

Religious Hatred Act – Historic Victory

We Won!

The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 is now on the Statute Book. But its passage into law made parliamentary history. Despite the Government's working majority of 70 MPs, it failed by *one vote* to get its way on the Bill. Amid uproar in the Commons chamber, a clearly furious Home Secretary had to announce through gritted teeth that the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill would go for Royal Assent and onto the Statute Book without any Government amendments at all.

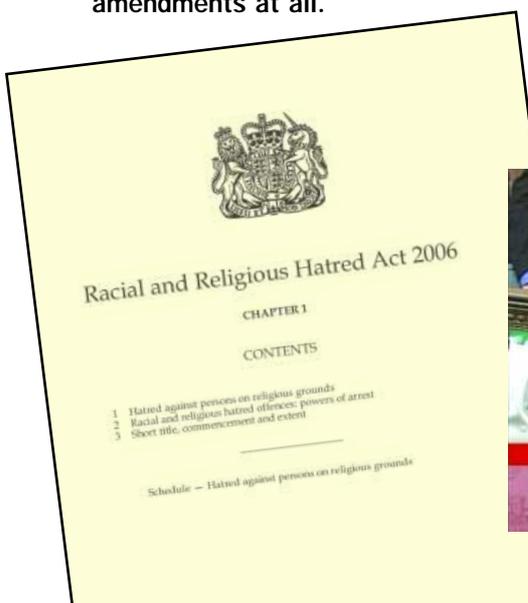
As reported in the last Bulletin, peers had earlier taken the sting out of the Government's Bill and introduced stringent freedom of speech safeguards by a massive 149 vote majority. The Government had been determined to reverse most of these important safeguards in the House of Commons, but failed – albeit narrowly – to do so.

The NSS and its Honorary Associates played a crucial role in this important victory for freedom of expression, and the Society was again mentioned in the debate. Intense lobbying behind the scenes led by NSS Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP covertly persuaded 27 Labour back benchers to rebel and a number to abstain.

Another Honorary Associate, Baroness Turner of Camden, kindly signed a letter to selected back bench Labour MPs making the case against the Government's amendments. Of the rebels, all but two were recipients of her influential letter. Evan Harris and fellow Honorary Associate Bob Marshall-Andrews spoke out strongly in the debate.

On the other hand, Frank Dobson MP (not an Honorary Associate), but sometime supporter of humanist and secular causes, was one of the most vociferous supporters of the Government line.

NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood was practically resident at the Houses of Parliament in the week leading up to the vote, working on tactics into the small hours with Honorary Associates and opposition MPs. He was lobbying, helping with research, preparing briefing papers and was the inspiration behind perhaps the most powerful Labour rebel speech. He also cooperated closely with religious organisations and MPs sharing our stance. When briefing the media, he was careful not to alert the Government to the expected scale of the rebellion. ■



**Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP,
clearly furious**

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The Government's humiliation – a blow by blow account:

On 31 January the Government lost the first of two crucial Commons votes by ten votes. In the second vote, which took place just a few minutes later, the Government lost by just one vote. Several rebels had been cajoled into changing sides. Keith Porteous Wood confirms that when the result of the vote was announced, the atmosphere in the Chamber moved in fifteen seconds from intense anticipation to disbelief and finally to one of euphoria.

Evan Harris practically sprinted from the Chamber to be filmed in front of Big Ben to tell TV viewers about this historic victory for freedom of expression. And it could not have been more fitting. This was his victory more than anyone else's.



Just before the vote, we understand the whips had made a panic call to the Prime Minister in Downing Street calling him urgently to the Chamber to vote. But having seen the size of the first defeat he was sent back home by the Chief Whip Hilary Armstrong, presumably to spare him from being humiliated by opposition MPs. This turned out to be one of the biggest miscalculations of his political career because, had he stayed for the second vote, the vote would have gone the other way. ■

Tony Blair's role

It has been Prime Minister Tony Blair's personal determination which has brought this measure back to Parliament time and time again over the last five years. So it was not with sorrow that we realised we had not just witnessed, but engineered, the second and third Commons defeats of the PM's entire administration. And the icing on the cake came minutes later with the astounding news that the one vote lost had effectively been Tony Blair's.



