

FORCED COLLECTIVE WORSHIP:**Another historic victory in sight!**

The National Secular Society has started a battle royal with the Government over the law that requires all pupils, even older ones, to “take part in” worship and attend Religious Education lessons, unless their parents request that they be withdrawn. We have made considerable progress and are optimistic that this initiative by the NSS will result in a positive change in the law. It looks set to be the only successful challenge to religious privilege in this year’s education bill.

We thank the churches!

The Churches’ Joint Education Policy Committee unwittingly prompted the NSS’s campaign by issuing a statement calling on the Government to enforce the law on Collective Worship even for those aged “post 16”.

The Executive Director immediately complained to Rt Hon Alan Johnson MP, the Secretary of State for Education. At the suggestion of Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris, Keith also copied the letter to the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR), the Human

“Older pupils have Human Rights to freedom from religion”

Honorary Associate **Dr Evan Harris MP** is a member of the JCHR. We are most grateful for his invaluable help and support in this campaign to secure older pupils’ Human Rights to freedom from religion.



Rights watchdog for both Houses of Parliament.

We referred to legal advice that the inability in law of older pupils to withdraw themselves from collective worship contravenes their rights under the Human Rights Act. We asked Mr Johnson to review this aspect of the law.

Mr Johnson’s reply revealed he was having none of it: “On the question of the right of pupils to withdraw from collective worship, I see no need to change the current

arrangements whereby parents decide whether collective worship is appropriate or not for their child. This is also the position on religious education.”

We didn’t take ‘no’ for an answer

Undeterred, Keith sought assistance from LibDem Education spokesperson Baroness Walmsley in tabling an amendment to the education bill going through the Lords. Keith drafted the amendment

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to allow 16s and over to withdraw themselves from both worship and R.E. in consultation with Dr Harris and Human Rights lawyers.

Lady Walmsley spoke brilliantly to the amendment in the Lords (on 18 July 2006, Hansard Col 1203). She told their lordships that leading human rights lawyers believe "there is no justification for forcing young people to take part in a religious service with which they do not agree. It would be strange for a young person to be old enough to work, pay taxes, manage his own money, get married, have children, fight for his country and possibly even vote but not be competent to absent himself from an act of collective worship."



Baroness Walmsley

That same week the *Times Educational Supplement* ran a front page story about pupils over 16 being forced to worship against their

will, and quoted the NSS's description of this as an abuse of their human rights. Lady Walmsley said about this: "If we want young people to take responsibility and act maturely, surely we should respect their rights to decide for themselves on a matter such as this." Her remarks caused quite a stir and turned out to be a direct hit.

The turning point

The Minister responsible in the Lords, Lord Adonis, responded by telling the House: "After much ministerial deliberation and reflection, we accept most of the spirit of [this amendment]. **Pupils aged over 16 should be able to withdraw themselves from collective worship rather than it being a matter for parental consent, as it is for 16 year-olds and under. We will discuss that further with our partners in the faith communities and beyond, but I will seek to move an appropriate amendment at Report [stage].**"

We believe the Government backed down because they will have known the JCHR was about to issue a formal report making the Human Rights case for withdrawal from Collective Worship for 16s and over. But, significantly, the JCHR went further, albeit in a rather more gentle tone. It observed that incompatibility with Human Rights would be reduced if older pupils not only had the right to opt out of Collective Worship but the right to opt out of Religious Education, too. And incompatibility would be further reduced if the right for withdrawal from both were extended to mature pupils under 16 "who are old enough to make informed decisions for themselves".

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200506/jtselect/jtrights/241/24106.htm

The JCHR acknowledged in its Report that it was prompted by the NSS's letter to Alan Johnson.

www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt200506/jtselect/jtrights/241/24112.htm

The Government have not agreed to pre-16 opt outs nor to opt outs from Religious Education, but we will look out for any opportunities to press for them when the Education and Inspection Bill returns to Parliament after the recess. ■

NEW HONORARY ASSOCIATE: Baroness Flather



We are delighted to welcome Baroness Flather to our distinguished list of honorary associates. Shreela Flather has been a life peer for the Conservative Party since 11 June 1990, as Baroness Flather of Windsor and Maidenhead, becoming the only Asian in the House at the time.

Lady Flather is a barrister and has served as Mayor for the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. She has also been a teacher of English as a second language and a member of the Conservative Women's National Committee. In 1996 Baroness Flather was recognised as *Asian Who's Who* Asian of the Year. She has served in senior posts in various organisations involved in refugee, community, race relations and prison work.

