

A decade after the Equality Act, loopholes continue to allow discrimination against the non-religious & religious minorities

NSS report highlights discrimination in education & employment and caste-based discrimination

Report is “excellent, informed and forensic”, says former equalities minister

## ELSEWHERE IN THIS EDITION:

**Page 5:**  
How the C of E's approach has come to dominate RE

**Page 7:**  
NSS lecture calls for disestablishment

**Page 9:**  
Free speech after the Samuel Paty killing

**Page 11:**  
NSS challenges government's pro-religious bias





# Religious privilege in modern Britain doesn't add up

Welcome to the spring edition of the Bulletin. Thankfully, light seems to be emerging at the end of the tunnel, but the ongoing pandemic is continuing to affect us all – not to mention NSS campaigning.

Despite lockdown restrictions on virtually all other public gatherings, special treatment has allowed communal worship to continue in England's churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. The decision to

exempt places of worship appears to be a dangerous double standard – particularly given that some religious communities have been disproportionately affected by Covid.

The special pleading from some religious leaders during the pandemic has revealed an entitlement that shapes their view that there is a hierarchy of rights – with religion at the top. We disagree.

Religious privilege can't be allowed to undermine efforts to protect public health.

Perhaps the greatest privilege of all is the Church of England's established status – and the seats handed to its bishops in our parliament. Geoffrey Robertson QC provided a thoroughly entertaining

***“Religion's inflated role in our public life is an anachronism and an absurdity.”***

yet searing critique of this archaic and unjustifiable state of affairs in our latest Bradlaugh Lecture, which you can read about on page 7.

Such privileges sit uneasily with a largely religiously indifferent population for who the established church has become a complete irrelevance.

But one area of public life where many citizens do encounter the

church is in the nation's schools. Vast swathes of the education system are still under the churches' control. In this Bulletin you'll read how ministers are strengthening this control rather than reducing it. And our report marking the 10th anniversary of the Equality Act reveals how religious exemptions

carved out to satisfy churches have led to levels of religious discrimination against pupils that would not be tolerated in any other area of public life.

All this comes as a public inquiry has said the church prioritised its reputation over the safety of children when handling sexual abuse.

Religious privilege in modern Britain simply doesn't add up. Religion's inflated role in our public life is an anachronism and an absurdity – and one which we intend to address.

## Treat religion equally during pandemic, NSS urges

One of the very few legal exemptions that allow larger numbers of people to gather under the latest national lockdown in England is for communal worship.

We sought the justification for this policy decision from the Cabinet Office, but none has been forthcoming.

And in a submission to parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights, we said restricting communal religious activities as a public health measure during the current pandemic is justifiable. The committee is considering the impact of lockdown restrictions on human rights.

We said permitting communal worship while it's unsafe to allow comparable secular activities would put public health in jeopardy

and undermine the principle that citizens should be treated equally.

In recent months some religious groups' demands for special exemptions for communal worship have grown louder.

And in England the government has given in, allowing communal

***“The decision to allow places of worship in England to open for communal worship under tier 4 and the January national lockdown strikes many as an incongruous, irresponsible, unnecessary and unfair privilege.”***

[Our submission to the JCHR](#)

worship to continue when parts of the country went into tier 4, and even in the lockdown that began in January.

In Scotland ministers included religious gatherings in the lockdown restrictions which applied from

January. But hundreds of religious leaders then demanded that they allow churches to reopen, with some since launching legal action.

Our submission to the JCHR said restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief should be introduced only if they were

necessary and proportionate. But it added that this right is qualified and can be abridged if it poses a significant threat to public health.

The BBC also noted our criticism of the exemption in England in a report on its website.

# How religious privilege undermines equality law

A decade after the Equality Act came into force, we've highlighted the ways it falls short of protecting the non-religious and members of religious minorities from discrimination.

Our report *Faith-shaped holes: how religious privilege undermines equality law* has shown the impact of religious exceptions within the act.

## FROM THE REPORT:

***"Those most likely to be negatively impacted by religious exemptions and omissions in the Equality Act are those who are already struggling on the margins of society."***

These exceptions mean discrimination against the non-religious and members of religious minorities remains lawful across key areas of public life.

The report calls for reform in relation to education, caste-based discrimination, and employment.

## Education

The report says exceptions to accommodate faith schools, faith-based admissions and religious practice in schools are leading to a level of religious discrimination that "would not be tolerated in any other area of society".

