

# Bulletin

national  
secular  
society

Issue 75 **Summer 2020**

challenging religious privilege

## Campaigning in the time of coronavirus

THE IMPACT ON  
THE NSS

HOW RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE  
IS UNDERMINING THE  
GLOBAL FIGHT AGAINST  
THE PANDEMIC

NSS CHALLENGES CHURCH  
OVER SALE OF 'PLAGUE  
PROTECTION KITS'

**ALSO IN  
THIS ISSUE:**

**Page 6:** Nigerian Humanist  
leader arrested for  
blasphemy

**Page 8:** Barbara Smoker  
1923–2020

**Page 8:** NSS launches  
lecture series on  
secularist history





# Looking forward

I trust this edition of the Bulletin finds you and yours in good health. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a surreal time in our history. It's been an unsettling and unprecedented few months.

Shortly after lockdown restrictions were imposed, I reached out to members with a message of support and solidarity to see how you were all holding up. The responses I received were gratifying – typically characterised by stoicism and good humour.

We were keen to do our bit to keep members entertained and informed during the lockdown, so produced a series of talks about the influential thinkers and activists that make up the rich history of secularism. These short lectures, written and presented by Bob Forder, are all available to view on YouTube.

Our work has continued apace throughout the lockdown. A health crisis can create opportunities for exploitative religious groups, and in March we raised the case of a church that was selling 'plague protection kits', which it claimed could ward off coronavirus. Following our intervention, the charity watchdog is investigating.

Bogus faith-based remedies are obviously useless at best. But social distancing measures are helping to curb the virus, and let's hope

we can now begin to look forward to the resumption of some sort of normality. I don't know about you, but after months of lockdown there's a lot I'm looking forward to. Simple pleasures like spending time with friends and family, attending events and public toilets being open!

I'm also looking forward to seeing the NSS team together again in the office. Thanks to modern technology

we were about to relocate. The restrictions caused an inevitable delay, but we've been able to complete the move in recent weeks – and we're looking forward to working from our new offices when it's safe to do so. And there's certainly no shortage of important lobbying for us to be getting on with.

Proposed legislation in Wales will shift religious education in a secularist direction, but government pandering to faith groups means pupils will be denied an equal entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum. Meanwhile, in Scotland, the good news is that draft legislation proposes to abolish the archaic blasphemy law. But the bad news is the new laws will usher in sweeping new 'religious hatred' offences, that promise to chill free speech. We'll be looking to your assistance to help us shape these important areas of public policy.

Finally, I just want to say a heartfelt thank you to you all for your ongoing support and commitment to the NSS throughout this difficult period. We were in the business of challenging religious privilege before the pandemic and will continue to do so when this pandemic is a distant and painful memory. I'm really looking forward to seeing many of you at our events when this becomes possible. Until then, take care of yourselves and others.



Our council has met remotely throughout the pandemic

our work has continued almost seamlessly amid the pandemic. There's a lot to be said for remote working, but its disadvantages are many. Video conferencing is no substitute for real life interaction. Our staff have missed the office conversations and camaraderie that happens when we're working together towards a common cause.

The lockdown struck just as

## We're on the move

We're excited to announce that we're moving to a new office.

We realised some time ago that we had outgrown our space at Conway Hall. This historic venue has provided a happy home for the NSS for many years, but we're now bidding it farewell and relocating to more spacious premises.

Our new office in High Holborn offers a more suitable space for work and collaboration and will give us a more productive atmosphere for our growing team.

This relocation is the start of

another chapter in our history. We're still working on getting settled in, and the current coronavirus has inevitably disrupted this, but



Our founder Charles Bradlaugh watches over our new office

we're very excited to be in our new space.

Our phone number remains unchanged: 020 7404 3126.





# Religious privilege and the pandemic

**A pastor in Louisiana claims an attendance of 1,265 at a church service. Crowds gather at mosques in Pakistan. Large Jewish weddings and funerals take place in New York.**

None of these would have been newsworthy a few months ago. But in the era of the coronavirus pandemic, these religious gatherings have presented threats to lives.

Since the pandemic began, billions of people have been forced to accept radical restrictions on their ways of life. But religious fanaticism has undermined the effort to uphold these restrictions and protect public health.

It's made it harder to prevent gatherings of people, and it's encouraged very risky rituals. Stories emerged of priests in Romania and Georgia continuing to use a shared spoon during communion, and of a group of men filming themselves as they licked the coverings which encase the tombs of Shia Muslim saints in Iran.

