

national
secular
society

twenty twenty

Annual Report 2020

challenging religious privilege

OUR MISSION

The National Secular Society works for the separation of religion and state and equal respect for everyone's human rights so 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.

From the president

Coronavirus has made this a challenging year, and we hope our members and those close to them are safe and well. I was glad to see so many members when we held our first virtual general meeting in September, to alter our articles to permit future meetings to be held virtually when necessary.

The NSS has continued to make its case powerfully, as I hope will be apparent from this comprehensive report, despite the challenges from Covid, the continued media focus on Brexit and an office move.

Over the last year, we have been very active throughout the UK, for example with substantial and successful campaigns on Religious Education in Wales (*page 4*), same-sex couples' rights in Northern Ireland (*pages 7 and 10*) and free speech in Scotland (*page 8*).

As secularist norms come under increasing attack around the world we have continued to press on with our human rights work internationally, particularly in the United Nations and at the European Court of Human Rights. India has all but abandoned its secular constitution and is rapidly becoming a Hindu state, with those of other religions and none becoming second class citizens. I gave evidence to a UN committee about the Polish state encouraging and prioritising religious fundamentalism in Poland, even privileging Catholic canon law over secular law and human rights treaty obligations. We need to continue the fight to discourage any spread of state governments privileging religion.

Sadly, you will see examples in our report of such privileging in the UK too, for example in the operation of the law and of government, both local and national. I was taken aback by the summary dismissal, even on appeal, of our persuasive application for a judicial review of a decision to open a new publicly funded Church in Wales school against parents' wishes in one of the least religious parts of the country (*page 6*). Similarly, the Department for Education's opaque announcement, which it refused to justify or accept any representations about, of 19 new faith schools even as church attendance continues to plummet. Is it a coincidence that the DfE's and the C of E's HQ are just yards apart?



The decision-making process for new schools and school reorganisations, both locally and nationally – regardless of the party in power, is weighted against the non-religious majority regardless of how strongly they make their case. There needs to be much greater local accountability and mechanisms to ensure new schools are suitable for all of the families they serve. No wonder the C of E targets schools in new developments; the church gets handed a new school and local people have little alternative but to send their children to it. It

is run from public funds and they do not even have to pay towards the capital – the developers pay, recovering the cost in house prices.

With the non-religious now forming the majority, there is no longer any excuse not to enshrine in law a formal entitlement of all to community, non-faith based education. Such schools make pragmatic and economic sense; those of all faiths and none can be educated together with everyone being equally valued.

We're also concerned that the government appears minded to repeal the provision in the Equality Act which enables caste to become a protected characteristic, despite being urged by the UN to outlaw caste discrimination. Such an

almost unprecedented regression of equality legislation in this country would however please the PM of India. In the most recent of several pieces of original research we've published this year, we've urged ministers to take another look at caste and other issues in a report to mark the 10th anniversary of the act (*page 6*).

This report would be incomplete without a tribute to Barbara Smoker, who died in April. Barbara served as our president for a quarter of a century and never missed an AGM to her dying day. She was a brave fighter, gifted writer and inspiration to many, including me. She will be missed.

Campaigning in the time of coronavirus

Adjusting to social distancing

The coronavirus pandemic has made this a surreal year for everyone, and the NSS has been no exception.

In March, just as life changed so suddenly and fundamentally, we were excited at the prospect of an imminent office move. This was inevitably delayed and made particularly tricky, but we did manage to complete it eventually.

Our new office (*pictured, with bust of NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh*) will help our growing staff team and council to perform their roles better, while also allowing more space for social distancing for as long as that's necessary. But the restrictions prompted by the virus have made it hard to use the office nearly as much as we'd like.

The virus has also proven very restrictive for our events and our attempts to reach out to local supporters, although we are adapting.

For example we were unable to hold our annual Bradlaugh Lecture physically, at its usual time in September, but as the year drew to an end we were able to confirm we'd host it as an online-only event in November. Our head of education, Alastair Lichten, has held several online talks with local groups addressing the work of our No More Faith Schools campaign.

The crisis has also inevitably prompted concerns about exploitative behaviour from some religious groups. In April we raised a church's role in the sale of 'plague protection kits' with the Charity Commission. This prompted the commission to investigate, and in August it opened a statutory inquiry into the charity.