Dr Evan Harris, MP, architect of the victory

Religious hate Bill lost after Blair fails to vote

Sir Iqbal Sacranie of the Muslim Council of Britain talking about the Danish cartoons depicting Mohammed on BBC The World Today 3 February 2006:

"If the original [Racial and Religious Hatred] bill would have gone through, [it] would certainly [have] prevented such malicious pictures that would incite hatred against the community"

"Calling these cartoons 'unacceptable' and censoring ourselves 'in respect' to Islam brings the West into compliance with a central statute of Shariah."
(Diana West, Columbia Daily Tribune)



Turbulent history of the Incitement to Religious Hatred measures

Setting aside the – initially uncoordinated – opposition of religious organisations, your Society was the only organisation from any sector to oppose these measures consistently throughout the five years they have been a threat. Together with Evan Harris, we also led the opposition.

The Government's first attempt to introduce these measures was in 2001, as a reaction to the September 11 atrocities. They were buried in the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Bill. The NSS led a revolt at that time and, after a Herculean battle, the then Home Secretary David Blunkett was eventually forced to take the hatred provisions out, or lose the rest of this flagship Bill.

Opposing MPs had largely been motivated by freedom of expression fears, but also that the measures had been prepared in too much haste and that they should be in a separate Bill where they could be given greater scrutiny.

Later Lord Avebury introduced a Bill containing solely these measures, but it also failed because of freedom of speech concerns. The Lords then convened a high powered Select Committee to consider religious hatred, but even after a year of deliberations it felt unable to recommend proceeding with legislation. It had been influenced by copious evidence from the NSS. We had said that there was sufficient legislation already and the dangers to freedom of speech were too great.

After a couple of years the Government tried again by inserting the measures in the Serious

Organised Crime and Police Bill. Home Secretary Charles Clarke was told by MPs – led on by the NSS – that they could not stomach the freedom of expression restrictions.

When Parliament was about to be dissolved for the last General Election, Clarke was forced into pulling the measures from this key piece of legislation, or lose it entirely. When making the embarrassing climb down, the Government announced that it would listen to its critics but, as we expected, it did nothing of the sort.

In contravention of political etiquette, the Home Secretary then wrote to selected mosques on Home Office notepaper making the party-political point that the failure of these measures was down to opposition parties.

The Government then made the introduction of the measure a manifesto commitment.

It reintroduced the measures last year in an *ad hoc* Bill, the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. No concessions were made in the wording to reflect the concerns of critics.

The Commons deliberated over the new Bill, with Evan Harris leading the charge in intellectually demolishing it in Committee. Even when the points he made were unarguable, all the Government did was to promise to look at the issues again, as it had done so often before, but it continued to stonewall.

As reported in the Autumn Bulletin, the Lords completely rewrote the Bill, introducing strong freedom of speech safeguards. Lord Lester was the principal architect of

Religious hatred

SIR – We, as leaders of some of the main organisations representing the views of Christians, Muslims, secularists and humanists in this country, are calling on MPs to vote tonight to reject the Government's proposals for a wide-ranging new offence of religious hatred and instead support the cross-party Conservative-Labour-Liberal Democrat amendments.

As people with strong views on religion, we know how easy it is to offend those with whom you disagree and how easy it is to resent what others say, and see insult in it. But we also recognise that a free society must have the scope to debate, criticise, proselytise, insult and even to ridicule belief and religious practices in order to ensure that there is full scope – short of violence or inciting violence or other criminal offences – to tackle these issues.

The amendments that we hope will be supported will deliver the Government its election pledge of a new law, but one that would cover only threatening words or behaviour, would be restricted to intentional offences only and would have a clear statement in law that protects legitimate free expression.

Tonight's vote is the last chance to protect this precious liberty that we all enjoy.

Keith Porteous Wood
National Secular Society
Hanne Stinson
British Humanist Association
Colin Hart
Christian Institute
Don Horrocks
Evangelical Alliance
Dr Ghyasuddin Siddiqui
Muslim Parliament
Manzoor Moghal
Muslim Forum
London WC1

Multi-signatory letter organised by the NSS to appear in the Daily Telegraph on the morning of the vote.

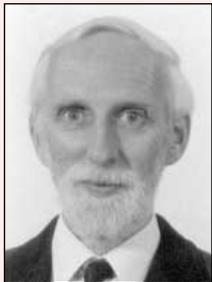
the revision. The NSS was formally recognised by leading peers of all parties as having played a key role in securing the impressive 149 vote majority. But not even the peers ever expected their much-improved version to reach the Statute Book completely unscathed. Yet it did. ■

We are indebted to Rowan Atkinson who spoke out so effectively against the Government's Bill. He gave numerous interviews on TV and radio, and to the press and spoke at meetings in the House of Commons and House of Lords. He became a highly effective mascot for the campaign. This is how *The Times* saw it: *ROWAN ATKINSON'S supporters in Parliament mounted a sophisticated ambush to defeat the Government over its laws against religious hatred. To borrow a phrase from the comedian's television series Blackadder, they had "a cunning plan".*



Rowan Atkinson: "I have a cunning plan"

Message from the President



Those of you who watched NSS Honorary Associate Richard Dawkins' television programmes *The Root of All Evil?* may have noticed that most of his opponents accused him of selecting only religious fanatics or eccentrics as interviewees in order to show religion in a bad light.