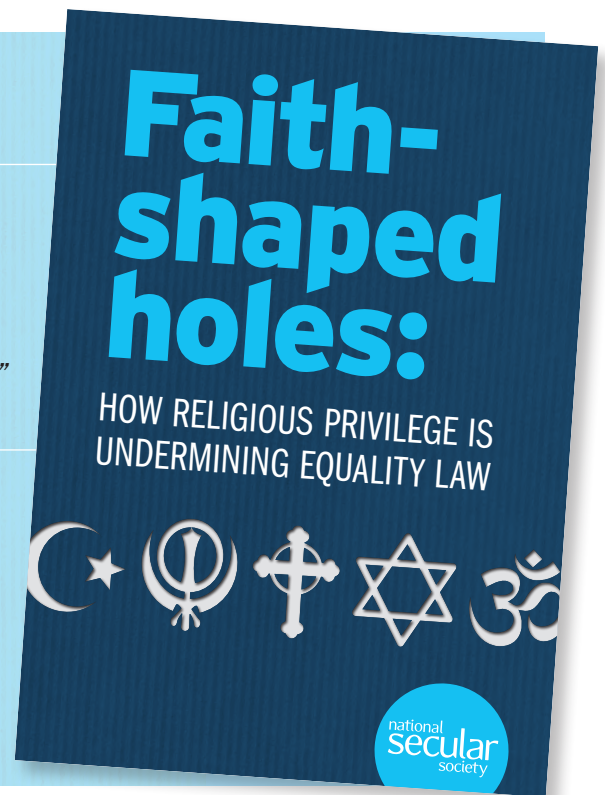
## VOICES FROM THE REPORT:

*"My daughter has no school to go to in her borough due to draconian and discriminatory criteria used by faith schools."*

— Owen in London, parent

*"Many people I know are overlooked for positions in Catholic schools because they are not Catholic. This is sectarianism at its finest!"*

— Eleanor in Glasgow



It calls on the government to remove exceptions that enable state-funded schools to discriminate against individuals on the basis of religion or belief. This would include the removal of the requirement for all state schools to hold acts of

collective worship.

It would also mean the end of discrimination in faith school admissions and recruitment, and the discrimination caused by curricula that favour particular religions.

## Caste-based discrimination

The report calls on ministers to add 'caste' as a protected characteristic under the act.

The government is refusing to legislate, despite evidence of caste-based discrimination and harassment in the UK – and despite an international obligation to do so.

## Employment

The report says an exception in the act which allows employers to discriminate on the basis of religion or belief when there is a 'genuine occupational requirement' is being overused.

It recommends that the government strengthens protections against discrimination in recruitment for religious organisations.

Find out more and help us make the case at [bit.ly/3un4KDd](https://bit.ly/3un4KDd).



***"The Equality Act has contributed to the UK becoming a more tolerant nation and has been vital in tackling discrimination against minorities and safeguarding individuals' rights... As this excellent, informed, and forensic report demonstrates it is certainly not a case of 'job done'."***

Lib Dem peer and former equalities minister Lynne Featherstone

# Academisation expanding religious control of schools

New NSS research has shown how academisation has created opportunities for religious groups to gain greater control over thousands of schools in England – including many schools which are nominally secular.

Our report, *Power grab: Academisation and the threat to secular education*, has found that academisation and the growth of mixed multi-academy trusts have seriously undermined community ethos education.

The report has highlighted five ways the academisation process has enabled religious groups to consolidate control over schools:

- Non-faith schools have become subject to faith-based governance.
- Community schools have become faith schools as a result of academisation.

*“With little public attention or debate, large swathes of the education system have come under religious governance... Schools should be run by and in the interests of school communities, not faith interest groups.”*

*Our report, Power grab*

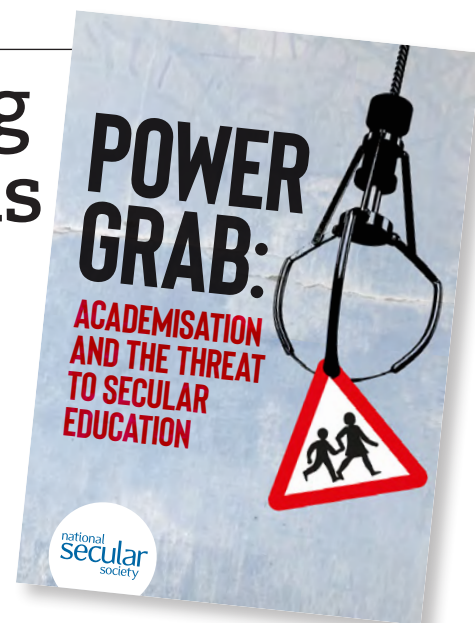
- Community ethos MATs have developed faith-based governance.
- Secular oversight of faith academies has diminished, while religious control has increased.
- Community schools’ ethos hasn’t been protected.

The report features case studies from senior leaders at several affected schools. It recommends several short-term solutions which could help to address some of the problems – including better

transparency, clearer guidance and a review of current governance arrangements.

But it also concludes that the best solution in the long term is for policy makers to commit to a secular education system.

The report prompted a meeting with DfE officials, in which we reiterated our concerns. Find out more at [bit.ly/3qJdJfR](https://bit.ly/3qJdJfR).