She said, in relation to "faith schools" in the debate on the new Education Bill in the House of Lords: "I feel that we are at a crossroads. It is time for serious decisions. We have to look ahead 10 or 15 years and see what kind of society we are going to create. We already have a divided society. We already have gross underachievement among many ethnic minority groups, not least Muslim boys. Instead of addressing the needs of those who are underachieving so badly, we are saying that we should put them in separate schools, that we should create a separate, apartheid school for them. Nobody else is going to go to that school. It will be a self-imposed apartheid, which is even worse."

Forced religion is abuse, say MPs

Making pupils aged 16 and over take part in RE breaches their human rights. **Graeme Paton reports**

Front page news from the *Times Educational Supplement*, August 11th

The recommendations have been welcomed by the National Secular Society, which has been pushing for a reform of the laws. Keith Porteous Wood, its executive director, said: "It is sometimes difficult to escape the conclusion that with the DfES religion trumps all even, as in this case, human rights." He said the society would continue to push for further reforms, including the abolition of compulsory RE for children of all ages. "It is clear that government policy on RE and collective worship does not comply with the Human Rights Act," he said. "We don't just want a half-hearted amendment to current legislation."

Important Message from the President



This will be my last 'message' to you as President as I shall not be seeking re-election at the forthcoming AGM on 25th November. I am sure there will be a smooth transition to a new incumbent.

During my nine years of tenure as President of the NSS, I am proud to say I have seen our membership greatly increased and our profile in the media enhanced. Two external factors have created a climate in which this was possible: the policies of the Blair Government; and the resurgence of religious zealotry inimical to a secular society. We could not have capitalised on these factors without the enormous energy of members, volunteers, officers, staff and, above all, the efforts of our Executive Director. I thank them all.

As you will know, the NSS was founded 140 years ago in 1866 and I am the tenth president. Inevitably, as in any society with such a long history, there have been times of internal conflict. Yet, I think I can say that during the period I have been in office, working in tandem with Keith Porteous Wood who has been in post this past decade, the NSS has seen a minimum of internal distractions. This has enabled us to concentrate all our energies on promoting a secular society and 'challenging religious privilege'.

I hope to continue to serve on the NSS Council of Management, if elected at the AGM.

Denis Gobel

Would you like to work in the NSS's London Office?

The NSS administration function is being expanded to cope with increased numbers of members, to improve service to members and to place greater emphasis on fundraising. Two new posts are being created as part of this reorganisation of functions based at our offices in central London. Any functions which do not need to be undertaken in London are carried out elsewhere.

Both jobs are part-time and require good PC skills and the ability to deal tactfully with telephone calls and act appropriately on them. A working knowledge of keeping payroll and accounting records is expected. Experience of fundraising would be a significant advantage. One post will require supervisory experience.

Anyone interested in either position should write in the first instance to Keith Porteous Wood, National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, marked "Confidential". The posts are open to both external and internal candidates.

Please register your interest by 7 November 2006.

Annual General Meeting Saturday 25 November 2006

We invite members to the Annual General Meeting at which you will have an opportunity to vote in elections to Council, have your say, and meet your fellow secularists over refreshments. Members will receive a formal notice, but non-members are not eligible to attend.

Newsline

Are you getting *Newsline*, the NSS's weekly e-zine or electronic magazine? It is a major benefit for members. It is now going out to many thousands of people every Friday, keeping them bang up to date with events of interest to secularists both nationally and internationally.

If you aren't getting *Newsline* and would like to, please send a blank email with "subscribe to Newsline" on the subject line to enquiries@secularism.org.uk. If you have subscribed from work and aren't receiving it, please note that we are having an increasing number of returns – rejected by workplace e-mail filters. You may wish to subscribe from another address.

Members without a computer can still receive a printed version if they send a supply of A5 stamped addressed envelopes. We'll let you know when they are running out and you can decide whether you want to send some more. (Please note: this service is only available to members of the NSS).

CHURCH AND STATE

NSS puts Church

The Constitution Unit at University College London held a private conference in London in July to take stock of the relationship between Church and State in the UK. They invited top academics in the field and asked the Church of England, and groups representing other religious traditions, to send their leading figures to consider the whys and wherefores of establishment and disestablishment. The organisers were particularly keen that the NSS should not only be represented, but should present a paper.

The conference was the most comprehensive review of the Church and State relationship for more than a generation. Given that the issue of disestablishment is at the very core of the NSS's aims and activities, we devoted considerable resources to preparing our Paper which ran to 60 pages and set out 20 recommendations.

