

79. Abolition of common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel

(1) The offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel under the common law of England and Wales are abolished.

(2) In section 1 of the Criminal Libel Act 1819 (60 Geo. 3 & 1 Geo. 4 c. 8) (orders for seizure of copies of blasphemous or seditious libel) the words “any blasphemous libel, or” are omitted.

(3) In sections 3 and 4 of the Law of Libel Amendment Act 1888 (c. 64) (privileged matters) the words “blasphemous or” are omitted.

national
secular
society

challenging religious privilege

annual report

2008

This report covers the year to October 2008.

President's message



The NSS has had another successful year, with one of our central aims achieved, as well as other significant campaigning successes and a continued high profile. The abolition of the blasphemy laws is something that the NSS has been fighting for since it was founded in 1866. It has been a privilege to see off the blasphemy laws on my watch, and that – to all intents and purposes – it was the NSS “wot done it”.

Or more specifically, it was our Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP working in concert with Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood, taking advantage of the ground made progressively more fertile over the years by our long-term and valued supporter, Lord Avebury. My gratitude and congratulations to them all.

There have been rumblings from the Government that it may be minded (that is, of course, if the current Government is re-elected) to amend the Act of Settlement, particularly the section excluding any non-Anglican from ascending the throne. Commentators immediately pointed out the many problems that would accompany such a move, but they also realise that if it happened, it would almost certainly lead to the disestablishment of the Church of England.

Suddenly, the NSS's primary aim seems closer to achievement than it has done for many decades. With the sudden end of blasphemy, we can only hope that the mood for constitutional change is in the air, and that the status quo can be replaced by a secular alternative. That is something that the NSS is in a unique position to argue. And it is especially important that it does so, because worse than disestablishment would be the proposals for a multi-faith quasi-establishment.

The other big issue has been that of religion in schools. The NSS's is the most prominent voice by far in the principled fight to oppose “faith schools” – they are divisive and unjust.

Campaigns to simply modify or reform them, but leave them in place, do not go to the heart of the problem.

One third of publicly-funded schools are “Christian”; their existence, and the many more being opened, makes it difficult to argue against the establishment of new minority faith schools. They will be catastrophic for cohesion in the long term. Children need to be educated together, regardless of culture or religion. It will become impossible to break down the dangerous barriers of suspicion and prejudice that are rapidly arising without stopping this system of educational apartheid.

On a related matter, we have been arguing that sufficiently mature older children should also be permitted to make their own minds up about whether they want to take part in collective worship and religious education at school. The NSS has managed to make some inroads here by securing the right of sixth formers aged 16 or over to absent themselves from collective worship if they want to. We need to build on that, and amendments we originated to extend the right are currently tabled in the House of Lords.

I hope that you'll be pleased with the NSS's campaigning activities over the past year. We have maintained our high media profile and our membership is rising.

These are turbulent and unpredictable times, but there are signs that we are making progress, so it is particularly important that you stay with us for the long and difficult battles ahead.

Terry Sanderson
President, National Secular Society

Bye Bye Blasphemy

As noted in the President's message, this year finally saw the end of the ancient laws of blasphemy and blasphemous libel. The initial, fatally-wounding shot was fired by Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP, assisted in research and in Parliament by Keith Porteous Wood. Following a dramatic debate in the House of Commons, Evan extracted from the Government the promise of an undertaking to support abolition in the House of Lords. This was apparently to be preceded by a "short, sharp" consultation with the Church of England (whose doctrine the laws were designed to protect). The representative of the upper echelons of the Church, to whom Keith spoke, was initially sceptical that the "short, sharp consultation" was, as Keith suggested, simply a face-saver, but it soon became clear to them that this was all it was.

Lord Avebury, our long-time supporter and opponent of the blasphemy laws for several decades was taking no chances, however. He tabled his own House of Lords amendment to have the laws abolished. But it soon became evident from a formal meeting he and Keith had with the Government Minister responsible that the question was not whether, but how, the blasphemy laws should go. When it came to the debate, the Government uttered a few emollient words, an Archbishop and several bishops huffed and puffed, but when it came to the division, the most senior of them didn't even vote. They did not want the abolition, but didn't want to be seen to have lost. Keith reported it was almost an anti-climax when the deed was done.

Not long before the debate, fundamentalist Christians tried to revive the blasphemy laws by attempting to

prosecute the BBC for its broadcast of *Jerry Springer – the Opera*. This spectacularly backfired by clearly showing that the laws were incompatible with the Human Rights Act. Also, attempts to counter iniquitous blasphemy prosecutions abroad, such as naming a teddy bear "Mohammed", were hampered by the fact that the same offence still existed in England and Wales.

This great result is the culmination of a 140-year campaign for the NSS, and we hope it signals a willingness in the Government to look at constitutional reform more generally. Although in the House of Lords, the government spokeswoman, [Baroness Andrews](#), tried to reassure the bishops that it was not the first step on the road to disestablishment, there is a small hope that, in fact, that is precisely what it is.

Of course, such a momentous achievement for the NSS needed a special celebration to mark it, and so we threw a *Bye Bye Blasphemy Party* in London in June. It was an extraordinary occasion at which the main campaigners in the battle were all present. Dr Evan Harris and Lord Avebury were our political guests of honour and we were thrilled to have Sir Ian McKellen come along and read the poem *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name* – the subject of the last successful blasphemy prosecution in this country. Baroness Andrews sent a message of support on behalf of the Government.