## Holding creationist schools to account

Our intervention spurred the government into action over an independent faith school which has taught creationism as science, and had several other serious failings.

Last year we raised the case of several independent faith schools which had repeatedly failed to meet standards in inspections. These included Bnois Jerusalem Girls School, a Jewish school in north London.

Among the school’s many failings, it was found to be teaching creationism as science and refusing

related disruption.

The notice signals the start of a process which can ultimately lead to a school being removed from the register of independent schools – which would mean it could no longer legally operate.

### Creationist Christian school

In November we also raised the alarm over the Vine Christian School in Berkshire, which said on the curriculum page of its website that “science is taught from the Biblical perspective of creation”.

The school uses the Accelerated Christian Education programme as its core curriculum.

We wrote to the government about the school. In a

comment to the press in response to our letter, the Department for Education said it was considering

### OFSTED'S FINDINGS ON BNOIS JERUSALEM GIRLS SCHOOL

Ofsted reported on the school in December 2019, and said it had:

- Taught creationism in geography and science
- Not entered pupils for GCSEs
- Limited its curriculum
- Redacted text and images in textbooks
- Left pupils lacking confidence with English language.

deregistering the school.

Legal standards allow independent schools to teach creationism as part of a belief system, but also say “it should not be presented as having a similar or superior evidence base to scientific theories”.

**Ministers have been urged to act over a private Christian school teaching creationism in science classes**

*Our interventions sparked coverage in iNews*

to enter pupils for GCSEs because leaders weren’t allowed to censor exam papers.

Now the government has told us it issued the school with a statutory notice last term, when inspections were able to resume following Covid-

*“Schools that teach creationism as science are prioritising religious indoctrination above the educational rights of the children they teach.”*

*Our CEO Stephen Evans responds to the government’s statutory notice in iNews*



# Resisting religious pressure over Welsh education reform

We've continued to push for substantial reform to the teaching of religion and belief, and sex education, in Wales – and the latest developments are encouraging.

In December the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the Welsh Senedd recommended that a bill to reform education should proceed to the next parliamentary stage.

The bill would replace RE with the more pluralistic religion, values and ethics (RVE). Its other reforms would include making comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) compulsory.

This came after we submitted evidence in response to the committee's call for evidence and our head of education Alastair Lichten gave evidence to the committee (pictured, top centre).

## NSS evidence

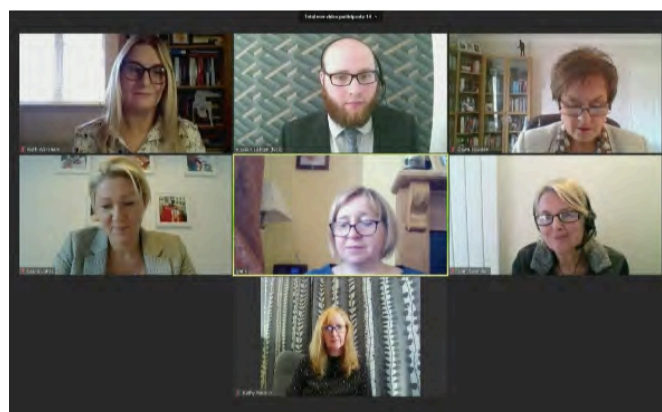
In our evidence we welcomed the Welsh government's aims and said the reforms would represent a significant advance for children's rights.

But we criticised plans to allow faith schools to continue to teach RVE and RSE through a faith ethos.

We also warned that plans to remove parents' right to

***"We want all children across Wales to have the same equal entitlement to a religious and ethical education fit for the 21st century."***

[A letter we sent to the Welsh government over the proposals](#)



withdraw their children from RVE could be subject to a legal challenge if RVE was still taught through a religious lens to families who didn't want that.

## Committee's recommendation

As it called for the bill to move to the next stage, the committee didn't recommend any new religious exemptions or loopholes in the bill.

This was despite calls from faith groups including the Catholic Education Service, which has objected in particular to the fact the bill will require faith schools to offer a pluralistic RVE option.

You can help us to make our case by visiting [secularism.org.uk/rve-wales](http://secularism.org.uk/rve-wales).

# NSS-backed study exposes C of E's control of RE

An academic study which we published has shown how the Church of England's theological approach to RE has come to dominate the subject.

*Understanding Christianity and the study of religion and worldviews*, by former RE teacher Chris Selway, highlights the results of a lack of government leadership over the teaching of religion and belief.

The study has found that ministers' failure to provide funding for academics and other experts to guide the subject has helped to create a vacuum.

And major resource providers funded by Christian trusts have increasingly filled it, assuming control over the subject and moulding it to suit their vision.