The Paper set out the context by giving statistics

to illustrate the increasing secularisation of our society. It also gave examples underlining the acute alienation felt by many non-religious people. The Paper turned a spotlight on the precipitous decline in support for the Church of England, and fundamental doubts were expressed about how long the Church can survive if this continues as projected.

Further sections focussed on: Establishment; the anachronism of Archbishops and Bishops in the House of Lords; the Coronation and the Coronation Oath. We also examined the head of state's formal position as the head of the Church of England, the Government's role in ecclesiastical appointments and Parliament's involvement in passing Church 'legislation'. For good measure, we added a list of religiously-privileged laws which need to be amended or repealed.

How did the Church justify Establishment?

The pro-establishment case was made, of course, by the Church of England who fielded their top people. For them, no matter how much attendance or observance falls, the case for retention of their established status remains intact.

They contended that a would-be secular state, with codified secular principles, would be unsustainable.

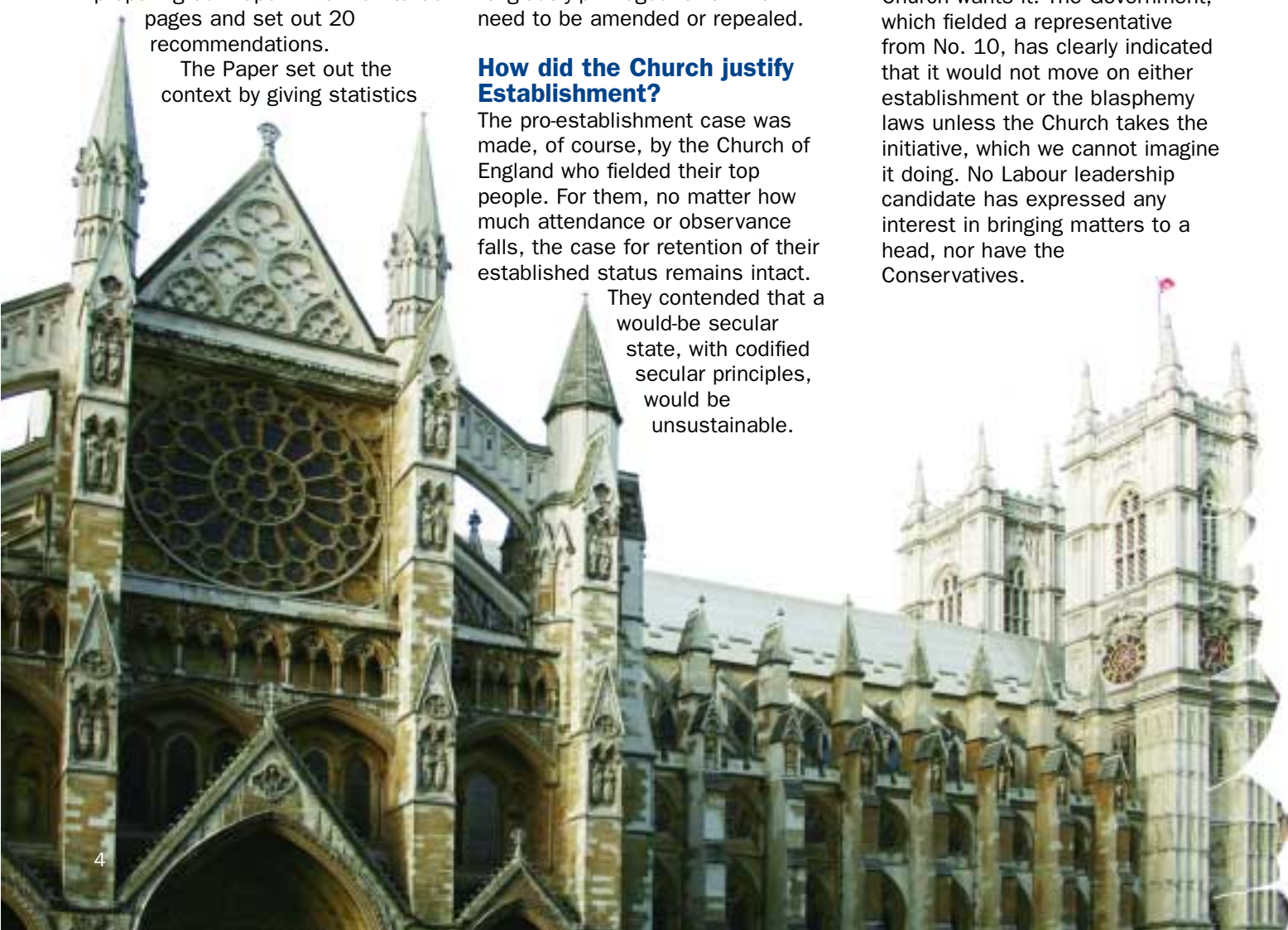
How was the Society's Paper received?