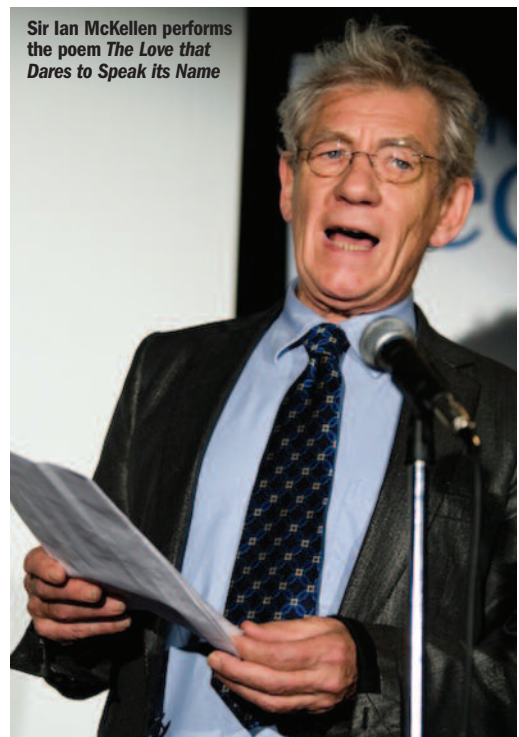
NSS members can have a DVD of the whole performance – including an entertaining film we have compiled about the history of blasphemy and some of its victims – by sending a padded, 42p stamped addressed envelope to the office.



Dr Evan Harris MP



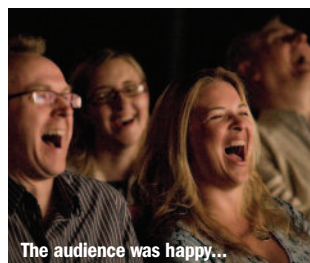
Lord Avebury



Sir Ian McKellen performs the poem *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name*



Robin Ince



The audience was happy...



Christina Martin

Collective Worship and RE in Schools

Following our success last year in getting the right for sixth-formers to exempt themselves from Collective Worship in schools, we are **actively engaged** in Parliament seeking to extend that further to include religious education and to make such a right available to all children who are mature enough to make an informed choice.

Our stance is supported by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, which issued another report telling the Government that it was potentially infringing the Human Rights of children by forcing them to worship and attend religious education against their conscience.

We made an initial attempt to bring the issue back in the House of Lords just before the parliamentary recess and have raised it again at the next stage of the Education and Skills Bill.

The office regularly receives phone calls and emails from parents concerned by what their children are being confronted with at school – in both “faith schools” and community schools – and we continue to send out our **parents’ advice pack**, which can be obtained by contacting the office.

The NSS continues to fight the teaching of creationism or Intelligent Design in schools as a valid alternative to science as well as religious proselytising

The continuing fight in education

The NSS fielded a speaker at two teachers’ conferences on the topic of “faith schools.” One was an **NUT members’ conference** and the other a round table **conference** of senior union representatives. Keith Porteous Wood spoke out strongly against the concept of religious schools and pointed out the dangers to community cohesion, as well as the injustices these schools engendered in relation to admissions. At both meetings, representatives from the Anglican and Catholic churches were clearly on the defensive.

Following discussions with the Minister of State for Education and his senior staff for generous transitional provisions for Section 37 of the Education and Inspections Act (which permitted greater discrimination against non-religious staff in schools), the Government issued a consultation document. The **NSS led the argument** for the most generous transitional provisions possible to try to protect the careers and promotion prospects of such staff, and through the Equal Opportunities Employment Forum mobilised the unions. As before with the legislation itself, the Government totally ignored all the counter-arguments. Worst hit by its intransigence will be those in Voluntary Controlled (publicly-funded) religious schools hoping for promotion to a headteacher post. Such posts can in future be reserved for the most pious and even for those whose private lives conform to the doctrines of the relevant religious body.



We continue to hold meetings with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to discuss the teaching of alternative philosophical perspectives to religious ones.

The NSS contributed to the NASUWT’s *Keeping the Faith?* This consultation document by the largest UK-wide teachers’ union sought to address issues raised in the 2007 NASUWT conference Resolution on Faith Schools, which focused on the concept of a ‘totally secular education system’.

The NSS contribution, *Religious Schools*, written by Keith Porteous Wood, argued for an embargo on new “faith schools”. Existing religious schools who want to retain their 100% revenue subsidy should be brought under LEA control. It also called for discriminatory religious admissions criteria to be scrapped, as well as the provisions permitting religious discrimination in the appointment of teachers and support staff.

West Midlands Police and *Dispatches*

The NSS has been prominent in pursuing the West Midlands Police (WMP) over its outrageous attempt to prosecute the makers of Channel 4's documentary *Undercover Mosque* about hatemongering at a mosque in Birmingham.

When the WMP and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decided they could find no grounds to prosecute, they raised multiple complaints with the media watchdog Ofcom, claiming for example that the *Dispatches* programme was misleading.

As we predicted, Ofcom rejected all the complaints. Legal action ensued against the WMP and CPS, who made an unconditional apology and paid out a six-figure settlement. Channel 4 are to be congratulated for screening a further programme showing similarly disturbing activities at Regent's Park mosque in London. No action has been taken against them.

The NSS made several complaints to the police and official watchdog bodies about the actions of the police and the CPS. All were officially rejected on the grounds that we were not a party to the dispute, but we are convinced this did not mean our complaints went unheeded. We have also raised the matter with a number of senior Parliamentarians and the matter is not yet closed as far as we are concerned.

