

## Bulletin

**Autumn 2007** 

Issue 37

www.secularism.org.uk

#### **NSS IN EUROPE:**

## NSS unites UN and EU

ecisions made in Europe by the EU Parliament, European Commission, Council of Europe and the United Nations affect us all. With this in mind, the NSS has continued to extend its reach to promote Secularism within all these bodies.

Keith Porteous Wood, our executive director, arranged a private meeting to introduce Sophie in 't Veld MEP to Mrs Asma Jahangir in Geneva in September (see picture). Mrs Jahangir is Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the United Nations. Sophie is chair of the Separation of Religion and Politics Working Group at the European Parliament and an NSS Honorary Associate.

They explored avenues of co-operation in the pursuance of Mrs Jahangir's UN Human Rights Council mandate. Keith and NSS President Terry Sanderson also took part in this highly productive meeting.



Sophie in 't Veld, Mrs Asma Jahangir, Keith Porteous Wood, Terry Sanderson after their meeting in Geneva

Earlier, Terry Sanderson and vice President Dr Anna Behan (along with representatives from other groups) met Mrs Jahangir when she came to London to

continues on page 2 ▶



# Keith honoured by international organisation

eith Porteous Wood's efforts to promote Secularism in Europe have been recognised by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). They presented him with an award for Distinguished Services to Humanism. IHEU president Sonia Eggerickx, who presented the award in Turin, said she "recognised Keith's tireless work for Secularism and Humanism over many years, both in the UK and on the international stage". A summary of the citation is shown at <a href="https://tinyurl.com/2k2jsq">https://tinyurl.com/2k2jsq</a>

#### **AGM 2007**

The NSS AGM is on Saturday 24 November 2007. We hope as many members as possible will attend. The formal proceedings are followed by refreshments, to which all participants are welcome. Members will receive papers with their *Bulletin* giving details about the meeting and associated matters, which we suggest they read promptly. Those who are not up to date with their subscriptions will also receive a reminder as the meeting is restricted to paid-up members only.

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#### **◄** "NSS in Europe" continued

investigate the situation in this country. We explained to her the situation in Britain, with its established church and massive religious influence in education, and made her aware of the many forms of discrimination this leads to, for example blasphemy laws.

#### Council of Europe

The Council of Europe is a pan-European body, responsible for the promotion and protection of Human Rights and democracy within its 47 member states.

The Council of Europe approved a document entitled "State, Religion, Secularity and Human Rights". It is a clear reinforcement of the principle that the Council itself is a secular body and that it considers Secularism to be a desirable way for society to structure itself.

Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson had been making representations in these very areas at the San Marino conference (as noted in the last *Bulletin*). We could not have asked for a more forthright and clear statement in our favour.

The Council of Europe also issued a statement about freedom of speech that strongly advocates that any attempt to restrict criticism of religion should be rigorously resisted. Only incitements to violence and intimidation should be legislated against. The report, entitled "Blasphemy, Religious Insults and Hate Speech against Persons on Grounds of Their Religion", recommends European

nations repeal of all forms of blasphemy legislation and other impediments to free speech based on religious objections.

Once again, Keith Porteous Wood's efforts over the last eighteen months have been critical to this development. In 2006 he chaired a session on this issue at a Council of Europe seminar held at the French Senate building in Paris.

At that session, our newly appointed Honorary Associate Lord Russell-Johnston was the Parliamentarian most outspoken in opposition to blasphemy legislation. (see page 7).

The two Council of Europe
Reports referred to above can be
read in full online here:
State, religion, secularity and human
rights http://tinyurl.com/323k23
Blasphemy, religious insults and
hate speech against persons on
grounds of their religion

Printed versions of both documents are available for members only on application to the NSS office.

#### European Parliament

http://tinyurl.com/2x95yg

Vice President Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood have been attending the regular meetings of the Separation of Religion and the State Working Group in the European Parliament, and have made incisive contributions to the debates. The NSS has become a prominent member of that group and, outside the meetings, works closely with the chair of the Working

Group, Sophie in 't Veld MEP.

In June, the European Parliament President Hans Gert Pöttering came to the Working Group to discuss the controversial invitation he had made to the pope to address the European Parliament.

