

challenging religious privilege



(SOME PLACES WHERE THE NSS'S VOICE HAS BEEN HEARD)

ANNUAL REPORT 2007

national
secular
society



Message From The President

My first year as President of the National Secular Society has coincided, a little dauntingly, with a fierce escalation of the battle between religion and secularism. As I took over the mantle, the issues we are most concerned with – the separation of Church and State, the place of religion in civic life, whether human rights will trump religious demands – moved towards the top of the national agenda.

Certainly, religion of the most conservative kind is surging at present. We have seen virulent Christian demands to curb free speech, to compromise the rights of homosexuals, for conscience clauses in the provision of medical services and for the imposition of “religious values” on our culture and legislature.

It seems almost impossible to open a newspaper without reading of some Christian complaining that they have been “banned” from wearing religious regalia at work or moaning that their “faith” is being squeezed out of its traditional position of power and influence. The wailing over the “de-Christianisation” of Christmas grows louder each year. The Vatican makes increasingly strident threats to democratic governments that will not yield in relation to its dogmas or its demands for influence and resources.

We have seen the Anglican Church lurch rightwards as the ultra-conservative elements from the “global south” mount their takeover bid. They are now clearly holding the puppet strings of the spineless Rowan Williams, so obsessed is he with preserving the illusion of unity. This so-called great thinker and ethics expert seems unable to grasp that the bullies will not rest until they make the Church so fundamentalist that it becomes an extremist sect. Radical Islam continues to insinuate itself into British life, getting a free ride on the back of society’s anxiety not to treat unfairly innocent Muslims who are

just trying to get on with their lives. Polls show young Muslims becoming increasingly reactionary – a development that should alarm us all.

Amid all this flurry of religio-political hyperactivity, the words “secularism” and “atheism” have become conflated, as religious propagandists try hard to make both into words of insult here in Britain as they have in the USA. Somehow, those of us who oppose the dangerous dominance of any particular religion in political life are seen as oppressors. Those who seek to protect others from the too-often malignant impulses of organised religion are now painted as persecutors of the faithful.

Those of us who value a society that is free from the privileged dictates of clerics and open to progress are standing up in increasing numbers and saying: “We must find a way to live together that is fair to everyone.”

As far as I am concerned, that way is Secularism.

Let us be clear: secularists are not seeking to oppress the manifestation of religion, or interfere in any way with the internal doctrinal matters of religious institutions. But religious bodies in this country must return the favour and accept that they do not have any special right to impose their dogmas on an unwilling nation through their privileged access to the State’s legislative machinery. The nation has made clear that it no longer wishes to live by imposed religious principles. The churches need to come to terms with that – however unappetising it is to them.

We are no longer a nation of churchgoers, or even believers. Poll after poll shows that the preferred lifestyle of Britain is not a religious one.

Why are 26 bishops entitled to sit in the House of Lords? Why do the churches still, for some unaccountable reason, run one third of our education system, with many schools giving preference to their own adherents (or claimed adherents) while everyone in the country is forced to pay for that privilege? Why does the taxpayer have to fund religious representatives in hospitals and the armed forces while nurses are being laid off? Why, when the Church of England Commissioners have six billion pounds in their coffers, does the lottery subscriber or taxpayer have to pay untold millions to support its crumbling buildings on top of all the gift aid claimed from collections? Why are clergy exempt from council tax? Why do political groups posing as religious groups get charitable status? Why is so much air time devoted to religion by our publicly-funded broadcasting corporation, when one survey after another illustrates that few people want to see it or hear it? Why does religion get near-blanket exemption from equality laws? Why is the religious “conscience” so often deemed more important than the conscience of others who come from a different viewpoint?

With the departure of Tony Blair from Downing Street, some secularists had hoped – but without much conviction – that Government policy would become less unfair to those not believing or practising. That hope is now dashed as we come to realise that Gordon Brown is even more religious than his predecessor.

The few secularisers in Parliament brave enough to put their head above the parapet are not anti-religious; they simply recognise that it is anti-democratic to allow religion to continue to impose its will on the nation. In the meantime, the secular fight-back needs to grow. We need to spread our influence. You can also help by encouraging friends, colleagues and acquaintances who share your views to join the NSS.

As a committed secularist, you can also do your bit by participating fully in society. Stand for election locally or nationally, get on representative bodies and school governing boards, join committees, pressure groups and political parties. This is where the important changes can be made. Religious people have known this for a long time, which is why so many of them are calling the shots now. We must make our stand as secularists by fully participating in the society we want to influence. Make your voice heard, get involved. And do it as a proud secularist, promoting justice for all and privilege for none.

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Terry Sanderson
President

And this from the opposition...

**“WITHOUT RELIGION, THERE
CAN BE NO MORALITY,
THERE CAN BE NO LAW.”**

THE ARCHBISHOP OF YORK,
quoting Lord Denning approvingly
(House of Lords, 19 April 2007)

ON THE EUROPEAN STAGE

The NSS has been extremely active in the European Parliament and the Council of Europe this year, either working on its own account or as a representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). We are delighted how hugely beneficial this co-operation is proving to both organisations. NSS initiatives have been successful in influencing some policy decisions at the Council of Europe. (The Council of Europe is the primary body enforcing the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and promoting human rights and democracy in its 47 member states.)

Last year at a hearing in the French Senate in Paris, Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood spoke passionately against laws that restrict criticism of religion. Later the Council of Europe issued a formal report calling on all member states to abolish blasphemy laws and not introduce other legislation that would restrict freedom of expression. The report was adamant that, in a free society, religious bodies should not be protected by law from criticism or even ridicule. The only justification for restricting freedom of expression would be to protect individuals from violence or threat. In other words, protect the believer not the belief.

In April, in San Marino, Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson attended a Council of Europe conference ostensibly called to examine the place of religion in the intercultural dialogue. Predictably, there had been no call for a conference on the place of civil society or secularism in intercultural dialogue. It soon became clear that the religious delegates' real reason for calling for this conference had been to secure special consultative rights within the Council of Europe. Keith and Terry spoke out strongly against this and, as one ambassador present commented, changed the course of the conference. The Roman Catholic delegation had apparently been offended by Keith's explanation of why religion is the greatest threat to Human Rights. Nevertheless, he left the podium to warm applause and was astonished how many ambassadors and delegates approached him afterwards saying he was quite right and that they only wish they could have said that. The final communiqué was changed to make consultation much wider and to give much more emphasis to "civil society", as opposed to religious bodies.