There was a general acceptance that our Paper was well thought out and comprehensive, even by those who vehemently opposed its conclusions.

After their attempts to discredit the Paper failed to hit home, some delegates resorted to venting their frustrations about the Society's campaigning stance. Our treasured Honorary Associates came in for a quite astonishing degree of bile from establishment figures. Clearly, our Honorary Associates are being very effective.

Stalemate

There seems little prospect of the *status quo* being disturbed which is, of course, just the way the Church wants it. The Government, which fielded a representative from No. 10, has clearly indicated that it would not move on either establishment or the blasphemy laws unless the Church takes the initiative, which we cannot imagine it doing. No Labour leadership candidate has expressed any interest in bringing matters to a head, nor have the Conservatives.



on the Defensive

Another major obstacle to change is that disestablishment would be immensely complex; such is the entanglement of church and state in this country. It could take decades of legislative change before it was completed – a commitment that few governments would want to take on.

The most likely trigger for any shift towards disestablishment would be some form of crisis. Financial melt down or schism are the most likely of these.

Even worse

Much more likely than even the retention of the *status quo* is something worse – a move by stealth to create a multi-faith establishment. One example would be the not-quite-*ex-officio* appointments to the House of Lords of minority faith figures. Another will almost certainly be a really crowded rostrum at the next coronation – with the mutually incompatible jostling for position. Since this Paper was prepared, there have been yet more newspaper reports that the next coronation will, indeed, be an “inclusive” event. But for those non-people, the growing millions

of non-believers, this religious service installing our next head of state is set to increase our sense of alienation.

And in conclusion?

So, was our participation in the conference worth it? Certainly. It would have been unthinkable for the secular view not to have been put, and put commandingly. Our case is now recorded in the Constitution Unit’s current papers on establishment where they will be available to politicians, constitutional experts - and to current and future students of politics and constitutional affairs.

The Church of Sweden was

disestablished in 2000 and a similar process is underway in Norway. Let us hope that one day our politicians will have as much vision as their Scandinavian counterparts. ■

Our delegate was Keith Porteous Wood. Copies of the full report he compiled are available for £25 from the office as a contribution to the considerable work entailed. (Please mark envelopes “Church and State” and enclose a cheque payable to “NSS”). Our thanks to the volunteers who assisted with this work, in particular Tim Boyce. Also available on line at <http://tinyurl.com/r9ukp>

A Summary of our Paper’s Conclusions

1. In addition to important secular and democratic objections in principle to an established church, the decline in support for the Church of England has already reached the point where it can no longer justify its claim to be “the nation’s church”. Control of the Church is no longer exercised from the UK but, in practice, by fundamentalists abroad, for example in Nigeria, to whom Human Rights count for practically nothing.
2. The Church must not be allowed to “cherry pick” those aspects of disestablishment that suit it (such as abolishing the power of the Prime Minister to choose Bishops), while leaving untouched its choicest privileges, such as the Bishops’ Bench in the House of Lords. It has to be an all-or-nothing approach.
3. The creation of a “multi-faith establishment” would be the worst of all outcomes. It also poses by far the greatest danger from our perspective.

MEDIA

NSS at the Centre of an Urgent New Dialogue

A busy quarter

We have had a busy quarter on the airwaves and in the media. Several stories were picked up by Reuters and the Press Association. At one point Evan Harris and Keith Porteous Wood were speaking simultaneously on Radios 4 and 2, about hospital chaplains, and Evan spoke again later on News 24. Keith had been slogging it out with an (RC) Archbishop and (Anglican) bishop on the Jeremy Vine Show.

Terry Sanderson, our principal media spokesperson, is a frequent guest on Sky News. Terry and Keith had fierce debates – too many to list – on local radio and Talksport. The President and Brian Lake from Derby were on Christian and local channels.

We placed one or more stories, most including a mention of the Society, in the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *The Times*, *Mail*, *Sun*, *Mirror*, and quite a few regional papers and trade journals. We had some overseas coverage too, and some cracking stories (some on pages 1 and 2) in the *Times Educational Supplement* and *Guardian Education*.