While President Pöttering assured the Working Group that he favours "a clear separation of church and state", he seemed curiously unaware of the views of the non-religious, or until now at least, of any need to consult them.

Herr Pöttering visibly bristled when Honorary Associates Michael Cashman MEP and Sophie in 't Veld spoke up strongly against the invitation to the pope. Sophie had also written formally to complain.

Both MEPs pointed out that lifting the requirement for the pope to answer parliamentarians' questions was the antithesis of the "open,





#### Secular and Humanist European and International Meetings

The largest secular event in Europe this year was held in June, in the Italian city of Turin. It took the form of the annual meetings of both the European Humanist Federation (EHF) and the worldwide umbrella group, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). The NSS is an affiliate of both, and was represented by Keith Porteous Wood.

In between these two meetings

was a day devoted to discussing Secularism. It was organised by Italian organisations and the audience consisted of delegates from both meetings plus Italian activists and politicians. Topics addressed included civil rights, neutrality of public institutions and comparisons of experiences in different countries throughout Europe.

Keith formally welcomed the politicians and chaired a lively

session in which he encouraged delegates from all over Europe to share their views on how Secularism could be progressed. It was so popular it was extended by half an hour.

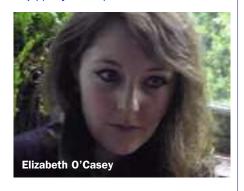
In the IHEU meeting the following day Keith gave a brief talk on the tactics groups should employ to maximise their effectiveness and long term growth.

transparent and regular dialogue" that is called for in Article 52 of the draft EU Treaty.

Herr Pöttering was clearly displeased and branded such calls as discrimination against "the Holy Father" (as he referred to him), presumably on the grounds that Heads of State address Parliamentarians without being cross-examined. The Vatican, in its alter ego "The Holy See", is accorded the status of a sovereign state, the privileges of which it exploits to the full.

Keith intervened in this formal session to complain to the President about the inadequate opportunities for representation of the non-religious perspectives, relative to religious ones. He also warned that minority religions would in future demand the same privileged influence accorded to the Vatican, and that this would be a source of division.

http://tinyurl.com/2oku6f



One of our new members of staff, Stephen Evans, has also been to the Working Group in Brussels to represent the NSS, as has Elizabeth O'Casey who has also acted as PA to Keith for important meetings in Europe.

#### **COLLECTIVE WORSHIP:**

#### What you can do

It is now possible for sixth formers to opt themselves out of collective worship in schools. This new right is enshrined in the Education and Inspections Act 2006, Section 55: "If a sixth-form pupil requests that he may be wholly or partly excused from attendance at religious worship at a community, foundation or voluntary school, the pupil shall be so excused." There is no longer any need for this to be conditional on a parent's request.

The law does not require any reason to be given. The only grounds on which the pupils can be denied this right is if they are less than 16 years old, or they are not doing sixth form studies.

Please do all you can to ensure

that secondary schools, and more importantly their pupils, are made aware of this important new provision, brought in on Human Rights grounds as a result of an initiative by the National Secular Society.

If you have access to a school, or school governors, please consider downloading our Factsheet about the change in the law and ask for it to be displayed.

#### www.secularism.org.uk/schools.html

Those without computer access could enlist the assistance of a friend or colleague with a PC. Or, copies of the leaflet can be provided by the office. Please send an SAE marked CW Fact Sheet and state the number of copies needed.

### Education changes threaten Secularism

The Government has announced that, in conjunction with the "faith communities", it intends to "remove the barriers" to the creation of new "faith schools" — particularly by minority religions. The Education Secretary, Ed Balls, said the state-funding of Muslim and Hindu schools would "aid community cohesion", although he did not explain how this would happen when children were separated from each other on the basis of their parents' religion. Terry Sanderson said: "This is the clearest indication yet that Gordon Brown intends to build on his predecessor's enthusiasm for religion in education. It is a severe blow to the concept of an open, secular society in which everyone plays an equal part."

The NSS's protests were very widely reported. Terry Sanderson and Keith Porteous Wood made numerous radio and TV appearances to put the case for the opposition.