## The consequences – and equivocations

Religious obstinacy, or lack of awareness, has had deadly consequences. In one case Indian health authorities think a Sikh religious leader who ignored advice to self-isolate and embarked on a 15-village preaching tour may have given the

***“Religious extremists across the world, and in nearly every faith, are contributing to a global pandemic by refusing to abide by scientific advice and hold off on gatherings... All too often governments worried about alienating pious supporters are buckling to their pressure.”***

*Borzou Daragahi in The Independent, 30 March*

virus to up to 15,000 people.

But the equivocations of some secular authorities have perhaps been more concerning.

In the US, several states have created religious exemptions to bans on public gatherings.

Pakistan's government gave in to demands for mosques to open during Ramadan. Iran's theocratic regime moved slowly for fear of upsetting the religious hardliners it relies upon.

## What about here?

When the UK government announced its social distancing guidelines in mid-March, it made no exemption for religious gatherings.

This was a welcome admission that religious freedom is a qualified right, and can be limited in order to protect legitimate purposes.

Mainstream religious groups here have – so far, at least – largely accepted the restrictions. But

there are signs of growing resistance. In June a small coalition of bishops and religious leaders threatened legal action to force the government to allow places of worship to open.

The government should be able to stand up to this. Article 9 of the Human Rights Act explicitly says politicians can restrict religious freedom to protect public health, and religious demands for special treatment are unlikely to gain much public support when the stakes are so high.

But as our country tries to move beyond the trauma of this extraordinary period, it will need to uphold the principle of equal treatment – regardless of religious affiliation.

## NSS prompts investigation over sale of ‘plague protection kits’

We prompted England and Wales's charity regulator to scrutinise a church after it emerged its bishop was selling “plague protection kits” consisting of oil and string during the coronavirus outbreak.

The Charity Commission opened a regulatory compliance case into The Kingdom Church in south London after we raised concerns.

The church's bishop, who's also its charitable trustee, runs a group called Bishop Climate Ministries. This appears, in practice, to be part

of the church.

A post on the Bishop Climate Ministries website in March promoted the protective power of “the Divine Plague Protection Oil” and “Scarlet Yarn”.

According to local newspaper Southwark News the kit was originally on sale for £91. And in late April a BBC reporter found the

church continuing to sell it and claim it cures coronavirus.

The commission told us that “any charity found to be exploiting people's anxiety during this time of national emergency can expect to face serious sanction”.

Trading Standards is also investigating.

***“As you use this oil, along with a special scarlet yarn, every coronavirus and any other deadly thing will pass over you.”***

*Original post on Bishop Climate Ministries website, 20 March*



Image via Bishop Climate Ministries



# No More Faith Schools: latest activity across the UK

## NORTHERN IRELAND

- We're supporting local campaigns to integrate faith schools in **Brollagh, Carrickfergus, Castlerock, Glenarm** and **Glengormley**, following successful votes by the school communities.
- We're supporting a local campaign against a school run by the Plymouth Brethren becoming state funded, across two sites in **Knockloughrim** and **Newry**.

## SCOTLAND

- We're opposing planned changes that would give children who've been baptised Catholic more priority for admission to Catholic schools in **Renfrewshire** and **Inverclyde**.
- We've created a new template letter to help supporters contact their MSPs.

## ENGLAND

- We're opposing a plan which would see a voluntary aided Church of England school open on the site of a community infant school in **Surrey**.
- We highlighted the impact of faith schools' ability to select pupils on religious grounds in response to a consultation held by the Sutton Trust, which champions social mobility in education.

## WALES

- We're opposing plans to replace existing faith schools with new ones in **Swansea, Gwynedd** and **Cardiff**, and to open a new faith school in **Glamorgan**.
- We've created a new template letter to help supporters contact their members of the Senedd.

## EVENTS

- We've unfortunately had to cancel meet-ups across the country – but we're planning to move some No More Faith Schools events online.
- If you'd like to arrange one, please get in touch by emailing [NMFS@secularism.org.uk](mailto:NMFS@secularism.org.uk)

**NO MORE  
FAITH SCHOOLS**

# Religious education in Wales: a chance for fundamental change

The Welsh government is to replace RE with 'Religion, Values and Ethics' (RVE) and is listening to concerns we raised about its proposal to remove the parental right of withdrawal.

In May the Welsh government said faith schools would be required to offer a non-denominational RVE syllabus where parents request it.