We explained more about the virus's impact on our campaigning, and some of the ways religious privilege had hindered the global response to the pandemic, in our summer Bulletin.



The events we did hold this year

Before lockdown struck we were able to hold a couple of physical events.

In February we held a talk on the legacy of the 1944 Education Act with the head of our Secular Education Forum, Keith Sharpe (*pictured*). Keith argued that this landmark piece of legislation was an extraordinary achievement in its time, but had also embedded religious control of the education system – and the privileges it granted to religion should be revisited.



In another talk before our 2019 AGM in November, our council member and historian Bob Forder gave a detailed insight into the life and work of Richard Carlile. Carlile was a secularist campaigner of the early 19th century who served time in prison for blasphemy.

As lockdown hit, Bob also created a series of online lectures on the origins of secularism and the NSS, available on our YouTube channel. These explored thinkers including Thomas Paine, George Holyoake, our founder Charles Bradlaugh and his close associate Annie Besant.

For a secular state

Our bill to scrap the bishops' bench

Our campaign to end the state's ties to the Church of England took a significant step early this year. The Liberal Democrat peer Dick Taverne introduced a bill, which we helped to draft, to scrap the bishops' bench in the House of Lords.

Parts of the Lords predictably received the very suggestion of a challenge to the status quo with incredulity. But reserving automatic seats for 26 C of E bishops in the legislature is antithetical to democracy. It undermines the principle of equal citizenship and puts those who oppose the church's positions at an unearned disadvantage.

Scrapping the bishops' bench would strike a blow for fairness, equality and democracy. And Dick Taverne's bill provides evidence that change is possible.



Dick Taverne (right) with our CEO Stephen Evans

“**GIVING CLERICS THE AUTOMATIC RIGHT TO SIT IN PARLIAMENT IS AN AFFRONT TO DEMOCRACY AND A MEDIEVAL PRACTICE UNFIT FOR A MODERN LEGISLATURE.**”

Stephen Evans responds to the bill's proposal

Lord Taverne: Separation of church and state is far from complete in the House of Lords

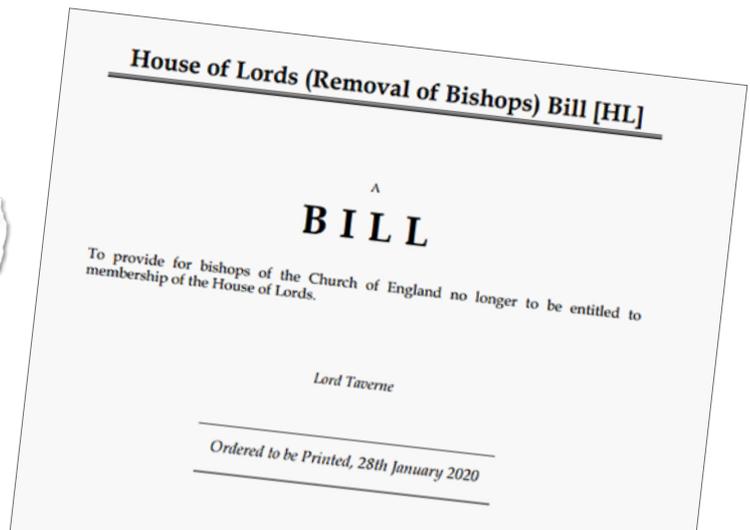
Dick Taverne made his case in an opinion piece for *PoliticsHome*



Twenty-six Church of England bishops sit in the House of Lords as of right

“**THE PRESENCE OF BISHOPS IN THE LORDS GIVES THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND SPECIAL ACCESS TO THOSE IN POWER. THIS BOLSTERS THE GOVERNMENT'S STRONG SUPPORT FOR FAITH SCHOOLS... THOSE WHO OPPOSE POLICIES LIKE THIS SHOULD HAVE AS FAIR A CHANCE TO MAKE THEIR CASE AS THOSE WHO SUPPORT THEM.**”

Dick Taverne



Progress on pluralistic education in Wales

Our longstanding ambition to see religious education overhauled made a significant advance this year. We've been lobbying the Welsh government to ensure planned reforms of religious education give every child an equal entitlement to a pluralistic and balanced syllabus.