The NSS has supported free speech throughout this episode and has called on the CPS to distance itself from the police in such cases. Keith Porteous Wood later spoke at a conference of the police and the CPS and told them that the Channel 4 debacle was a case of justice going into reverse.

He told the conference that the police and CPS should be at least as protective of free speech as they are of the rights of minority religions. Both were important, but free expression must not be sacrificed to satisfy the demands of religious activists anxious to shut down examination of their activities.

Quite apart from the freedom of speech aspect, these programmes raise huge questions about the way the authorities tackle religious extremism.

Scouting for all – but not really

In a top-level meeting with the NSS and BHA, the Scouting Association refused to modify the rule that anyone wishing to join the Scouts must swear a "religious promise" (not necessarily Christian). We suggested that, given that most teenagers don't have a religion, the rules would often force applicants into an act of hypocrisy, hardly good Scouting behaviour. Our stand was not a popular one in the right wing press.

The NSS took the complaint a stage further to the Equality and Human Rights Commission. We argued that the Scouts cannot have it both ways – either they are a discriminatory organisation and accept the consequences, such as in funding, or they really should be open to all, as they currently pretend they are. We believe that it is unacceptable for the only youth organisation that is present in so many communities, and that receives considerable financial support from public funds, to practise such discrimination.

We detected a certain diffidence at the meeting and in a broadcast afterwards Keith Porteous Wood made mincemeat of the defence put up by Scouting's top brass to justify their policy. This, and the newspaper coverage has opened up the topic in this less-than-democratic organisation and it seems, as we suggested all along, that the religious fervour at the top is not shared in the ranks. We are optimistic that change will ensue.

The NSS has been prominent in pursuing the West Midlands Police over its outrageous attempt to prosecute the makers of Channel 4's documentary *Undercover Mosque*

Moral But No Compass

A report commissioned for the Church of England by one of its bishops entitled *Moral But No Compass* protested that the Government was ignoring the various good works it claimed the Church does. The report was full of self-interest and special pleading.

The All-Parliamentary Humanist Group held a meeting in the Palace of Westminster to discuss this report and Keith Porteous Wood was able to make a powerful case against faith-based welfare and point out its many dangers. He also managed to make his points about the report to Communities Secretary Hazel Blears in a transatlantic radio debate while he was in Washington DC.

Our campaigns make their mark

There are increasing attempts by religious bodies to blame secularism for all of the ills of modern society. Many of them identify the NSS as the leader of this secular tide. These attacks come in retaliation for the NSS' constant public challenges to religious privilege, obstructing what religious leaders consider to be their rights whether society as a whole approves or not.

The Moral But No Compass report mentioned above singles out the NSS for several direct attacks, albeit on a number of baseless or inaccurate grounds. This demonstrates once again that our criticism and actions really hit home.

It is not just the Anglican Church that is resenting the growth of secularism. According to *The Tablet*, Fr Aidan Nichols, a (Catholic) Dominican academic at Oxford, argues that secularism is far more of a challenge to Christianity in England than Islam and spoke about a 'soft atheism that seeks to privatise the public space so that religion has no part to play'. He warned of the dangers of the growing influence of secularism and even of the disintegration of society as a whole if Christian narrative was lost. Nichols called on Catholics to use public bodies such as the BBC, Parliament, Ofsted and the Human Rights Commission to oppose the tide of secularism. He did not rule out Catholics refusing on the grounds of conscience to abide by laws.

This typical over-wrought response to secular campaigning, which is echoed by some Muslim leaders, shows that we are slowly but surely making increasing inroads into religious privilege. Despite resorting to disingenuous claims that belief is on the increase, it is clear that religious leaders are finally realising that it is non-believers who are growing in number and influence. The growing obsession with secularism even of the Pope himself demonstrates that our campaigning is hitting its targets.

Submissions

The NSS keeps up a steady flow of responses to the many Government consultations. A sample of the responses this year includes ones:

- to a House of Lords [consultation on Cohesion and Migration](#);
- to the Liberal Democrats' education policy body (we emphasised the [dangers of "faith schools"](#) and the over-representation of religion in schools);
- to the Communities ministry's report [Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side](#): a framework for interfaith dialogue and social cohesion;
- to the Department for Children, Schools and Families' [consultation on Schools Admissions](#); and
- to the [Empowerment Fund](#), a proposal to introduce faith-based welfare into local communities.

[Evidence](#) was submitted to the House of Lords Ad Hoc Committee on Intergovernmental Organisations on how effectively the global spread of communicable diseases is being controlled by intergovernmental organisations – including the stance of religious groups on condoms and abstinence. Our forthright report focussed on the major adverse impact of religious groups and religious perspectives on disease control, especially the imposition of abstinence programmes and the prohibition or restriction of the supply of condoms. We do however acknowledge that some Catholic aid agencies, to their credit, ignore directives from Vatican City on such matters.

Wales

The NSS broke new ground in the Welsh Assembly when our representative Greg Pycroft spoke at an inquiry into presumed consent for organ donation, following our [written submission](#). This was the first time a non-religious group has ever spoken there. Our Honorary Associate Lorraine Barrett AM was on the committee.



Greg Pycroft



Lorraine Barrett, AM

Media

When new members join the NSS, we ask them how they found out about us. Most people respond that "they have been aware of the Society for some time through the media". It is this awareness that we will continue to raise at every opportunity.

