments or against governments'.

How apt in the current climate! Those playground bullies of which I wrote in January, who lead two Western governments, have waved their bibles, offered prayers, as did missionaries of yore, as they entered a heathen land by force of gunfire, and won a victory. Unfortunately, those they have 'liberated' seem less prone to accept the Coca-cola/McDonald's democracy they have to offer. Instead we see pictures of Friday worshippers bottom-up/heads in sand reasserting their allegiance to Allah. Is this what was sought? Another Blackham quote is timely: 'freedom of thought is the first essential; orthodox humanism is heretical. Under the humanist charter, each cultivates his own garden'.

Denis Cobell

President

* copies of Barbara Smoker's two books are available direct from 51 Farmfield Road, Bromley, Kent, BR1 4NF. Costs, including post: *Blackham's Best* - £5, *B. Smoker's Freethoughts* - £10.95 - or both for £15.

Hon. Treasurer Steps Down

Alan Lord has served as Honorary Treasurer for several years. He indicated last year his wish to step down shortly, which he did in February, for personal reasons. He has, however, kindly agreed to stay on the Investment Sub-committee which has overseen the successful sale of Bradlaugh House.

Ian Andrews, who has been serving on the Investment Committee for a number of months, kindly agreed to take over as

Acting Treasurer.

Alan's wise counsel around the Council table will be much missed, and not just in financial matters. The Council as a whole would like to thank Alan for his work in this demanding and vitally important area. The Executive Director and Alan Lord worked closely together, and Keith wishes to put on record how much he has valued, and enjoyed, working with Alan.

MPs who Swear or Affirm

The campaigning of Charles Bradlaugh pointed the way to giving MPs the choice of whether to swear an oath of allegiance or to affirm. To what effect has Bradlaugh's legacy influenced the current Parliament? Not much on the Tory Party, of whom only 2 members (C Blunt and D Wilshire) affirmed after the last general election. All members of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist

Party swore the oath. Just under 50% of the Liberal Democrats affirmed as did about 40% of Labour MPs.

Thanks to NSS member Clive Greedus who painstakingly listened to the tapes of the proceedings and provided the information. Phone the NSS office if you want to know whether your MP affirmed.

Progress on Animal Welfare

The Society has responded to a government consultation on animal welfare, once more making the case for the withdrawal of the religious exemption from the requirement that animals be stunned in advance of slaughter. The Submission listed other important cattle-producing countries such as Australia which have banned slaughter without pre-stunning, and noted religious "authorities" that have accepted that pre-stunning need not transgress their religious slaughter rules.

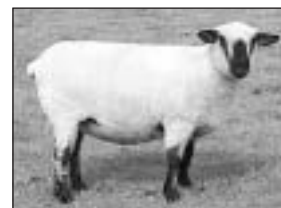
Ours is not the only voice making this call; the Farm Animal Welfare Council has also done so. Their position prompted a meeting with representatives of the Campaign for the Protection of Shechita (Jewish ritual slaughter). When it became clear that FAWC were not going to back down, the Shechita supporters walked out.

The *Sunday* programme on BBC Radio 4

hosted a debate on the topic. FAWC's Chair, Dr Judy MacArthur Clarke, told listeners that FAWC has "come to the conclusion that there is suffering to these animals; there is significant suffering and therefore, in our view, on welfare grounds our recommendation to government is that the exemption should be repealed". She was opposed by the Campaign's political director Prof Geoffrey Alderman. He justified the retention of the *status quo* on the grounds of the Talmud and Torah and the fatuous argument that because shechita was carried out "in one act, not in two, it is less cruel".

The arguments about cruelty are far stronger for cattle (that can take two minutes to die from being bled to death), however, than they are for poultry.

The full Submission is available on the website as is a *Freethinker* article describing the campaign in more detail.



Late News

We understand that a Government White Paper is expected to recommend outlawing ritual slaughter without pre-stunning. This is what the NSS has suggested in several consultation responses. Stand by for a ding-dong battle as the orthodox religionists fight back!