Alistair McBay did exceptionally well in Scotland, with an armful of brilliant letters in the *Herald* and *Scotsman* as well as regional and evening papers and a Radio 5 interview. He is drawing a great deal of ire from religious groups, which shows how effective he is being.

The debate hots up

The extreme reaction to the Pope's reference to Islam provides yet more evidence that the religious resurgence is becoming ever more violent and threatening. The public are starting to wake up to this and the media are increasingly seeking out rationalist voices to try to bring perspective to a sometimes hysterical debate. The NSS spokespeople frequently confront clerics of one sort or another in radio and TV studios. These people are not accustomed to being vigorously challenged or being required to justify their views or pronouncements. And they do not like it.

An uphill battle

But the balance is still very much in their favour – in the traditional media at least. Clergymen still get an inordinate amount of time on the *Today* programme, and there are still acres of religious propaganda in all our broadsheet newspapers. BBC executives,

Below: More front page news, July 14



particularly those on Radio 4, seem to have been on Alpha courses and consequently deem it their personal duty to spread the word.

It's sometimes difficult for the NSS to find space in such an unsympathetic environment but, when opportunities do come along, we grab them and we work hard to create new ones.

If you listened only to the BBC or read only the *Guardian* you'd never guess there is a huge secularist/atheist population out there.

You can help too

All of us can help make it clearer to those who control the media that we

want to have our voices heard. Write to your local paper, write to the national papers and complain to the BBC about its over-emphasis on, and favouritism towards, religion. Demand that an opposing point of view is given whenever you're exposed to religious propaganda.

We must all play our part in this push. We must not allow religious interests to keep us silent. But it's up to all of us to speak out.

The internet is increasingly the place where people look for news and opinion. Its democratic, uncensored nature means everyone can have their say, without the partial editorial filters that keep us out of the mainstream media. And when there are unfettered debates about religion, it becomes very clear that there is an enormous hostility to it. Look at any internet discussion that involves religion and you'll find the hostility that "faith" attracts is sometimes quite startling. ■



Religious Education in a Multi-Faith Society

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD reports on a visit to the lions' den

The NSS was invited to this two-day conference of a hundred Religious Education professionals in Windsor Castle in September. The motive for inviting us was, I would guess, to challenge the other delegates out of their complacency. Judging by the amount of anger we provoked, I think we fulfilled our brief.

Council member Anna Behan was my fellow target for a weekend in the firing line.

Guidelines not fit for purpose

David Bell, top civil servant at the Department for Education and Skills, and a former Chief Inspector of schools, was one of the speakers at the conference. In front of the packed audience I told him that the Government's non-statutory Religious Education Framework sold non-religious pupils – the majority – seriously short. Such pupils were almost invisible in the guidelines as were any detailed references to non-religious philosophies. Given that few pupils subscribe to a religious belief, it was pointless teaching ethics by reference to “revealed truth”.

I drew Mr Bell's attention to the best selling guide book on religious studies, the *Letts' Guide*, and how it had interpreted the framework. The non-religious majority merited less than half a page in the 150 page volume. Everything to do with religion, however, was covered in glowing and respectful terms, stopping just short of claiming it was fact. In the book, competing arguments were rehearsed in only a

very few areas. These included euthanasia (not of course described as “voluntary”) and abortion. Liberal arguments were expressed in cold unconvincing language, religious arguments were couched in glowing terms and contentious issues were skirted around. Homosexuality, for instance, was dealt with exclusively from a conservative religious perspective.

Headway under enemy fire

The various discussion groups gave Anna and me many chances to challenge both speakers and delegates. Some tackled contentious subjects such as: *In a secular world is it right or necessary to spend time on religious education?* After the non-religious had had their say, we could count on almost a third of delegates giving our perspective at least limited support. Perhaps predictably, the more senior people were, the less likely they were to show any recognition of our stance. The Catholic representatives were particularly hostile and resistant to our point of view.