Of the several hundred references to the NSS in print or broadcast media over the last year, the two most-reported topics related to the Archbishop of Canterbury's musings on sharia law and our comments on the filleting of anti-religious references from *The Golden Compass*, a film based on NSS Honorary Associate Philip Pullman's novels *His Dark Materials*. Both ricocheted around the world, reaching USA, Canada, Australia and Singapore – and even the *Investors' Business Daily*.

A similar volume of media references covered youth issues such as the Scouts, RE and religious schools, and the increasing infiltration of creationism into schools.

There was less coverage than we hoped for the repeal of blasphemy and for Human Rights and Equality work.

As the number of serious reporters and space allotted to serious news decreases, securing coverage for more complicated issues such as reduced employment protection for non-religious teachers often proves impossible.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke about sharia law, our spokesperson Alistair McBay led the fray. He was also on the front line when Professor Michael Reiss of the Royal Society made remarks about the treatment of creationism in schools. Once more, Alistair's comments were widely reported. He rose to the task magnificently and we are very grateful for his expertise and energy. At about the same time, the first Hindu school opened in London, and Alistair was once more centre stage as leader of the opposition. He has also continued with his phenomenal success rate in getting letters published in both English and Scottish national papers on behalf of the NSS.

We have had several high-profile TV and radio appearances, with Terry Sanderson appearing on the Radio 4 programme *The Moral Maze* and being ferociously attacked by Melanie Phillips and Clifford Longley (the latter wrote to Terry the following day to

challenging religious privilege www.secularism.org.uk

The Catholic Herald's article featuring Terry Sanderson and Rowan Williams

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2008-09-11 14:04 THE CATHOLIC HERALD

FEATURES

Which of these men has the best vision for Britain?

Is it the unmet secularist or the Anglican leader, asks Quentin de la Bédoyère

By Rowan Williams (left), would a society that gives the observance of religious observance, Terry Sanderson (right) thinks religion should be a strictly private matter

There are two men, a secularist and a religious leader, who are being compared in the pages of the *Catholic Herald*. One is a secularist, the other a religious leader. One is a man who has spent his life in the service of the Church, the other a man who has spent his life in the service of the secular world. One is a man who has spent his life in the service of the Church, the other a man who has spent his life in the service of the secular world. One is a man who has spent his life in the service of the Church, the other a man who has spent his life in the service of the secular world.

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apologise for being unnecessarily rude and aggressive). Terry has also become a regular newspaper reviewer on BBC London's Sunday morning programme. He has given interviews to foreign TV stations – notably a French station making a documentary about the contrasting approaches to secularism in France and Britain. Terry has continued to contribute frequently to *The Guardian's* Comment is Free blog – and briefly held the record for the largest number of responses.

Brett Lock appeared on behalf of the NSS in a debate on More 4 News and John Dillon appeared on the BBC's *The Big Question*. Council members Norman Bacrac and Jennifer Jeynes spoke about sharia law to Sky News, BBC Wales, CNN and the Press Association.

Keith Porteous Wood has been busy with the BBC, including arguing against religious schools on *The Politics Show* and commenting on Tony Blair's Faith Foundation on *Newsnight*. While in Washington at the IHEU conference, Keith was even summoned to attend the BBC studio there for a head-to-head transatlantic debate with the Communities Secretary, Rt Hon Hazel Blears MP, over faith-based welfare. He has also appeared frequently on BBC Radio Ulster's top political comment programme and on Radio Five Live. Throughout the year we have had the usual steady round of local radio interviews and comments in newspapers.

In addition to appearing in the media, the NSS attended the launch of the BBC's annual report at Broadcasting House where Keith Porteous Wood and Anna Behan challenged the Director General and Chair of the BBC about the level of religious programming despite surveys indicating the ever-decreasing interest of viewers. The former seemed impervious to these. We also complained about the contempt shown by the BBC for the non-religious as a group in a way that would be unthinkable for any other (for example our exclusion from *Thought for the Day* without any alternative being offered).



Above: Keith Porteous Wood attacking "faith schools" on BBC1



Alistair McBay

When the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke about sharia law, our spokesperson Alistair McBay led the fray. He was also on the front line when Professor Michael Reiss of the Royal Society made remarks about the treatment of creationism in schools

Work with international bodies

Europe

What happens in the European Union and even in the United Nations can have a profound effect on what happens in Britain, so it is important that the NSS does what it can to prevent religious power-seekers from infiltrating into these institutions to the disadvantage of others.

At the Council of Europe we took part in a consultation on Intercultural Dialogue. Although we answered the official questionnaire issued by the Council we felt it failed to address many key areas and questions. So we prepared a report on the issues it had neglected to ask about, such as the decline in Christian adherence in Europe, democracy and the nature of representation, and the need to protect Human Rights. Our highly detailed but wide-ranging sixty-page report, entitled *Concerns about Undue Religious Influence and Religious Activities Compromising Human Rights*, included recommendations on issues such as: core values, representation by religious groups, equality of women, homosexuality, voluntary euthanasia, ritual slaughter, science, free speech, media, education, language; and the need to keep public services neutral. We commend this *tour d'horizon* as a source of reference in its own right.

The Council of Europe's White Paper in response was published in May, and many of the points we made in our report were included, although we would always prefer a greater emphasis on secularism.

