

72% Christians? Ridiculous, says NSS

Our opponents fake delight in quoting the English 2001 Census finding that 72 per cent identified themselves as Christian. An official consultation on the Census gave us the opportunity to criticise the 2001 Census questions. We also called for improvements to those to be used in the next (2011) Census.

Our researches revealed that Census officials privately acknowledged that these English figures do not represent respondents' current religion, but the proportion given approximates instead to the religion of upbringing figures – a much higher number. This is because many more lose their religion of upbringing than convert to religion in later life.

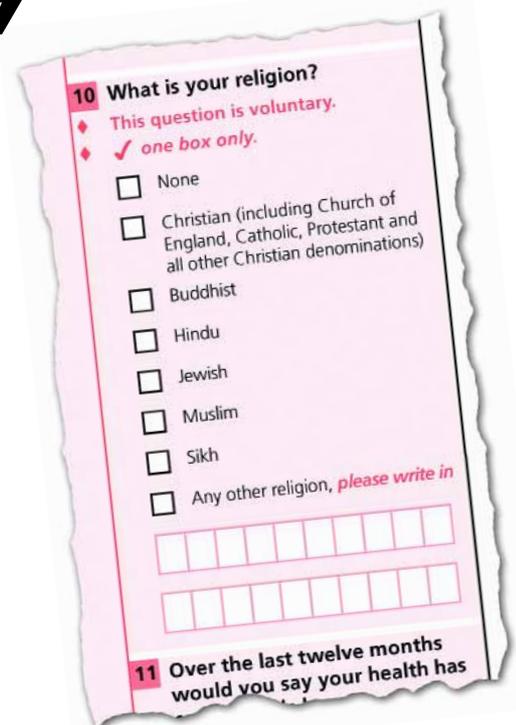
More detailed Scottish figures undermine the England and Wales ones

The Scottish Census specifically asked about both “current” religion and that of “upbringing”. The percentage of respondents

answering that they had “No religion” of upbringing was 18 per cent, but, when asked about their religion now, 28 per cent said they had no religion – more than a half more. And this excludes a further 5 per cent who coyly declined to say what their religion was (or was not) now. We quoted a prominent Christian statistician who believed that most of these decliners were “very likely to be those with no religion”. So that would take the 28 per cent up to 33 per cent.

And that was the Scottish figures, and the English and Welsh are self-evidently much less religious than the Scots. So perhaps we are talking about 40 per cent south of the border. Yet the official English non-religion figure is only around 15 per cent. The discrepancy is so substantial that as well as making our detailed Submission, we are lodging a formal complaint to a government ombudsman.

Honorary Associate Nick Cohen wrote up our findings on 19 September in the *New*



Statesman – obligatory reading for Government ministers <http://www.newstatesman.com/200509190017>. Under the headline “The state should stop playing God”, Nick contended that the Census methodology was “under convincing intellectual assault” and that “the evidence suggests that the Office of National Statistics blundered”. He concluded that “Our pious government wants faith-based

continued on page 8 ▶

In this issue:

2 Paris Conferences

Seminars, debates and awards

3 Religion in the EU

MEPs critical of European Commission

4 Faith Schools

The rise of religion in education

7 NSS in the Media

We are front page news!

8 BBC Charter Review

Make your voice heard

NSS Speakers at Paris Conferences on Separation of Church and State

Freethinkers, secularists and humanists from around the world gathered in Paris in July to celebrate the anniversary of the law that separated state and church in France. The NSS was represented at the two conferences looking at different forms of separation, one organised by the Worldwide Congress of Freethought (WCF) and the other organised jointly by our French sister organisation, Libre Pensée (Freethought), and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).

Seminars and debates were held in various venues, including the UNESCO building and the Sorbonne. Topics included the problems that are being caused by religion in the USA, Nigeria, Nepal, Uganda, India, Iran and many other places.

A highpoint was a lively debate on the role of secularism in the EU. A split soon emerged about the best model for relations between religion and the state. Some wanted a complete separation – where the state is blind to religion and both are completely separate, as in France. Others were content with state neutrality – where the state



Barbara Smoker at IHEU reception

recognises and supports all religions equally – provided of course that humanists are also included in the privileged band.

This latter model was particularly popular with the Norwegians, whose Humanist group shares the proceeds of a church tax and has consequently become very large and wealthy. Belgian and Dutch humanists are also given substantial amounts of public money for organising social services and, in the case of the Dutch, even a university.

The debate was chaired by NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood.

The NSS has, like the French, always held passionately that there must be complete separation. Once religion has state recognition, it has a privileged platform to interfere politically, which is completely unacceptable and undemocratic, as are church taxes.