It was encouraging however to see a growing awareness during the weekend that the controversial and negative aspects of religion, such as the treatment of apostasy in Islam, should be faced up to, especially given the new trend to justify R.E. as a weapon against terrorism. There did seem to be a willingness to encourage critical discussions about religion, and to call for better training to facilitate this.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, appeared to be calling for R.E. to move back towards



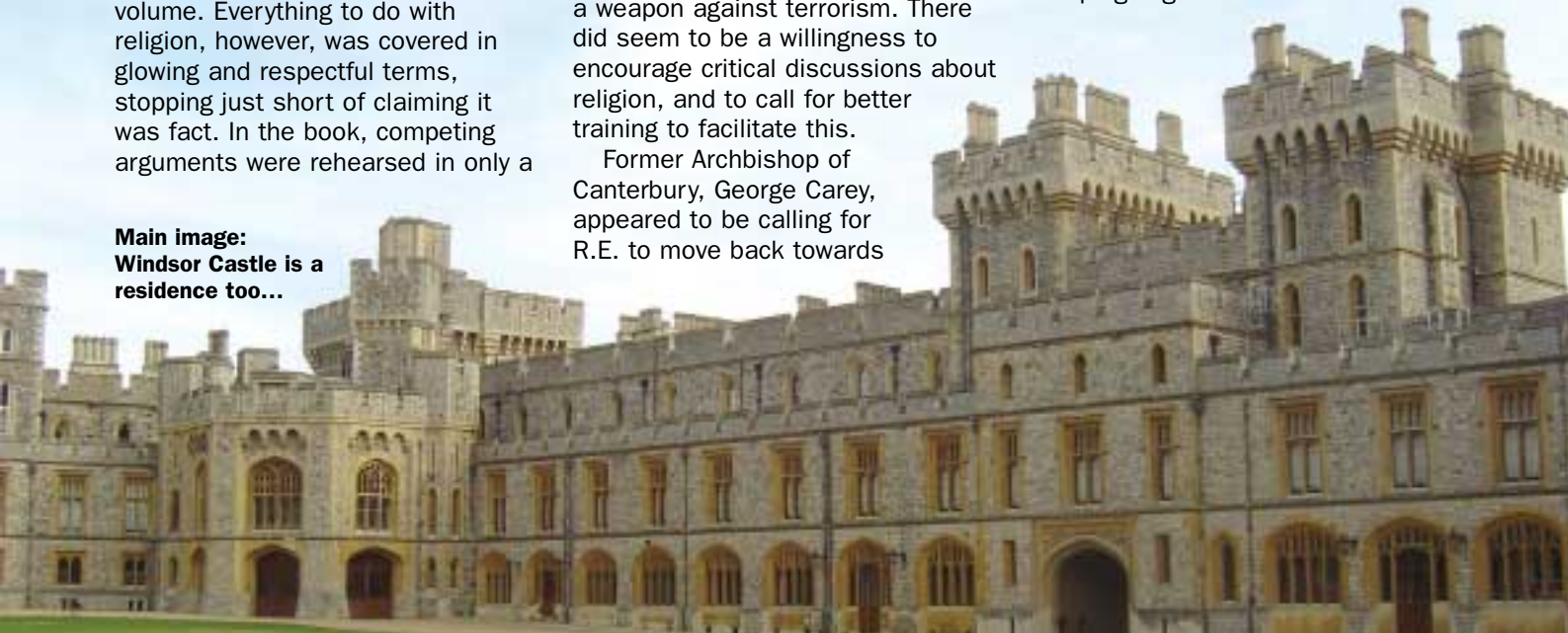
Anna Behan had the last word

the confessional Religious Instruction approach which had been abandoned, officially, nearly twenty years ago. This rather back-fired, however, because it was overwhelmingly rejected by the (predominantly religious) R.E. professionals.

Anna had virtually the last word of the conference. She chided delegates for the failure of many of them to even acknowledge their non-religious pupils and their needs. She made clear to the gathered worthies that it was they who must do better.

It was a step forward to be invited to the conference to confront delegates and open them up to a greater awareness of the needs of their non-religious pupils. We also made some useful contacts and garnered information which has already proved fruitful in our campaigning. ■

Main image:
Windsor Castle is a residence too...



NSS Festive Gifts and Cards

With the Festive Holiday Season approaching, the NSS has some great gift ideas for you. You can see them on-line with more details at our shop at www.secularism.org.uk (Click on NSS Shop) or you can send a cheque to NSS Offers, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

For all the family we have – exclusively by mail order from the NSS – a new board game called **Evolution**. It is an exciting, challenging and (don't tell the kids) educational romp through eons of pre-history. Beat off challenges from other species to become the dominant species. But you will have to choose your evolutionary path carefully and avoid natural calamities. Talk about survival of the fittest! £18.99 plus £2.50 p&p.