Nevertheless, there were copious references to non-believers and the religiously-unconcerned, whose opinions were often neglected in favour of religious leaders. We prepared a paper outlining the influence we believe we had on it.

We continue to take a leading part in the European Parliament's All-Party Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics. Its chair, the Dutch MEP Sophie in 't Veld, is one of our Honorary Associates and has

helped us significantly on several fronts as has another valued Honorary Associate and MEP, Michael Cashman.

The NSS works closely with both of them and when it was announced that the Pope had been invited to address the European Parliament – along with a whole string of other religious leaders (all male) – Sophie in 't Veld demanded that a woman speaking from a non-religious perspective be included. Eventually, the Parliament invited Mrs Asma Jahangir, the United Nations rapporteur on Religious Freedom, whom the NSS President and Executive Director had introduced to Sophie the previous year. Mrs Jahangir's [speech](#) earned her a standing ovation. As it turned out, the Pope declined his invitation, we suspect as part of an attempt to exert further pressure on the EU to dance to his tune.

In April, the NSS took part in a conference in Brussels to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, organised by the European Humanist Federation (EHF), to which the NSS is affiliated. It was addressed by José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, which kindly funded it. Shortly before he spoke, Keith Porteous Wood warned the audience against complacency over the protection of Human Rights outside Europe. He also spoke of the problems at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.

Keith also [gave a speech](#) in French at the opening session of the 160th anniversary of our sister organisation Libre Pensée at the French Senate in Paris. He told delegates about the worrying situation at the UNHRC but concluded by announcing, to great jubilation, that the blasphemy laws in England and Wales had been abolished earlier that week. Terry Sanderson was also welcomed as an official guest.

We were unable to accept a formal invitation to a Libre Pensée meeting to protest against the Pope's visit to Paris, but sent a supportive speech which was translated and kindly delivered *in absentia* by Catherine le Fur.

United Nations

This year, we have been particularly involved in opposing attempts by Islamic nations to restrict freedom of expression at the UNHRC.

Representing the 56 Islamic states and describing itself as "the collective voice of the Muslim world", the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has been regularly tabling motions in both the UNHRC and the UN itself to make "defamation of religions" – particularly of Islam – an offence throughout the world. Although not binding on all States, it provides the framework for a future international super-blasphemy law.



Mrs Asma Jahangir
addresses the
European
Parliament

Working closely with the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and its invaluable chief of operations in Geneva, Roy Brown, the NSS has been raising awareness among key policy makers and NGOs around the world about the OIC's disturbing manoeuvring. We have urged Western nations, who have been silent about much of this, to make their voices heard more loudly in opposition. The NSS has submitted written statements in respect of motions at both the UNHRC and UN.



Roy Brown – former president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)

We are convinced that another purpose of these manoeuvres by the OIC is to deflect criticism of persecution in Muslim countries and create a climate in which Islam is regarded as a “victim”. Freedom of expression is even being compromised in the UN itself. OIC members now routinely attempt to silence those who seek to point out the perils of these motions, or talk about Human Rights abuses in Muslim countries. The UNHRC President has even ruled that matters of faith can only be discussed there by religious scholars. We take this to mean matters of Islamic faith and to include sharia law. There was even an attempt to silence Non-Governmental Organisations from speaking without the “authority” of their own governments – when often the very raison d'être of the NGOs is to fight oppression in their own countries. We compiled a major submission to the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee making the case that the Government's Human Rights Report had failed to adequately recognise the gravity of the problems facing the UNHRC. Our submission cannot be published until released by Parliament, but Keith Porteous Wood has raised it with the Foreign Office Minister Lord Malloch Brown, the previous deputy Secretary General of the UN. Further talks are planned.

We had earlier prepared a carefully-researched report, “Concerns about the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam and moves to outlaw the Defamation of Religions” to raise awareness of these problems



The UN building in New York

around the world. The Report was updated to reflect developments and issued under IHEU's banner to maximise its impact. It was sent to senior officials, diplomats and parliamentarians attending a major international conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the international organisation of parliamentarians held in South Africa in April 2008. We have also sent the report to carefully selected diplomats and politicians in the European Union, European Commission and the Council of Europe. We have also worked to raise the issue in the international media. This seems to have had some effect and, after years of complacency, nations such as Canada, the USA and the UK have at last begun to mount a resistance.

There are still perilous times ahead, and we are monitoring the situation closely. The OIC is adopting new tactics to get its way, and the huge number of votes it can command at the UN and the diplomatic clout its supporters can wield makes it very difficult to resist.

A speech by Keith about the developing problems at the UN Human Rights Council was delivered at the European Humanist Federation General Assembly in Athens. Keith's commitments precluded his going to Athens, so it was kindly read in his absence by Vera Pegna.



Keith Porteous Wood speaks at the EHF

America

The NSS also took part in the three-yearly congress of the IHEU, on this occasion held in Washington DC, co-hosted by the American Humanist Association.

The NSS had a prominent role throughout and was lauded for its work. Keith Porteous Wood gave a well-received speech about the religious approach to combating HIV/AIDS in developing countries. He was particularly concerned about religious bodies interfering with the distribution of condoms – the only known protection from HIV infection – and the



Michael Cashman MEP



Sophie in 't Veld MEP

dangerously unrealistic and impractical promotion of abstinence policies. The President and he gave three further talks and took part in several broadcasts.