#### Meet the new staff

Some of you will already have had contact with **Tessa Kendall**, the Society's Senior Administrator, or **Stephen Evans**, our Administrator. For those who haven't, allow us to introduce them. Since they started with the NSS, they've been extremely busy and have risen to the challenge of an enormous variety of tasks. Tessa was responsible for our submission to the General Medical Council on Personal Beliefs and Medical Practice, and Stephen went to the European Parliament to represent the Society, as noted in our Europe feature.



Tessa Kendall



Stephen Evans

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# Winning over Windsor Castle

eith Porteous Wood and NSS honorary associate A.C. Grayling took part in a high-level seminar entitled Religion in Public Life, the Atlantic Conversation at Windsor Castle earlier this year. Many of the delegates were senior politicians from the Commons and Lords as well as prominent lawyers and academics.

Anthony Grayling set out the secularist position in the opening session. He emphasised that religious organisations are selfselected interest groups on a par with political parties and trade unions. As such, they have a right to put their point of view in public, provided they stay within the law, but they have no greater right to do so than political parties or trades unions. He denounced religious privileges and the attempts by religious organisations to seek to impose their doctrine on others, for example through the law.

Secular speakers were heavily outnumbered. Apart from Anthony and Keith only one other delegate of the 30 invitees attending took a consistently secular line. She came from a high-level think tank.

Keith was the opening and principal speaker on secular perspectives, and presented evidence showing that no longer do the public look to the churches for guidance, nor do they any longer give automatic respect to religious figures at any level. The Church's claim to "speak for the people" is unsustainable in the face of these facts. On issues such as extramarital relationships, homosexuality and voluntary euthanasia, the churches are completely out of step with the populace. Yet the degree of influence of religion in public life had grown alarmingly, both internationally and domestically.

Internationally, religious influence had grown on the back of mounting fear of terrorism, especially post September 11, 2001. Domestically, the Government has been led by unquestionably the most religious PM since Gladstone. Many of his cabinet and advisers have been devout Christians determined to use their positions to further their faith. Nowhere could this be more evident than in the expansion of religious schools with their privileged selection criteria. The non-believing and non-practising majority are

increasingly having to resort to subterfuge to secure admission to good schools. Many are even driven to attending church when they would not otherwise do so. There was laughter when Keith expressed astonishment that, despite this, the church attendance figures were still in freefall.

He noted the chasing of Muslim votes, which was so evident in the repeated attempts by the Government to introduce the Racial and Religious Hatred provisions, which in their original form would have severely compromised freedom of expression. He also criticised the Government's totally disproportionate courting of unelected minority religious leaders. All this practically disenfranchises the non-religious in minority communities, many of whom

actually feel oppressed by religious pressure exerted by their families and communities. And the non-religious in the wider community are disenfranchised too, albeit to a lesser extent.

Delegates came from the United States and the Netherlands as well as the UK. It was evident how different the three countries are in their degree of religiosity and the attitude to religion in public life, and this frequently informed other delegates' contributions.





St. George's House, Windsor Castle

This international dimension in the seminar provided some interesting contrasts. While freedom of expression was clearly greater in the United States than Britain, nonreligious perspectives are rarely expressed in the public domain, and even less frequently by politicians. Whether or not the Dutch have ever been as liberal as they are perceived to be in Britain, whatever liberality existed is definitely on the wane. And the cause for this is, of course, religious; greater influence from Islam and, perhaps as a reaction to it, a revival of Christian power (but not adherence).

Keith concluded that everyone should coalesce around the values of Human Rights and Secularism. Religious moderates had everything to gain and little to lose from subscribing to these ideals.

Human Rights are under sustained attack as being some kind of "Western construct", rather than being universal and inalienable. We must resist this dilution at all costs; our civilisation depends on it. Keith found it moving when he drew support from a Muslim woman on this point.

Secularists fight religious privilege, but Secularism is not antireligious, it is about a level playing field for all. Theocracies have a poor record on religious freedom. Secularism has a vital role to offer where a country is dominated by one religion, where countries become more multi-religious and, indeed, where they become less religious. In none of these cases can one religion, or several religions, be allowed to dominate. So, a precondition to living together in harmony and equity is Secularism.

#### **Consultations**

n the last few months, the NSS has researched, written and submitted five consultation responses, which have generally been highly complex and required considerable original thought.