Our DVD collection is also a good source of presents for the thinking person. The ever-popular **God Who Wasn't There** holds Christianity up to a bright spotlight and asks: was Jesus a real historic character or a figment of the imagination of religious propagandists? The controversial answer – backed with convincing evidence – is no, Jesus never existed. £16.99 plus 50p p&p

Another DVD that has proved popular is **Why Atheism?** Six films about people who don't believe in God. It shows people from many different backgrounds who have abandoned the faith of their upbringing, and features a series of heartening interviews with extremely cogent school kids who explain why they don't believe. There's also an extended interview with NSS honorary associate Philip Pullman. £16.99 plus 50p p&p

Other DVDs in our collection (all these are £9.95 plus 50p p&p): **Saved!** – a biting satire on the religious right in

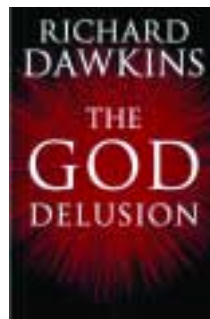


America; **The Magdalene Sisters** – a heart-rending story of life (and death) in the despotic Magdalene Laundries, run until surprisingly recently by the Catholic Church in Ireland; and **The Crime of Father Amaro** – which tells of an idealistic young priest who is rapidly corrupted by the Catholic hierarchy.

Our book selection includes Sam Harris's **The End of Faith** which has proved to be the biggest seller in our shop – selling literally hundreds of copies in just days of going on sale. When you read it, you'll understand its popularity. It is an all-out attack on religion that is reasoned but unrestrained.

£7.99 plus £1 p&p.

Richard Dawkins' new book **The God Delusion** has really set the cat among the pigeons. Love him or hate him, you can't ignore him and this book is absolutely essential reading for all NSS members. Hardback £20 (free p&p).



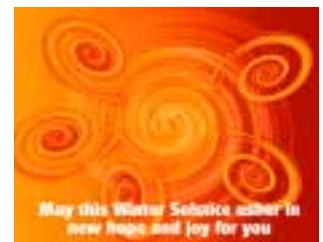
Witchfinders: a Seventeenth-century tragedy is a gripping account of the witch-hunt mania provoked by the activities of Matthew Hopkins, the "Witchfinder General", in 17th century England. Eminently readable history. £8.99 plus £1 p&p.

Of course, we also have our marvellous **mugs** and magnificent **t-shirts**. Mugs cost £5.75. There's the classic NSS mug which is a simple statement of your commitment to one of the best little pressure groups in the world. Or you could have an "Atheist and Proud of it" mug, or a "Happy Heathen" version or one with the slogan "Religion is the Problem not the Answer".

We have a splendid NSS **mousemat** for £3.25 and the NSS enamel **lapel pin** for £2.99.

And that's before we get the exciting selection of seasonal **greetings cards**, straight from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York which are available in this country exclusively from us. We have 20 exquisite designs to choose from and they cost £5.95 per pack or £9.95 for the 36 card selection.

This year we also have a unique **Solstice Greeting** in the form of a self-stick label. A generous 95mm x 95mm, this peel-off sticker, printed on glossy paper, contains a glorious, full-colour sun design, with the words "May this Winter Solstice usher in new hope and joy for you". You can use them to customise your own cards, as envelope seals, as decoration for gift wrappings and many other things. £1.99 for a strip of ten or £17 for 100 post free.



order online: www.secularism.org.uk (click on 'NSS Shop')

or by post: NSS Offers, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL
(cheques payable to NSS)

We've done rather more than you can read about in the printed edition of this *Bulletin*.

Members are happy with the *Bulletin* being around this size, but there are quite a number of activities undertaken which there isn't space to include. Around a dozen additional short news

items will be included in the web version of the *Bulletin*. If members would like to see these but do not have Personal Computer access (also available in libraries) they may send an S.A.E. to the office marked 'Bulletin Extra'.

Bulletin

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national
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society

NEWS SHORTS

■ As shown in our lead story, the NSS wrote to Education Secretary Alan Johnson after it was revealed that a group of religious leaders had demanded that he enforce collective worship in schools more rigorously. Keith Porteous Wood wrote in the letter: “According to a National Centre for Social Research study, two thirds [of 12 – 19 year olds] do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion. ...Consequently, the daily act of collective worship in schools is actually a daily act of hypocrisy for most pupils.”

“President David Tribe launched a campaign for secular education around forty years ago. One of the demands was for pupils to opt themselves out of Collective Worship. It has taken until now to make any progress on this.”

— Bill McIlroy, who was NSS General Secretary during the 1960s



Former NSS president David Tribe, who now lives in Australia.