Keith Porteous Wood also gave the closing address for the WCF, calling on each national organisation to nominate a representative for a newly formed International Liaison Committee of Atheists and Freethinkers. It aims to collect information and coordinate action towards separation at an international level. Vice-President Jim Herrick and Keith Porteous Wood became founding members.

Among other NSS contributions was Vice-President Terry Sanderson's workshop on using media to our advantage. IHEU's President Roy Brown (an NSS life member) presented Barbara Smoker, NSS President for 25 years to 1996, with a Distinguished Humanist Award. ■

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Newsline

Our free weekly newsletter *Newsline* is rapidly growing in popularity. We have even had a letter from the Church of England's Archbishops' Council, indicating that they hang on its every word – although not with any great pleasure. More importantly, the press use it as a source for stories, and leads from *Newsline* subsequently appear in the national press.

We hope all members who would like to receive *Newsline* are actually receiving it. To subscribe, send a blank email with "Subscribe to *Newsline*" on the subject line to enquiries@secularism.org.uk. If you are having problems receiving *Newsline*, please let us know.

Fully paid-up members without computer access can also receive it in printed form. Simply send a batch of C5 SAEs to the office with 30p stamps. We will then send you printed copies for as long as we have envelopes and will send you a reminder as they are running out.

Newsline is edited by Vice-President Terry Sanderson.

Religious Power Seeking in the EU

The draft European Constitution, introduced to coincide with the recent enlargement of the EU to 25 states, has now effectively been abandoned. The proposed Constitution had included the infamous Article 52, which undertook that “the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue” with churches (and other organisations). During the debate on the constitution, the NSS had joined with secular groups from around Europe to oppose this clause, because we believe it would have been used to extend religious power.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have criticised the European Commission (the EU’s Civil Service) for favouring the Catholic Church in the consultations it had held with churches and non-confessional organisations. Indeed, NSS Honorary Associate Michael Cashman MEP strongly criticised the European Commission for its lack of transparency during these consultations, saying that if they were to be truly transparent, lists of participants and minutes of the meetings should be made available, and the meetings had to take place

in public. He made his feelings known at a plenary session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 5 September and his remarks were reported by Agence France Presse.

Keith Porteous Wood had already raised the question of the lack of availability of minutes at a private meeting in March with the EU President’s religious adviser, H.E. Dr Michael Weninger.



Michael Cashman MEP: criticised the European Commission

Michael Cashman also played a leading part in opposing EU funding of a Roman Catholic “World Youth Day” in Cologne in August 2005, presided over by pope Ratzinger. The EU Parliament voted against making the grant, but the powerful European Commission decided to allocate 1.5 million euros (£1 million). German state funds added a further 15 million euros towards the total cost of 100 million euros.

Michael Cashman’s Belgian colleague Veronique de Keyser MEP goaded the Commission by describing this funding as pope John-Paul II’s “final miracle”, turning a “no” vote into a “yes”.

She protested that the European Humanist Federation (EHF) had been excluded from the consultations with the Commission at which the Vatican had played such a prominent role. Shockingly, their place had been taken by the Scientologists.

Concerns are mounting that the new President of the Commission, José Manuel Barroso, is even more sympathetic to religious interests — especially those of the RC church — than his predecessor, Romano Prodi. ■

Religious Schools Opening at an Unprecedented Rate

We are becoming increasingly concerned about the accelerating pace of forthcoming religious school openings.

Plans reportedly include 150 Muslim schools destined for conversion to the publicly funded sector. At least 40 per cent of the new academy schools will have religious sponsors. Some community schools are also being converted to religious schools. This may partly be to enable them to avoid admitting children whom they consider to be unruly or who will hinder their position in the league tables. We suspect that some such schools may have converted after pressure from religious organisations, or at least from

religiously motivated governors.

The paucity of information available publicly about conversions and the scant opportunities for objection mean that such conversions often go ahead without any informed open debate. On the other hand, the Anglican and Roman Catholic education representatives are statutorily informed about all school organisation changes.

There are also worrying signs that the meagre financial contributions which religious bodies or sponsors are supposed to make in order to take over academies are being postponed, watered down or even waived entirely. A *Guardian* headline as we went to press gives a flavour of this. It reads: "Sponsors offered 'four for price of three' deal for city academies programme".

This last putsch by Prime Minister

Tony Blair aims to take his education reforms to the point of no return, despite opposition by former Education Secretary Estelle Morris, the TUC, head teachers and secularists.