While in Washington Keith made good contacts with other organisations operating out of the USA. Of particular relevance was a formal meeting with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which is very similar in aims to the NSS. He also had a meeting with the Amnesty International Representative at the United Nations in New York, rallying their support for opposition to the OIC activities over defamation of religion at the UNHRC.

Census 2011 – Scotland

We have been [maintaining pressure](#) to resist changes to the wording in the next Scottish census. The last census had two questions concerning religion of upbringing and religion to which the respondent currently belonged. This produces an objective and informative response. The proposed change to the same question as used in the England and Wales census would heavily exaggerate the level of affiliation.



Patrick Harvie MSP

Early reports from Honorary Associate Patrick Harvie MSP suggest some cause for optimism that the “England and Wales” question may not, after all, prevail. We are most grateful to him for his work on our behalf.

We have also tried to change the question for the English and Welsh census but the obsession of both the Government and the newly-independent ONS with over-stating adherence to religions is so great that we do not expect any change there.

Lawyers’ Secular Society

We are pleased to have helped with the formation of the Lawyers’ Secular Society, the brainchild of NSS council member and barrister Carla Revere. Carla had already helped in one case, where a hairdresser was sued by a Muslim woman denied a job after she refused to take off her hijab in the salon. No direct discrimination was found, but the complainant received £4,500 in compensation for “hurt feelings”. If you would like to find out more about the LSS, which is also open to law students, please contact Carla Revere at the NSS office admin@secularism.org.uk or NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.



Carla Revere

NSS at Human Rights conference

The NSS was represented at The Equality and Human Rights Commission’s top level session for key stakeholders at Coombe Abbey, near Coventry, to discuss its Strategic Priorities. Keith Wood made a point that religious leaders claim to speak for all of their followers but are often not representative of them – especially women, young people and sexual minorities who can find religion a source of oppression. Those of no religion – including those hidden in minority communities – are often ignored or side-lined.

NSS and Joel Edwards

The NSS called for the dismissal of evangelical leader Rev Joel Edwards from his job as commissioner on the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Mr Edwards, who was, until recently, head of the Evangelical Alliance, had spoken out in a newspaper article published some months before his appointment against “a culture that is being railroaded into an individualistic, rights-orientated mentality”. We wrote to the Government complaining that Mr Edwards’ actions had shown him not to be a suitable person to be a Commissioner, given his antipathy to the very concept of individual Human Rights.

A few months later, a resolution was passed at the TUC Conference similarly calling for Mr Edwards to be removed.

The NSS was represented at The Equality and Human Rights Commission’s top level session for key stakeholders to discuss its Strategic Priorities

Secular Medical Forum

The SMF has responded to several consultations this year, including the one about hospital chaplains, and is generally becoming more active. It is open to new members; if you work in any of the health care professions, you can find out more from the website: www.secularmedicalforum.org.uk.



Hospital Chaplain moves opposed

The NSS responded to a consultation by the all-party parliamentary group looking into the future of hospital chaplains. The group was considering recommending that chaplains be made a “commissioned service” on the same basis as medical staff. This would make it impossible for a hospital trust – even if it was on the verge of bankruptcy – to cut that service.

Needless to say, the NSS took the view that chaplaincy services should be provided – and paid for – by the churches (or other religious bodies) themselves.

Most patients come from the vicinity of the hospital and it would be more appropriate (and also cheaper to the NHS) for them to receive any support they request from their own place of worship, which would be able to send people who know them and are of their own religious persuasion.

The Government has revealed that it does not keep records of how much is spent by the NHS on employing clerics so the NSS has undertaken its own research, co-ordinated by dedicated volunteers. From initial returns, we anticipate the total cost running into tens of millions of pounds, which could more usefully and appropriately be spent on nearly a thousand extra nurses. We were told by one Trust that the cost of employing and maintaining a chaplain was in the region of £50,000 per annum. This would pay for another two nurses or several desperately-needed cleaners. We will reveal the true cost of this religious privilege when all the information has been compiled.

Debates

Keith Porteous Wood spoke for the motion *This House Believes that the Ideal State is a Secular State* at the Oxford Union. It was carried 56% in favour, 44% against. The event was also a commemoration of the life of Benazir Bhutto, a former president of the Union who was assassinated in Pakistan last year. He also spoke to the Oxford Humanists.

Alistair McBay spoke in a debate at St Andrew’s University, defending the proposition *This House Prefers Darwin to God*. The proposition was lost 71 to 82 with 21 abstentions. Alistair was told by the organisers that this was the narrowest margin they can recall on a religious issue, as it is usual for the Christian Unions to pack such debates.

Council member Denis Cobell spoke in a debate at Trinity College Oxford to the motion *Is Freedom of Speech at Odds with the Ideal Secular State?*

Council Member Norman Bacrac spoke for the opposition in the debate at Westminster University Politics Society, *This house believes that god does exist*.

Emeritus professor Colin Gallagher spoke for the NSS at Durham University Union in January, to propose the motion *This House has no Faith in Organised Religion*.



Other activities on behalf of the NSS

Elizabeth O'Casey attended a Catholics for Choice forum on Religion & Politics in the New Europe with Vice President Anna Behan. The conference was told that Europeans who have no religion are increasing in number but are becoming more disadvantaged in the political process.

Elizabeth was also present at a hearing in the EU Parliament on Cultural Diversity, Religions and Dialogue, making comments from the floor at both events. She has also represented the NSS at the Working Group meetings on Separation of Religion and Politics in Brussels.