This came after we told ministers that removing the right to withdraw, particularly in faith schools, could infringe human rights, as some children would be taught confessional RVE against their parents' wishes (see the *spring Bulletin*).



The Welsh government's plans for reform are broadly positive. Along with a change to the name of the subject, as RE becomes RVE, the syllabus will include a requirement to teach about non-religious worldviews.

But there's also a risk ministers will miss a chance for fundamental change.

Syllabi will still be heavily influenced by faith groups through SACREs – bodies which decide what gets taught locally – albeit they will also now need to include non-religious representatives.

Ministers made clear that they considered imposing a new obligation on all schools to teach RE in a pluralistic manner – but shied away from this because of the implications for faith schools.

Their recognition of our concerns is welcome. But in their unwillingness to confront religious groups, they've devised a solution which raises significant practical concerns.

The Welsh government is now holding a consultation on its plans – and we'll again be urging it to ensure that every child has the same entitlement to a pluralistic and impartial education.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

■ If you live in Wales, or your children attend school in Wales, you can respond to the government's consultation by Tuesday 28 July.

■ Write to your members of the Senedd to let them know your views using our template letter.

■ Supporters across the UK can let us know your experiences and views on the right to withdraw from religious education.

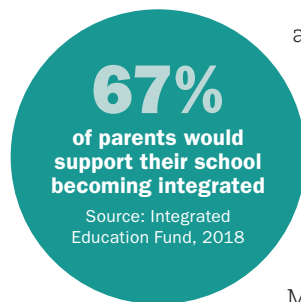
Go to [secularism.org.uk/rve-wales](https://secularism.org.uk/rve-wales) for more.

# Will Northern Ireland move away from segregated schooling?

Over 90% of children in Northern Ireland are sent either to controlled schools – which overwhelmingly cater to children from Protestant backgrounds – or Catholic ones. Northern Ireland's divided schools have long been seen as a reflection of its divided society.

But now there are signs that this could change.

In January the UK and Irish governments published an agreement to restore devolved government at Stormont. The deal said there would be an



assembly has approved a supportive motion – although MLAs couldn't explicitly agree that the education system should be "inclusive".

Meanwhile several schools are taking meaningful steps towards integration – including three which could be the first Catholic school to transform into integrated ones.

As we show on the map opposite, our No More Faith Schools campaign is working with these campaigns.

A more integrated education system could play a crucial role in a more harmonious future for NI.

***"If Catholics and Protestants in Carrick went to our school together they wouldn't hate each other any more. It's simple."***

A pupil at Carrickfergus Central Primary School, which is considering integrating

independent review of education with "the prospects of moving towards a single education system".

It said the executive would support educating children from different backgrounds together. It said NI's current education system was "not sustainable".

Since the agreement was signed the Northern Ireland

## OTHER EDUCATION CAMPAIGNING

■ We expressed broad support for government efforts to close loopholes which allow those who run illegal schools to avoid registration in England.

■ We urged the local council in Telford and Wrekin to end discretionary funding for transport to faith schools.

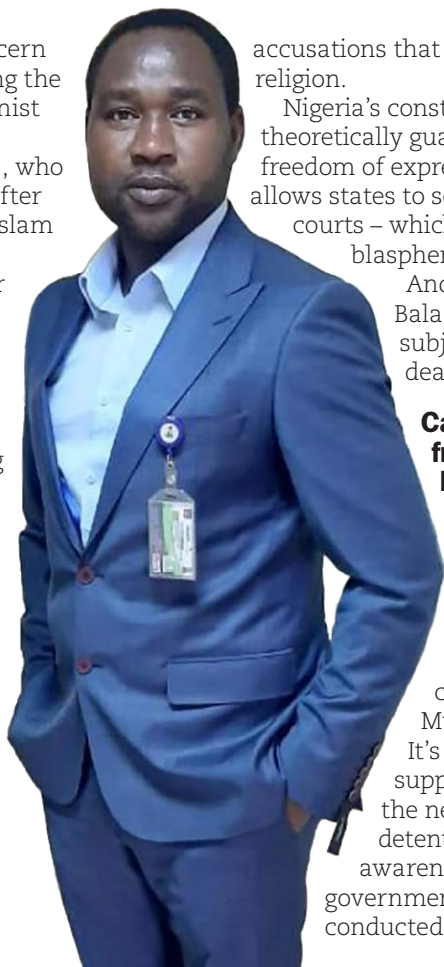
# Nigerian Humanist leader in danger after blasphemy arrest

There's significant concern over the situation facing the president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala (pictured), who was arrested in April after apparently criticising Islam on Facebook.