In January ministers outlined details of long-awaited plans to reform RE. The plans would see RE replaced with a new subject, religion, values and ethics (RVE).

We welcomed this change, which reflects a wider effort to make the subject more pluralistic. But, in a meeting with education minister Kirsty Williams, our CEO Stephen Evans urged her to ensure the reformed subject incorporates the diversity of both religious and non-religious worldviews, and every child has access to a reformed syllabus.

Our lobbying played a major part in securing some significant changes. The government altered its plans to cover “philosophical convictions protected by human rights law” in its core curriculum – a more inclusive standard than previously proposed. And crucially, it added secularism to a series of core concepts which need to be covered.

Our main criticism has been that the plans will still allow faith schools to teach RVE from a religious perspective, albeit they will be required to offer pluralistic RVE as an option where parents request it. Religious interests are fiercely opposing even this modest requirement.

HOW WE LOBBIED:



Met with ministers



Responded to consultations



Wrote to the first minister



Encouraged supporters to write to members of the Senedd

Protecting children's rights in independent and unregistered religious schools

We raised concerns with the government that independent religious schools, with often serious failings, were being allowed to repeatedly fail inspections.

We wrote to the minister responsible to highlight examples of six schools that had failed multiple inspections in recent years.

Their failings included teaching creationism as science, unlawfully segregating children by sex and not entering pupils for GCSEs because exam regulations don't allow school leaders to censor papers.

The minister informed us that the department is still considering what action is to be taken with the schools we highlighted, with decisions delayed due to Covid-19.

Our campaign for a clamp down on unregistered religious schools received a boost when the government announced plans to better regulate settings providing full-time religious instruction to children and close loopholes that allow illegal faith schools to operate.



“WE BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT IS FALLING SHORT ON ITS OBLIGATIONS TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEREFORE CALL ON YOU TO ENSURE THAT CHILDREN'S FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT TO A QUALITY EDUCATION IS PROPERLY RESPECTED AND PROTECTED.”

Our letter to the DfE

Religious instruction was the “core purpose” at

107

unregistered schools investigated between January 2016 and August 2019.

Source: Ofsted

Families pushed into faith schools against their wishes

Our research again revealed that thousands of children in England are being assigned faith schools despite their families choosing non-faith schools each year.

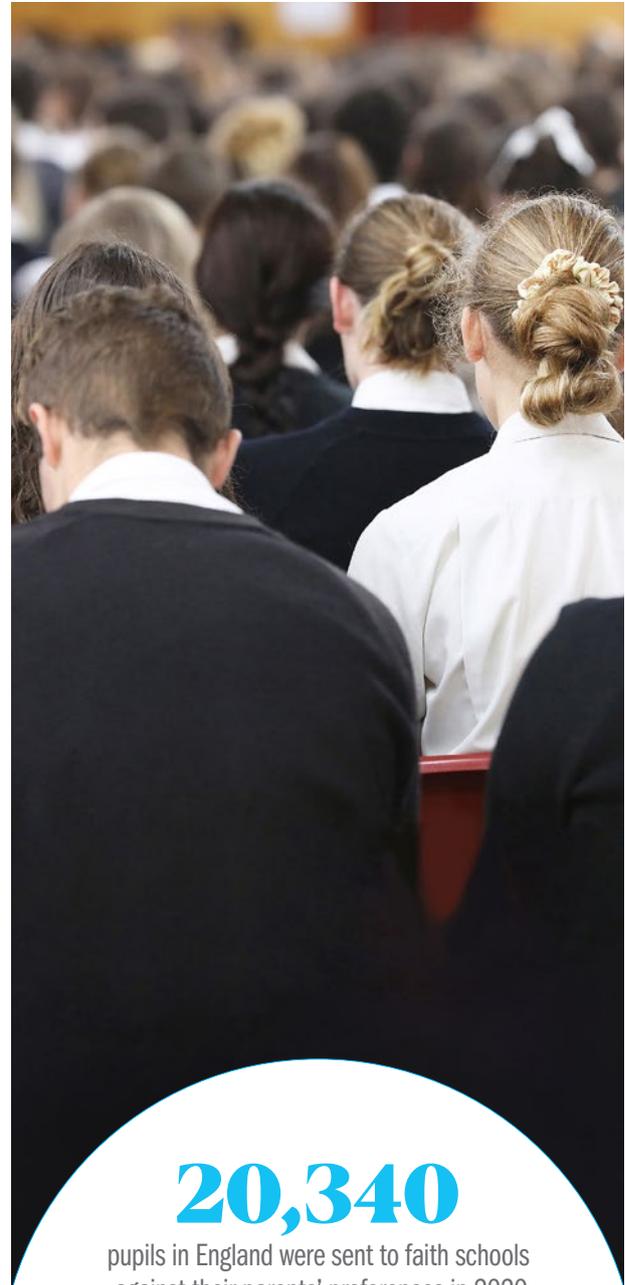
We found that 132,216 children were assigned to faith schools despite their families listing a non-faith school as their first preference between 2014 and 2020.