NSS on BBC1

The serenity of Easter Sunday morning may have seemed somewhat disturbed for the most pious of viewers to BBC1 by an exchange between the Executive Director and the recently appointed Anglican Bishop of Croydon. It had been prompted by the claim by the leader of England's Catholics, Cardinal Murphy O'Connor, that most youngsters no longer knew the basics of Christianity - such as being able to recite the Lord's Prayer. Keith said that it was obvious that the young had lost all interest in the church: fewer and fewer attended it and Sunday schools, which had been attended by the majority of children in the early part of the last century were now on the brink of extinction. He ventured that they found the morality taught by the church something which did not chime with their own experience,

especially on sexual ethics in such matters as contraception and homosexuality. Until the church changed to adopt more realistic and humane policies in these areas the 75 year continuous decline in church attendance would continue unabated. A little unwisely, the bishop tried to bluster his way out by challenging the statistics with the apocryphal accounts of increases in his own church. Keith stuck to his guns, giving the precise (Christian) source of the figures and giving some additional ones for good measure. At this point some members watching the programme felt that the bishop's carefully honed media façade deserted him. Faced with these unpalatable statistics, the bishop announced irritably that the figures weren't what really mattered and sought to change the subject.

NSS Calls Again for a Fixed Date for Easter

The NSS again this year protested at the ridiculous moveable feast of Easter and advocated its replacement with a fixed early Spring Holiday. At present, Easter Sunday can vary between 22 March and 25 April. It would make far more sense to have an early spring holiday at the same time each year.

NSS President Denis Cobell stated in our press release: 'This vestige of the Babylonian calendar may be removed at any time by an Order in Council, as laid down by the Easter Act of 1928. This provides for Easter to be fixed on the first Sunday after the second Saturday in April.'

He also pointed out that "The former Whitsun bank holiday provides a precedent for making such a change. Whit Monday used to be a bank holiday but has been replaced by the fixed late spring holiday."

The NSS also called on the Government to include Easter Sunday within the general provision of normal Sunday shopping hours for supermarkets and other large stores.

Having a variable Easter is very inconvenient, and plays havoc with holiday planning and school terms. We are not alone. The Local Government Association agrees, proposing a two week school holiday starting in the last week of March—even if this is after Easter.

What does the general public feel? Teletext (ITV) picked up our press release in the London region at least. They used it for their daily poll, and asked:

"Should Easter holiday be fixed at the same time each year to help holiday and school planning, says the National Secular Society?"

Out of 2,116 calls, 39% agreed, and 61% did not.

The ultimate irony is that both Easter and midwinter festivals long pre-dated Christianity, so it is entirely inappropriate for the church to be dictating the dates on which they are held, especially in a society that has largely abandoned religion.



No Personal

Computer?

You have been referred to Internet pages in this Bulletin. If you do not have access to the Internet, we will be pleased to send you printed copies. Please contact the NSS office 020 7404 3126.

Equipment Appeal

Many thanks to all who contributed to the success of our appeal for funds to upgrade office and computer equipment. We raised £4,300 through your generosity. Since the last Bulletin we have received donations from those members listed below as well as 5 members who indicated on the form that they wished to remain anonymous. Many thanks indeed:
 B J Balderson, R R Brown, D Cunningham-Green, John Dowding, Simon Finebaum, Geraldine Jones, John Manley, Bertie McCullough, Kris Morgan, Mel Osborne, L J Porter, Dr J Radford, Beryl Samuel, T W Stone, Dave Turner, Stewart Ware.

“Newsline”

Newsline is the NSS’s unique weekly update that is delivered free to your PC each Friday. It brings you news of the Society’s current campaigns as well as coverage of national and international developments relating to secularism. It also gives you a platform for putting forward your own opinions and ideas. It’s informative, entertaining and frequently provocative.

Newsline is proving an indispensable tool for journalists, activists and supporters alike. If you aren’t already receiving it, you can subscribe by sending a blank email with “Subscribe to Newsline” on the subject column

to enquiries@secularism.org.uk.

If you don’t have a computer, you can still receive a printed version of Newsline. Simply send a supply of stamped and self-addressed A5 envelopes to Newsline, NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. When your envelopes are running out, we’ll remind you and you can then decide whether you want to continue your subscription by sending more s.a.e..

Newsline’s popularity is growing. It is compiled and edited by NSS Vice-president Terry Sanderson and is a prolific source of new members.