There may be some truth in this, but the whole point is that it is the power and danger emanating from zealots that is of greatest concern. The growth of activity, and increase in membership of the NSS, is largely a reaction to the undue and increasing influence of the faithful on government and society.

A decade or more ago, as secularism was advancing steadily, it may have

seemed to some that the NSS was as relevant as the 'round earth society'. More recently, though, this advance has been stopped and may even be in reverse. We must oppose this, and effectively. It is up to all of us, so please support the cause both locally and nationally, with letters to the editor or contributions to your local radio stations, and giving as generously as you can to the NSS.

Denis Cobell,
President

AGM 2005

THE AGM on 26 November was the best attended for decades.

A new member of Council was elected, Nick Pullar who is convenor of the London *Skeptics in the Pub* (more biographical details in next Bulletin). Bill McIlroy and Liz Thompson did not seek re-election. The remaining officers and Council members were reelected. Bill was presented with a digital radio in recognition of his fifty years serving the secular movement.

A member's motion about prioritising membership growth was defeated in a lively debate in which it was more generally felt that membership growth arose from successful campaigning, and that targets would be a distraction.

The event finished convivially over a light buffet. Please note the 2006 AGM in your diary for Saturday 25 November.

NSS work in Scotland

A Alistair McBay from Perthshire has been appointed as representative of the NSS to promote campaigning in Scotland. This follows a review of our pilot project which was prompted by the resignation of the original convenor north of the border, Keith Charters. Keith's literary career is taking off in a big way and he wants to spend his time concentrating on that. We thank Keith for his work and hope that members in Scotland will also support Alistair.

Alistair McBay writes: "The task to confront primitive prejudice and superstition is no less a challenge in Scotland than elsewhere. Witness the foul stench of hypocrisy in January, when the headlines revealed the less than celibate Scottish priest, known as 'Father Flash', had fathered a child by his first cousin, and was directly responsible for her marriage breakdown. Days later, and with no hint of irony, Archbishop Conti in Glasgow was denouncing the moral

decline of secular society, condemning sex before marriage and attributing our nation's social ills to the crisis facing marriage and the family, in other words civil partnerships. 'We (i.e. the Catholic Church) must be at the forefront of promoting family life', he said. You couldn't make it up!

"I have been writing letters to the Scottish press for some time in order to expose such double standards. And I seem to have managed to get up some religious noses, as well as catching the eye of the NSS, of which I have been a member for some years. Such profile-raising work will continue, but work is more urgently needed behind the scenes with the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive, with our children's education, as opposed to indoctrination, a key issue.

"I am delighted to be asked to represent the NSS in Scotland, and hope I prove to be up to the challenge." ■

Alistair McBay: campaigning north of the border



NSS Media Profile Rides High

The NSS's media profile continues to rise, as our spokespeople are increasingly sought out to comment on a wide range of topics.

The Racial and Religious Hatred Bill put the NSS once more at the centre of a national debate, and we were quoted extensively in newspapers around the world, and did literally dozens of interviews on radio and TV while the Bill was in its final parliamentary stages. Because the NSS was so deeply involved in the successful campaign to minimise the dangers of this legislation, we were able to give journalists insights into what was happening in a very complicated situation.

The explosion of hysteria

in the Muslim world over the Danish cartoons also provided many opportunities for the NSS to put forward a vigorous case for freedom of expression. We were invited on to the *Today* programme on two separate occasions (and another time when the item was prepared but pulled to make way for a major breaking news story).

To fulfil all these calls to contribute, our media spokespeople have to be extremely well-informed about events as they happen (the media always wants instant reaction). The range of topics we have to be briefed on is enormous.

Examples of what we've been speaking about in the past few months in the media include: animal



Jim Herrick, Vice-President

welfare; the supposed "de-christianisation" of Christmas; the rights and wrongs of the jilbab (woman's long, loose outer-garment); the *Chronicles of Narnia*; the BBC's obsession with religion; whether Hindu funeral pyres should be permitted in England; and whether Christian crosses should be removed from crematoria. We've debated the new civil partnership law and whether blasphemy should be abolished, and we've defended the theatrical tour of the *Jerry Springer the Opera* from Christian fanatics.