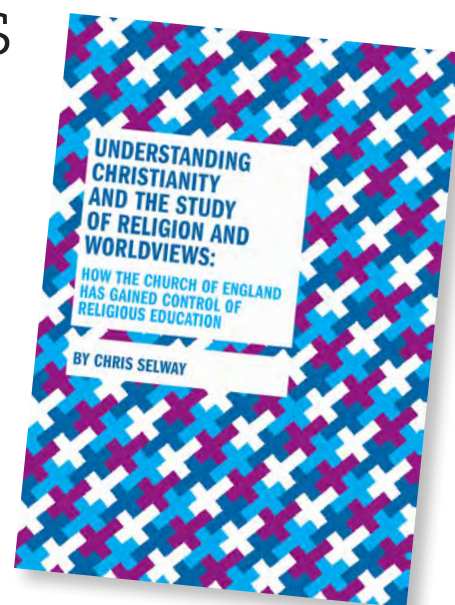
***"It seems clear that the way RE is administered, resourced, taught and monitored need to be remodelled, to ensure religion is taught in a balanced way."***

[Chris Selway reflects on the findings in his report](#)

The study looks specifically at the widely-used resource *Understanding Christianity*, which is published by RE Today Services, as an example of the problem.

It provides more evidence of the need to wrest the teaching of religion and belief out of the hands of vested interests.

You can read more about the study at [bit.ly/3qLYSKJ](http://bit.ly/3qLYSKJ).



The study was backed by our scholarship scheme. Find out more about how to apply for funding for original research at [secularism.org.uk/scholarship](http://secularism.org.uk/scholarship).

# Challenging airlines which pander to religious sexism

In October 2019 Melanie Wolfson, a British-Israeli citizen, boarded an easyJet flight from Tel Aviv to London.

An ultra-Orthodox Jewish man and his son were already sitting in her row. They asked her to swap seats with a man a few rows ahead, as they didn't want to sit next to a female passenger.

Some ultra-Orthodox Jews have religious objections to interacting with members of the opposite sex outside their family.

Initially, Wolfson refused.

A flight attendant then offered her a free hot drink as an incentive to move. Worrying that the flight could be delayed, and feeling under pressure, she agreed to switch.

Two months later, she boarded another easyJet flight to London – and was again asked to move seats by two ultra-Orthodox men.

She refused, but two female passengers agreed to change seats with the two men sitting next to her. Members of the cabin crew didn't intervene.

## Lawsuit in Israel

A civil rights group, Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), has now filed a lawsuit on Wolfson's behalf in Israel.

It says that during the first incident several flight attendants told her women were often asked to switch seats to accommodate ultra-Orthodox men.



IRAC previously won a similar case against Israeli national carrier El Al in 2017. El Al now has a policy which enables the removal of passengers who refuse to sit next to others because of their sex.

## NSS letter to easyJet

The NSS wrote to easyJet when Wolfson's case came to light, and urged it to adopt a similar policy to El Al.

We said one passenger's religious beliefs shouldn't serve as a reason for an airline to treat another passenger unfairly.

In 2018 we also raised this issue with representatives of the Civil Aviation Authority, which regulates civil aviation in the UK, and wrote to Austrian Airlines about the same topic.

We'll continue to work to ensure all passengers are protected from sex discrimination.

Photo by Alf van Beem (in the public domain)

# NSS raises human rights violations

We wrote to the prime minister to back a campaign to secure the freedom and safety of 14-year-old Maira Shahbaz, who's in fear of her life in Pakistan after fleeing a forced marriage.

She was abducted at gunpoint in April 2020, gang-raped, forcibly converted to Islam and forced to marry her abductor.

She escaped and fled into hiding with her parents – but Lahore's High Court has since ordered her to return to her abductor.

We also wrote to the Foreign Office to urge it to take up the case of Nasibe Semsai, an Iranian women's rights activist who faces a long jail term for protesting against mandatory Islamic veiling. She was arrested in Turkey and could face deportation back to Iran.

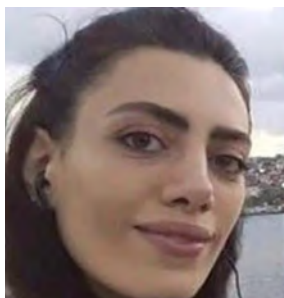
And we backed a campaign to secure the rights of Zara Kay, an ex-Muslim campaigner who was arrested in Tanzania in December and prevented from leaving the country.

Zara, an Australian citizen who has lived in London, faces charges which are transparently politically motivated, and designed to send a message about the risks of challenging intolerant Islamic ideology.

## Protecting women's right to access contraception

Britain's pharmacy regulator, the General Pharmaceutical Council, told Lloyds Pharmacy to ensure women could access emergency contraception after we intervened.

We raised the case of a woman who was refused the morning-after pill at a Lloyds Pharmacy branch for religious reasons. We'd also raised a similar incident in 2019.



Nasibe Semsai



Maira Shahbaz



Zara Kay

© Zahra Abbas Panjwani [CC BY-SA 4.0] (cropped)

# Time for disestablishment: Geoffrey Robertson delivers NSS lecture

Leading human rights barrister Geoffrey Robertson called for the disestablishment of the Church of England in our 2020 Bradlaugh Lecture in November.

