

challenging religious privilege

national  
**secular**  
society

**Annual  
Report**  
2019

## **OUR MISSION**

The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state and equal respect for everyone's human rights so that no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged on account of their beliefs.

## **THE SECULAR CHARTER**

The National Secular Society campaigns for a secular democracy, where:

- There is no established state religion.
- Everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief.
- The judicial process is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.
- Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.
- Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum setting, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices.
- The state does not express religious beliefs or preferences and does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine.
- The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
- There is freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion.
- Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief.
- Individuals and groups are neither accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

I'm pleased to present this review of another industrious year at the National Secular Society.

It was a pleasure to welcome so many of our members, along with a range of knowledgeable and thoughtful speakers, to our Secularism 2019 conference in May, which addressed the ways in which 'religious freedom' is being misused by religious lobbyists.

And it was particularly humbling to welcome our Secularist of the Year, Saif ul Malook, who has defended victims of Pakistan's blasphemy law despite facing threats to his life. You can read more about the conference on page 8.

In the UK, the close ties between the state and the Church of England – which have always been unjustifiable – are becoming increasingly unsustainable. This year's British Social Attitudes survey has found that just 12% of British people now consider themselves Anglican.

Meanwhile church attendance – and in particular attendance at Anglican churches – continues to plummet. Sunday attendance by parents with school-age children has dropped by nearly two-thirds since 1990 and is now less than 1% of the relevant population. A quarter of Anglican churches have no children at all in their Sunday congregations.

It is no wonder therefore that churches are pushing ever harder to open more schools as the only way left to reach the young, and at our expense. And faith schools are becoming more religious, with prayer spaces and more religious services.

The increase in faith schooling means many parents are forced to send their children to faith schools even though they would prefer not to. This year we highlighted the extent of this problem when we published a groundbreaking report on faith schools' impact on school choice, which is explained on page 2.

The NSS has always opposed publicly funded faith schools. There is no acceptable reason why taxpayers' money should subsidise proselytisation. So we're pushing the government to roll back faith based education. And as a minimum first step we're arguing that those of all faiths and none should be entitled to secular school provision within a reasonable distance.

Meanwhile the teaching of relationships education becomes mandatory in England next year, but attempts to promote inclusion in a few Birmingham schools has resulted in continuing hostilities, particularly over LGBTI aspects. Religious activists there have fomented unrest by deliberately misrepresenting these lessons.



The teachers at these schools deserve our unstinting support. But this is about much more than Birmingham. The school is right to emphasise that the future of our plural society and cohesion will be imperilled if these antagonists get their way. If they succeed, others will emulate them elsewhere.

While the antagonists identified were mainly Muslim, their objectives, if not their methods, have found favour with the religiously orthodox of several faiths. You can read more about our involvement in this on page 3. We will continue to press the government and local authorities to be much more robust in supporting schools in their promotion of inclusivity and tolerance.

And while the balloon has gone up in Birmingham over relationship education in a state school, I am even more concerned about cohesion (and basic education too) in private schools and especially unregistered establishments, particularly the most religiously orthodox ones. These are likely to be mono-ethnic and in some cases most of the time is spent on indoctrination rather than on equipping pupils for life in modern Britain. Where the religion practised by the schools is highly orthodox and the vast majority of pupils are from ethnic minorities, such schools also impede cohesion.

Our society is failing children who, often because of their parents' religious conservatism, are denied a proper, rounded education. But the NSS is standing up for those children's rights.

And as you'll see from the pages that follow, we're pushing to protect freedom of and from religion on a range of fronts. Whether we're highlighting the harm caused by deference to religion in charity law or defending freedom of expression, the NSS remains a vital vehicle for a fair balance between everyone's human rights, regardless of their religion or belief.

I conclude by putting on record my appreciation, and that of council and our CEO, for the support of members and supporters to allow this important work to continue.

## FOR SECULAR EDUCATION

### Unravelling the choice delusion

Faith schools are often defended in terms of 'parental choice'. But a groundbreaking report which we published in December revealed the extent to which faith schools are restricting choice for many parents.

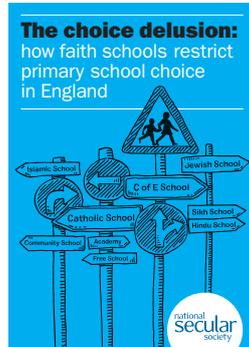
The report, *The Choice Delusion*, found:

- Almost three in 10 families across England live in areas where most or all of the closest primary schools are faith schools.
- Every year between 45,000 and 60,000 families apply for primary schools in areas with extreme restrictions on non-faith school choice.
- In more than 40% of rural areas restrictions on non-faith school choice are 'high' or 'extreme'.
- More than 20% of those who miss out on their first choice of a non-faith primary school are being assigned faith schools.

In September we released further research revealing that more than 20,000 pupils were being assigned faith schools against their parents' preferences.

Our research was raised in both houses of parliament. We also secured a number of meetings with MPs to discuss the need for all families to have reasonable access to secular schools.

Find out more at [secularism.org.uk/choicedelusion](http://secularism.org.uk/choicedelusion).



**Every MP and local authority in England received a copy of the report**

### Resisting new discriminatory faith schools



Our dedicated No More Faith Schools campaign has continued to grow and resist government plans for a new wave of religiously selective faith schools, with considerable success.

In November the government announced plans for a new wave of voluntary aided faith schools, which can potentially select 100% of their pupils on religious grounds. And in March 14 proposals were published.

We worked nationally and locally to oppose the plans and stand up for secular, inclusive alternatives.

We exclusively revealed that some of the proposed schools were in areas where there was no need for new school places, or were in competition with inclusive school proposals. We also briefed local councillors on our findings.