We've been on most major news outlets, including the *PM* programme, BBC TV *Breakfast*, Radio Five Live, *The World at One*, News 24, Sky News, ITN News, IRN News, Five News, Channel Four News, practically all national newspapers and many regional journals as well as trade and specialist papers. These included

Thanking MPs and organisations such as the National Secular Society and the Barnabas Fund, along with the Christian Institute and the Evangelical Alliance, who all campaigned ceaselessly against the legislation, Rowan Atkinson said: "Something I feel that I have learnt over this long campaign is that hate legislation, no matter how well intended, is never more than a mechanism to paper over the cracks in society".

Keith Porteous Wood, the director of the National Secular Society said: "This is the best news on freedom of speech for decades. Given we had to have this Bill because it was a Labour manifesto commitment, having the Lords amendments agreed in full was more than freedom of speech campaigners dared hope for.

"We salute the courage of those 27 Labour backbenchers who defied their whip in the cause of freedom of speech".

From *The Times* 1/2/2006

PR Week (who actually wanted to write about how we had achieved such a high public profile), *Broadcast* and many others.

The NSS has won its reputation as a dependable source for journalists looking for informed opinion and research. Our media officer is Vice-President Terry Sanderson. Nearly all of the media work is done by him and Keith Porteous Wood. Fellow Vice-President Jim Herrick also helped out on a TV interview about faith schools. ■



Key French Centenary

The Centenary of the historic 1905 law separating church and state in France was celebrated on 10 December with a large demonstration in Paris. Our French counterparts, Libre Pensée, fielded an impressive number of participants, each marching behind their own county's LP flag. Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson represented the NSS and they helped to carry the banner of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.



NSS carry the international banner in Paris

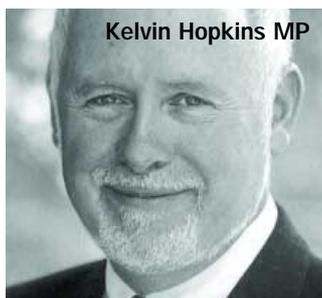
New Honorary Associates

We are delighted to announce the appointment of the following new Honorary Associates, who all voted against the Government on the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill:

Colin Challen MP has an impeccable record in voting for the secular stance. He voted against the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill at every turn and in favour of School Admissions (Prohibition of Religious Discrimination) in 2004. Only an MP since 2001, he is a passionate advocate of sustainable development and is a member of the Environmental Audit Committee.

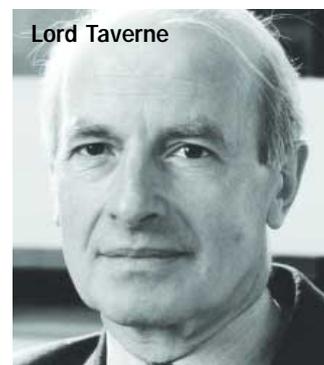


Kelvin Hopkins MP joined the Parliamentary Humanist Group in 1997 and later became a Vice-Chair. He is a member of the Socialist Campaign Group and has participated in a large number of Commons rebellions, including voting against the Iraq war. He has also voted in favour of enabling voluntary euthanasia. He has a wide range of political interests including Education and



Transport and is strongly opposed to privatization in all forms.

Lord (Dick) Taverne QC became an MP in 1962 and later held ministerial positions. In 2002 he founded Sense About Science, a charity to promote the evidence-based approach to scientific issues. His book *The March of Unreason – Science, Democracy and the New Fundamentalism*



was published in 2005 and will appear in paperback in October this year. ■

LORD TAVERNE initiated a debate in the Lords on 8 February about religious schools (*Hansard* starting at Col 719). Fellow Honorary Associate **Graham Allen MP** initiated one on religious schools admissions on 14 February (*Hansard* starting at Column 367WH). We are grateful to them both. We assisted both with a briefing and copious research.

Fabian Society conference

The NSS was much in evidence at the Fabian's conference on "Britishness" on 14 January. Both keynote speaker Chancellor Gordon Brown and Minister Yvette Cooper MP were asked by Keith Porteous Wood and other secularists how on earth single faith schools could be squared with trying to create a more integrated society. Both responded that, whether we like it or not, there are thousands of Christian schools already and it would therefore be unfair to bar other faiths schools.