His online lecture, *The ultimate blasphemy: disestablishing the Church of England*, argued for the separation of formal ties between church and state.

He called for the end of the lords spiritual – the 26 places automatically reserved for C of E bishops in the House of Lords – and questioned the monarch's role as head of the church.

His lecture addressed issues including the C of E's failure to deal with child abuse and its bishops' hostility to women's rights, same-sex marriage and the decriminalisation of assisted suicide.

If you missed it, you can watch the lecture in full on our YouTube channel.

ON THE C OF E'S HISTORY:

***"Let's face it – the Church of England was established because of the lust of a pathological monster [Henry VIII]."***

ON PARLIAMENTARY PRAYERS:

***"It's absurd to think that MPs will be inspired by prayers from a church in which so few of their constituents worship."***

ON THE LORDS SPIRITUAL IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS:

***"These bishops are given a privileged place in our legislature. Would we miss them if the church was disestablished? I don't think so."***

ON THE C OF E'S ROLE IN THE NEXT CORONATION:

***"Nowhere will [the church's establishment] seem more jarring and antediluvian than at the coronation of Charles III."***



## Churches put their reputations first on child abuse, inquiry finds

In the autumn both the Church of England and the Catholic Church were subject to damning reports from a public inquiry, on their handling of child sexual abuse.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse said both churches had prioritised their reputations over the interests of children, and had at times treated alleged perpetrators better than victims and survivors.

IICSA's report on the C of E said its culture enabled child abusers to "hide" and highlighted several

barriers to the disclosure of abuse, including "deference to the church's authority and to individual priests".

Its report on the Catholic Church said senior Catholic leaders were complicit in significant failures and noted "widespread" resistance to external oversight of safeguarding.

It also criticised the Vatican and its ambassador for failing to cooperate properly with part of the inquiry's investigation – a matter we raised with the Foreign Office and the then PM, Theresa May.

FROM THE IICSA REPORTS:

***"The culture of the Church of England facilitated it becoming a place where abusers could hide."***

***"The evidence in this investigation has revealed a sorry history of child sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales... Responses to disclosures have been characterised by a failure to support victims and survivors."***

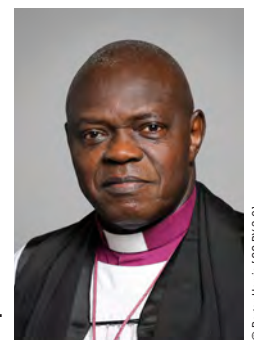
## Sentamu gets life peerage – despite concerns over handling of abuse

In December it was confirmed that John Sentamu, the former archbishop of York, would be given a life seat in the House of Lords as a crossbench peer.

This is in line with the tradition that former C of E archbishops are given life seats in the Lords on retirement. But serious concerns over Sentamu's handling of sexual abuse allegations remain unresolved.

And meanwhile former archbishop of Canterbury George Carey also still sits as a crossbencher – despite even more severe criticism of his handling of abuse allegations.

It's time for this custom to end.



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# Sounding the alarm over Jehovah's Witnesses 'hospital liaison committees'

We warned the government that NHS trusts which encourage Jehovah's Witness patients to engage with committees of religious representatives could be endangering lives.

Our research found that some trusts' policies encourage engagement with JW 'hospital liaison committees' (HLCs) – groups of elders who aim to ensure JW patients refuse blood products.

Statements from some trusts also appear to assume that all Jehovah's Witness (JW) patients will refuse blood.

We wrote to the Department of Health to call for a review of relevant trusts' policies.



***"We are concerned that HLCs may add to the pressure on JW patients to make decisions that are not in the best interest of their health and wellbeing."***

***"JW patients in hospital are at their most vulnerable and in a weak position to stand up for their personal autonomy or dismiss JW representatives who approach them."***

Our CEO Stephen Evans's letter to the Department of Health

Our letter highlighted several examples of trusts which refer to engagement with HLCs in positive terms, and which encourage JWs and staff working with JW patients to get in contact with them.

It also noted that HLCs influence

the formulation of hospital policies on blood transfusions, contribute to JW patient care plans and hold training for staff on JW issues.

Our campaign was also covered in the *Daily Mirror*.

■ HLCs work to ensure "God's law" forbidding blood transfusions is upheld, even if it costs a patient's life, according to published JW materials.

■ HLC members offer no confidentiality if a JW patient decides to pursue treatment with blood.

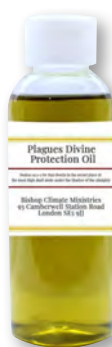
■ It's JW policy to shun those who "willingly and unrepentantly" receive blood transfusions.

## Prompting tougher scrutiny of rogue religious charities

In recent months England and Wales's charity regulator has stepped up action against two religious charities which we'd raised concerns about.