Souvenir Mugs

We are working on a new line of merchandise based on our ‘Heroes of Atheism’ poll in Newsline, but in the meantime we still have some stocks of our original and much sought-after souvenir mugs. The slogans are:

- M2. ‘Just say no to religion’**
- M3. ‘Faith is believing what you know ain’t so’ (Mark Twain)**
- M4. ‘Schools are for teaching, not preaching’**

The mugs cost £4.99 each including post and packing.

For fullest details and illustration go to: www.secularism.org.uk/merchant.htm (where you can purchase using a credit card)

Or send your order by post, with cheque or PO, to NSS Mug Offer, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Be sure to include your name and address and the number(s) of mugs required.

Is There a Group Near Me?

At the NSS office we often receive requests for information about local secular groups across the country. This is particularly so where members would wish to meet with like-minded people. There are currently some thirty local groups affiliated to NSS and these have been printed below. In addition, there are other groups that at present are only affiliated to the British Humanist Association, some of whom are listed on the back page of Freethinker each month.

So, if you are looking for regular contact with other atheists, freethinkers and secular humanists, give your local group a shot and if they are not already affiliated to NSS you may wish to suggest it to them! You know it makes sense.

(For a free sample of Freethinker, contact the NSS office.)

- Birmingham Humanist Group - 0121 475 6508
- Blackpool & Fylde Humanists - 01772 686816
- Brighton & Hove Humanist Groups - 01273 733215
- Bristol Humanists - 0117 904 9490
- Bromley Humanist Group - 01959 574691
- Chiltern Humanists - 01494 771851
- Cotswold Humanists - 01242 528743
- Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists - 01926 858450
- Croydon Humanists - 020 8764 0261

- Devon Humanists - 01626 864046
- Ealing Humanist Group - 020 8741 7016
- East Cheshire & High Peak Secular Group - 01298 815575
- East Kent Humanists - 01843 864506
- Essex Humanists - 01245 265664
- Greater Manchester Humanist Group - 0161 286 5349
- Hampstead Humanist Society - 020 7328 4431
- Havering & District Humanist Society - 01708 473 597 or 01708 762575
- Imperial College Union Secular Society - 07776202816
- Leeds & District Humanist Group - 0113 257 7009
- Leicester Secular Society - 0116 262 2250
- Lewisham Humanist Group - 020 8690 4645
- Norfolk Humanists - 01362 820982
- North East Humanists (Tyneside) - 01434 632936
- North London Humanist Group - 020 8360 1828
- Sheffield Humanist Society - 0114 230 9754
- South Cheshire and North Staffordshire Humanist Association - 01270 882 003
- South Hampshire Humanists - 02380 769120
- Sutton Humanist Group - 020 8773 0631
- West Glamorgan Humanist Group - 01792 206108
- West Kent Secular Humanist Group - 01892 523858



Pressure for Religion to be mentioned in New EU Constitution

The drafters of a new constitution to take account of the forthcoming extension of the EU are under pressure to include references to God and Europe's "Christian heritage" in the charter. Most of the pressure is coming from the Vatican, and the pope has been hyperactively pressurising leaders in Catholic countries throughout the Union to support him.

Many of the new countries that are about to be admitted to the EU are strongly Catholic – Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Malta – and the Pope is obviously anxious that Catholic influence in the new Europe will be written into law.

The NSS has been lobbying European representatives to resist this pressure. All the British representatives on the convention have indicated that they support keeping the constitution secular. We are also liaising with the other European secular and humanist groups in the hope that a concerted effort will help thwart the Vatican.

If the Vatican manages to get what it wants, we fear it would lead to the granting of legal powers for Catholic countries to opt out of EU legislation that contradicts Catholic doctrines – such as abortion reform, contraceptive availability and gay rights. It would also oblige the EU institutions to consult the Vatican and other churches about policy and decision making.

The religious demands have led to a battle royal between secularists and religionists throughout the EU. France has insisted that the constitution remains Godless and therefore inclusive, but the Italians have demanded that the Pope be given whatever he wants. This would create divisions not only between believers and non-believers, but potentially between Christians and Muslims if Turkey achieves its ambition to join the EU.

NSS representatives will be attending meetings in Brussels and Paris over the next couple of months to formulate a co-ordinated campaign of resistance.

Alan Urdaibay continues his excellent work on the website – which has undoubtedly transformed public perceptions of the Society. We would like to thank Alan for his enthusiasm and his technical brilliance.