Lord (Andrew) Adonis, who is widely considered the architect of the academy programme and expansion of religious schools, has been appointed as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Schools, making him Government education spokesperson in the House of Lords. He was previously a Downing Street policy adviser. He also makes no secret of his own deep religiosity.

Education Secretary Ruth Kelly is a prominent Roman Catholic. She is a member of the secretive, and some say sinister, Catholic organisation Opus Dei, an organisation about which even the late Cardinal Basil Hume had

NSS grabbing the headlines: *The Guardian* from 23 August





Evan Harris: led cross-party group of MPs

◁ serious reservations.

We have compiled a detailed dossier which formed the basis of a comprehensive letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP, sent by a cross-party group of MPs led by Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP.

Here are some key points from the dossier:

- We give the classic NSS objections to publicly funded schools proselytising. The expansion in religious schools flies in the face of public opinion. A poll in the *New Statesman* on 29 August 2005 asked: "Should Blair end his support of faith schools?" The result extracted from its website on 6 September showed 96.2 per cent agree with the proposition.
- Expanding Christian schools understandably fuels demands for schools for minority denominations and religions. Such schools present serious additional problems, especially where children are predominantly from minority ethnic groups and/or from groups who tend to keep separate from mainstream society.
- We are alarmed that this expansion is leading directly to a racially segregated education system. Inter-school visits, joint projects and correspondence clubs are no substitute for children growing up together in a school which represents a cross-section of the community.
- The potential for educational apartheid is large — and growing at a significant rate. The number of active members of minority faiths is projected to grow from 1.6m in 2005 to 3.5m in 2040, according to the UK Handbook

Christian Trends. It is likely that the children of many minority non-active faith families will also be expected by their communities to attend minority faith schools.

- We believe that exerting much tighter controls over independent minority faith schools is infinitely preferable to bringing these schools into the maintained sector. Doing so will lead to many more pupils receiving segregated education.

- The Government is reportedly contemplating a 25 per cent quota in minority faith schools for children of other faiths. The quota acknowledges the problem, but is totally unrealistic.

The dossier was prepared by Keith Porteous Wood. It includes a great deal of research material and ends with a long list of penetrating questions to the Education

Prime Minister's Press Conference

Tony Blair was caught on the hop at a press conference on 26 July 2005 when the subject of religious schools was raised. A journalist from *The Herald* asked if segregated faith schools won't split communities rather than make them cohesive. Is there any evidence from anywhere else in the world that faith schools unite rather than divide?

"There's nothing wrong with parents wanting to teach their children their values – my own children have been educated in faith schools," said Mr Blair, as several journalists rounded on him over the issue. "I hadn't realised you all felt so strongly about it," he said.

Mr Blair also opined that sometimes it's better to have a formal Muslim faith school within the state sector than de facto teaching without any safeguards.

Mr Blair looked very uncomfortable indeed at the vehemence of the questioning. But the PM will have to think of a much better explanation next time in the light of a *Guardian* banner front-page headline reading: "Two thirds oppose state aided faith schools". The newspaper reported an ICM poll in which 64 per cent of respondents agreed that "the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind". The NSS's reaction appeared as part of this article.

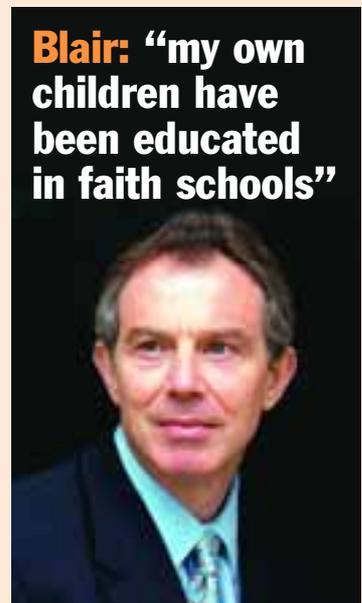
We have also sent a copy of the schools dossier to Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, to assist him with a speech on community cohesion. Trevor Phillips believes that the term "multiculturalism" is out of date and that separate development is no longer the answer in present-day Britain.

Source of PM's comments:

<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/terrorism/story/0,15935,1536365,00.html> and tv footage.

See also fuller but more diplomatic official account at

www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page7999.asp.



Message from the President



The NSS is most concerned about the likely adverse impact on freedom of expression of the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. Despite massive opposition, this dangerous Bill has completed its passage through the Commons almost unscathed. The only amendment passed happened to be one which the NSS had suggested. But it was only a token technical amendment, probably the least significant item on our long wish list.