Our submission to the General Medical Council was made in association with the Secular Medical Forum, with whom we work closely. This voiced our concern that patients and potential patients should be clearly made aware in advance that doctors intend to object to certain treatments and procedures, based on their religion. It also sought to propose procedures to avoid patients from being intimidated into submitting to a doctor's views on such "conscience" matters. Tessa Kendall was the prime mover on this consultation with assistance from volunteer Carla Revere, a lawyer.

We also responded to a proposed revision of the Crown Prosecution Service's Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Racist and Religious Crime. Our response emphasised the need to distinguish much more clearly between religion and race, which the draft policy had tended to treat identically. Freedom of expression considerations are much more important where religion is concerned and this needed to be emphasised very much more in the policy. Dr Behan and Keith Porteous Wood were joint authors of this work.

Another consultation response was to A Framework for Fairness: Proposals for a Single Equality Bill for Great Britain. We made recommendations on this Discrimination Law Review consultation for the proposed Single

Equality Bill. We sought to ensure that the non-religious were not disadvantaged by this harmonisation process. Dr Behan led this response. She was aided by Carla Revere, whose specialist legal background enabled her to provide

invaluable input.

We made a submission on the Scotland Census 2011 Consultation. Our main concern was the questions on religion in this census. It had been

proposed that these be framed in the much less informative style of the England and Wales census. We suspect that the motive of changing to the England and Wales style questions is to give a higher (and exaggerated) percentage for religious adherence. We opposed this change, offering detailed research in support for our argument.

We answered the Council of Europe Intercultural Dialogue Questionnaire. Our particular concern was religious demands being made and granted without sufficient thought given to their effect on the non-religious and on Human Rights. We indicated that some of the questions implied an insufficient grasp of these issues or the problems of integration and cohesion. The Council will have found some of our answers challenging and disturbing.

Keith Porteous Wood produced the last two responses above and acted as editor for all of them.

These consultation documents can all be found on our website at: www.secularism.org.uk/responses.html

#### NSS supports the launch of the Ex-Muslim Council of Britain

The NSS co-sponsored the launch of the Ex-Muslim Council of Britain in June at the Houses of Parliament. Its spokeswoman, Maryam Namazie, was the NSS's Secularist of the Year in 2005.

A key speaker at the launch was the courageous Mina Ahadi who had started the whole idea of ex-Muslim groups when she established the first chapter in Germany. Now other groups in Belgium, The Netherlands and Scandinavia are starting up and making waves throughout Europe. The organisation encourages those people from a Muslim background who wish to, to abandon Islam. Maryam Namazie emphasised that hers was not an anti-Muslim organisation, but was seeking to provide a counter to political Islam. She considers Islam to be beyond reform.

Terry Sanderson gave words of

encouragement at the meeting, emphasising the Human Rights aspect of the organisation's work and underlining the importance of giving a voice at last to those from a Muslim heritage who do not define themselves as Muslim. It was important for the world to hear this message and would be encouraging to those who had not up until now had the courage to speak, or even to acknowledge their own non-belief.

#### In the news...

s religious demands and power-seeking increase, so the call for a voice of opposition becomes more urgent. The NSS is that voice and our profile in the media has never been higher. We have featured in most major newspapers – both here and around the world. We have scored over a hundred mentions in recent months, with coverage spreading as far as Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and USA (including coverage in the Wall Street Journal).

A major front-page feature on Secularism was published in the Washington Post after one of their top journalists attended one of our Council meetings and met staff and volunteers. The coverage brought several other international opportunities - including an appearance on CNN for Terry Sanderson (broadcast worldwide) and one on Al Jazeera English (broadcast to the Arab world). It also resulted in an approach from a South Korean TV company that wanted to film our Secularist of the Year event, and to interview the



Terry Sanderson being interviewed from Washington DC

President. We have helped in the preparation of documentaries, and given interviews on many mainstream radio and TV shows, including *Newsnight* and *BBC*Breakfast.

The NSS's message is being spelled out clearly and is becoming increasingly familiar. Our media protests against the Government's constant privileging of religion have put both the Government and the churches on the defensive. They now know, as they hatch their expansionist plans, they are being watched by people able and prepared to blow a very loud whistle in the media.

Sometimes an issue arises that brings us blanket coverage. This occurred, for example, over our criticism of The Silver Ring Thing, the American chastity ring which some religious activists in Britain think is a worthy substitute for frank sex education.