The Charity Commission has opened a statutory inquiry into The Kingdom Church GB, whose bishop sold 'plague protection kits' made of oil and string during the coronavirus outbreak.

We raised the church's case with the commission, and reported on it in the summer 2020 Bulletin.



The commission has also appointed an interim manager who will "consider the future viability of" the charity Islamic Research Foundation International, saying it has "serious concerns" over its administration.

We've repeatedly raised concerns about IRFI since 2018. IRFI aims to advance the Islamic faith by funding the Peace TV network, which has been censured for breaches of the broadcasting code on several occasions.

There's more detail on Peace TV's atrocious record of pushing Islamist extremism on page 7 of our summer 2020 Bulletin.



# Samuel Paty: brutally killed for doing his job

In Paris in October, 47-year-old history teacher Samuel Paty was attacked and beheaded in the street for doing his job.

It seems clear that the killer, a young Muslim fanatic who was shot dead at the scene, objected to Paty's use of cartoons from *Charlie Hebdo* in a class about freedom of expression.

At the time of writing the French authorities are also investigating a number of other people's potential involvement. Samuel Paty appears to have received threats, and been the target of a vicious social media campaign, before his murder.

The killing raises questions which are specific to France. But the question of who will defend the freedom to teach when Islamists or other religious fanatics try to enforce blasphemy taboos has resonance further afield.

In the wake of Samuel Paty's killing, France



displayed the *Charlie* cartoons as a sign that the assassin's veto wouldn't prevail. But elsewhere much of the focus has turned to critiquing French secularism in response.

In several Muslim-majority countries, there have

been widespread calls for a boycott of France. Turkey and Pakistan's presidents have denounced France's response.

And many western liberals have again shown how queasy they are about defending freedom of expression in the face of Islamic fanaticism.

For example, shortly after the killing, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau said "freedom of expression is not without limits".

Much of polite opinion has reflexively retreated to a comfort zone where there's no need to ask hard questions about Islamist supremacism and separatism.

Liberal societies must ensure we don't give up fundamental values in the face of religious intolerance.



## NSS CEO SPEAKS TO CHARLIE HEBDO

Our CEO Stephen Evans addressed freedom of expression, secularism and multifaitism in an interview with *Charlie Hebdo*.

The interview appeared in an edition marking the sixth anniversary of the deadly 2015 attack on the magazine's staff.

## Scottish government gives ground over hate crime bill

We've continued to push the Scottish government to ensure freedom of expression is protected as it proceeds with plans for a new hate crime bill – and we've had some significant success.

In recent weeks the justice secretary Humza Yousaf has introduced significant amendments to the bill, which will introduce a new offence of 'stirring up hatred' on religious grounds.

### Proposed amendments

One amendment would provide greater protection to expressions of "antipathy, dislike, ridicule and insult" of religion – although worryingly, as we went to press, ministers appeared to have reopened

the possibility that this language would be watered down.

That free speech protection would still be weaker than a similar clause in England and Wales's Racial and Religious Hatred Act, but would bring it much closer in line.

Another amendment which the Justice Committee has agreed to would ensure the prosecution will need to demonstrate intent to secure a conviction for 'stirring up hatred'. Another introduces an objective test for 'abusive' behaviour.

### NSS lobbying is paying off

The amendments, all of which we lobbied for, would go some way to addressing the concerns we've raised over this bill, including when we

## Law Commission proposals risk chilling free speech

We responded to two consultations from the Law Commission, on proposals on hate crime and communications offences in England and Wales.

In both cases we warned the proposals could have a chilling effect on free speech.

gave written and oral evidence to the justice committee in the autumn.

The bill has now passed its second hurdle in the Scottish parliament. As it moves to its final stage, many campaigners are warning that freedom of expression protections need to be strengthened further.

We'll continue making that argument too.

# Poland's record on child abuse under the spotlight

Last May the Catholic Church marked 100 years since the birth of Pope John Paul II.

But just as the centenary rolled around, so did a damning film about child abuse in John Paul's home country – Poland.

The documentary *Hide and Seek* told the story of two brothers who were allegedly abused by a priest, who was protected by a bishop.

It was the third significant film on clerical abuse in Poland in as many years.

The films have helped to highlight the substantial amount of clerical child abuse in Poland – and some of the damage done by Poland's close relationship with the Catholic Church.

## The concordat between Poland and the Vatican

The close ties between Poland and the Vatican were codified in a treaty known as the concordat in 1993.

The concordat requires conformity with the Catholic Church's canon 'law' in some instances and remains valid today.

The maximum sanction under



canon law for abuse of minors, including rape, is defrocking.

And in a 2019 letter, Poland's national prosecutor appeared to suggest local prosecutors seeking evidence from the church were required to treat it with deference.

## NSS submission to UN

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is currently preparing a five-yearly report on Poland's record on children's rights.