He was arrested after a group of lawyers sent a petition to local police, saying he'd called the Islamic prophet Muhammad "all sorts of denigrating names".

The petitioners also claimed his words would "definitely incite Muslims and provoke them to take law into their hands, which may ultimately result into public disturbance and breach of the peace".

Shortly before we went to press the UK government said he would face charges in the state of Kano over



accusations that he insulted religion.

Nigeria's constitution theoretically guarantees freedom of expression but also allows states to set up sharia courts – which can punish blasphemy by death.

And Mubarak Bala has also been subject to credible death threats.

## Campaign to free Mubarak Bala – and NSS involvement

The NGO Humanists International is coordinating a campaign to free Mubarak Bala. It's encouraging supporters to spread the news of his detention and raise awareness with their governments. It's also conducted a crowdfunding

*"To say what one thinks about a prophet or any religion is not a crime...It is a human right."*

Leo Igwe, Nigerian human rights activist, on the case

You can hear more from Leo Igwe on our podcast – [secularism.org.uk/podcast](https://secularism.org.uk/podcast)

campaign to raise money for a legal team.

We've written to the Nigerian ambassador to the UK and the government to lobby for Bala's immediate release and contributed to the crowdfunding campaign. We've encouraged supporters to take similar steps, and in June the UK government outlined steps it was taking to pressurise the Nigerian authorities.

We'll also continue working to end blasphemy laws wherever they exist.

■ There are regular updates on Mubarak Bala's condition, and information on more ways you can help, at [freemubarakbala.org](https://freemubarakbala.org)

# Scotland's blasphemy law to go – but hate crime proposals threaten free speech

In April the Scottish government published a new bill on hate crime.

The good news is that the bill would abolish Scotland's archaic blasphemy law. But we're concerned that a new offence of 'stirring up hatred' on the basis of religion is too censorious.



## What would 'stirring up hatred' on religious grounds look like?

A successful prosecution for 'stirring up hatred' on the basis of religion would require two criteria to be met.

An individual's behaviour would need to be "threatening or abusive". And they'd either need to intend to

## HOW THE LAW WOULD COMPARE

Scotland's hate crime bill is more censorious than the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, which applies in England and Wales.

SCOTLAND 	ENGLAND & WALES 
Assesses whether behaviour is "threatening or abusive"	Only uses the word "threatening"
Considers either intent of speech or its likely outcome	Only considers intent
Speech won't be criminalised "solely" because it criticises religion	The law won't have the "effect" of criminalising criticism of religion

'stir up hatred' against a religious group, or it would need to be "likely that hatred will be stirred up" against one.

A clause in the bill also says behaviour or material shouldn't be

considered threatening or abusive "solely on the basis that it involves or includes discussion or criticism of religion or religious practices".

## The NSS's response

We question the wisdom of creating an offence of 'stirring up hatred' on religious grounds at all. But we're particularly concerned about the reach of these proposals.

We're now preparing our response to the Scottish government's consultation on the subject. And we'll make the case that freedom of expression on religion must be protected.



# NSS prompts investigation of charity over promotion of Islamist extremism

England and Wales's charity regulator decided to open a statutory inquiry into a charity which has promoted Islamist extremism – after we pushed it to do so.

The Charity Commission opened an inquiry into Islamic Research Foundation International in May, a few months after we revealed it had received multiple complaints about the charity in recent years.

IRFI, whose charitable purposes include the advancement of the Islamic faith, is being investigated over its funding of the channel Peace TV – which has a long history of promoting extremism.

Peace TV's speakers have included IRFI trustee Zakir Naik (pictured), who

has previously praised Osama bin Laden and said all Muslims "should be terrorists", and Bilal Philips, who the US has named as a co-conspirator in the 9/11 attacks.

In December our freedom of information request revealed the Charity Commission had received five complaints about IRFI since 2010 but hadn't yet opened a statutory inquiry. The revelation prompted press coverage and pressure on the commission.

Meanwhile we've urged Northern Ireland's charity regulator to review the charitable status of Core Issues Trust, a Christian organisation which promotes "change oriented therapy" for gay people.

We've written to NI's chief charity commissioner Nicole Lappin,



via Wikimedia Commons, © Masaru [CC BY 2.0]

communities minister Deirdre Hargey and health minister Robin Swann over the issue. Swann made a commitment to put the issue of LGBT conversion therapy "in our work scope" in February.