Dr Anna Behan and Keith Porteous Wood were invited by Communities Minister Parmjit Dhanda MP for what



Former Communities Minister
Parmjit Dhanda

turned out to be a warm and constructive round-table meeting, giving the NSS a chance to communicate its perspective on community cohesion issues.

Anna continues her important and onerous work with the Religion and Belief Consultation Group and the fast-evolving Human Rights structures. She has written several submissions and is also leading our liaison with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). She attended events at the Institute of Economic Affairs, as has council member Peter Vlachos. Anna also gave a talk about the NSS at the 50th anniversary of the Brighton Humanist Group.

Denis Cobell has given a number of talks to local groups around the country this year, including a very well-attended one in Ludlow at the invitation of the Marches Secularists and one as part of the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of Brighton Humanists. He was on Radio 5 Live speaking about fixing the date of Easter and on the BBC1 *Politics Show* talking about ridiculous allegations of "Christianophobia".

In addition to his routine duties as Treasurer, Jim Nugent has put in months of work heading up the implementation of the new accounting and membership system. He also gave a talk to Greater Manchester Humanist Association on Advocating Secularism and attended the inaugural "faith round table" at the EHRC in Manchester.

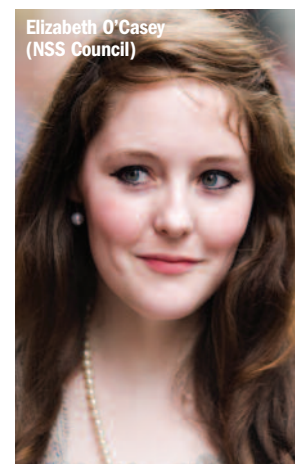
Peter Vlachos co-represented the NSS (with Anna Behan) on the Religion and Belief Consultative Group. He was invited by the Chartered Management Institute and commented on their draft guidelines for "Managing Faith in the Workplace". He also participated in a round table discussion on Academy schools at the Institute of Economic Affairs with senior advisors to Government. He led a campaign to install non-religious "chaplains" in a state-funded university, participated in a TV debate on Bangla TV on secular morals and made numerous representations to the BBC regarding religiously-biased reporting and programming.



Stephen Evans (right)
at the NSS stand



Vice President
Anna Behan



Elizabeth O'Casey
(NSS Council)



Dan Bye (NSS Council)



Peter Vlachos (NSS Council)

Dan Bye works throughout the year on membership administration. He also gave a talk to a school in Rutland about education, concentrating on evolution and creationism.

Norman Bacrac talked to a group of Italian teachers who visited Conway Hall to find out more about secularism.

In addition to his numerous broadcasting and other media activities, Terry Sanderson gave the keynote speech at the annual general meeting of the Hampstead Humanist Group. He spoke about the modern definitions of secularism. Terry also spoke to the Skeptics in the Pub group in London, questioning whether the much-vaunted religious revival was real or simply propaganda.

Alistair McBay gave a talk at the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow on “Secularism – a new religion?” More details of his media work are on page 6.

Staff members Tessa Kendall and Stephen Evans helped organise a big event run by Skeptics in the Pub to bring the celebrated American magician and debunker of the paranormal James Randi to Conway Hall.

Volunteer Alistair Banton ran the NSS stall there and Stephen and Alistair also ran a stall at the Council for ex-Muslims Britain conference. The NSS would like to thank all members who have run stalls at local events, publicising the NSS and signing up new members.

NSS at Conservative Party Conference

With the help of one of our members who also belongs to the Conservative Party, we hired a stand at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham this year under the banner “Secularism – the next Big Idea”.

We were not sure what reception might greet us, but were pleasantly surprised by the positive reaction. We recruited new members and made useful political contacts. The stall ran for four busy days and was staffed by Council members Anna Behan, Carla Revere and Terry Sanderson, former Council member Malcolm Trahearn and Keith Porteous Wood, maintaining a high-level presence throughout the conference.

They all reported fascinating discussions with delegates, and an insight into the modern Tory party, which is much younger and different from the traditional stereotype. However, at a conference fringe meeting, Keith Porteous Wood asked the Tory spokesman on education some detailed questions about the Party’s approach to “faith schools” and religious sponsorship of academies. He was told that the Conservatives supported the expansion of “faith schools” and, indeed, the expansion would probably be speeded up under a Tory Government.



Malcolm Trahearn, Carla Revere and Keith Porteous Wood welcome another interested delegate at the Tory conference

We hired a stand at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham this year under the banner “Secularism – the next Big Idea”

Facebook and MySpace pages

We are pleased to note that both [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) have Friends of the National Secular Society pages, which are flourishing, especially among students, with over 1,300 supporters between them. These pages have been useful places to find volunteers to help out with research. The NSS is particularly keen to have a secular presence in universities, which always have a large contingent of religious groups in operation. We have been encouraging the formation of secular groups on campuses up and down the country and supplying posters, literature and badges for Freshers' Fairs. The Society contributed towards the University of Edinburgh Humanist Society summer conference. Any students who would like to start a secular group can contact the office.



Newsline

Our popular Friday email newsletter *Newsline* goes from strength to strength. If you aren't receiving it, and would like to, you can subscribe free at the NSS website www.secularism.org.uk. The Editor of *Newsline* is President Terry Sanderson.

Secularist of the Year

We have moved the next presentation of the £5,000 Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year to Saturday 7 February 2009. This is to coincide with the celebration of Charles Darwin's 200th anniversary. So, as well as being a platform for honouring the award winner, our event will also be a birthday party for Darwin.