The Bill will shortly be debated in the Lords, where we hope it will be radically amended. We urge members to write to their MP and any peers they know along the following lines. The Bill is:

- Unnecessary. The Government has failed to identify any activity which would be illegal under this Bill which is not already illegal;
- Draconian. The maximum penalty is seven years in prison, yet prosecution thresholds are very low indeed; and

- Likely to severely limit freedom of expression, both directly and through self-censorship.

We commend, above all, the LibDem/ Conservative amendment which will ensure that race hatred dressed up in religious language is chargeable under Race Hatred legislation. If this amendment were passed it would obviate the need for any of further amendments. But if it is not, we recommend any amendments to:

- Introduce specific safeguards for freedom of expression;
- Increase the prosecution threshold, especially in relation to “intent” and intention or likelihood of violence; and
- Abolish the blasphemy laws.

Denis Cobell,
President

Our brand new image

MEMBERS WILL NOTICE we have had an image makeover. We hope you like our new house style and logo, which apply to all printed material as well as to our spanking new website (www.secularism.org.uk). Your Council is delighted with the results – which have been achieved with a minimum of expense. Some very talented members have devoted a great deal of time over the last six months to this important project without charge.

Member Marla Madison has been the driving force behind its implementation. A professional design job was required and, fortuitously, member Bradley Davis stepped forward to offer his design services.

Brad’s design consultancy WhiteLight (www.wlight.com) specialises in branding and identity. The fruits of his work for the NSS have already appeared on the website and drawn much praise. Brad has also designed and laid out this edition of the *Bulletin*.

A further vital piece of the jigsaw was provided by member Sean Clark of Cuttlefish.com Ltd



The new-look website

(www.cuttlefish.com). Sean hosts and maintains our website. He has spent days without charge implementing the new design on the website and completely changing its structure. The conceptualisation and detailed specifications are the products of Marla Madison’s impressive imagination. Terry Sanderson, with the expert help of Stewart Ware, has project managed this exciting development on behalf of the NSS Council. We are grateful to them all. ■

NSS Gets the Message Out

Media profile goes from strength to strength

The NSS has continued to present a high media profile over the past couple of months, with dozens of broadcasts and a good selection of appearances in the print media.

We've been on the front page of *The Guardian* and have featured in prominent stories on the inside of the paper, too – mostly about the relentless march of faith schools. We were also the focus of a front page piece in some editions of *The Observer* about the late Robin Cook, former Foreign Secretary. It revealed that he had been invited to become an honorary associate of the NSS but had declined as a matter of political expediency. We were included in a major London *Evening Standard* story by Andrew Gilligan about the rise of Islamic schools.

We've also been quoted in news stories (often on more than one occasion) in *The Observer*, *The*

Times, the *Times Educational Supplement*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Express*, *The Independent*, the *Daily Mail* and Scottish papers, the *Sunday Herald* and *The Scotsman*. Several of our stories were picked up by the Press Association, which resulted in widespread regional press coverage.

We've been on flagship Radio 4 news programmes *Today* and *PM* as well as BBC News 24, BBC1 *Breakfast News*, Talksport Radio, BBC3 Television, Sky News (interviews and a debate) and even the God Channel. Keith appeared in an ITV programme called *Essentials of Faith* and spoke in both parts of Radio 4's *The Westminster Hour* programme about bishops in the House of Lords. Terry Sanderson took part in an hour-long debate about faith schools on Radio 5 Live's *Simon Mayo Show*.

Keith was interviewed for a

programme about religion and politics to be shown on BBC2 which includes Ms Widdcombe and Messrs Benn, Murphy O'Connor, Sacranie and Tutu. We have done innumerable broadcasts with local BBC radio stations on questions as diverse as "Does God exist?" and "Should assisted suicide be made legal?". Our Scottish convenor, Keith Charters, did a to-camera piece for Scottish TV's *Politics Now* programme.

We are also helping several journalists with research for forthcoming programmes – one is about the rise of Christian fundamentalism in Britain to be fronted by Rod Liddle on Channel 4.

The NSS has had letters to the editor in *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Independent* over this period, as well as *The Scotsman* and the *Western Mail*. ■

Cook 'hid atheism to help career'

by Jamie Doward
Religious Affairs Correspondent

HIS profound political convictions saw him leave government in the highest profile resignation of the New Labour administration, but it appears Robin Cook was much more ambivalent when it came to matters spiritual.

The former Foreign Secretary, who was buried last Friday following a full Christian service at St Giles's cathedral in Edinburgh, held back from speaking out about his deeply held atheism because he believed it would derail his hopes of resurrecting his political career.

Cook quietly outed himself as an atheist in a recent book, but the full extent of his beliefs – and the reasons he was keen to keep them out of the public eye – have until now remained obscure.