A professor drew attention to research which showed that while some ethnic minority groups fared educationally, economically and in employment less well than the

average for their majority peers, other such groups fared much better. Other researchers had established that the non-religious fared more favourably than their religious counterparts in each ethnic group. This prompted Keith



Conference venue: Imperial College

Porteous Wood to suggest that further work be done on the extent to which an inability to speak English well, attitude to education and cultural issues contributed to lower attainment.

Ben Summerskill, the Director of gay rights group Stonewall, was by far the most secularist panellist. He strongly disputed the value of religious schools with fellow panellist Sir Iqbal Sacranie, chair of the Muslim Council of Britain.

The NSS also maintained a high visibility outside the debates with a prominent stall from which large quantities of literature and merchandise were distributed by Terry Sanderson, who also answered delegates' questions. ■

Equality Act 2006

The Equality Act completed its passage through Parliament and received Royal Assent in February 2005. It represents the biggest shake up for decades both in equality legislation and the way it is administered.

The Act makes way for the setting up of one single body to tackle discrimination, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR).

The Act also sets out the law against discrimination on the new strand of Religion and Belief (which includes non-belief). It also includes powers to make regulations against discrimination on grounds of Sexual Orientation, which – like those on Religion and Belief – are planned for implementation towards the end of the year.

There are two important fronts on which the NSS has been influencing these developments: on the legislation and in the setting up of the CEHR.

Work on legislation

We worked with senior officials responsible for legislation at the Home Office and with members of both Houses of Parliament. The most pressing task was to eliminate or mitigate the most unreasonable or unjustified religious exemptions. They mostly related to religious “faith” schools or other religious organisations.

Some of the more outrageous exemptions were deleted or toned down, largely at the behest of Evan Harris’ sterling efforts during committee debates. He always maintained scrupulous courtesy and tended to smile disarmingly while delivering the most devastating blows. But this most intransigent of governments refused to modify many other unsatisfactory exemptions.

We owe Evan Harris an immense debt and are also very grateful for the work done on our behalf by fellow Honorary Associates in the Lords, particularly Baroness Turner of Camden, and also by Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC. Keith Porteous Wood has been working closely with them over this Bill, assisting them, highlighting areas of concern and suggesting amendments.

Single Equality Body

Council member Dr Anna Behan has been taking the lead for the Society on our work on the Single Equality Body. This is both important and challenging. Anna has represented the Society in numerous meetings of the Religion and Belief strand working towards the single equality body. She has worked hard and successfully to raise consciousness about the rights of the non-religious.

Dr Behan’s presentation at the DTI

Anna Behan made the presentation on behalf of the non-religious in late January at the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI). Anna chided the Government for its failure to engage with the non-religious, demonstrated in particular by the lack of consultation and public funding on equal terms with the religious. She also drew the Government’s attention to the disadvantages suffered by the non-religious. These include the unequal access to public