In February, Keith also spoke in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe Committee on Culture, Science and Education Colloquy on Questions related to State and Religion. He made a strong case for keeping the Council of Europe as a secular body that was not under undue religious influence.

Keith Porteous Wood and Vice-President Dr Anna Behan, assisted by Stephen Evans and Elizabeth O'Casey, have continued to keep an NSS presence on the Separation of Religion and Politics Working Group in

the European Parliament (EP). The NSS participated in a meeting in Brussels at which European Parliament President Hans Gert Pöttering was challenged about his invitation to the Pope to address the European Parliament.

Dr Anna Behan represented the NSS at the launch of the Brussels Declaration, a restatement of Europe's shared Human Rights and secular values, at a meeting in the European Parliament. Supported by hundreds of national and European politicians, prominent academics and community leaders, the Brussels Declaration is the centre-piece of the campaign to head off claims by organised religion for even greater involvement in Europe's political affairs. The Declaration was an IHEU initiative, the brainchild of Roy Brown, their former president, who is also an NSS member. Keith was on the Editorial Committee. Attempts to claim the Christian religion as the foundation for the continent's democratic and ethical values are being strongly contested.

Some of the relevant documents can be read in full online here. Printed versions will be sent to members on application to the NSS office:

State, religion, secularity and human rights
<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1804.htm>

Blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech against persons on grounds of their religion
<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1805.htm>

San Marino declaration, with multiple references to "civil society"
www.coe.int/T/dg4/intercultural/Source/sanmarinofinal_EN.doc

Brief address to President of European Parliament
www.secularism.org.uk/keithateuparliament.html

United Nations

The NSS arranged a meeting in Geneva to introduce Mrs Asma Jahangir, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, to Sophie in 't Veld MEP, the chair of the EP Separation of Religion and Politics Working Group. Keith and Terry are confident from the meeting that this laid the foundations for Ms in 't Veld being better placed to assist Mrs Jahangir in carrying out her mandate, which also applies to non-belief.

Earlier, Terry Sanderson and Anna Behan had taken part in a meeting with Mrs Jahangir when she came to London. There, she was told of the situation in this country, with its special privileges for the established church, over-emphasis on religion in education, unjust clerical representation in Parliament and lack of rights for non-believers in many areas.



Asma Jahangir

ACTIVITIES AT HOME

Scotland

In September, Terry Sanderson and Keith Porteous Wood met Honorary Associate Patrick Harvie MSP in Edinburgh. It was a valuable opportunity for Patrick to apprise them of Scottish issues of secularist relevance, and for them bring Patrick up to date with NSS issues. One direct result of the meeting is that Patrick tabled parliamentary questions to flush out the ruling coalition's stance on the form of the questions to be asked on religion in the Census in Scotland in 2011.

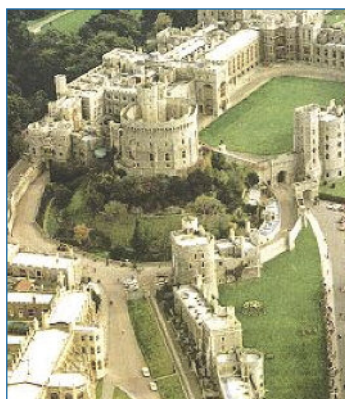
Our Scottish representative, Alistair McBay has been particularly busy this year, writing trenchant letters to the editors of newspapers in Scotland and England. He has appeared countless times in both *The Scotsman* and *The Herald* as well as some English nationals and several regional papers. Alistair has a catchy turn of phrase that packs a big punch into the small space allotted for letters. He has also spoken for the NSS on Radio Scotland a couple of times.



Alistair McBay

The Atlantic Conversation conference

Keith Porteous Wood and Honorary Associate Professor Anthony Grayling represented the NSS at a high-powered conference in Windsor Castle to discuss *Religion in Public Life: the Atlantic Conversation*. Most of the delegates were religious leaders, parliamentarians and leading academics. It fell to Keith and Anthony to hold high the banner for secularism during the three day event. Keith presented a paper to this influential audience, demonstrating growing religious privilege despite declining religious adherence. He concluded that a truly secular state and unwavering commitment to Human Rights were preconditions for a fair and just society.



Windsor Castle

Secular Medical Forum



This year the NSS has played midwife at the birth of the Secular Medical Forum. The Forum, the brainchild of Dr Michael Irwin who sponsors our Secularist of the Year prize, was created to counter the many flourishing religious medical bodies. We have worked closely with the Forum throughout the year. For more information about the SMF please visit:

<http://www.secularmedicalforum.org.uk>

Liberty Intervention

The NSS intervened at the AGM of Liberty – a group to which we are affiliated – over a motion proposed by the Communications Workers Union. The motion noted “with alarm, the increasingly intemperate attitude of some mainstream politicians towards the religious and civil rights of Muslims, and other minority faiths”. The NSS inserted an amendment aimed at protecting freedom of expression, to refer to Human Rights instead of civil rights, and to introduce parity in the motion for the non-religious. Council member Peter Vlachos moved our amendment, urging Liberty to maintain a secular ethos. The amendment was accepted by the original proposers of the motion.



Peter Vlachos

Hospital Chaplains

The NSS wrote to support the decision by Worcester Acute Hospitals Trust to make redundant most of the chaplains employed in its hospitals. The Trust is millions of pounds in debt, and the NSS argued that if jobs are to be lost, they should not be those of front line medical staff. Since then, it has been revealed that many other Hospital Trusts have followed suit and have reduced the number of clerics they employ. The Theos think-tank reports that chaplaincy hours have been severely reduced throughout the health service.

Equality Work

Dr Behan continues to represent the Society on the Religion and Belief Consultative Group, on which we are hugely outnumbered by religious groups. She is steering her way through uncharted waters while the Equalities and Human Rights Commission is becoming established. She leads this major strand of work with the assistance of Peter Vlachos and Keith Porteous Wood.