#### Plans for new wave of religiously segregated schools revealed

Catholic, CoFE, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish groups behind plans for schools with 100 per cent faith-based selection

We were quoted in *Tes* and elsewhere on the government's plans for new VA schools

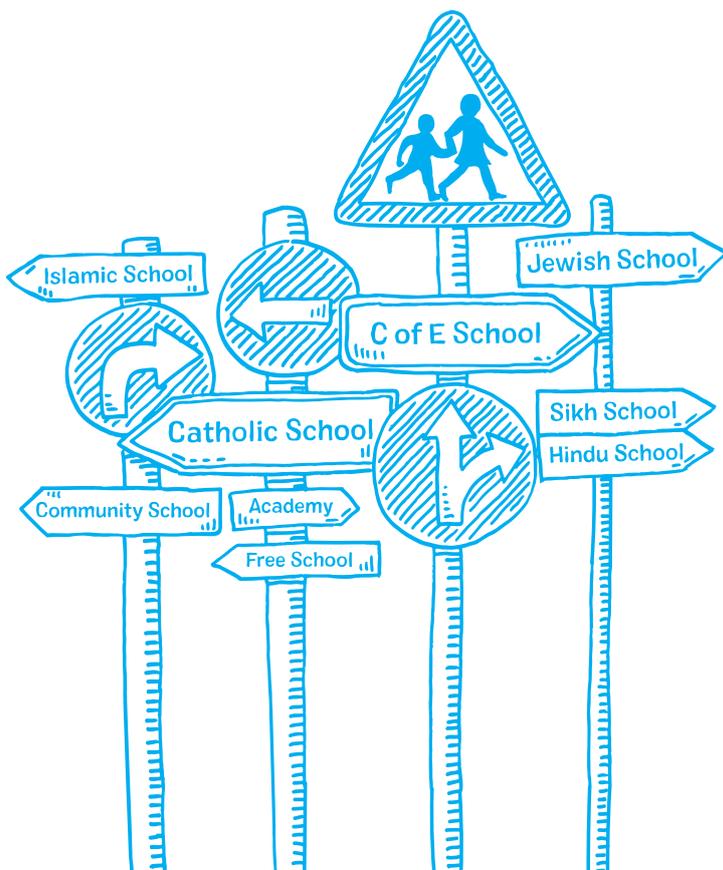
We joined a broad coalition of leading public figures, experts and campaigners by signing an open letter in *The Sunday Times* criticising the plans.

At the time of writing, just one VA school (a Catholic school in Peterborough) is set to go forward. We're working with local campaigners to organise opposition to that plan.

The No More Faith Schools campaign has also produced guides to challenging new faith school proposals and urged supporters to sign a national petition and send letters to MPs. Find out more at [nomorefaithschools.org](http://nomorefaithschools.org).

Our research revealed that more than

**20,000**  
children go to faith schools  
against their parents' preferences  
in England each year



## Standing up for inclusive RSE

This year reactionary religious campaigns against inclusive education on relationships and sex caused significant disruption, and we played a major role in pushing back against them.

There were vocal and intimidating protests by Muslim groups outside primary schools in Birmingham against teaching which promotes diversity. Meanwhile LGBT activists were attacked, senior teachers were threatened and leafleting campaigns spread across the country.



Mainly Muslim protesters gathered outside schools in Birmingham

Our research has exposed the activities of several groups of campaigners, both against inclusive teaching programmes and against relationships and sex education (RSE) specifically. We highlighted:

- The bigoted messages being spread by the predominantly Islam-based campaign group Stop RSE, which has supported protests, and a group called Islamic RSE which mobilised Muslim opposition to RSE.
- A coordinated effort by ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools to refuse to teach aspects of RSE by exploiting loopholes in Department for Education regulations.
- A rant from a Church of England school governor, who said inclusive education “opens the door for sexual predators”. The governor resigned after we raised his remarks with the school.

We briefed MPs and lobbied education ministers, urging them:

- Not to water down guidance on RSE in the face of religious pressure.
- To provide “unequivocal support” to a school affected by protests.
- To reconsider a requirement on schools to take pupils’ “religious background” into account when teaching about relationships.



**We don't condone the behaviour but we need to work psychologically or in a mental health capacity with (those experiencing same-sex attraction)."**

Comments from **Dr KATE GODFREY-FAUSSETT**, of Stop RSE, which we discovered and publicised

Meanwhile our work helped to persuade the government to resist pressure from anti-LGBT campaigners to extend parents’ right to withdraw their children from RSE in England. New Department for Education guidance has replaced parents’ explicit right to withdraw their children from sex education in secondary schools with a “right to request” withdrawal.

And we raised concerns that the education inspectorate Ofsted was allowing some faith schools to teach that same-sex relationships were wrong at a meeting with its representatives.

→ On page 9: Andrew Moffat, the award winning deputy headteacher behind the ‘No Outsiders’ programme whose school was targeted in some of the protests, delivered our 2019 Bradlaugh Lecture.

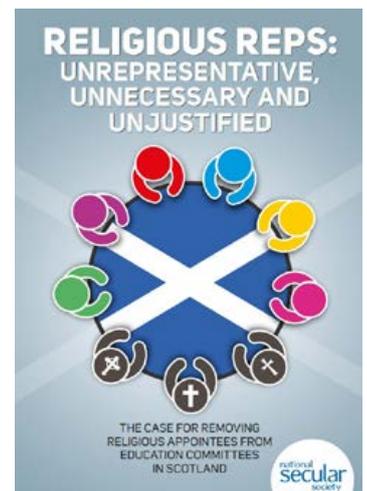
## Challenging religious reps in Scotland

We urged members of the Scottish parliament to remove religious appointees from councils’ education committees, and local councillors to revoke their voting privileges while the positions remain, in a major report.

*Religious Reps:* unrepresentative, unnecessary and unjustified argued that reserving a special role in policy making for representatives of religious institutions runs counter to democratic principles.

Scottish councils are legally required to appoint three unelected religious representatives to their education committees. At least one must be appointed by the Catholic Church and one by the Church of Scotland.

The issue gained prominence after Perth & Kinross Council decided to remove the reps’ voting privileges. Our research showing that eight of Scotland’s 32 councils were willing to consider this was highlighted on the front page of *The Times* in Scotland.



Every MSP and councillor across Scotland received a copy of the report

## FOR SECULAR EDUCATION

### Opposing collective worship

We continued working for an end to the legal requirement on schools in England & Wales to hold daily acts of worship.

We publicised the case of the Harris family, who were concerned with evangelism in their children's community ethos school following its takeover by a Christian academy trust. The Harrises have subsequently brought a human rights challenge against the school's collective worship policy and management of the right to withdraw.

We wrote to education secretary Gavin Williamson shortly after he took up his post, urging him to consider clarifying how schools should interpret the collective worship requirement.

And our education campaigner Alastair Lichten participated in a seminar on the suitability of the requirement with academics, policy makers, activists and religious representatives.