Almost a fifth (26,163) of these pupils were assigned to schools which their families hadn't listed as preferences at all. We're campaigning to ensure every child has the right to access a local publicly funded secular school.



MINISTERS SHOULD LOOK TO ROLL BACK FAITH SCHOOLS AND OPEN INCLUSIVE, SECULAR SCHOOLS WHICH ENABLE CHILDREN TO MAKE THEIR OWN MINDS UP ABOUT RELIGION. IF THEY WON'T COMMIT TO THAT THEY SHOULD AT LEAST ENSURE EVERY CHILD HAS A RIGHT TO A SUITABLE SECULAR SCHOOL WITHIN A REASONABLE DISTANCE, SO FAMILIES CAN BE FREE FROM RELIGION IF THEY CHOOSE."

Our head of education Alastair Lichten comments on the figures in *iNews*



Since 2014,
26,163

pupils have been assigned faith schools which their families hadn't listed as preferences at all

20,340

pupils in England were sent to faith schools against their parents' preferences in 2020

The No More Faith Schools campaign in 2020

Resisting faith school expansion in court

We went to court to challenge the expansion of faith school places in the Vale of Glamorgan.

We supported local parent James Brunt's attempt to secure a judicial review of the local council's decision to meet demand for additional school places by expanding his local Church in Wales Primary School.

The school has a strong religious character and teaches Christianity as fact.

We argued that the school failed to consider the impact of its decision on families of other faiths and no religion; and used a flawed methodology to predict future demand for Church in Wales school places (see *the spring Bulletin for more details*).

Regrettably our request for a judicial review was refused, so even more families will be effectively forced into faith schools with a religious ethos they don't share.



Lack of scrutiny over faith schools

We highlighted a lack of transparency around proposals to open 19 new faith schools in England, and warned that the plans weren't being properly scrutinised.

The schools were part of a wave of free schools announced by the government in February. We asked to see details of the proposals for the schools, but the DfE told us the process of assessing applications should be "free from speculation and lobbying until the final decision is made".

We requested an independent review of that decision, and our criticism was covered in *iNews*.

“PUBLIC SCRUTINY IS NOT AN ILL TO BE AVOIDED, BUT ESSENTIAL IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY.”

Our letter requesting a review of the government's decision not to publish details

Challenging faith school plans locally

We challenged proposals to open a discriminatory Catholic school, which was in direct competition with a plan to open a school with a community ethos at the same site, in Peterborough.

We held a public meeting to rally opposition to the plan, submitted evidence to the local council and assisted three councillors who formally challenged the council's approval of the faith school.



Megan Manson of the NSS (third left) with councillors and residents who opposed the plans in Peterborough

Nevertheless, the plan to open the first state-funded Catholic school in England for more than a decade was disgracefully given the green light.

We also worked with local residents to oppose plans to open or expand faith schools elsewhere. These included a plan which would see a voluntary aided Church of England school open on the site of a community infant school in Enginefield Green in Surrey.

And we revamped our No More Faith Schools website to give more support and visibility to local campaigns.

Religious discrimination in admissions

We continued to lobby, nationally and locally, for an end to religious discrimination against children and their families in admissions to state funded faith schools.

We opposed planned changes that would give children who've been baptised Catholic more priority for admission to Catholic schools in Renfrewshire and Inverclyde.

We urged Surrey County Council not to proceed with changes which would restrict some families' chances of sending their children to non-faith schools.

And we called on Liverpool City Council to consider the impact of discriminatory admissions policies in faith schools as part of a review.