## Peace TV: a timeline

### 2012:

Peace TV reprimanded after Zakir Naik said he "tended to agree" that Muslims should be executed if they leave Islam and tried to proselytise a different religion "against Islam".

### 2016:

Peace TV fined £65,000 after another speaker used deeply derogatory terms to describe Jews.

### 2018:

Ofcom says it's pursuing six investigations against Peace TV.

### 2019:

Ofcom revokes the licence of Peace TV Urdu's broadcaster, Club TV, after finding the channel had "repeatedly rebroadcast" material that incited murder.

### 2020:

Ofcom fines Peace TV's former broadcasters £300,000 for breaches of its broadcasting code.

## Arguing for human rights at the UN

We've urged the UN Human Rights Council to act to prevent caste discrimination, clerical child abuse and ritual child genital cutting.

In a statement during the council's 43rd regular session in Geneva, our vice-president Josephine Macintosh (pictured) highlighted the government's failure to legislate on caste discrimination.

Ministers have refused to amend the 2010 Equality Act to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of 'caste', despite a UN recommendation to do so.

In a separate statement Josephine called on the council to strengthen recommendations designed to tackle child abuse in the Catholic Church in Italy.

And we also called on the council to ensure protections from forced genital cutting encompass all children equally in a written submission.

***"Abusers in the church cannot be allowed to continue committing crimes with impunity, which constitutes a further betrayal of victims."***

Josephine Macintosh at the UNHRC



## Standing up for equality in Northern Ireland

We warned the government that allowing providers of wedding services to opt out of serving same-sex couples in Northern Ireland would seriously undermine equality law.

Same-sex marriage has been legally recognised in NI since January, and ministers are consulting on how to implement the change.

They currently propose to add exceptions to discrimination law so it isn't unlawful for officiants to refuse to solemnise same-sex marriages.

Meanwhile the government has published a framework for the extension of abortion rights in NI.

The legalisation of abortion represents a substantial step forward for women's rights, but we're disappointed that a 12-week time limit has been set.

During a consultation earlier this year (see the spring Bulletin) we said the time limit in NI should match the 24-week limit in Britain.



# Barbara Smoker 1923–2020

We're deeply saddened to report that one of our longest-serving presidents, Barbara Smoker, died on 7 April at the age of 96 after a long illness.

Barbara was our president from 1972 to 1996 and a consistently forthright campaigner on issues such as faith schools and religious restrictions on freedom of expression and reproductive rights.

She also campaigned on a variety of other significant social and legal issues including assisted dying, the death penalty and nuclear disarmament.

Barbara stands as one of the most gifted, determined and brave individuals the NSS has been fortunate to count in its ranks.

During her time as president she campaigned on subjects including Mary Whitehouse's campaigns against TV "filth" and the Gay News blasphemy trial. When in her 70s, she held up a "free speech" placard at a rowdy demonstration by Muslims against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

Her 24-year term as president has only been rivalled by our founder Charles Bradlaugh and his successor G.W. Foote, and exceeded by Chapman Cohen (who was president for 34 years).

Barbara was a spirited defender of human rights and a tenacious challenger of religious privilege. She will be greatly missed.

■ You can read our full obituary on our website.

*"The Northern Echo once described me as 'the militant martinet of the National Secular Society'! That will do as my epitaph."*

Barbara Smoker in her final annual report as president, 1995–96



## Lecture series on history of secularism

We've launched a 10-part series of online lectures on the history of secularism.

Our historian and council member Bob Forder addresses the roles of influential thinkers and activists from the 18th century through to the 20th.

You can watch the lectures on our YouTube channel.

## Latest NSS podcasts

Our podcast continues to shine a light on issues of concern to secularists at home and abroad. Our most recent episodes feature interviews with informed guests on subjects including:

- The threat of Hindutva in India
- Unregistered schools
- Religion and the coronavirus pandemic in the US.

Listen and subscribe at [secularism.org.uk/podcast](https://secularism.org.uk/podcast).



## New honorary associate

We're delighted that Lib Dem peer Lynne Featherstone has agreed to become one of our honorary associates.

Baroness Featherstone has been a champion of equality and was the originator and architect of the law that made same-sex marriage a reality in England and Wales.

*"So much debate around equal rights rages around religious freedom, argument and identity – but very little of that debate (if any) expresses my secularist voice and view. I want the secularist voice raised on an equal basis. The National Secular Society fights this fight on our behalf."*

Lynne Featherstone



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