### Other education work

- We teamed up with the campaign group Comprehensive Future to call for an inquiry into the school admissions system in England. An open letter to *The Observer* gained signatures from MPs from across the political spectrum, activists, experts and educationalists.
- We continued to engage with curriculum reform in Wales – particularly over religious education and relationships & sexuality education. We met officials and responded to consultations as we argued for a move away from religious exceptionalism.
- We continued to work to protect children's rights from religious impositions in registered and unregistered (illegal) independent faith schools, elective home education and out of school settings.
- We wrote to the government over examples of state and independent faith schools which require their pupils and families to observe strict rules in their private lives.
- Our education officer visited Belfast to meet with advocates for and professionals in integrated education in Northern Ireland.
- We intervened at the European Court of Human Rights to support two Greek students who argued that the confessional nature of religious education and arrangements for pupil withdrawal violated their human rights.
- We urged councils in Wrexham and Stockport to reform discriminatory school transport policies which privilege travel to faith schools.
- And we continued to provide plenty of advice and support to parents, pupils and staff affected by inappropriate religious influence and discrimination in schools.

### Exploring Secularism: our new resources for schools

We are determined to get secularism on the curriculum so students can have a better awareness and understanding of secularist principles. With this in mind, this year we launched a major new range of resources for secondary school students and teachers to explore key concepts and questions related to secularism and religion's role in society.

We introduced our Exploring Secularism website and our first resources: a guide for teachers and a pack on the core principles of secularism.

Every secondary school in the UK received an introductory letter about the project. Already dozens have requested information packs and hundreds of people have downloaded the resources.

We also sent the resources to every SACRE – the bodies which determine local RE curricula – in England and Wales.

Find out more at [exploringsecularism.org](http://exploringsecularism.org).



# 64

The number of education related pieces of casework our team worked on this year

## FOR SECULAR HEALTHCARE

### Challenging ritual infant genital cutting

Our lobbying has continued to bring the debate over the ritual cutting of boys' genitals into the mainstream.

In July our CEO Stephen Evans called for an end to non-therapeutic circumcision of boys in an opinion piece published in *The Independent*. He argued that society should protect children's right to grow up in their own bodies and make their own decisions about religion, rather than having them imposed on them.



The demand for religious freedom to be respected is often little more than a demand for the state to turn a blind eye to the violation of others' rights and freedoms when done in the name of religion."

Our CEO **STEPHEN EVANS** on circumcision in *The Independent*

His article, which coincided with the release of a BBC documentary on circumcision, was widely read and shared on social media.

We also challenged public bodies and a charity which have deferred to religious interests over circumcision.

We urged the General Medical Council (GMC) to address the issue of genital cutting in guidance on decision-making and consent. In a submission to a consultation on the guidance, we noted the contradiction between the GMC's welcome rhetoric on patient autonomy and its weak stance on ritual genital cutting.

We highlighted and criticised guidance from the British Medical Association which places an undue emphasis on parental culture and religion, to the detriment of children's independent rights.

And we wrote to the children's charity the NSPCC to challenge its position on male circumcision after it equivocated over the issue in a public statement.

Over the last couple of years there have been increasing moves globally towards restricting infant circumcision, particularly in several Scandinavian countries. We'll be lobbying politicians in the UK and urging them to defend the right of all children to bodily integrity, regardless of their sex or religious background.



The Mirror highlighted criticism of circumcision from our campaigns officer Megan Manson

### Success on vaccination advice

We convinced Public Health England (PHE) to change guidance which encouraged parents to seek advice from "faith leaders" over whether to vaccinate their children.

## Fluenz: 'Don't ask faith leaders for vaccine advice'

PHE's change of policy was reported in *The Times*, with our response quoted

We wrote to PHE after we noticed it had told parents to "seek advice from their faith or community leaders" to "inform their decision". PHE had given the advice both in statements to the press and in a public facing leaflet.

We asked PHE to explain its rationale for advising people to consult "faith leaders", saying its statement sent "a confusing and potentially harmful message". PHE wrote back to us to say it had reviewed our concerns and removed the line from the booklet.



In principle, a public health authority should not refer the public to authorities with no medical expertise or certification on matters relating to medicine."

Our letter to Public Health England

### Other healthcare work

■ We wrote to the GMC and a local clinical commissioning group to raise the case of a GP in Kent who continued to proselytise to patients despite a warning not to do so. Our concern prompted an investigation into his conduct.

■ We asked a medical regulator to investigate an incident in which a pharmacist reportedly refused to serve a woman contraception for "personal reasons".

→ On page 9: We hosted the groundbreaking *Healthcare & Secularism* conference in October.

## FOR A SECULAR STATE

### End parliamentary prayers

We coordinated a parliamentary motion calling for the end of the practice of holding prayers in parliament – and gained the support of MPs from across the political spectrum.

Our early day motion (EDM 1967) said:

- Religious worship should “not play any part in the formal business of the House of Commons”
- Parliamentary meetings “should be conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all attendees, irrespective of their personal beliefs”
- Parliamentary prayers are “not compatible with a society which respects the principle of freedom of and from religion”.

We also wrote to the Commons procedure committee to alert it to the motion. And many of our supporters helpfully wrote to their MPs to urge them to sign it.

Sittings in both the House of Commons and the Lords currently begin with Anglican prayers. And MPs and peers who wish to attend or speak in busy sessions often effectively have to attend them to secure a seat.



Our honorary associate Crispin Blunt MP highlighted our motion in *The Times*

In response to the EDM the chair of the procedure committee told us he was “content to discuss” our proposal with the committee “once we have disposed of currently pressing business”.

### End council prayers

We also continued to lobby for an end to prayers at local government meetings.

We assisted councillors who sought to reform meetings by removing prayers in Norfolk. We also helped councillors seeking a reasonable separation between prayers and meetings in Denbighshire, after making similar efforts in Barry in south Wales late last year.

Councils in Wales aren't allowed to hold prayers during meetings, thanks to a legal challenge we won in 2012. In Denbighshire and Barry we objected to the fact prayers were

held in the council chamber just before meetings started, inconveniencing those who did not wish to attend.

Unfortunately English councils are currently allowed to hold prayers during meetings, as the law in England changed in 2015.



Council meetings should be conducted without anyone feeling compelled to participate in prayers, or feeling excluded, or that they have to absent themselves from any part of the meeting... religious rituals should play no part in proceedings.”