In September we submitted written evidence and our president, Keith Porteous Wood, appeared before the committee.

We highlighted the damage the concordat causes to efforts to secure secular justice in Poland.

Meanwhile we said Poland should take steps to tackle the discrimination and persecution faced by LGBT children.

## Human rights in retreat

This is part of a pattern of retreating human rights in Poland. The populist government has attacked LGBT rights, while a recent politicised court ruling effectively outlawed abortion.

But that ruling has also sparked a furious backlash from a women's movement, and posed awkward



Lena Ivanov / Shutterstock.com

questions over the Catholic Church's close ties to the state.

Perhaps Poland's feminist protesters, and its documentary makers, are a sign that the Catholic Church's damaging power over public policy can be curtailed.

## OTHER CAMPAIGNING

### Children's rights in the UK

■ We urged the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to ensure children's rights in the UK aren't undermined by religion in a written submission. The committee recently began a periodic examination of children's human rights in the UK.

■ Meanwhile the Scottish government has announced plans to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into law. We've welcomed this and will argue that it should encourage more willingness to stand up to religious demands where they undermine children's rights.

### Non-stun slaughter

■ We wrote to the environment secretary to warn of a lack of transparency after the Food Standards Agency stopped publishing data on the number of animals being slaughtered without pre-stunning.

■ Meanwhile the European Court of Justice, the EU's highest court, ruled that states subject to its jurisdiction may ban non-stun slaughter on animal welfare grounds.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Out-of-school settings code to be voluntary

■ The government has confirmed that a new safeguarding code for out-of-school educational settings will not be compulsory. We've warned that this will create an ongoing risk to children's rights.

■ We called for the code to be mandatory and enforced where proportionate when we responded to a consultation on draft guidance last year.

### Declining religious belonging

■ New statistics from the Church of England showed that fewer than two per cent of people in England regularly worshipped at C of E churches in 2019. This was despite the fact tens of thousands of children attended services for schools.

■ Meanwhile, in a report published by Scotland's chief statistician, 56% of adults said they didn't belong to any religion.



# Questions over new freedom of religion or belief envoy

In December the government announced the appointment of Fiona Bruce as the UK's new envoy on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). We've questioned the wisdom of the appointment.

Bruce has raised some significant human rights abuses in parliament, in countries such as North Korea, Pakistan and Nigeria.

But as a member of the Evangelical Alliance council, much of her parliamentary record also indicates a willingness to impose her beliefs on others.

We've written to her to make the case for an even-handed approach to FoRB, and to urge her to ensure everyone's right to freedom of religion or belief is upheld and protected equally.

We hope to meet with her shortly.

During her parliamentary career, Fiona Bruce has opposed:

- Women's reproductive rights
- Same-sex marriage
- Assisted dying



Official portrait of Fiona Bruce MP via parliament.uk [CC BY 3.0]

## NSS calls out biased faith engagement review

We've highlighted significant pro-religious bias in a government review of its engagement with faith organisations in England.

The review will see the government's faith engagement adviser Colin Bloom make recommendations to the communities secretary about how the government should engage with faith groups.

The review raises several questions over faith groups' role in public policy.

We wrote to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), which Bloom is attached to, over the issue.

We urged it to pause a consultation on the review and re-launch it so the public is consulted fairly and impartially on these issues. Our letter was covered in the *Mirror* (pictured).

The review appears to have been designed to reach pre-determined conclusions that reflect the priorities of religious groups.

We expect it to recommend a new office for faith engagement within government to oversee interaction

with religious groups and efforts to make Whitehall officials more 'religiously literate'.

It was also revealed that the government had apparently removed Ahmadi Muslims from a list of Muslim denominations in the review, under pressure from radical Muslim groups.

We then wrote to MHCLG again to urge it to investigate the allegations – and to reiterate our call for the redesigning of the review.

In response a minister told us the matter had been raised with the minister for faith and Colin Bloom.

### Loss of faith in religious dialogue

The Government has launched a consultation with the public to discuss how it should engage with faith groups on key issues, including education.

One of the questions is: "Do you think that faith-based schools are good for society?"

Another is: "Do you think that faith-based or religious practices in schools have a positive impact on a child's education?"

The call for evidence says that it will value the responses of religious people more than

non-religious: "Because the review is specifically about faith and religion, priority will be given to



**SCEPTICAL** Evans

responses that fit within those parameters."

So you can expect the results to be slanted towards people who, for instance, approve of having a state education system that segregates children according to their parent's religion.

Any idea that this might be an impartial process isn't helped by the fact it is being led by Colin Bloom,

formerly a director of Christians in Politics.

The National Secular Society is not impressed.

"The Government's consultation places a disproportionate focus on religious communities' input on important matters of public policy," said chief executive Stephen Evans.

"The whole thing appears to have been designed to reach a conclusion which will please religious interest groups.

"This approach marginalises the non-religious and those who see religion as a private matter – and who have a legitimate interest in its findings."