For equality and human rights

The faith-shaped loopholes in the Equality Act

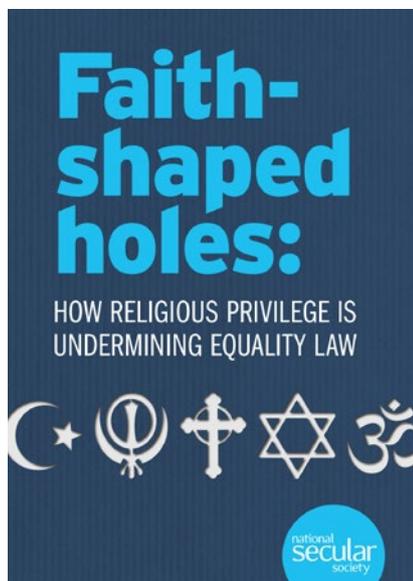
This year marked the 10th anniversary of the Equality Act – a landmark piece of legislation which instituted legal protections against discrimination.

To mark the occasion we investigated the impact of legal loopholes that allow faith based discrimination to continue, and released a report calling for their end.

Faith-shaped holes: how religiously privilege undermines equality law warned that glaring gaps meant the act was failing to protect the non-religious and religious minorities from discrimination.

It warned that this was leading to discrimination and social segregation, and reducing opportunities for people on the basis of their personal beliefs.

The former equalities minister Lynne Featherstone wrote the foreword to the report. And as the year drew to an end we began lobbying politicians more widely, including by encouraging our members to write to their MPs.



Defending same-sex couples' rights in Northern Ireland

Our lobbying helped to ensure businesses won't be able to refuse services for same-sex marriages in Northern Ireland.

We responded to a consultation on the implementation of same-sex marriage after it became legally recognised in NI early this year.

We warned that exceptions allowing religious organisations to refuse to solemnise same-sex marriages shouldn't be extended to service providers such as hoteliers, florists and photographers, as some religious lobby groups were calling for.

In July ministers said they wouldn't extend the provisions, taking our point that doing so would seriously undermine equality law.

Secular proposals on wedding law

Throughout the year we constructively engaged with the Law Commission on reforming wedding laws in England and Wales for greater simplicity, equality and fairness for all. As the year drew to a close, the commission published proposals to reform the wedding laws.

Current laws governing how and where couples can marry are outdated and unnecessarily restrictive, as they're still fundamentally structured around Anglican church weddings. The commission's proposals would give couples greater freedom over where they can choose to marry, and enact several other proposals which we've argued for.

We'll be responding to a consultation from the commission in the next year.



NSS staff met with the Law Commission to discuss reforms to wedding law

For freedom of expression

Defending free speech in Scotland

This year we were at the forefront of a major campaign to prevent a hate crime bill, proposed by the Scottish government, from undermining freedom of expression.

We welcomed one encouraging part of the bill – a section that would repeal Scotland’s historic blasphemy law. But the bill, as initially drafted, would have criminalised behaviour which was “threatening or abusive” and intended or “likely” to ‘stir up hatred’.



Image via Wikimedia Commons. © User: Colin [CC BY-SA 4.0]

“**IT RISKS CAPTURING A VAST ARRAY OF SPEECH AND WILL CREATE AN UNREASONABLE EXPECTATION THAT RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITIES ARE PROTECTED BY SOMETHING AKIN TO A BLASPHEMY LAW.”**

Our joint letter with Edinburgh Secular Society, which highlighted concerns over the hate crime bill’s provisions on religion

“**FREEDOM TO SAY ONLY WHAT OTHERS FIND ACCEPTABLE IS NO FREEDOM AT ALL.”**

Our CEO Stephen Evans on our involvement in the ‘Free to Disagree’ campaign

In a submission to the Scottish parliament’s justice committee in July, we warned that these provisions represented “an unacceptable erosion of freedom of expression”.

We joined with campaigners including the Christian Institute and Index on Censorship to form the ‘Free to Disagree’ campaign, which called for the provisions in the bill on ‘stirring up hatred’ to be scrapped.

We worked alongside Edinburgh Secular Society to lobby MSPs and the minister responsible for the bill, justice secretary Humza Yousaf, warning about the threat it posed to free speech on religion specifically.