Our message to councillors in Denbighshire

### Revealing the C of E's unscrutinised spending

We highlighted the fact that the government allowed the Church of England to spend £40m of taxpayers' money on cathedral repairs without subjecting it to proper scrutiny.

Ministers gave the church the money under the first world war cathedral repairs fund. But documents revealed in response to our freedom of information requests revealed that they:

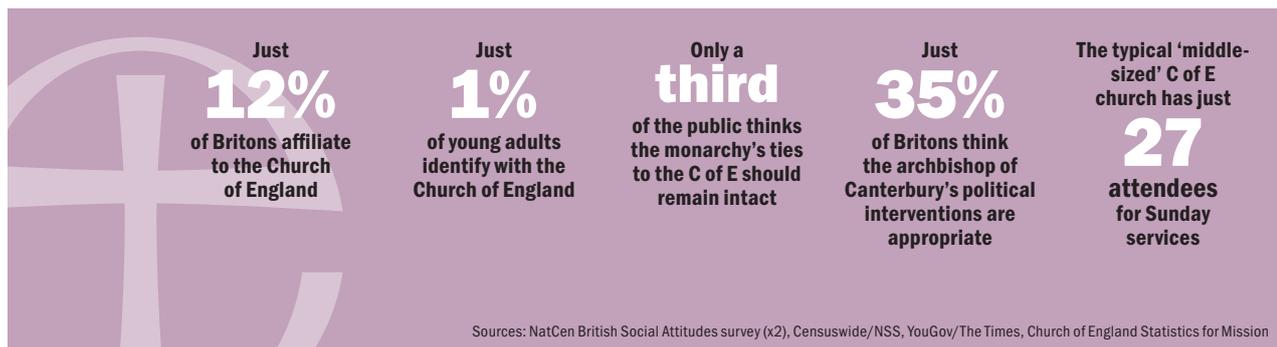
- Didn't require the church to make a business case before it was given the money, as bidders for public funds usually are.
- Allowed the church's archbishops' council to administer the fund, creating a conflict of interests and excusing the scheme from independent oversight.
- Failed to press the church to justify the expenditure or provide independent verification that it was being reported accurately – a condition of the money being made available.
- Put inaccurate, unverified figures on the parliamentary record as a result.

And the church warned that the government would suffer “significant reputational risk” if it did not award the money.

### Other campaigning

■ We reiterated our call for the end of the Anglican judges' service which marks the start of the legal year in a letter to the justice secretary.

■ Our president Keith Porteous Wood participated in the Ecclesiastical Law Society's conference on the establishment of the Church of England.



## FOR SECULAR LAWS

### Calling for reform of charity law

We published a major report calling for 'the advancement of religion' to be removed as a charitable purpose and highlighting the harm done by many charities which exist to promote religion.

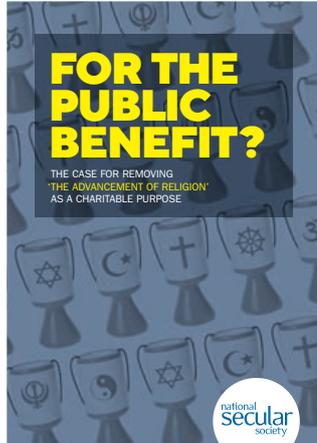
Our report, *For The Public Benefit?*, revealed that over 12,000 charities exist solely to promote religion – with some using public money to promote extremism and harmful practices.

'The advancement of religion' is listed as one of 13 charitable purposes under charity law. Our report made the point that the benefit of advancing religion is far more contestable than the benefit provided by other charitable purposes – such as saving lives or relieving poverty.

We sent the report to the charities minister. It generated significant media coverage and has opened up an important debate around the charitable status of religious bodies.

Under our proposed reforms religious and faith-based organisations could still apply for charitable status but the onus would be on them to demonstrate some benefit to society other than simply promoting and practising their own beliefs.

Some of our supporters have written to their MPs to highlight the findings of the report. If you'd like to do the same, you can find out more at [secularism.org.uk/charities](http://secularism.org.uk/charities).



We sent our findings to ministers and charity regulators across the UK



**12,000**  
charities exist solely to advance religion  
– as we revealed

### End non-stun slaughter

We continued to urge the government to rethink the legal exemption which allows animals to be slaughtered without stunning for religious reasons.

For several months of this year ministers indicated a willingness at least to consider introducing requirements to label the meat, to help consumers make informed choices.

But in September the environment secretary Theresa Villiers appeared to backtrack, as she said the government opposed all restrictions on non-stun slaughter – including labelling requirements. We wrote to her to challenge her position in response.



**It would be wrong for religious economic interests to be prioritised over animal welfare and providing consumers with accurate information about the products they are buying."**

Our CEO **STEPHEN EVANS's** letter to Theresa Villiers

Throughout the year we have held a series of meetings with MPs from across the political spectrum to push for an end to non-stun slaughter and/or the introduction of labelling requirements.

Our case is made even more pressing by the reach of non-stun meat in schools. In late 2018 we revealed that at least 17 councils across the UK were providing non-stun halal meat to schools. The meat is reaching at least 140 schools, most of which are not Islamic faith schools.

## Parents left in dark over 'inhumane' meat

The Times highlighted our findings on non-stun meat in schools

At the same time there was more welcome news from Lancashire County Council, which ratified a previous decision to stop serving non-stun meat in schools after we repeatedly lobbied its representatives.

But when a debate arose in Kirklees in West Yorkshire the council leader shut it down and smeared those raising concerns as bigots. Kirklees Council supplies non-stun meat to at least 40 schools – and has repeatedly refused even to reveal which schools are affected.

### Other campaigning

- We warned against allowing religious groups to host opposite-sex civil partnerships while opting out of hosting same-sex ones in response to a government consultation.
- We wrote to the Home Office to challenge the use of 'faith tests' in asylum policy amid a series of dubious refusals. The government promised to review its decision-making procedures in response.

## EVENTS & OUTREACH

### Secularism 2019: Reclaiming Religious Freedom

Our biggest event this year was our Secularism 2019 conference in May, which was attended by a capacity audience at the spectacular Tower Hotel in central London.

The conference brought together speakers from fields including campaigning, journalism and academia to discuss what 'religious freedom' truly means, and how religious privilege can infringe on other freedoms.

The keynote speaker was Rachel Laser, CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Rachel gave an insightful and eye-opening look into the risks posed to the USA's secular constitution by President Trump and his evangelical Christian supporters.