■ The NSS criticised a Government consultation of religious groups on whether pupils aged 16 or over should be permitted to exempt themselves from collective worship in schools. We told the DfES that the consultation invited comments and opinions on a matter that was not up for debate – the Government had already promised to introduce an amendment to the new education bill to permit this. The issue was a matter of human rights, as the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights had made clear. What they should have done was to invite consultation on the other matters acknowledged by the JCHR to contravene Human Rights, but which the Government had not yet agreed to remedy.

■ NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood and Council member Anna Behan attended an all-day meeting of the Religion and Belief Consultative Group at the Department of Trade and Industry, preparing the representations this advisory body will make to the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights through its inaugural Chair, Trevor Phillips. In particular, Keith and Anna want to make sure that the voice of the non-religious

is heard and that the impact of demands by the religious on those who are not religious is properly understood and taken into account by the new body when it comes into operation later this year.

■ The NSS wrote to support the decision by Worcester Acute Hospitals Trust to make redundant most of the chaplains that are employed at its hospitals. The Trust is millions of pounds in debt, and the NSS argued that if jobs were to be lost at the hospitals they should not be those of front life staff, such as doctors and nurses. The decision came under attack from various bishops and archbishops, and the NSS was prominent in defending the Trust's difficult decision.

■ The NSS made a response to the Interim Report of the Equalities Review. We argued that the Government is placing far too much emphasis on the flawed results of the 2001 Census. We showed convincingly that the much-vaunted figure of 72% of people who ticked the “Christian” box on the census form cannot be taken literally. The report can be seen on-line here:

www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/3544918b043d658945912830.pdf

or members can have a printed copy if they send a stamped address envelope and a cheque for £1 to NSS (Equalities Review Report), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

We argued that the granting of exemptions to religious bodies from equality legislation was unjust and possibly in breach of human rights legislation

■ Following the contribution made by the NSS to a Council of Europe seminar on free speech and religious sensibilities earlier this year (see front page of previous Bulletin), the Council has come out in favour of protecting free speech and resisting laws that would protect religious sensibilities. The Council said in its report: “The Assembly is of the opinion that freedom of expression as protected under Article 10 the European Convention on Human Rights should not be further restricted to meet increasing sensitivities of certain religious groups. At the same time, the Assembly emphasises that hate speech against any religious group is not compatible with the fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Convention and the case law of the Court.”



Graham Allen MP

■ **NSS honorary associate Graham Allen MP wrote on our behalf to the Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, after it emerged that a group of religious bodies had demanded that the BBC should be forced to broadcast more religious programmes. In the letter, Mr Allen pointed out that research by Ofcom, the broadcasting watchdog, had shown that religious programming was the least valued and appreciated genre. It was ridiculous to force the BBC to broadcast programmes that hardly anybody wanted to see in order to placate unreasonable religious demands.**

■ **The NSS wrote a joint letter with the International Humanist and Ethical Union to the president of Pakistan, asking for clemency in the case of a UK subject now on death row as a result of a sharia Court decision. Mirza Hussain has been in detention for 18 years, and on the death row for 16 years, on murder charges which (secular) Pakistani courts have already rejected twice.**



Mirza Hussain

■ The NSS responded to an interim report from the Women and Equalities Unit, entitled Getting Equal. We argued that the granting of exemptions to religious bodies from equality legislation was unjust and possibly in breach of human rights legislation. Read it online here: www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/354490238bcfb74166350806.pdf or for a printed copy write to the office (as above) specifying “Getting Equal” and enclosing a cheque for £1 and an s.a.e.

■ The NSS responded to a consultation on discrimination in the provision of goods and services in the areas of religion and belief and sexual orientation. We made a strong case for the government not to grant widespread religious exemptions in the Equality Bill (now Act), as religious groups had been demanding.

■ NSS Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris spoke out strongly against the unfair influence that Christian groups brought to bear in Parliament in order to defeat Lord Joffe’s Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill, which would have legalised assisted suicide in Britain. He drew attention to their concerted letter-writing campaign which will have misled Parliamentarians over the views of the public. Fifteen bishops turned out to oppose the Assisted Dying Bill, contributing significantly to what was in essence a defeat by ambush. Parliamentary convention dictates that Bills are not opposed at this stage, before any proper debate. The defeat took place on a Friday when the House is normally virtually empty and any business is, by tradition, non-contentious. The defeat also denied both peers and the elected house the opportunity to debate this issue – an issue on which the majority of the public want the law to be changed.