You can see his work, regularly updated, at

www.secularism.org.uk

Thanks too to Barry Thorpe for continuing to monitor Hansard for the Society and to Jan Fortune-Wood for transcribing from a radio broadcast.

Jonathan Edwards Appointed to Ofcom's 'Taste and Decency' Board

The proposed new media regulator, Ofcom, which will replace the present TV and advertising watchdogs, has appointed Jonathan Edwards, the Olympic Gold Medalist and well-known born-again Christian, to its Content Board as a representative of the English regions.

NSS Vice-president Terry Sanderson immediately protested at this appointment, arguing that Mr Edwards was bringing to the job a heavy Christian "family values" agenda and that his views would not be representative for those he was supposedly speaking. In an interview with the *Observer*, Mr Edwards admitted that he hardly watched television and that he didn't approve of "sex 'n violence" anyway. Research has shown that in general TV viewers don't mind a bit of sex, violence and swearing so long as it is in context and not gratuitous.

Our complaint started something of a debate that spread through the media. A commentator in the

Radio Times supported our stance, but Nick Higham, the BBC's media correspondent, thought that Mr Edwards would be kept in line by other members of the board and that we were worrying unnecessarily.

Even the *Sun* thought the appointment a bad idea, writing an editorial asking whether Ofcom would not appoint a "bachelor atheist" to balance the Board. Philip Hensher in the *Independent* mounted an all-out attack on Mr Edwards' appointment, which sparked a rash of letters from outraged Christians claiming that everyone was taken seriously but them.

Now the leader of Mediawatch-uk (the successor to Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers and Listeners Association) has protested that we are being intolerant. He had even put in for the job himself, and wondered what we would have said had he been appointed!

Lords Reform Kicked into the Long Grass

The second stage of the reform of the House of Lords seems to have stalled after parliament failed to agree on the best way to proceed.

A cross-party committee was formed to try to take the issue forward but that, too, was unable to reach a consensus and so it is thought that this important constitutional reform will now be reduced to a small Bill which will remove the rights of the remaining 92 hereditary peers to sit.

The NSS had sought to grasp what may be the last opportunity for change by sending a 23 page report to the cross-party committee (which is now in the House of Lords library, and is available on the NSS website) setting out the case for expelling the bishops from a reformed Lords.

In the last consultation on reform, 85% of respondents had said that they thought unelected bishops should have no place in the upper chamber.



Alberto Bona kindly drew this cartoon for the Bulletin expressing his view on the war in Iraq. He is an Illustrator and Cartoonist and has recently joined NSS.

Church of England is Stifling Objections to New Church Schools

We have attacked plans by the Government to reduce the amount of time that local communities can object to the establishment of a new school in their area. The Government is proposing to cut the amount of time for consultation from two months to one month.

In their contributions to the debate over faith schools, both the Government and the CofE promised that new religious schools would only be opened after proper consultation and with the consent of the local community. Now

it seems that every obstacle is being placed in the way of proper consultation, and objections when received are disregarded.

The Society also made these points in a submission (prepared by Acting Treasurer, Ian Andrews, and the Executive Director). It also suggested that information about plans for new schools be made available on the new Schools Organisation website and for the formal consultation period not to start until it has appeared there.

R.E. - The Way Forward?

Some might be surprised to learn that two NSS Council members attended the AGM for National Association of SACRE's on 7th May. Their attendance was however opportune as they witnessed the general consternation and bewilderment amongst the RE teachers and members of locally SACRE's from around the country. And the cause for this consternation and bewilderment - the recent proposal of leading church educationists that there should be a national syllabus for RE. This would replace the locally developed syllabuses that have been the system for 60 years.

This initiative had come unexpectedly and without consultation, and there was disquiet that it should have come exclusively from the Christian churches (excluding the RC's). It was expected that the Imams would be put out! Nobody had an explanation, although patchy quality and poor OFSTED reports of some LEA's was suggested. We can only assume that whatever the case the churches are trying to preserve as much of the *status quo* for RE as possible and their continuing influence upon it. Could they be trying to head off the subject being subsumed into some kind of "Philosophy" syllabus? What a good idea!