The highlight of the conference was presenting our Secularist of the Year 2019 award to Pakistani lawyer Saif ul Malook. Saif has risked his life defending those prosecuted under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. In 2014 he took up the high-profile case of Asia Bibi, helping to secure her acquittal.

Former NSS president Barbara Smoker was also given a lifetime achievement award for her longstanding commitment to secularism and human rights.



Together, Trump, Pence and their emboldened allies are weaponising 'religious freedom' and turning what is supposed to be a shield that protects us into a sword that harms people, stops social progress and actually robs people of true religious freedom."

Our keynote speaker **RACHEL LASER** on the emboldened US Christian right



To fight blasphemy cases in Pakistan is putting one's own and families' lives at risk... I assure you that I plan to continue my mission in providing legal aid to all blasphemy victims even in future regardless to the threat to my life."

**SAIF UL MALOOK**, Secularist of the Year winner for 2019



Our CEO Stephen Evans (left) and Rachel Laser congratulate Saif ul Malook



Saif ul Malook was named Secularist of the Year



Geoffrey Robertson QC presented the Secularist of the Year award



Our vice-president Josephine Macintosh chaired the conference



Rachel Laser said the US religious right had "misused" the idea of religious freedom



Our honorary associate Pragna Patel defended free speech on religion



Dr Joyce D'Silva of Compassion in World Farming said non-stun slaughter must end on animal welfare grounds



Sara Khan (left) and our council member Yasmin Rehman addressed religious freedom and religious orthodoxy



Izzy Posen (left) and Brian Earp defended children's rights from religious impositions



Our former president Barbara Smoker was given a lifetime achievement award



A packed conference room at the Tower Hotel watched Dr Ahmed Shaheed introduce the event

## Healthcare & Secularism conference

In October 2018 we held our first ever conference for healthcare professionals and other concerned parties to explore secularism's role in healthcare and medicine.

Academics and experts in medicine, law and ethics gathered in Birmingham to address issues including conscientious objection, 'gay conversion therapy', ritual genital cutting, sexual health rights and assisted dying.

Tickets for the event, which was co-organised and chaired by Dr Antony Lempert of our Secular Medical Forum, sold out.



“When you permanently alter a child's genitals before they've formed an identity, before they've developed even basic preferences or acquired the capacity to say no, you deprive them of the future autonomy that they might have had over the most private part of their body.”

Medical ethicist **BRIAN EARP** on ritual infant genital cutting



Several of our speakers emphasised the importance of defending personal autonomy from religious impositions



The conference was the first of its kind and brought together experts from a broad range of fields



### Watch again

Videos from the major events we held this year are available to watch on our YouTube channel.

## Bradlaugh Lecture on inclusive education

We were delighted to be joined by Andrew Moffat for our third annual Bradlaugh Lecture in September at the Manchester Art Gallery.

Andrew is an assistant headteacher at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham and the creator of No Outsiders, a scheme for teaching about equality and diversity in primary schools. Andrew and No Outsiders became the targets of aggressive protests and threats, mainly by Muslim activists who objected to children being taught about LGBT+ people.

His talk *No Outsiders: Reclaiming Radical Ideas in Schools* addressed the need to defend inclusive education.

Andrew dispelled myths and misinformation that protesters had circulated about No Outsiders. And he urged the government to make it easier to resist pressure from religious lobbyists who want to shut down teaching about families with same-sex parents.



Andrew Moffat (left) with our CEO Stephen Evans

## Course on secularist history

Historian and NSS council member Bob Forder held a six-week course on the history of secularism in Britain at Conway Hall in London.

*Radicals, rebels and revolutionaries of the 19th century* examined the history of some of the most important historical figures in secularism and freethought, including Thomas Paine, Annie Besant and NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh.

## Outreach

Our representatives took part in debates and held talks on secularism for organisations around the UK, including debating societies, festivals, interfaith groups and mosques.

We also held a secular social in Belfast in March, and sponsored an event to mark the 30th anniversary of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie held by Feminist Dissent in February.



Our CEO Stephen Evans discussed secularism, social cohesion and the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims at Baitul Futuh Mosque in south London

## Upcoming events in 2020

**Talk: The 1944 Education Act and its legacy**

Monday 10 February at Conway Hall, London

**CPD Day: Exploring Secularism for educators**

Saturday 9 May at Conway Hall, London

## FOR FREE EXPRESSION

### Resisting 'Islamophobia' definition

Throughout the year we worked to stop the adoption of a formal definition of 'Islamophobia', which was proposed by a parliamentary group in late 2018, at national and local level.

The definition, from the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, says: "Islamophobia is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."



**The government must not treat the civil liberties of British citizens as an afterthought in its efforts to tackle anti-Muslim prejudice."**

#### Our submission to the home affairs committee

We raised concerns that this definition is vague and unworkable, and conflates criticism of Islam with bigotry against Muslims. We:

- Coordinated a joint letter to the home secretary urging the government not to adopt the definition.
- Submitted evidence to the home affairs committee.
- Briefed MPs ahead of a parliamentary debate.
- Signed an open letter criticising the "uncritical and hasty adoption" of the definition by many political parties and local authorities.
- Submitted an essay to an anthology of concerns published by the think tank Civitas.
- Wrote to several local authorities urging them not to adopt it.

In May the government said it would reject the definition. It's now looking in to establishing its own working definition of 'Islamophobia' – and we're planning to engage with that process.

Our work also had success at a local level, as Lancashire County Council rejected the definition after we wrote to all its councillors.

### Urging ministers to stand up to blasphemy laws

We asked the government to review its stance on blasphemy laws after noticing that ministers seemed to criticise only the "misuse" of Pakistan's laws in response to parliamentary questions.

We also urged the Foreign Office to do everything it could to secure the release of Asia Bibi, who was facing a death sentence for blasphemy in Pakistan, in late 2018. And we urged Google to remove an app which encourages Indonesians to report people they suspect of religious 'heresy' to the authorities.



**Public statements that criticise only the 'misuse' of blasphemy laws suggest there may be legitimate uses for blasphemy laws."**

#### Our letter to the Foreign Office

### Man sacked for blasphemy – then gets his job back

We helped a checkout worker who was sacked by the supermarket chain Asda for sharing a comic clip which mocked religion on social media – and then got his job back.