And we spotted that Yousaf had claimed in parliament that the threshold for prosecution is higher than it really is. His error was reported in *The Times* after we noticed it, and he corrected the record.

Amid the overwhelming public opposition to his plans Yousaf announced his intention to amend the bill. His amendment will remove the ‘likely’ threshold and require the prosecution to prove criminal intent to secure a conviction.

We will continue to push for further action to protect free speech as the bill makes its way through the Scottish parliament.

Against blasphemy laws

We continued to highlight the needless misery caused by blasphemy laws around the world.

In particular we were among groups who lobbied for the release of Nigerian Humanist leader Mubarak Bala (*pictured*). He was detained after being accused of blasphemy in April, sparking deep concerns over his safety.

Nigeria’s constitution theoretically guarantees freedom of expression but also allows states to set up sharia courts – which can punish blasphemy with execution.

We wrote to ministers and the Nigerian ambassador to the UK to lobby for his release, and the Foreign Office took up his case “on an urgent basis” amid a significant public campaign. But at the time of writing he still hasn’t been freed.



Image courtesy of Humanists International

Exposing NHS trusts' deferential relationships with Jehovah's Witnesses' committees

Our research brought to light many NHS trusts' deferential relationships with Jehovah's Witnesses' hospital liaison committees (HLCs) – groups of religious representatives who work to ensure JW patients refuse blood products.

We wrote to the Department of Health to call for a review of trusts' policies that encourage engagement with HLCs.

We warned that many trusts were encouraging engagement with HLCs and several appeared to make the assumption that all JW patients would refuse blood.

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 regarding blood transfusions, contribute to JW patient care plans and hold training for staff on JW issues.

We also sent similar letters to several relevant regulatory bodies. At the time of going to press we're awaiting responses.

Standing up for women's bodily autonomy in NI

We urged the UK government not to allow religion to restrict women's reproductive rights after abortion became legal in Northern Ireland in response to a consultation in December 2019.

The government published its framework for abortion rights in NI in March. Disappointingly this set a 12-week time limit on terminations. We'd urged that it should match Britain's 24-week limit.

But the change still represents a welcome step forward. Beforehand a woman was allowed an abortion only if her life was at risk or there was a risk of permanent and serious damage to her mental or physical health – thanks very largely to religious groups' continued influence.

Pushing for all children to be protected from genital cutting

We urged England's children's commissioner, Anne Longfield, to encourage child protection agencies and the government to rethink their laissez-faire approach to religious surgery on boys' genitals.

We wrote to her to say all children should be protected from non-therapeutic genital cutting, regardless of the religion, belief or traditions of their parents.

“CHILD SAFEGUARDING MUST TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER THE DESIRE OF ADULTS WITHIN A COMMUNITY TO EXPRESS THEIR OWN OR THEIR CHILD'S PRESUMED BELIEF THROUGH FORCED CUTTING OF THEIR CHILD'S GENITALS.”

Our CEO Stephen Evans, in our letter to the children's commissioner



Our concerns were covered in the *Daily Mirror*

Challenging charities which promote intolerance

We continued to highlight the harm caused by deference to religion in charity law, following our major report on the subject published last year (*see our 2019 annual report*).

Conversion therapy

We urged the government to consider the role of charities promoting ‘conversion therapy’ as it looked into ways to end the practice.

Meanwhile Northern Ireland’s charity regulator is considering concerns we raised regarding the status of Core Issues Trust – a charity that promotes “change oriented therapy” for those “seeking to leave homosexual behaviours and feelings”.



Mike Davidson of Core Issues Trust during a BBC documentary on conversion therapy in Northern Ireland, broadcast in September

Jehovah’s Witnesses restructure

Charity regulators are investigating after we urged them to ensure that the restructuring of Jehovah’s Witnesses charities doesn’t obstruct victims of child abuse from claiming compensation.

We raised the issue after reports that the church was selling off substantial amounts of property and land, prompting concern that JW charities could be left unable to pay potential liabilities.

Islamic and Christadelphian charities

Elsewhere our persistent pressure prompted the Charity Commission to act on the case of Islamic Research Foundation International (IRFI), a charity accused of promoting extremism.

The commission opened a statutory inquiry into the charity, and then appointed an interim manager who will consider its future viability in September.