There were some positives at the meeting, particularly the keynote address of Professor John Hull of Birmingham University. He almost sounded the sort of religionist with whom we could do business! Among his more encouraging expressions were: "Religion is the day-dream and nightmare of our culture" and "The shadow of religion must be faced". He asserted with some emphasis and to the obvious approval of the meeting that "the ambiguity of religion" could be better dealt with by the provision of RE in schools, and not by the churches. He also stressed that a national

syllabus would need to be very diverse. His view seemed to be that RE has a place in the school curriculum provided it does not seek to proselytize. That this in turn should equip students to make a rational choice. Interestingly, it seemed that John Hull's view of the subject might not exclude a study of atheism. However, he did not explicitly include non-belief in his diversity, perhaps not surprisingly given his audience. What was very clear was that he saw RE as an academic subject that needed a distinct independence from the churches.

Should the NSS welcome a national syllabus?

An argument for this would seem to be that, yes, provided that there was recognition that a vast number of children and their parents have no interest in religion, that the drafting involved those of "no-faith" and that it should apply to all schools. We should also insist that atheism, agnosticism and indeed the whole idea of not needing to believe be included not just in the interests of balance, critical thinking and free discussion, but to reflect the reality of society today. The argument against would be that like teaching astrology, Religion has no relevance to human existence in the 21st century of the Common Era.

But above all else we should treat this move by the Churches with suspicion because the one certainty is that they see some advantage, if only in maintaining their influence. We need to seize the opportunity their initiative provides for us to have an input. Furthermore, the necessary legislative changes could mean a secular funeral for that beast of 1944, collective worship. There's a thought!

Council Members
Malcolm Trahearn and Ian Andrews

Volunteers in London

Office

Members have been of great assistance in the office. We are grateful to Renata Anderson, John & Lorna Archer, Julian Blake, John Claydon, Clive Greedus, Peter Hearty, Don Langdown, Simon Wakeling, Fiona Weir and Linda Wright. If you can volunteer and have a particular skill or interest you feel would be useful to NSS, please contact us at the office.

Education - School Transport

We are still seeking to challenge this and would be particularly interested in hearing of any case where:

- parents have opted for their child to attend a community school because they do not wish them to attend a local school which is a church school (normally Church of England)
- they are required to pay for transport

- neighbouring children attending a school (which is not the nearest school) on denominational grounds e.g. Roman Catholics are given free transport

It would be even more helpful if the child's family were on benefits; the importance of not having to pay such transport would be even more crucial.

Anna Behan on "Woman's Hour"

Anna Behan who has been co-opted to the ANSS Council (see page 1) was an ideal choice to represent the Society on a recent piece on *Woman's Hour* to put the secular case in a debate about whether or not children needed to be taken to church. Although she had never broadcast before, her experience of lecturing regularly to classes of up to three hundred had obviously stood her in good stead.

She made some excellent contributions and made a point of rebutting the implication that the churches were the sole source of morality. Indeed, she gave some examples of where their approach was the very opposite. The presenter sought to put her on the spot by asking if she would let her children go to church if they expressed a wish to do so. Anna responded that, given their young age, the children would need to be accompanied and she would not be happy to do this. Nevertheless, if this hypothetical case arose, she would discuss it with her husband. He was of like mind but just might be more flexible.

Religion is being pumped into *Woman's Hour*, like so many BBC programmes, especially on Radio 4. Contributors declaim religious views or stories from their so-called sacred texts as if they were fact and the characters in them were bosom friends. This item was no exception and, outrageously, a *vox pop* which introduced it included only

religious voices. Despite being cast in the role of defending her decision "to deprive" her children of a religious upbringing, Anna left listeners in no doubt that an atheist upbringing is a positive choice and that she was instilling strong moral values in her children.

She had felt that the religionists had sought insidiously during the programme to portray themselves as culturally valuable minorities in a way that appropriated, and perverted, the language of genuinely oppressed minorities. She found it particularly galling that their rhetoric was taken at face value without challenge and no attempt was made to consider the vast public spending on religious schools and religious privilege generally.

A member from Kent was so incensed by the tone of the piece that she wrote to the programme's producer to object to (among other matters) the lack of questioning of religious claims on the programme. Nor had there been reference to the abuse of children in teaching them opinion as fact, the harmful effects of religion on women and children—for example though persecution, oppression, psychological conflict and guilt.