Brian Leach was dismissed after a colleague complained that a Billy Connolly sketch was anti-Islamic.

We provided him with support and assistance throughout an internal appeals process. In July he was rightly reinstated.



### For free expression at the BBC

We raised concerns that draft BBC editorial guidelines deferred excessively to religious sensitivities in response to a consultation – and the BBC then watered down some protections for religious ideas.

The BBC removed a requirement that content "likely to cause offence" to religious people should be referred to a senior editorial figure.



**We urge the BBC to defend and uphold the principle of free expression as a positive value."**

#### Our response to the BBC's consultation

It also removed a requirement to avoid "derogatory treatment" of "religions" unless it is "justified by the context". We said this treated religions as equivalent to people or groups of people.

But the BBC retained requirements that there must be "strong editorial justification" for depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad and that any depictions must be referred to "a senior editorial figure".

### Other campaigning

■ We stood up for free expression on religion in response to consultations on:

- Hate crime in England & Wales and Scotland.
- Plans to require social media companies to censor "hateful" and "offensive" content.
- New rules on offence in advertising.

■ We also met with the press regulator Ipso to urge it to protect free speech on religion as it planned new guidelines which will inform the reporting of stories about Islam and Muslims.

## FOR ACCOUNTABILITY ON CHILD ABUSE AT HOME & ABROAD

### At the IICSA inquiry

Over the year hearings at the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse revealed damning evidence of religious groups' failures to tackle abuse – and we worked to hold them to account.

Our vice-president Richard Scorer represented victims of clerical abuse at the inquiry in his capacity as a lawyer. His work highlighted the cultures of abuse and cover-up in the Church of England and the Catholic Church.

And he successfully lobbied for campaigners against domestic abuse within minority religious communities, including our council member Yasmin Rehman, to be included in upcoming hearings.

Meanwhile our president Keith Porteous Wood spoke at an IICSA seminar on mandatory reporting.

We also twice wrote to the government over the Vatican's brazen refusal to cooperate with IICSA. The Vatican has refused to supply written evidence or send witnesses about clerical misconduct in advance of hearings and is claiming diplomatic immunity for its representative in Britain, meaning he can't be summoned.

We asked Theresa May, as prime minister, and Foreign Office minister Tariq Ahmad to bring pressure to bear on the Vatican to ensure it cooperated.



**We urge you, in the interests of the countless victims of Catholic clerical abuse, to bring all the pressure you can to ensure that the Vatican is not allowed to thwart the ability of IICSA to understand and address the significant institutional failures to protect children from sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales."**

[Our letter to the Foreign Office](#)



Our vice-president Richard Scorer represents survivors at IICSA in his role as a lawyer

### Holding the Vatican to account at the UN

Our president also urged the UN Human Rights Council to exert pressure on the Vatican to submit long-overdue reports outlining its response to child sexual abuse.

He highlighted the abuse of tens of thousands of children in the Catholic Church and the church's continued violation of its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including its protection of perpetrators.

He highlighted reports which were due to be sent to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) by September 2017 – but which the Vatican has still failed to submit two years later.

He noted that the Holy See's previous report on the same topic was submitted so late that the UNCRC's efforts to review its implementation of the convention were delayed for 14 years.



Keith Porteous Wood made oral and written statements to the UNHRC

### Two major Catholic cardinals convicted

In March there was also significant news from France and Australia, as high-ranking cardinals from the Catholic Church were convicted of offences related to child abuse.

First the archbishop of Lyon Philippe Barbarin, the most senior Catholic official in France, was convicted of covering up sexual abuse and given a six month suspended prison sentence.

We supported the victim-initiated private prosecution – which was opposed by the public prosecutor.

Then George Pell, the Vatican's former treasurer, was sentenced to a total of 11 years and nine months in prison for sexual activity with children in his native Australia. Until recently Pell was regarded as the third most senior official in the Catholic Church.

At the time of writing both convictions are being appealed.



Philippe Barbarin  
Philippe Barbarin / AFP / Wikimedia Commons / © AFP (2018/03/20)

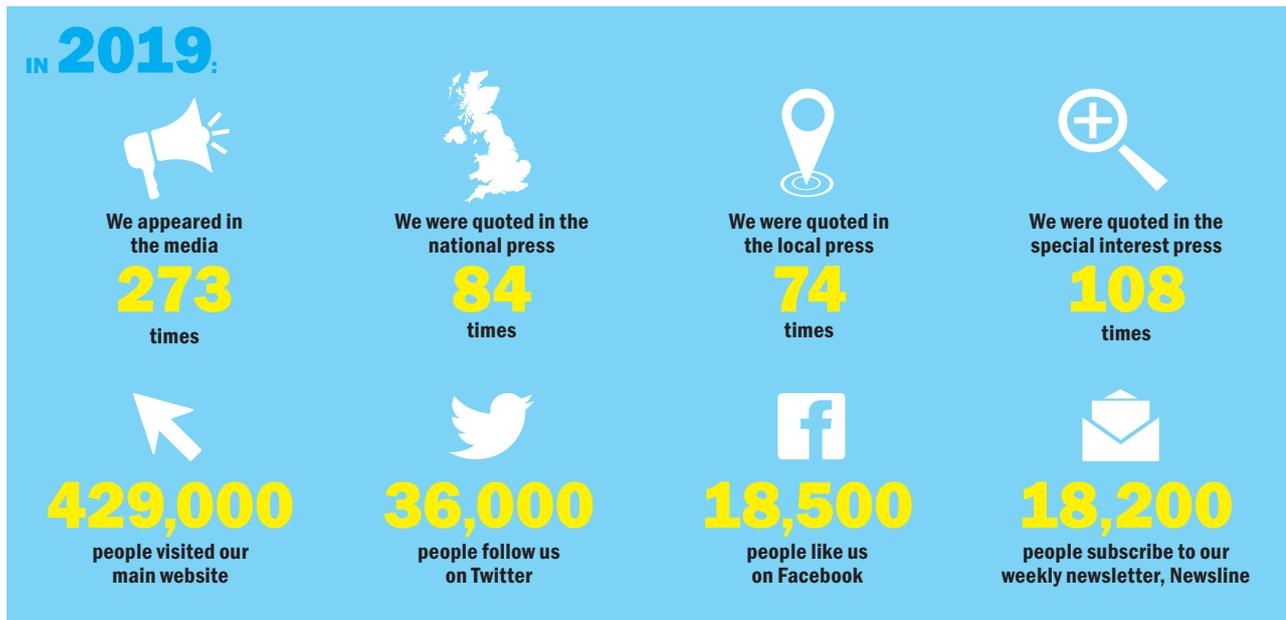


George Pell  
George Pell / Wikimedia Commons / Flickr / © Amy Hayes (2018/03/20)

### Other campaigning

■ We challenged the NSPCC after it decided to produce separate guidance on 'raising concerns about child abuse' for Jewish communities, which omitted and altered advice contained in equivalent general guidance.