IRFI aims to advance the Islamic faith by funding the Peace TV network, which has repeatedly been found to breach the broadcasting code.

We also referred 10 Christadelphian charities to the Charity Commission over concerns that they promoted deeply intolerant messages.

CONVERSION THERAPY – CHARITIES OF CONCERN



Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries – revealed to be practising a form of ‘conversion therapy’ involving a three-day starvation programme in 2017.



Winners Chapel International – where a pastor was found offering “complete mind reorientation” in 2018.



Core Issues Trust – advocates “change orientated therapy” for people “seeking to leave homosexual behaviours and feelings”.

Highlighting religious groups' failures on safeguarding

We continued to highlight the significant scale of child abuse in religious institutions and hierarchies' continuing failure to report suspected perpetrators to civil authorities or to take responsibility for adequately compensating survivors.

This year serious failings not only came to light in the Anglican and Catholic churches but also within the Jehovah's Witnesses, Jewish groups, Muslim groups and elsewhere.

We helped to draw attention to evidence emerging from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Our vice-president Richard Scorer also highlighted a shocking – though thankfully unsuccessful – effort from the Jehovah's Witnesses hierarchy to prevent an ex-JW from giving evidence.

We continue to argue for a law mandating the reporting of abuse, with religious organisations resistant to such a measure.

Non-stun slaughter

We continue to lobby for the abolition of non-stun slaughter – a religious practice that undermines animal welfare.

Despite our best efforts, parliamentarians wasted an opportunity to at least ensure meat from non-stun slaughter is accurately labelled by failing to support amendments to an agriculture bill.

We also wrote to the government to warn of an “unacceptable lack of transparency” after the Food Standards Agency stopped publishing data on the number of animals being slaughtered without pre-stunning.



Richard Scorer at IICSA, in his professional capacity as a lawyer

Election campaigning

During the general election campaign in late 2019 we lobbied all the major political parties, urging them to adopt 11 secularist pledges:

- **Not to open more faith schools.**
- **End religious discrimination against pupils in school admissions.**
- **Abolish the collective worship requirement.**
- **Promote free speech as a positive value.**
- **End non-stun slaughter.**
- **Review laws on assisted dying.**
- **End all forms of non-consensual genital cutting.**
- **Outlaw caste discrimination.**
- **End 'the advancement of religion' as a charitable purpose.**
- **Guarantee secular public services.**
- **Separate church and state.**

Working to end parliamentary prayers

Shortly after the election we wrote to the new speaker of the House of Commons, Lindsay Hoyle, to urge a support of a review of parliamentary prayers.

This came after we coordinated an early day motion on the subject (see *last year's annual report* for more).

The C of E and sex: another reason for disestablishment

In January the Church of England issued a statement declaring that sex outside marriage fell “short of God's purposes for human beings”.

Our president Keith Porteous Wood said this highlighted the need to disestablish the church in a letter to *The Guardian*.

“**AN ORGANISATION CLAIMING THAT SO MANY HAVE NO RIGHT TO A SEXUAL LIFE SHOULD HAVE NO OFFICIAL TIES TO THE STATE, NO AUTOMATIC RIGHT TO SEATS IN OUR LEGISLATURE AND NO ROLE IN RUNNING STATE-FUNDED SCHOOLS.”**

Keith Porteous Wood's letter to *The Guardian*

International work

Successful intervention at European Court of Human Rights

The European Court of Human Rights ruled that religious education must avoid indoctrinating children into religious practice if it's compulsory after we successfully intervened in a case.

A group of parents and students challenged a practice in Greece which required parents to declare their children's religious affiliation to exempt them from religious education. We mentioned our intervention in the case in the 2019 annual report.

The ruling reiterated that states must ensure RE curricula are "conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner" and avoid indoctrinating children into religious practice if it is compulsory.

We later intervened in another ECtHR case concerning Greece, as we challenged a requirement that parents must declare their religion on children's birth certificates.