**Mirror**

Both gave assurances that they have a "zero tolerance approach" to extremism and will be meeting with members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.

### THE BIAS IN THE GOVERNMENT'S REVIEW

- A call for evidence said "priority" would be given to responses that fit within the "parameters" of "faith and religion".
- The opening line of a press release launching the review only said it was calling for views from "people of all faiths", without mentioning anyone else.
- Colin Bloom, who's leading the review, has held several roles which have focused on working towards greater representation of faith in politics.

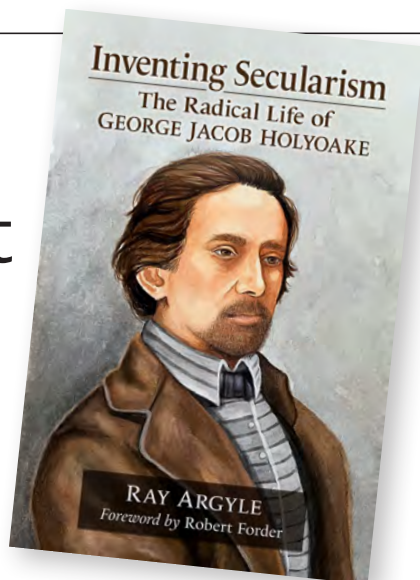
# Inventing Secularism launch event

We'll be hosting a launch event for the book *Inventing Secularism: The Radical Life of George Jacob Holyoake*, by Ray Argyle, on Thursday 22 April.

Holyoake was an instrumental thinker in secularist thought in the 19th century. He was credited with coining the term 'secularism' and spent six months in prison for blasphemy.

Ray will discuss Holyoake's life, work and legacy, and consider how his vision rings with renewed clarity at a time when secularism is under siege worldwide.

Keep an eye on our website for more details, at [secularism.org.uk/events](http://secularism.org.uk/events).



## Lasting change to admissions policy needed

In November, *Schools Week* reported that faith schools across much of England had temporarily altered admissions provisions which give priority to children who attend places of worship.

The changes resulted from closures prompted by the coronavirus.

In a comment in response, we said discriminatory faith-based admissions should be scrapped for good.

## Virtual AGM

We held our first ever virtual AGM in November. This followed an EGM which gave our council the power to hold virtual meetings to ensure we can continue with 'business as usual' during the pandemic.

The AGM elected two new members of council: we welcome aboard Catriona Low and David Parker, who took over as treasurer.

We also thank Terry Sanderson and Yasmin Rehman, who both stepped down from council at the AGM.

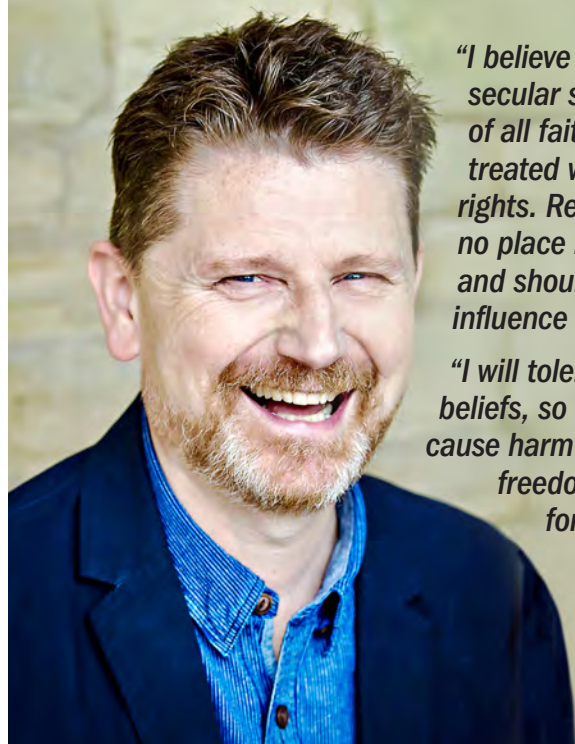
## Latest podcasts and audio blogs

Our latest podcasts include interviews on the disestablishment of the Church of England, the rise of the religious right in America and the 'war on Christmas'. One episode also sees Lynne Featherstone address our report on the Equality Act.

We're also now making some of our blogs available as audio files, as part of our Opinion Out Loud series.

You can listen to both the podcast and Opinion Out Loud by going to [secularism.org.uk/podcast](http://secularism.org.uk/podcast).

## WHY I SUPPORT THE NSS...



*"I believe passionately in a secular society where people of all faiths and none can be treated with equal respect and rights. Religion has absolutely no place in state matters and should carry no power or influence over public policy."*

*"I will tolerate anyone's religious beliefs, so long as they don't cause harm or impinge on my freedoms – or anyone else's for that matter."*

Emmerdale actor and director of stage, film and television,  
**Reece Dinsdale**



national secular society **Bulletin**

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