## COMMUNICATIONS



RAF and Royal Navy urged to cut ties to sultan of Brunei over anti-gay law

Scrap religion as a charitable purpose, says National Secular Society

School cancels play about Darwin and evolution after Christian parents complain

It has provoked anger among other families who call the decision 'shameful'

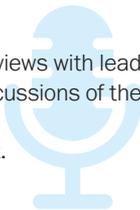
Langley Academy cuts ties with Islamic weekend school

Our campaigning was covered in the national, local and trade press

### NSS podcast

We launched a new podcast, featuring interviews with leading experts and activists on secularism and discussions of the latest issues we're working on at the NSS.

You can listen at [secularism.org.uk/podcast](http://secularism.org.uk/podcast).



# 106

The number of pieces of casework we worked on this year



Our letters were published in outlets including *The Guardian* and *The Sunday Times*



Our president Keith Porteous Wood discussed topics including the Catholic Church's record on child abuse and falling church numbers on Sky News

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## HONORARY ASSOCIATES

Graham Allen  
Prof Peter Atkins  
Joey Barton  
Dr Susan Blackmore  
Baroness Blackstone  
Prof Colin Blakemore  
Crispin Blunt MP  
Edward Bond  
Tom Brake MP  
Nick Brown MP  
Ruth Cadbury MP  
Prof Ted Cattle CBE  
Lord Cashman CBE  
Nick Cohen  
Prof Richard Dawkins  
Prof Lord Desai  
Angela Eagle MP  
Baroness Falkner  
Jim Fitzpatrick MP

Baroness Flather  
Caroline Fourest  
Michael Frayn  
Lord Garel-Jones  
Ricky Gervais  
Prof AC Grayling  
Baroness Greengross OBE  
Nia Griffith MP  
Dr Evan Harris  
Lord Harrison  
Julia Hartley-Brewer  
Patrick Harvie MSP  
Prof Ted Honderich  
Mary Honeyball MEP  
Sophie In 't Veld MEP  
Virginia Ironside  
Dr Michael Irwin  
Prof Steve Jones  
Baroness Kinnock

Stephen Kinnock MP  
Lord Knight  
Stewart Lee  
Graham Linehan  
Baroness Massey  
Kerry McCarthy MP  
Stewart McDonald MP  
Jonathan Meades  
Sir Jonathan Miller  
Baroness Murphy  
Maryam Namazie  
Taslina Nasrin  
Maajid Nawaz  
Lord O'Neill  
Pragna Patel  
Safak Pavey  
Philip Pullman  
Raheel Raza  
Geoffrey Robertson QC

Martin Rowson  
Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP  
Gita Sahgal  
Tommy Sheppard MP  
Joan Smith  
Dan Snow  
Lord Soley  
Dr David Starkey  
Peter Tatchell  
Lord Taverne QC  
G P Taylor  
Baroness Thornton  
Polly Toynbee  
Beverley Turner  
Lord Warner  
Baroness Young

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## NEW HONORARY ASSOCIATES



Ruth Cadbury MP



GP Taylor



Beverley Turner

## YOUR COUNCIL

### President

Keith Porteous Wood



Keith Porteous Wood

### Vice-presidents

Josephine Macintosh

Richard Scorer



Josephine Macintosh



Richard Scorer



Ed Moore

### Treasurer

Ed Moore

### Council

Judy Audaer

Robert Forder

Sadikur Rahman

Yasmin Rehman

Afonso Reis e Sousa

Peter Revell

Dorothy Smith



Judy Audaer



Robert Forder



Sadikur Rahman

### Chief executive officer

Stephen Evans

### Departing council members

At the 2018 AGM, vice-president Terry Sanderson left the NSS council. Terry first joined the council in 2000 and served as our president for 11 years and a vice-president for a total of five. We thank Terry for his long and distinguished service to the NSS.

Patricia Wallis, who joined council in 2017, also stood down. We are grateful for her contribution to the NSS.

### New vice-president

Josephine Macintosh was elected vice-president at the 2018 AGM, after serving on council since 2016 and contributing in particular to our work at the UN.

### New council member

We welcomed Yasmin Rehman to the council at the 2018 AGM. Yasmin was named as our Secularist of the Year in 2017 for her work supporting victims of domestic violence and campaigning against Islamic extremism and faith-based abuse.



Yasmin Rehman



Afonso Reis e Sousa



Dorothy Smith



Stephen Evans

## AFFILIATED GROUPS

Groups who support our aims can join the NSS as affiliated groups. These groups are independent of the NSS.

Basingstoke Humanists Group  
Bedfordshire Humanists  
Belfast Humanist Group  
Birmingham Humanists  
Bradford Atheist & Humanist Society  
Brighton Humanists  
Bromley Humanist Group  
Cambridge Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society  
Cambridge Humanist Group  
Cornwall Humanists  
Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists  
Dorset Humanists  
Durham Atheist Secularist and Humanist Society  
East London Humanists  
Edinburgh Secular Society  
Essex Humanist Students  
Farnham Humanists  
FiLiA  
Gloucestershire Humanists  
Greater Manchester Humanists  
Humanism in Scotland  
Humanist and Secularist Liberal Democrats  
Isle of Man Freethinkers

Kent Humanists  
King's College London Atheist Humanist and Secular Society  
Lancashire Humanists  
Leicester Secular Society  
LJMU Student Secular Society  
Ludlow and Marches Humanists  
Milton Keynes Humanists  
North East Humanists  
North London Humanist Group  
Nottingham Secular Society  
Oxford Humanists  
Plymouth Humanists  
South East London Humanist Group  
South Hampshire Humanists  
South London Humanists  
Suffolk Humanists and Secularists  
The Radical Party  
UCL Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society  
University of Birmingham Atheist Secular and Humanist Society  
University of Bristol Atheist Agnostic Secular Society  
University of Edinburgh Atheist, Humanist, and Secularist Society

University of Leicester Atheist Humanist and Secular Student Society  
University of Lincoln Secular Society  
University of Nottingham Atheists & Sceptics Society  
University of Surrey Atheist Humanist and Secularist Society  
Watford Area Humanists  
West Glamorgan Humanist Group  
West London Humanists and Secularists  
Windsor Humanists

The NSS also has three internal groups: the Secular Education Forum, the Secular Legal Forum and the Secular Medical Forum. These groups provide specialist advice and support to the NSS. You can find out more at [secularism.org.uk/groups](http://secularism.org.uk/groups).