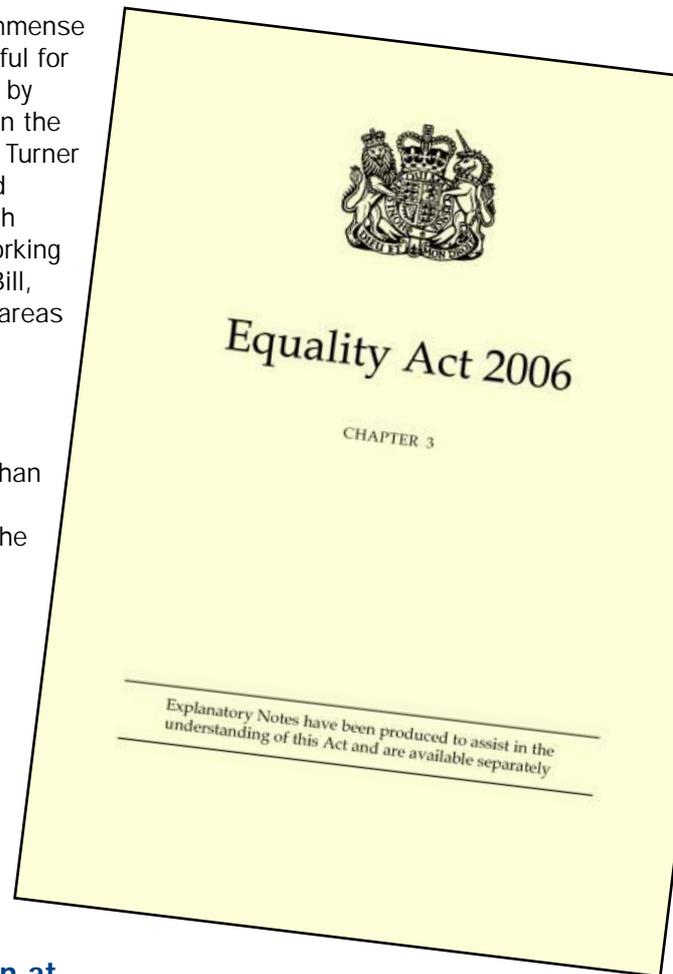
Anna Behan

services and the impact on the non-religious of excessive exemptions for religious organisations. She stressed that such matters need to be addressed by the new CEHR.

Anna and Keith later had the opportunity to make the above points and express their concerns about the general religious-centred approach in a private discussion with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Women and Equality, Meg Munn MP. ■



DTI Minister
Meg Munn MP

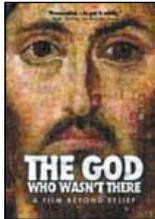


A more comprehensive version of this article on <http://www.secularism.org.uk/equalityact.html>; it is also available to members sending an SAE to the office.

The God Who Wasn't There

GET THE MOVIE TODAY

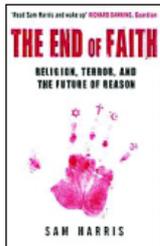
DID JESUS ever exist other than as a figment of the early Christians' imagination? Not according to this film – which makes a very convincing case that the ideas that modern-day Christians have about Jesus are almost all stolen from pre-existing mythologies. Presented in a light-hearted format, this challenging movie also rips into the born again madness that is currently afflicting the United States. The film is backed up by many DVD extras, including an interview with Richard Dawkins. Available exclusively in the UK from the NSS, the DVD costs £16.99 (including postage). Send a cheque to NSS DVD Offer, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL or order on-line at our shop, www.secularism.org.uk



The End of Faith – Religion, Terror & the Future of Reason

THE BOOK EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT – BUY IT HERE

SAM HARRIS'S all-out attack on organised religion is long overdue and is proving a popular read among NSS members. Mr Harris makes the point that even moderate versions of religion are dangerous, as they give credence to the myths and dogmas that motivate the fundamentalist terrorists. Packed with stimulating and well-researched ideas, *The End of Faith* is available from the NSS, paperback 336 pages, for £7.99 plus £1 postage and packing. Send a cheque for £8.99 to NSS Book Offer, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL or order on-line at our shop www.secularism.org.uk



Volunteer News

Can you help with bookkeeping? We are looking for a volunteer experienced in bookkeeping and with PC experience able to spend a day a week in our Holborn offices. Please contact Stewart Ware on 020 7404 3126.

- The record numbers of new members joining has kept our regular office volunteer Claudine Baxter extremely busy with membership administration and we thank her for her regular effort.
- The website continues to attract an ever-increasing number of visitors – 1,700 in one day alone in February – creating a new record. We are grateful to Sean Clark and colleagues at cuttlefish.com who generously implemented and maintained the site.
- Barry Thorpe diligently adds the press stories provided by Terry Sanderson in *What the Papers Say*, as well as monitoring other websites.
- The AGM in November was the largest gathering of NSS members for a long time and we thank volunteers Fiona Weir, Muriel Fraser and Tessa Kendall for their help on the day and for Marla Madison and Peter Purton for selling so much merchandise.
- We are grateful to volunteers Tessa Kendall, David Holohan, Garry Marlowe and Robert Stovold for despatching wagon loads of merchandise to customers in the run-up to the er... Solstice.
- The Concordat Watch section of the website continues to grow, thanks to Muriel Fraser, and is attracting attention worldwide. We would like to think that we have added to the pressure on the Slovakian government which fell over the adoption of the concordat (See *Newsline* 10th February 2006). Muriel would like to know if any members are proficient in east European languages, particularly Croatian, Slovenian, Hungarian and the Baltic languages. Please email admin@secularism.org.uk if you could help with translation.
- We thank Marla Madison who inspired our new look and Bradley Davis who designed the website, and much of our merchandise.
- Our thanks also go to Joel Clompus for legal advice and to Tim and Debbie Boyce, Tessa Kendall and Paul Stevenson for research and Mazin Zeki with assistance with consultations, of which there have been quite a few, but insufficient space in the Bulletin to mention. We are also grateful to Penny Rogers' help for proof reading, sometimes to tight deadlines. Muriel Fraser and Robert Stovold have given valuable help in the office.

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