Dr Anna Behan

NSS Meets Equality Chief

Keith Porteous Wood and Anna Behan met Trevor Philips, the chair of the new Equalities and Human Rights Commission. She said she was pleased with the reception they had received from Trevor Phillips although, as expected, he did not accept the NSS's line on "faith schools".



Trevor Philips

Race Convention

NSS Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood, was a participant in the convention to celebrate 30 years of the Race Relations Act.

Activists associated with the London Mayor reportedly sought to sabotage the conference by calling on speakers to withdraw and speak instead at an alternative event deliberately timed to coincide with the conference. This appeared to be a retaliation for Race Relations supremo Trevor Phillips' attack on multiculturalism, and the more cynical might even have wondered if it was also a bid to increase the power of religious groups in race relations. Whatever it was, it failed. Keith's exposure of the spoiler was prominently reported in *The Observer* and won him the gratitude of the conference organisers.

www.guardian.co.uk/race/story/0,,1957467,00.html

Ex-Muslim Council of Britain

The NSS has helped sponsor the launch of the Ex-Muslim Council of Britain. This is the British version of a group created originally in Germany by Mina Ahadi, winner of this year's Secularist of the Year award. The British group was launched at the Houses of Parliament and its spokesperson is Maryam Namazie (who is an NSS honorary associate and winner of Secularist of the Year in 2005). Find out more about this group here:

www.ex-muslim.org.uk



Maryam Namazie

Women and the Veil conference

The NSS co-sponsored a conference for International Women's Day entitled "Women's Rights, the Veil and Islamic and Religious Laws". Speakers included Ann Harrison, the researcher for the Middle East and North Africa Department of Amnesty International's International Secretariat, as well as NSS Honorary Associates Maryam



Brave Honorary Associate Taslima Nasreen

Namazie and Taslima Nasrin. It turned out to be a very powerful evening and the venue was packed with an enthusiastic audience.

Keith wins international honour

In June, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood was awarded the 2007 award for Distinguished Service to Humanism by the International Humanist and Ethical Union in Turin, Italy. Presenting the award at the General Assembly of IHEU, their President, Sonia Eggerickx, said: "The award recognises his tireless work for secularism and humanism over many years, both in the United Kingdom and on the international stage." The previous day, Keith had chaired part of a one-day conference in Turin on Secularism which started by welcoming regional politicians. He then led a lively brainstorming session to explore ways of maximising the effectiveness of the all-too-necessary secular fight-back. As you can see from the picture, the award was featured on the cover of IHEU'S magazine.



EVENTS

Secularist of the Year

Our Secularist of the Year prize winner for 2007 is Mina Ahadi, a brave Iranian-born woman now living in Germany, who has opposed the clerical regime in her native country. Ms Ahadi, founder of the International Committee against Execution and Stoning, was spokeswoman for the International Campaign in Defence of Women's Rights in Iran and, more controversially, the founder of the Central Council for Ex-Muslims in Germany.

Mina was driven out of Iran over her challenge to the regime's treatment of women and, particularly, her campaigns to stop the barbaric stoning to death of women and girls charged with "crimes against chastity".



Secularist of the Year: Mina Ahadi

She was not at home when the authorities arrived to arrest her, but they managed to arrest her husband and some other friends. Mina's husband and colleagues were executed and she had to flee the country.

She now lives in Germany where she continues to struggle for the rights of women to live free of the oppressive strictures of the Islamic theocracy in Iran. Her conviction that Islam cannot be reformed led her to create the Ex-Muslim Committee. It aims to provide a focus for those who come from a Muslim background but who do not want to be defined by that religion and want to abandon it. This powerful idea has resulted in chapters of the organisation being formed in the Netherlands, Belgium, Scandinavia and England.

We are extremely grateful to Dr Michael Irwin, the event's sponsor, who has now provided prize-money to continue the event up to 2014.

The whole event, devised by Terry Sanderson, was an upbeat occasion with entertainment generously provided by singer Esther Williams and comedian Christina Martin. It was rounded off by a moving rendition of an Iranian love song kindly performed by Elizabeth Mansfield. By that

stage there wasn't, as they say, a dry eye in the house.

There was not one seat left unoccupied. Those lucky enough to attend agreed it was unquestionably the best NSS event to date.

We also would like to thank volunteers Nick Lansley and Paul Christopher for their excellent photographic services at the event, as you can see from the page opposite.

Other Debates and talks

Former Council member Nick Pullar took part in an Oxford Union debate on the proposition "That the veil is a barrier to integration". Also proposing the motion was Gerald Howarth MP, a Conservative shadow defence Minister. Opposing were a Rhodes Scholar, David Edgar (a playwright) and Yvonne Ridley, of Burka fame. The proposal was lost 138 to 211.

Council member Norman Bacrac debated the motion "This house believes that belief in God is not rational" at the Literary and Historical Society of University College Dublin in September. It can be heard at www.ucd.ie/lnh/debates/1533god.html

Norman also took part in debates on Premier Christian Radio and Bangla TV. Former President and now Council member Denis Cobell has given talks to several local groups around the country, including the Sutton group.

Making young politicians aware of Secularism, and Women's Rights

In January, Keith spoke at the University of Westminster to a forum held for promising young politicians from all parties, not just those based in Westminster. He banged the drum for Secularism and the paramount need for supporting Human Rights. He emphasised how much they were under threat and pointed the finger at organised religion as the principal culprit, to the evident discomfort of the senior cleric present. Keith could not have had a more ardent supporter with him on the platform than Honorary Associate Maryam Namazie, who spoke so forcefully and passionately about Women's Rights and the State.



Novelist, columnist and Honorary Associate Joan Smith kindly presented the Prize



Mina Ahadi accepts her prize



Guests tuck into a splendid Spanish-themed meal



Our sponsor, Dr Michael Irwin



Happy attendees – including fellow-nominee Peter Tatchell – clamour to congratulate Mina



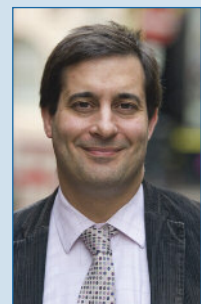
Keith Porteous Wood was Master of Ceremonies



Independent columnist Johann Hari was one of the nominees



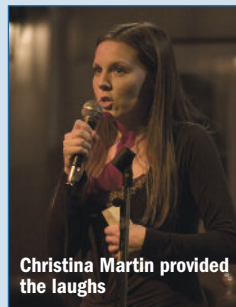
A former President, Barbara Smoker, and a former General Secretary, Bill McIlroy, share a joke.



Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP joined us for the festivities



Esther Williams tinkled the ivories



Christina Martin provided the laughs



Elizabeth Mansfield performed an Iranian love song

Westminster Hall Debate

Three of the NSS's most high-profile honorary associates took part in a hugely successful debate in Westminster Hall in March. Before an audience of over 2,000 people, the motion "We would be better off without religion" was defended by Professors Richard Dawkins and A. C. Grayling together with Christopher Hitchens. Opposing the motion were Rabbi Julia Neuberger, philosopher Roger Scruton and classicist Dr Nigel Spivey, but they were a poor match for our champions.

The result: 1,205 supporting the motion, 778 against and 100 abstentions.

Theatre Event

The NSS sponsored a dedicated performance of *The Last Priest*, a play about the French priest Jean Meslier who was secretly a freethinker. The play, at the Kings Head Theatre in London, was followed by a discussion with the cast and a reception. Both were well received by a full house of NSS members and supporters. It has now been put onto DVD and is available at the NSS's on-line shop.

NSS at the Fabian Society Conference

Council members Jennifer Jaynes and Norman Bacrac ran a stall at the Fabian Conference in London in January. They reported a great deal of interest in and sympathy for the aims of the NSS.

EDUCATION

Education wins and an honourable defeat

The Passage of the Education and Inspections Bill through parliament brought success and failure to the NSS in its attempts to loosen the grip of religion in schools. On the plus side, it was an NSS initiative which resulted in Section 55, permitting those aged 16 and over in sixth forms to withdraw themselves from Collective Worship without any need for parental intervention. The victory came despite an initial refusal by the Education Secretary and would not have been successful without wholehearted support from Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights. Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP pleaded our case persuasively with the Committee and facilitated the tabling of amendments by the LibDems in the Lords, which the Government accepted subject to some small changes. The Conservatives objected to any change whatsoever. We sought a similar exemption for Religious Education but this was not accepted.

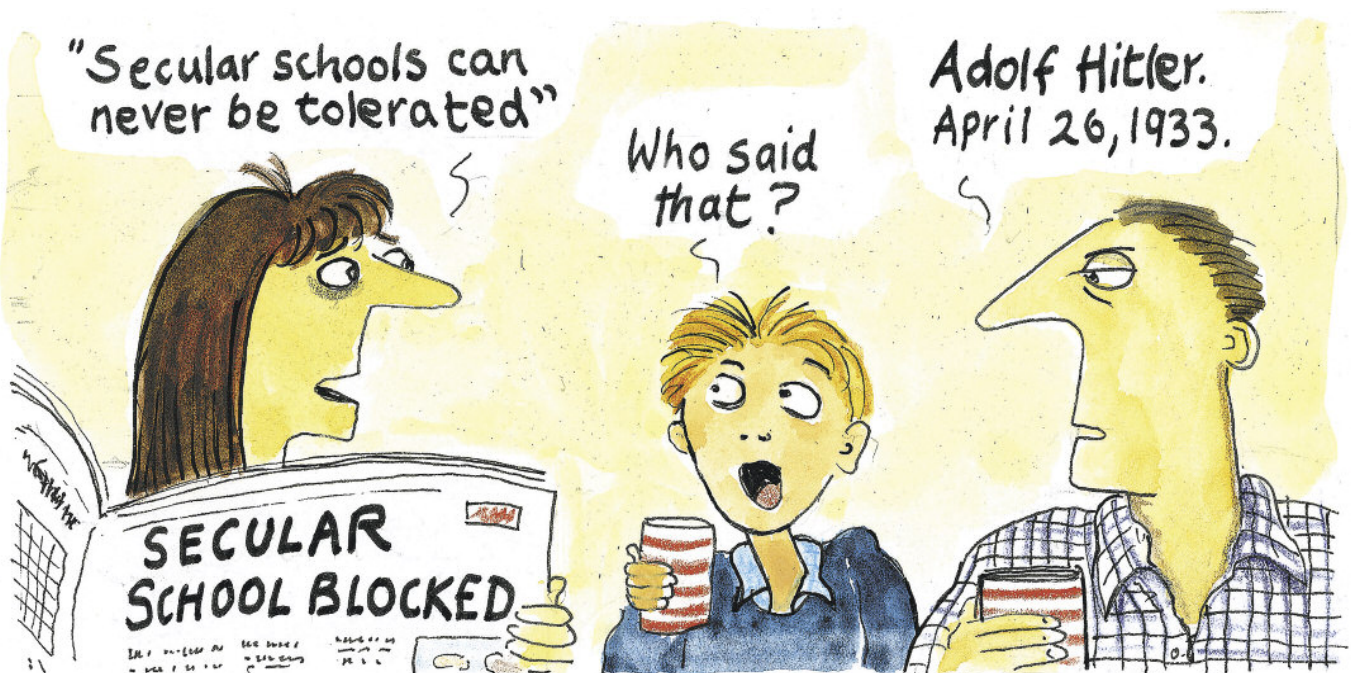
The Society was alone in blowing the whistle on a disastrous last-minute change to the Bill which will now make it possible to discriminate against non-religious head teachers in Voluntary Controlled (VC) schools, and non-religious non-teaching staff, mainly teaching assistants, in Voluntary Aided (VA) schools. VC schools are religious schools controlled by the local authority; VA schools are "faith schools" controlled by the Church.

The change regarding head teachers is a particular blow because it is now possible to refuse to appoint the best candidate if they do not have the requisite religious faith, but even if they do, are not regarded as worshipping enough. They can also be refused a job if they are unable to teach RE in the faith, or if their private lives are thought not to come up to the standards required by the "faith" of the school. And the running costs of both types of school are entirely paid for out of public funds.