Student groups can affiliate without charge. Find out more at [secularism.org.uk/student](http://secularism.org.uk/student).

We can provide affiliated groups with advice, materials and guest speakers. For more information please email [membership@secularism.org.uk](mailto:membership@secularism.org.uk) or call the NSS office.



Members of Oxford Humanists hand out NSS leaflets in the city centre



Members of South East London Humanists Group hand a letter to the BBC at their monthly protest against the exclusion of the non-religious from *Thought for the Day*

## THANKS

### Volunteers

Our volunteers support the NSS by contributing their time and expertise. If you are interested in volunteering, please see [secularism.org.uk/work-with-us](https://secularism.org.uk/work-with-us) for more information.

Thanks to:

**William Altoft, Jerry Beere, James Brunt, John Chadwick, Fiona Fall, Richard Gregory, Shaun Joynson, Paul Orton, Jane Mann, Susannah Rosenberg, Neil Smith, Ralph Thompson, Adele Walker** and **Peter Witchell** for conducting research for the No More Faith Schools campaign.

**Bob Baxter, Claudine Baxter, John Chadwick, Fiona Fall, Shaun Joynson, Gunyeop Lee, Tony Loraine, Alison Meek, Paul Orton, Emma Park, Susannah Rosenberg** and **Peter Witchell** for assisting with events.

**Fiona Fall, Jessica Lewis** and **Susannah Rosenberg** for improving our online content.

**Ranjith Ramanathan, Susannah Rosenberg, Gary Turner, Adele Walker** and **George Willard** for improving website accessibility.

**Susannah Rosenberg, Adele Walker** and **Peter Witchell** for creating subtitles for our videos.

**Claudine Baxter** for her regular assistance with membership administration and other office tasks.

**Bradley Davis** of WhiteLight for his graphic design work on NSS publications.

**Steve Bond** and **Emma Park** for their work on the NSS podcast.

**Barry Thorpe** and **Stewart Ware** for copyediting and other assistance.

**Antony Lempert**, chair of the Secular Medical Forum, **Sadikur Rahman**, chair of the Secular Legal Forum and **Keith Sharpe**, chair of the Secular Education Forum, and all the forum members who have assisted us throughout the year.

### Fundraising

We would like to thank everyone who has supported us throughout the year. In 2017, we launched our 2020 fundraising campaign, which aimed to increase our resources so that we could expand our campaign work. This campaign is coming to a close. We are now preparing to expand the NSS in 2020 so that we can broaden the reach of our work. Thank you to everyone who has made this possible by donating to our campaign.

Many thanks to our anonymous donor who provided the prize money for Secularist of the Year 2019. This year the prize went to Saif ul Malook, a lawyer who defends people accused of blasphemy in Pakistan. Saif continues this vital work despite facing threats to his life. *(See page 8 for more).*

We would like to give special thanks to all the members who have remembered us in their wills. We are especially grateful to those whose legacies we have received over the last year, most of whom we were never able to thank personally. We are very moved by the kindness of members who choose to make our work part of their legacy.

Finally, thanks to all our members for their support and dedication. Members are the lifeblood of the NSS and we intend to expand our membership over the coming year and give members increasing opportunities to become involved in our work.

If you have any questions about membership, donations or leaving a legacy, please call the NSS office or email [membership@secularism.org.uk](mailto:membership@secularism.org.uk).

## WHY I SUPPORT THE NSS



I believe in universal individual human rights. Secularism is the only environment for it to flourish.”

**JAY**, Wiltshire



Firm belief that government, legislation, education and healthcare should not be influenced by religion. My tax contributions should not fund faith schools.”

**ADAM**, Warwickshire



Fairness for all, promotion of freedom of thought, equality.”

**SIMON**, Switzerland



Faith should be practised privately and should not be used as an excuse for intolerance and bigotry. Children deserve to be educated in a secular environment.”

**RACHEL**, Cambridgeshire



Concern that the link between religion and nationalism in many areas of the world poses a continuing threat to peace and prevents us working together to find solutions to urgent global problems. I was brought up as a Christian and understand that people’s religious beliefs are bound up with their identities; however, I think we must not confuse the need to respect the individual with the right to question religious ideas and practices, however difficult it is to get this balance right.”

**KATHERINE**, Suffolk



I am a Christian and see no contradiction in supporting secularism. I am particularly opposed to faith schools which are detrimental to social cohesion in our society. Children should be educated together, not segregated by religion.”

**PETER**, Berkshire



I believe in a democracy where everyone is treated equally under the law and nobody should have extra rights or privileges above others just because they have a particular belief.”

**SEAN**, Hampshire



I am very concerned about a loss of civil liberties and what this means for the future of this country. Freedom of expression is a foundational principle of democracy and I am worried we are heading in a very bad direction. Democracy needs defending.”

**VIC**, Northumberland



A secular society is the fairest way to be, I really dislike how religion invades public life and policy.”

**MARY**, Suffolk



To ensure that society adheres to ‘one law for all’ and that freedom of and from belief predominates.”

**RUSSELL**, Hampshire



To resist the incursions of sharia law in the UK and support apostates under attack and isolated by their families.”

**YASMIN**, Yorkshire



I think it is so important, now more than ever, that logic and reason are defended and fought for in an age that seems to have turned its back on these fundamental human qualities. We need to show that compassion and empathy, love and understanding stem not from religious faith, but from a shared human experience.”

**PAUL**, Liverpool



To help continue the road to secularism, reason, and enlightenment.”

**DENNIS**, Cardiff



I sense that what is, in effect, our secular society, is under threat from religious groups. A specific example, but by no means the only, is that religious pressure groups put women’s hard-won rights to freedom of choice at risk.”

**NEIL**, Warwickshire

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