Now it has emerged Cook held private talks with the National Secular Society, offering encouragement to the atheist organisation. But despite his admiration for the society, he declined an invitation to become an honorary associate for political reasons.

'He said that we were playing an essential role, and "I only wish I could do more",' said the NSS's executive director, Keith Porteous Wood. 'He

said: "It is not just that I am busy, but much of what I am doing is not popular with my colleagues in the party."

That revealing explanation suggests Cook believed he was still set to return to a Labour cabinet once the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, stood down. 'The impression I got was that to join us openly would hamper, if not rule out, any return to high office,' Porteous Wood said.

Cook's reluctance to wear his atheism on his sleeve has also been interpreted as a sign he felt isolated in the Blair cabinet, which is dominated by religious believers. 'I was naturally disap-

pointed, but frankly not surprised, that even someone of his seniority didn't feel able to be open about this issue in the atmosphere of "religious correctness" that dominates Mr Blair's administration,' Porteous Wood said.

● The racing pundit John McCririck, who denounced Tony Blair from the pulpit at Cook's funeral for 'petty vindictiveness' in not attending the ceremony, yesterday insisted he had the blessing of Cook's close relatives for the remarks. McCririck told BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme: 'One member of the family said, "It needed to be said, thank you very much."'

Robin Cook had been invited to become an honorary associate of the NSS but had declined as a matter of political expediency

Back page: CROSSWORDS Azed Escape, 15; Everyman Review, 20; Speedy This section, 10; COMMENT This section

Front page news: *The Observer* 14 August 2005

< continued from page 1

bodies to run our schools and provide our welfare services, and justifies this by pretending Britain is a religious country. But it isn't." Our Submission was also referred to in *The Guardian*.

Why are the figures so wrong?

The answers are so misleading because (in summary) the England and Wales question was too vague. Many of those who do not profess any faith in any practical way will have answered "Christian" to differentiate themselves from those from other cultures. The completion of the Census form generally by an older (more likely to be religious) head of the household will have added to the distortion.

Our evidence includes academic treatises from specialists in this area in support of our arguments. The 18 page Submission, drawn up by Keith Porteous Wood, is available on www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/35430434015cc7c284491961.pdf

Members unable to access it electronically can receive a copy by sending a SAE (at least C5) to the office marked "Census". ■

Active Secularism

OUR "HANDS ON" day for activists on 10 September was fully booked and popular with participants. Our thanks to workshop leaders Allan Hayes, Sue Lord, Nick Pullar (all members). From the Council and staff, Terry Sanderson, Peter Vlachos and Keith Porteous Wood also led discussions – and Jennifer Jaynes and Malcolm Trahearn organised the event.

A generous donation

WE ARE DELIGHTED to have received a £25,500 donation from Maurice Hill, who now lives in Spain. He has been an NSS member for around 50 years and is a real enthusiast for our work. This is the largest single donation, as opposed to legacy, we have yet received in one go. We are most grateful to Maurice for his generosity. We invite you to follow his example.



House of Lords BBC Charter Review Committee Seeks Submissions on Religious Broadcasting

You can make your opinions count

As reported in the last *Bulletin*, we sent a comprehensive response to the Green Paper on the BBC Charter Review. Since then, the House of Lords Select Committee on the BBC Charter Review has extended its inquiry into the BBC to focus on, among other matters, religious broadcasting. We just hope that the phrasing of the questions in this Review does not betray the answers the Committee is seeking:

- ***Do different faiths (including no faith beliefs) figure sufficiently in BBC programmes and services?*** (our underlining) and
- ***How should faiths be represented in BBC programmes, services and governance?***

A detailed response has been sent from the NSS, compiled by campaigning volunteer Barry Thorpe and Keith Porteous Wood, and will be posted on the website.

Members can also make their views known. Submissions should be sent to Rita Logan, Select Committee on the BBC Charter Review, House of Lords, London SW1A 0PW, fax 020 7219 4931 and preferably also as an email attachment to loganr@parliament.uk. The official deadline for submitting written evidence is **Monday 10 October 2005**, but submissions may be accepted for a short time afterwards – telephone 020 7219 5765.



Patrick Harvie becomes Honorary Associate

We are very pleased to welcome Patrick Harvie MSP to our distinguished panel of honorary associates. Mr Harvie was elected the Green Member of the Scottish Parliament for Glasgow in 2003. He is an enthusiastic secularist and has already been active on our behalf in the Scottish Parliament. We look forward to working closely with him over the coming months. His website is at www.patrickharviemsp.com.

Patrick Harvey MSP: enthusiastic secularist