The NSS did manage to prompt fierce debates in both Houses through some of its parliamentary Honorary Associates (particularly Baroness Turner of Camden and Evan Harris), who tried hard to oppose this iniquitous development. Keith Porteous Wood also enlisted the help of the teaching unions. Despite disingenuous Government claims that the unions were "fully consulted", they had no idea this proposal was on the cards at senior level or, in some key unions, at any level. Despite our best efforts, and in spite of winning the moral argument in the chamber, the Government called three-line whips and the new employment discrimination was enshrined into law.

NSS Meets Education Minister

Later, in March, Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood had a formal round-table meeting with the then Education Minister, the Rt Hon Alan Johnson MP. The NSS expressed its alarm at the growth of religious influence in the education system, and at the Government's apparent enthusiasm for more of it. Mr Johnson said he was a non-believer himself, but thought



This cartoon originally appeared in the *Education Guardian*. Reproduced with the kind permission of Ros Asquith.

that “faith schools” had a part to play. Although, as reported above, we had lost the fight on the protection of non-religious staff, Mr Johnson winced when we raised the topic, suggesting that we had given the Government quite a run for its money.

Tony Blair and Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly, who happens to be a Roman Catholic, had wanted exemptions in the Sexual Orientation Regulations to allow the said Church to continue to discriminate in its adoption agencies. In January, Mr Johnson, well aware of the Prime Minister’s failing power, achieved what until then would have been unthinkable: he and Peter Hain reportedly defied the PM and refused to grant the exemptions, carrying the rest of the Cabinet with them. We would like to express our appreciation here to them both for their courageous stand for Human Rights.



Rt Hon Alan Johnson
MP

Opposition to “faith” schools, and our work with the unions

Since our meeting with Alan Johnson, the new Education Secretary, Ed Balls, has announced the Government intends to “clear the way” for more religious schools, and intends to bring large numbers of Islamic schools from the private sector into the state sector. Churches (and increasingly the mosques and temples) are forging ahead while they can. We suspect that they are well aware of the growing public hostility to such schools. Once established, it will be extremely difficult to close or convert them to community schools.

The new Department for Children, Schools and Families has produced, in conjunction with the “faith communities”, a highly partial puff for religious schools entitled *Faith in the System*. We suspect it is a response to growing public unease about “faith” schools generally and minority faith ones in particular.

The Society has been prominent in speaking out against this policy, and is the first port of call for hordes of journalists and reporters looking for opposing opinions and evidence. We are working to build a coalition of organisations formally opposing these schools. The most promising area we have found so far has been the unions, with whom we have been cooperating. We have talked to senior management at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers who have since produced a position statement critical of the Government’s policies. Keith Porteous Wood gave evidence to a NUT Faith Schools Working Party in February and he described the warmth of his reception as “overwhelming”. Here is the Paper that Keith presented <http://tinyurl.com/2g8uvz>. He has been invited to speak on the topic at an NUT conference in November.

Questions from the public

The NSS has devoted a great deal of time advising members of the public about their rights when confronted by overbearing religion. We get many queries from parents who are outraged at the power that religion wields in their children’s schools. Many do not realise that they have a legal right to withdraw their children from Collective Worship and Religious Education. Even those who attempt to exercise that right find that some schools try, illegally, to discourage withdrawal. We have parents approaching us complaining that their children are being told ridiculous fairy stories about religion at school, being made to sing hymns, say prayers and go to church – even when they don’t want to. Extraordinarily, such complaints do not come exclusively from so-called ‘faith’ schools. As noted above, we have managed to have the law changed to permit sixth formers to withdraw themselves from Collective Worship, including in “faith” schools, but younger pupils still need parental permission.

Many people imagine the sometimes stringent and discriminatory admissions criteria that “faith schools” enjoy must surely be against the law. It can’t be right, they tell us as they are forced to bus their children miles every day to the nearest community school, even though there is a perfectly good school at the end of the road which they can’t get into because it is reserved for “people of faith”.

We agree: it isn’t right! But, as the law stands, there is no appeal against this outrageous religious discrimination. The NSS is constantly researching new ways of challenging this injustice.

We have also fielded many questions and enquiries about employment, advertising, television and radio programmes (which amount to free advertising for the churches) and hospital chaplains.

Student Secular Societies

Universities are overwhelmed by Christian Unions and Islamic Groups, so we thought it important that we encourage the creation of outlets for those who think a secular approach is best. During the year, the NSS launched a campaign to try to encourage the formation of Student Secular Societies in universities and colleges. We produced an advice pack about how to go about it, some literature for distribution at freshers’ fairs and some lapel badges.

If you would like to start a Student Secular Society, we will be delighted to help – please contact the office.

COMMUNICATIONS

The NSS Web presence

Our website is increasingly popular and has received millions of hits over the past year. It is updated daily with our *What The Papers Say* feature, listing relevant stories about secularism from the national and world media. A flurry of interest in our infamous “Debaptism Certificate” has prompted us to upgrade it, so anyone with a colour printer can have a really stylish certificate, worthy of framing.

The NSS on-line shop also continues to draw in customers, many attracted by the unique selection of merchandise we have on offer, ranging from elegant lapel pins to specially imported American books and DVDs, many not available elsewhere in the UK. We have just published an attractive new booklet *Did Christians Steal Christmas?* replacing the popular *Our Pagan Christmas*. We have a new set of secular greetings cards for the festive season, too. (Please take a look, they are delightful: www.secularism.org.uk).

The website is also the place you can find information about the NSS’s activities through its reports, submissions, press releases and so on.

Newsline

One of the NSS’s major means of communication is the weekly e-zine *Newsline*. With many thousands of subscribers, *Newsline* has become the focus for information-sharing, campaigning opportunities and news gathering from around the world. *Newsline*’s letters section is a constant source of ideas, opinions, surprises and occasionally amusement. It provides the opportunity for members to share their take on the world and to brainstorm on particular issues. It also keeps you up to date with the NSS’s activities and events.

Newsline is often first with particularly juicy news stories that are regularly picked up by the national press. Indeed, some journalists demand advance copies in case there’s something they can “lift”. It also provides endless material for bloggers around the web who are either cheering us on or calling God’s curses upon us from their “heavens”.

If you aren’t receiving *Newsline*, please subscribe at our website www.secularism.org.uk or, if you don’t have a computer, members (only) can have *Newsline* in printed form. Please send the office (marked “Newsline”) a supply of stamped addressed envelopes (A5 size).