Council were pleased that Anna had so effectively expressed a dissenting voice, albeit a lone one, and generated publicity for the Society.

News short

Guardian 8 May 2003 on a
war thanksgiving service

However, ministers were
also pointing out that if the

Church wanted to distance
itself from major state

ceremonies [such as a
thanksgiving service for the

end of the war in Iraq] they
were also in the long term

signing their own death

warrant as the established

Church.

Some cabinet figures believe

the disestablishment of the

church is desirable and

inevitable in the long term.

Fundraiser - Volunteer

As religious privilege seems to increase year by year, so do the demands on our funds. As you will have seen from this Bulletin, our campaigning is going from strength to strength. To develop further the work of the Society we need to attract funds. We are looking for some volunteer help with

our fundraising and membership development. If you are up to date with fundraising avenues and methods we would like to hear from you.

Please contact the NSS office by phone (020 7404 3126) or by email (enquiries@secularism.org.uk).

David Yeulett

David Yeulett, who was an enthusiastic volunteer worker for the Society for decades, died in April after a long illness. He is survived by his daughter Ruth, to whom we send our condolences.

David had been brought up by the Coram Foundation, a London "foundlings" charity known for taking in children born to unmarried servants made pregnant by the sons of their masters, who were well placed to pay a hefty settlement.

Such children's names were changed shortly after birth to disguise the identity of the parents, but, suspiciously, his name was changed again later and he determined to find out more about his origins. He established that the new name

had come from an old gravestone and was convinced that a young friend of his from the Foundation could throw more light on David's parents' identity. Sadly, the friend was dying in hospital and the staff heartlessly followed the Foundation's instructions to prevent David from ever seeing him again.

Nor did he forgive the Foundation for under-feeding him when in their "care" (the incessant diet had instead been fundamentalist Christianity), or when he came of age for them involuntarily enlisting him in the Army: he hated violence.

His account was reminiscent of Dicken's Dotheboys Hall, and we will never see David's like again.

Secularism and the Future

Summer Conference of the NSS

Saturday 7th June, 2003

Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

(Only a mile from Euston, Kings Cross, St Pancras and Waterloo)

Holborn tube – Central and Piccadilly lines

Start 1000h for 1030h. End 1630h

Registration fee £5 to include a light lunch

Keynote address by

Joan Smith

Journalist, Author and NSS Honorary Associate:

'I've Seen the Future and it's Secular'

*followed in the afternoon with presentations on issues that **matter** to you.*

There will be opportunities for meeting other members and networking.

Proposed Programme for the Day

1000h	Registration and payment in the Library	1230h	Lunch in the Library
	Internet and exhibition	1330h	Taking It Forward - a series of presentations: The Challenge of the Internet Secularism and Europe Quo Vadis Schools? Secularism and the Future (<i>open forum</i>) Taking the Media with us
1030h	Conference in the Brockway Room Welcome by the President, Denis Cobell and a brief NSS update. Prelude	1630h	Conference ends.
1100h	Keynote address by Joan Smith Discussion		

To assist with catering, if you have not already done so, please let the NSS office know you intend to come to the Conference by phone on 020 7404 3126 or by email to enquiries@secularism.org.uk

The registration fee of £5 per person will be collected on the day.

Other Diary Dates

Annual 'Humanist Lunch'

The 'Humanist Lunch' is organised by the British Humanist Association and kindred organisations. This year it will take place on:

Saturday 21 June

(midsummer's day)

at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square,
London WC1R 4RL.

Speaker - Sally Feldman - who is

Head of Media, Arts and Design at Westminster University and on the Editorial Board of the *New Humanist*. There will also be music played by a jazz duo.

Advance bookings before 31 May, £17.50 (including one free drink), thereafter, £20, and on the door £22.50. - Ticket sales and information from British Humanist Association, Tel. 020 7079 3580.

Ethical Society Annual Coach trip

Secular Trail to Brighton.

Sunday 6th July

0930h – 1930h.

Coach leaves from
Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Cost £12 per person

Details from Jennifer Jeynes

Tel. 020 7242 8037

email.library@ethicalsoc.org.uk

NSS AGM 2003

Will be held on the afternoon of **Saturday 29 November 2003** in Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.