This year, the winner of the prize will also receive our new trophy, the Golden Ammonite (pictured) as a souvenir of their achievement. Tickets for previous events have sold out very quickly so this year we have again arranged a new, larger venue in central London so that more members and their guests can join us. The cost is £45, to include a superior three course lunch and a celebratory glass of sparkling wine. There will be entertainment and some great surprises. It's a lunchtime event so members living outside London can make it a day trip. You can buy ticket on-line at www.secularism.org.uk (go to *Shop* and then *Tickets*) or by post from NSS Tickets, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL



We have been encouraging the formation of secular groups on campuses up and down the country and supplying posters, literature and badges for Freshers' Fairs.

Your Council at 30 September 2008

Officers

President: Terry Sanderson
 Vice President: Dr Anna Behan
 Treasurer: Jim Nugent

Other Council Members

Norman Bacrac
 Dan Bye
 Denis Cobell
 Jim Herrick
 Jennifer Jaynes
 Surendra Lal
 Elizabeth O'Casey
 Afonso Reis e Sousa
 Carla Revere
 Peter Vlachos

Executive Director and Company Secretary

Keith Porteous Wood, FCCA

Office Administration

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 Stephen Evans
admin@secularism.org.uk

Honorary Associates

Graham Allen MP
 Professor 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
 Baroness Flather
 Rt Hon. Michael Foot
 Ricky Gervais*

Ian Gibson MP
 Professor A.C. Grayling
 Johann Hari*
 Dr Evan Harris MP
 Patrick Harvie MSP
 Christopher Hitchens
 Paul Holmes MP
 Prof. Ted Honderich
 Mary Honeyball MEP*
 Kelvin Hopkins MP
 Sir Ludovic Kennedy
 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
 Phillip Pullman
 Lord Raglan
 Claire Rayner OBE
 Martin Rowson
 Joan Ruddock MP
 Joan Smith
 Dr David Starkey
 Lord Taverne QC
 Polly Toynbee
 Baroness Turner of Camden
 Sophie in 't Veld MEP
 Gore Vidal
 Lord Wedderburn of Charlton QC



*Three new honorary associates have been appointed during the year. Ricky Gervais (far left) is a top-rank comedian and comedy writer; Johann Hari (above, left) is a prize-winning journalist who writes regularly for the Independent; Mary Honeyball (above, right) is an MEP and a committed feminist.



We are sorry to report that Lord Russell-Johnston, who accepted an Honorary Associateship only last year, has died. He was a great defender of Human Rights and a past President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. His support for the NSS will be sorely missed.



Volunteers and Donations

The NSS Council, staff and Executive Director greatly appreciate the work done by the growing band of volunteers both in the London office and around the UK whose time, efforts and enthusiasm contribute greatly to our work. We would also like to record our especial thanks to all members who have made donations in the last twelve months and to all those who have taken out monthly standing orders.

Organisations to which the NSS is affiliated

Amnesty International, the European Humanist Federation, the International Humanist and Ethical Union and Liberty. We also support Abortion Rights, Dignity in Dying, the European Women's Lobby, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and the Secular Medical Forum.

Affiliated Local Groups

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society; Chiltern Humanists; Cornwall Humanists; Cotswold Humanists; Devon Humanists; Durham University Humanist Society; Ealing Humanist Group; East Kent Humanists; Essex Humanists; Farnham Humanists; Greater Manchester Humanist Group; Hampstead Humanist Society; Havering & District Humanist Society; the Humanist Society of West Yorkshire; Leicester Secular Society; Humanist and Secular Liberal Democrats; Liverpool Humanist Group; Norfolk Humanists; North East Humanists; North London Humanist Group; Sheffield Humanist Society; Stoke Humanist Group; Suffolk Humanists; Sutton Humanist Group; and Welsh Marches Humanist Group.

The Society's Council has adopted this secular charter:

THE CREATION OF A JUST AND EQUITABLE SECULAR SOCIETY IN BRITAIN

The National Secular Society seeks a society in which religion and the State are distinctly separated, and where Human Rights always take precedence over religious demands. We would like to see the following ten objectives incorporated into a written, secular constitution:

1. There should be no established state religion.
2. The state should not fund religious activities.
3. The state should not fund religious proselytising in any form and the provision of all services using public money should be religiously neutral.
4. The state should not prescribe, proscribe, or amend religious doctrine.
5. The state should not interfere in religious hierarchies, nor interfere in issues strictly related to membership.
6. No action by the state should have the primary effect of engaging in religious practice.
7. No state action should have the primary effect of restricting religious practice.
8. The state should not express any religious beliefs in any publication, speech or implement of state power such as currency, sworn testimony, oath of fealty to the state, or endorsements of national pride. The state should not imply any derivation of authority from any religious authority, nor should it express temporal supremacy in relation to religious belief or practice.
9. Political leaders should not express religious preferences in the course of their duties.
10. No religion or denomination should have the power to prescribe, proscribe, or amend civil or common law.

JOIN US

You can join securely online at www.secularism.org.uk/join.html or by contacting the office at NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

UK membership is £29 per annum, £17 for the unwaged and £9 for students. Joint membership for two people at the same address is £45 and overseas membership is £51.

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

www.secularism.org.uk

Cover quotation taken from the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008. The abolition of the blasphemy laws was one of our major achievements of the year.

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Executive Director:
Keith Porteous Wood FCCA