Speaking Out

Regular readers of *Newsline* will know from the weekly reports that the NSS has a very high profile in the media. During the year, Keith and Terry have done dozens of broadcasts on radio and TV. We have appeared in all the national newspapers, many local and regional ones, in trade journals and women’s magazines as well as in the religious press. Several times during the year we have been the centre of media attention and been literally running from one television studio to another.

Perhaps the most interesting event has been our appearance in the top-flight American media. A journalist from the *Wall Street Journal* spent many hours talking to Terry Sanderson for a major feature in that paper. A similar feature then followed in the *Washington Post*. For that, the journalist spent an afternoon at the NSS, sitting in on the Council meeting where the Secularist of the Year was chosen. This resulted in a front page article that was reproduced in papers around the world. It also resulted in Terry Sanderson appearing on the international news channel CNN (being interviewed from Washington DC) and the Arab channel Al Jazeera. He has also given an interview to a South Korean TV station for a major series they are planning on secularism in Europe. The same film crew came along to capture the Secularist of the Year event for the programme.

Over the years, we have established good relationships with journalists who know they can depend on the NSS for informed and trenchant comment, practically seven days a week and 24 hours a day. Throughout the year we have had hundreds of mentions in the UK and abroad, in both printed and electronic media. A selection of titles in which we have appeared is shown on the cover of this Report. But our influence spreads far wider than this. Our press releases, *Newsline* and direct conversations with representatives of the media frequently form the basis for articles in which we are not mentioned. This happens more and more following the reduction in page size of most leading UK papers: this has materially reduced the space available for additional comment. But we are never satisfied about our coverage; we are always striving for more.

No wonder that a student who had recently been asked by his tutor to write a thesis on an organisation always in the news chose the NSS as his subject.

Do they all play by the Queensberry Rules?

The Anglican and Roman Catholic churches threatened to withdraw services to the poor and needy, such as soup kitchens, if the Government pressed ahead with introducing the Sexual Orientation Regulations provided for in the Equality Act. Honorary Associate Polly Toynbee chided the churches harshly in the *Guardian* for this shameless blackmail.

Following a complaint by the Society, the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that a full page advertisement in *The Times* and another in a parliamentary journal placed by evangelical Christians were misleading. The advert, placed by a group calling itself Coherent and Cohesive Voice, was a further attempt to engineer the defeat of these Regulations. The NSS complained that the scaremongering advertisement was factually incorrect: it had made four claims about the Regulations *every one of which* was incorrect. A Government minister confirmed the inaccuracy of the claims on the floor of the House and later mocked the dishonesty of such tactics by jibing "I thought it was a sin to tell a lie". Curiously, there has been no explanation for the extent of these errors in the advertisement, particularly as lawyers are thought to be among those placing the advert. During the debate in the Lords on the Regulations, a Christian peer denounced a briefing from a Christian campaigning organisation as "deeply inaccurate in a number of respects".

Readers are therefore left to draw their own conclusions about the lengths to which some religious opponents are prepared to go, not to mention the massive cost of the advertisements themselves. Fortunately, on this occasion, these well financed and questionable attempts to derail the Regulations failed miserably.

And we have been shocked to have been contradicted on air by Christian opponents for making factual statements we knew to be true, only for them to concede the accuracy of our claims when we challenged them again after the broadcast.

SEX

Freedom of conscience? Freedom of religion? Not any more.

Now the Labour Government are going to decide what is and isn't acceptable, and then they are going to force their views onto you.

Until last week it appeared that the Government were taking seriously the concerns expressed by religious groups about the Sexual Orientation Regulations. However, the Government has now fast-tracked identical Regulations in Northern Ireland, ignoring all such representations and setting an unworkable precedent for England, Wales and Scotland.

So what do the Government's newly proposed SEXUAL ORIENTATION REGULATIONS do?

- Force all schools to actively promote homosexual Civil Partnerships to children (from primary school age) to the same degree that they teach the importance of marriage?
- Force a printing shop run by a Christian to print fliers promoting gay sex?
- Force a family-run B&B to let out a double room to a transsexual couple, even if the family think it is in the best interests of their children to refuse to allow such a situation in their own home?
- Make it illegal for a heterosexual policeman, fireman or member of the Armed Forces, to refuse to join a Gay Pride event promoting the homosexual way of life?

All British people should live together respectfully and peacefully but they should not be compelled by law to act against their conscience. It is not too much to ask of the Government that individuals are left with the freedom to make their own minds up as to what sexual practices are acceptable and what aren't.

We call on the Ministers with authority on this issue, **Meg Munn** and **Ruth Kelly**, to protect the long cherished freedom of conscience in this country, by adding a simple clause to the Regulations:

'Nothing in these Regulations shall force an individual to act against their conscience or strongly held religious beliefs'.

If you are concerned about this issue, make your views known by writing to your MP and to ministers Ruth Kelly and Meg Munn at:

<p>Ruth Kelly Department for Communities and Local Government Eland House, Bressenden Place London, SW1E 5DU Telephone: 0207 944 4400.</p>	<p>Meg Munn Women and Equality Unit, 1 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0ET Telephone: 0207 215 5000 e-mail: munvm@parliament.uk</p>
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Placed by Coherent and Cohesive Voice, a network of hundreds of Christian leaders in the UK representing hundreds of thousands of voters.

This is not an advertisement.

New Staff at the NSS

The NSS has taken on two new members of staff during the year. Dr Tessa Kendall and Stephen Evans have established themselves as great assets to the Society and have been working extremely hard to ensure things run smoothly. As the Society grows, the pressure on our staff becomes ever more onerous. We hope that we will soon be able to take on more hands to help in the fight for a secular Britain.

With this in mind we would like to remind you that the only sources of income we generate are through our membership and our on-line shop. Many members have generously signed monthly standing orders in favour of the Society, providing us with a regular income that helps so much with planning. If you haven't done this yet, we really urge you to do so. This kind of



Tessa Kendall



Stephen Evans

predictable, regular donation will give us the confidence to take on the kind of campaigns that have, up until now, been beyond our resources. If you could do this – and any bankers order for £5 a month or more will include your annual subscription – we would be very grateful.