Our denunciation, on public health grounds, of those obstructing the slaughter of a tubercular Welsh bullock considered sacred to worshippers at a Hindu temple in Wales was also reported worldwide.

We are increasingly sought out by the media for well-informed opinion that other, less outspoken, organisations shy away from. Terry Sanderson was on BBC 1's Breakfast show at peak time speaking out against the disturbing precedent being set by Sainsbury's in offering Muslim employees the option of not handling alcohol products.

#### Racial and Religious Hatred Act

The Racial and Religious Hatred Act came into effect on 1 October 2007.

The NSS was the only organisation to oppose these measures for the whole five years the Government was repeatedly trying to introduce them. We did so because they posed a severe threat to free expression – particularly on the right to criticise and mock religion. We fought a high profile campaign that involved comedian

Rowan Atkinson, and which was brilliantly spear-headed in Parliament by NSS Honorary Associate Evan Harris MP. This succeeded in removing the most illiberal elements of the Bill.



Despite the Government trying desperately to derail the watered-down version, it was passed by the House of Lords with a 149 vote majority, and then – to the Government's astonishment – by the House of Commons with a majority of just one vote. The then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, had left Parliament before the vote on the Bill was taken, in the mistaken impression that it would be lost regardless of his vote.

Concerns have been expressed that the Government still wishes to bring in stronger legislation

#### **Donations**

We would like to thank members who have made much-appreciated donations to support our continuing work. We have had a number of particularly generous donations recently, including four for  $\pounds 5,000$ , all from different benefactors (one in the United States). We are most grateful to them all and these contributions will go towards financing new areas of activity.

Along with membership subscriptions and standing orders, donations are our only source of income.

If you would like to remember the NSS in your will, our office can send you a legacy leaflet so that the Society will be able to flourish in the future when it is clear the need will be at least as great.

#### Newsline

Are you receiving our weekly e-zine Newsline? If you aren't, and you'd like to, please contact enquiries@secularism.org.uk and we'll add you to the list. If you don't have a computer and would like to receive the printed version of Newsline, please let us have a series of A5 stamped addressed envelopes at NSS Newsline, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. (This service is for members only).

#### **Scotland**

Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson met Honorary Associate Patrick Harvie MSP in Edinburgh in September and

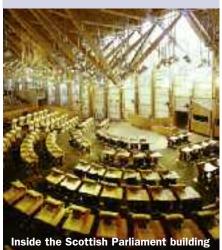


brought him up to date with current issues for the Society, although Keith is in regular contact with him on specific issues.

Following the Scottish Parliamentary elections. Patrick.

representing the Green Party, has been appointed Convenor of the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee at Holyrood (the ultra-modern seat of Scotland's Parliament). We are exploring ways to maximise the campaigning opportunities presented by the change.

The previous administration proposed that the question on religion in the Scottish Census 2011 be replaced with the much less informative and less accurate English version. We have suggested to Patrick that every effort be made to abort this retrograde change.



Alistair McBay, the NSS's Scottish spokesperson, continues to excel in having an astonishing number of the most incisive and often amusing campaigning letters published in the Scottish and UK media. He seems well on his way to becoming a one-man institution, to the delight of editors but to the apoplexy of bishops and archbishops...

#### **New Honorary Associates**

Lord Russell-Johnston is a Scot who was for many years the MP for Inverness. He has been active in organisations promoting democracy and Human Rights and taken much



interest in European matters, initially while in the House of Commons where he became a front bench spokesperson for the LibDems. He has also been an MEP and

served as President of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly from 1999 - 2002. He is still active in the Council of Europe and the House of Lords. As the Bulletin went to press, we received reports of the patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Alexy II, speaking to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He told them that "[Christian] morality is more important than human rights". The report continued: "The Europeans did not argue with him, except for the august Lord Russell-Johnston, who took him to task on the rights of sexual minorities. ...[Alexy II] stated that homosexuality is an

illness and compared a gay parade to a parade of kleptomaniacs. The Russian delegates applauded. Other delegates noticeably did not".