SUBMISSIONS

A significant part of our output, largely hidden from view, is our submissions to Government or international bodies' consultations. The brunt of this unglamorous but demanding work is shared by Dr Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood with assistance from Dr Tessa Kendall and senior volunteers.

A selection is shown below, but more (complete with full texts) can be found on

www.secularism.org.uk/responses.html

Faith-based Welfare – clarification sought

The NSS made a submission to the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee to recommend clarifying the law to ensure that when a public body delegates functions such as faith-based welfare to a private body, the latter is subject to a duty not to act in a way which is incompatible with Human Rights. Public authorities are already required not to act in contravention of Human Rights but recent judicial decisions have cast doubt on the extent to which private bodies having been delegated public functions are also subject to the same duty.

Dr Behan, Vice President of the NSS, said: "Faith based welfare is being promoted by both Labour and Conservatives and is likely to grow massively in the next few years. Unless a change of the sort we advocate is made, vulnerable people will be put at risk if providers who deliver outsourced services financed with public funds disregard the Human Rights implications of the way they deliver their services. If those providers include religious organisations which refuse on grounds of 'conscience' to ensure that delivery is made in a non-discriminatory manner, we fear that those whose belief or sexuality does not 'fit in' with the ethos of the provider may suffer."

Community Cohesion response

The NSS has submitted a response to the Government's consultation on Integration and Cohesion. Although the Government maintained that "faith schools" are not a problem, and therefore not part of the consultation, the NSS presented evidence that the best way to achieve cohesion is by educating all children together, at least from the primary stage. In its interim report on the consultation, the Government said those who objected to "faith schools" were "obsessed" and the issue was nothing more than "a red herring" – rather suggesting that they had no counter evidence.

NSS urges tighter control on medical opt-outs

The National Secular Society, in conjunction with the Secular Medical Forum (with whom we work closely), has made a joint response to a consultation by the General Medical Council. The response makes clear that patients or potential patients should be informed in advance about doctors intending to exercise "conscience clauses", and that there should be an automatic referral if they do.

www.secularism.org.uk/responses.html

Census

The Society made a submission to the Scottish Executive over the religious questions in the 2011 Census. The 2001 version of the Census in Scotland was much more informative and accurate on religion than the one in England and Wales. The Scots had been asked about their religion of upbringing as well as "What religion, religious denomination or body *do you belong to?*" We argued in our submission against a proposal to change the 2011 Scottish Census questions to the less accurate English version. The stated justification was to achieve standardisation, but is it just a coincidence that adopting the England and Wales questions will result in a materially higher percentage of religious adherents? We doubt it, and have raised this with Patrick Harvie MSP, who has tabled some Parliamentary Questions.

The NSS also responded to an interim report of the Equalities review. We argued that the Government is placing too much emphasis on the flawed results of the 2001 census. We showed convincingly that the figure of 72% of people who ticked the Christian box on the census form represents a gross exaggeration of the true picture.

No religious opt-outs from equality law

The NSS responded to an interim report from the Women and Equalities Unit, entitled *Getting Equal* and the Discrimination Law Review's *A Framework for Fairness*. We argued that the granting of exemptions to religious bodies from equality legislation was unjust, and possibly in breach of European and/or Human Rights legislation. Our Response was largely compiled by vice president Anna Behan. See the first Response here: www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/354490238bcfb74166350806.pdf

Less religion on TV, not more

NSS Honorary Associate Graham Allen MP wrote on our behalf to the Culture Secretary after it emerged that a group of religious bodies had demanded the BBC should be forced to broadcast more religious programmes. In the letter, Mr Allen pointed out research showing that religious programmes were the least watched, least appreciated and least wanted on TV. To spend even more licence-payers' money on producing programmes that few want to watch would be a betrayal of those who pay the bills.

Donations

In the last 12 months, our members and supporters have been very generous. We were remembered in the wills of Mr J Craddock, who left us £25,000 and Trevor Morrison, who left us £20,000. Atlantic Philanthropies, a multi-billion dollar philanthropic organisation, sent us £3,300. We have also had four donations of £5,000, one from America, as well as other gifts from members, including one of £2,500. Along with members' subscriptions and standing orders, donations are our only source of income. We do not receive any Government or outside funding, so your generous gestures are very much appreciated to support our continuing work as this time of increasing religious influence.

If you would like to remember the NSS in your will, please contact the office for a legacy leaflet.

Volunteers

On behalf of the members, the Council and Executive Director would like to pay tribute to the growing band of talented and hard-working volunteers throughout the UK who play a major role in the Society's work.

Organisations to which the NSS is Affiliated

Amnesty International; European Humanist Federation; International Humanist and Ethical Union; Liberty. We also support the Humanist Peace Forum, Dignity in Dying (formerly the Voluntary Euthanasia Society), the European Women's Lobby and Abortion Rights.

Honorary Associates

Three of our Honorary Associates have caused a literary earthquake this year. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and A. C. Grayling have written respectively *The God Delusion*, *God Is Not Great* and *Against all Gods*. All have sold in enormous numbers.

Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have been touring America, demonstrating that it is not quite the complete theocracy that the Religious Right would have us believe.

Christopher Hitchens tells how he asked his publisher to send him on a tour of the Bible belt in the USA to promote his book. Wherever he went, he played to packed houses, and in all these supposedly pious cities he was finding crowds telling him: "I thought I was the only atheist in town!" Richard Dawkins' book has caused the greatest sensation, with several volumes of refutation being issued in damage-limitation exercises by desperate Christians. Just about every newspaper in the world has carried articles critical of both these books but their impact is not in question, as their phenomenal sales reveal.



Dawkins



Grayling



Hitchens



Michael Cashman MEP

Michael Cashman was chosen by fellow MEPs to be MEP of the year for justice and Human Rights in a poll organised by *Parliament* magazine. After the prize-giving ceremony in Brussels, the West Midlands MEP said: "When it comes to the defence of human rights and civil liberties, no one acts alone. Therefore I want to pay tribute to all those people who work with me over the years,

both personally and politically. We share a common goal, which is to make the world a fairer and better place to live."

The Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin was subjected to a violent attack by Islamic fundamentalists in India this year as she launched her new book. Taslima is constantly threatened by these religious maniacs, but it does not stop her speaking out. We express our admiration and support for her. The NSS wrote to the Indian High Commissioner following the incident, and asked that she be given protection.

YOUR COUNCIL AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2007

Officers

President:
Terry Sanderson
Vice Presidents:
Anna Behan
Jim Herrick
Treasurer:
Afonso Reis e Sousa

Council members

Norman Bacrac
Dan Bye
Denis Cobell
Jennifer Jeynes
Surendra Lal
Malcolm Trahearn
Peter Vlachos

Office administration

Head of Dept.: Tessa Kendall

Executive Director:
Keith Porteous Wood, FCCA

Honorary Associates

Graham Allen MP
Prof. Peter Atkins
Iain Banks
Lorraine Barrett AM
Edward Bond
Michael Cashman MEP
Colin Challen MP
Nick Cohen
Prof. Richard Dawkins
Lord Desai
Angela Eagle MP*
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Ian Gibson MP*
Prof. A. C. Grayling
Dr. Evan Harris MP
Patrick Harvie MSP
Christopher Hitchens
Paul Holmes MP
Prof. Ted Honderich
Kelvin Hopkins MP
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Stewart Lee*
Graham Linehan

Robert Marshall-Andrews QC, MP
Baroness Massey of Darwen
Lord McIntosh of Haringey
Jonathan Meades
Sir Jonathan Miller
Maryam Namazie
Taslima Nasrin
Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan
Lord Peston
Harold Pinter
Philip Pullman
Lord Raglan
Claire Rayner OBE
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Dr. David Starkey
Lord Taverne QC
Polly Toynbee
Baroness Turner of Camden
Sophie in 't Veld MEP
Gore Vidal
Prof. Lord Wedderburn of Charlton QC



**Angela Eagle
MP**



Ian Gibson MP



Stewart Lee



**Lord Russell-
Johnston**

* These four Honorary Associates were appointed during the last year. Stewart Lee is a comedian and writer; he was closely involved with *Jerry Springer The Opera*. The other three are active parliamentary campaigners in both houses. Their full details can be found in this year's Bulletins. We are sad to note the death of George Melly, a long-time and much-loved Honorary Associate, who died in July aged 80.

We invite you to support our work and join the National Secular Society

Subscription details

UK membership is £29 per annum (£17 for those unwaged and for under 18s). For those resident abroad, membership is £51 p.a.

Joint UK membership (two people living at the same address) is £45 p.a.

The above rates are effective from 1 January 2008, before which lower rates apply.

Under the Society's Articles of Association, those under 18 years of age and non-UK citizens living outside the UK are only eligible for associate membership. Associate members are not able to vote at General Meetings.

Standing orders of £5 or more per month are deemed to include the annual subscription. Standing order forms are available online at <http://tinyurl.com/2k5rqy> or by application to the office.

(Payments are only accepted in £ sterling drawn on UK banks and payable to the NSS.)

The membership year is 1 January to 31 December. Regardless of the date of joining, membership is renewable on 1st January. However, those joining in September – December do not have to renew on the following 1st January, but the 1st January on the year after that.

Joining online can be done quickly and securely at www.secularism.org.uk/join.html

If you are already a member and have a friend or colleague who might be interested in joining, please pass this form on to them – or the whole report.

JOIN US

You can join and pay online using our secure credit card service at www.secularism.org.uk/join.html or complete the form overleaf and return it to:

NSS
25 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL

From the President:

We all want a society that is free and open to all on an equal basis. Only a democratic, secular society can support such an ambition. Please take a stand and join thousands of others to help us achieve this.

Terry Sanderson



Name(s):

Address:

Post Code

Telephone number:

Email (if applicable):

Occupation:

(Optional but appreciated)

I accept the principles and objects shown in this booklet and apply for membership.

Signature:

Date:

I enclose my cheque/postal order for:

£	subscription
---	--------------

plus

£	donation
---	----------

Total enclosed:

£

Please return completed form to:

**National Secular Society,
25 Red Lion Square,
London WC1R 4RL**

THE SOCIETY'S PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTS:

1. Secularism affirms that this life is the only one of which we have any knowledge and human effort should be directed wholly towards its improvement.
2. It asserts that supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and assails it as the historic enemy of progress.
3. Secularism affirms that progress is possible only on the basis of equal freedom of speech and publication; that the free criticism of institutions and ideas is essential to a civilised state.
4. Affirming that morality is social in origin and application, Secularism aims at promoting the happiness and well-being of mankind.
5. Secularism demands the complete separation of Church and State and the abolition of all privileges granted to religious organisations.
6. It seeks to spread education, to promote the fraternity of all peoples as a means of advancing universal peace, to further common cultural interests and to develop the freedom and dignity of mankind.

The NSS is certainly vigorous in its opposition to the forces of superstition, obscurantism, and illiberalism; but that is merely another way of looking at its support for liberal causes. When it campaigns against censorship, it is campaigning for freedom of expression; when it campaigns against faith schools, it is campaigning for educational impartiality; and when it campaigns against any of the social and fiscal survivals of religious privilege, it is campaigning for equality in a pluralist society.

Affiliated Local Groups

Birmingham Humanists; Blackpool & Fylde Humanists; Brighton & Hove Humanist Society; Bromley Humanist Group; Chiltern Humanists; Cornwall Humanists; Cotswold Humanists; Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists; Democratic Association; Devon Humanists; Ealing Humanist Group; East Kent Humanists; Essex Humanists; Farnham Humanists; Greater Manchester Humanist Group; Hampstead Humanist Society; Haverling & District Humanist Society; Humanist Society of West Yorkshire; Isle of Wight Humanists; Leicester Secular Society; Lewisham Humanist Group; Liberal Democrat Humanist & Secularist Group; Norfolk Humanists; North East Humanists; North London Humanist Group; Sheffield Humanist Society; South Hampshire Humanists; South Somerset Humanists; Suffolk Humanists; Sutton Humanist Group; Welsh Marches Humanist Group; West Glamorgan Humanist Group.

The Secular Medical Forum has also affiliated to the NSS during the year.



www.secularism.org.uk

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London WC1R 4RL

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