Dumfries-born Labour MP lan

Gibson started his career with a PhD in Genetics from Edinburgh University. He was Dean of Biology at UEA when he went into politics and has been a



member of the science and technology select committee since being elected to Norwich North in 1997. Gibson was one of the leaders of the massive backbench rebellion against plans for increased university tuition fees. He called it his proudest moment. He was one of just 21 Labour rebels who opposed the Government on the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill; without this opposition, we would not have achieved the important amendment to protect freedom of speech. He is a strong advocate for Human Rights as well as campaigning for health, the environment and higher education.

#### **Other Council activity**

Dr Anna Behan has taken responsibility for our work on the Religion and Belief Consultative Group, speaking up for non-believers in the many meetings associated with the constantly evolving Human Rights agenda. The establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is part of this, as has been the Discrimination Law Review. Council member Peter Vlachos has also shared some of the workload. This is demanding work where non-believers are heavily out-numbered.

Council member Norman Bacrac spoke in a debate at the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin on the motion "that this house believes that belief in God is irrational". Norman also appeared on the Bangla TV debating the Richard Dawkins book *The God Delusion*.

Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood have been assisted by volunteer Carla Revere on several important legal issues.

#### Last Priest plays to a full house

The NSS's dedicated performance of the play *The Last Priest* – about the life of Jean Meslier – played to a full house at the King's Head Theatre in London in June.

The performance was followed by a lively and interesting discussion with the writer, producer and actor who played Meslier. The testimony anticipated the present spate of books about non-belief by nearly three hundred years. The play has been recorded, and a DVD of it can be purchased at the NSS's online shop, or by post from NSS DVD, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL for £10 plus 80p p&p.

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#### secular **Bulletin**

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www.secularism.org.uk

**NEW BOOK OFFER** 

#### **Did Christians Steal Christmas?**

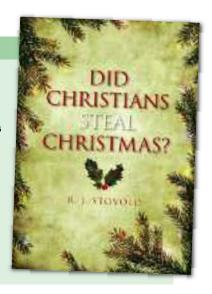
And why did it take centuries for most Christians to agree on a date for Jesus' birth?

Robert Stovold explores the myths and legends around a December festival that dates back to earliest times, investigating the origins of Christmas trees, the divine child and the virgin birth - and finding some surprising connections.

Price £2.99 (post FREE to members only)

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#### National Secular Society's seasonal greetings cards

Our collection of cards for the season provides the opportunity for secularists to greet their family, friends and colleagues in a way that does not compromise their principles. No nativity scenes, guiding stars, three kings or other religious references here, just the glorification of nature and admiration for human creativity.



Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Each of our collections costs £9.95 plus 80p p&p for a pack of six different images. 3. Natural History Museum's collection

http://www.secularism.org.uk/shop.html?category=merchandise%2F938

The National Secular Society or NSS, to NSS Cards, 25 Red

Or if you prefer to order by post, please send a cheque to

Place your order securely on-line here:

These striking and unusual images will stand out in any display of seasonal cards and will be a joy to receive. The illustrations come from the Museum's extensive collection, accumulated over 200 years. 153mm x 127mm, printed on 250gsm board with lustrous finish. Blank inside.

Here is a representative sample of the illustrations. It may be necessary to change some images, but rest assured the quality will not vary. All cards are individually cello-wrapped and come with a white envelope. Please state clearly which pack(s) (e.g. "Birds") you require.

#### 1. The Kew Garden Collection

These delightful cards are based on paintings from the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew - a world-renowned centre for scientific enquiry into biodiversity and protection of the environment. Selected from the 200,000 prints in the Gardens' collection.

160 x 160mm, they are printed on heavy art board with gloss varnish. Individually wrapped, they have no greeting so can be used for all occasions and as secular seasonal cards.











Fruits and Flowers - pack of 6



Birds - pack of 6







We also have our

ever-popular cards from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which you can see in the online shop.

#### 2. Victoria & Albert Museum Collection

The Victoria and Albert Museum is the world's largest and finest museum of decorative arts and design, with a permanent collection of over 4.5 million objects. From this vast and varied collection, we have chosen a few images that we hope will delight those who receive them.

160mm x 160mm, these cards are printed on good quality art board with gloss finish. Images may vary, but you can be assured they will all be of equal quality. Blank inside. These images are a representative sample of those available. See our online shop for more.