“**THE STATE MUST TAKE CARE THAT INFORMATION INCLUDED IN THE CURRICULUM IS CONVEYED IN AN OBJECTIVE, CRITICAL AND PLURALISTIC MANNER. THE STATE IS FORBIDDEN TO PURSUE AN AIM OF INDOCTRINATION THAT MIGHT BE CONSIDERED AS NOT RESPECTING PARENTS' RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONVICTIONS.**”

From the European Court of Human Rights ruling in *Papageorgiou and Others v. Greece*

At the United Nations

We made numerous submissions to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and special rapporteurs this year. We highlighted failures relating to both perpetrators and victims of clerical child sexual abuse, particularly in several highly Catholic countries.

For example in a submission to the CRC we drew attention to the way Poland's concordat with the Vatican had undermined the effective administration of justice, and indeed Poland's own autonomy to conform to its human rights obligations. Our work led to an invitation to give evidence orally to the committee's first virtual session.

We're grateful to our president Keith Porteous Wood and council member Aleksandra Myslek for their work in particular.



Our vice-president Josephine Macintosh (*pictured*) also addressed the UN Human Rights Council, urging tougher action to tackle clerical child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Italy and caste discrimination in the UK.

And we have called on the UNHRC and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to ensure protections from forced genital cutting encompass extend equally to boys.

The NSS in the media

National Secular Society chief warns new abuse laws 'seriously risk chilling free speech'

New powers drawn up to protect victims of hate crime are "excessive, vague and seriously risks chilling free speech", the chief executive of a secular organisation has claimed.

The Press and Journal

Humza Yousaf u-turns and agrees to amend hate crime Bill

THE SCOTSMAN

Equality law gaps 'leading to unnecessary religious discrimination'

Discrimination against the non-religious and religious minorities remains lawful across much of Britain, the National Secular Society said.

Express & Star

BOOT OUT THE BISHOPS

Mirror



More than 130,000 children assigned to faith schools despite parents wanting a non-religious school

National Secular Society calls on the Government to guarantee 'every child has a right to a suitable secular school within a reasonable distance'

i

Our work continued to gain substantial coverage

2020 IN NUMBERS:

198

Times we appeared in the press.

63

Times we appeared in the national press.

22

New episodes of our podcast produced.

Who we are

Council



Keith Porteous Wood
President



Josephine Macintosh
Vice-president



Richard Scorer
Vice-president



Ed Moore
Treasurer



Judy Audaer



Robert Forder



Aleksandra Myslek



Sadikur Rahman



Yasmin Rehman



Afonso Reis e Sousa



Peter Revell



Terry Sanderson



Dorothy Smith

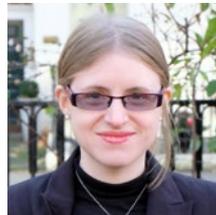
Staff



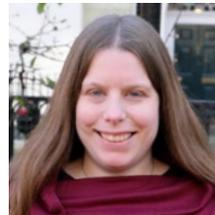
Stephen Evans
Chief executive officer



Alastair Lichten
Head of education



Megan Manson
Head of policy and research



Helen Nicholls
Head of operations



Chris Sloggett
Head of communications

Thanks

Thanks to:

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Emma Park, presenter of the NSS podcast.

Steve Bond for editing the NSS podcast.

Antony Lempert, chair of the Secular Medical Forum, and the professionals that have assisted him during the year.

The lawyers of the Secular Legal Forum, chaired by Sadikur Rahman, for their extensive work. Particular thanks go to Harry Small for his invaluable input into submissions to the European Court of Human Rights.

Tom Hart and Robert Aimes for additional legal assistance.

Keith Sharpe, chair of the Secular Education Forum and its members who have provided significant feedback on and support with our education focused consultation responses and research reports.

If you are interested in volunteering, please see secularism.org.uk/work-with-us for more information.

Affiliated groups

We would like to thank our affiliated groups for their support. Affiliated groups are independent of the NSS. Any group that supports the NSS can apply for group membership. Please see secularism.org.uk/groups for more information.



Leicester Secular Society took part in a demonstration against the Indian Citizenship Amendment Act in January

Members

We would like to thank our members for their support in a very difficult year. We very much appreciate the generosity of members who have made donations to the NSS and who have remembered us in their wills.

We would also like to thank all the members who took part in the virtual extraordinary general meeting and who submitted proxy votes. Their participation allowed us to hold this year's annual general meeting online. We hope that 2021 will provide us with more opportunities to meet members in person.

If you have any questions on membership, donations or leaving a legacy, please contact membership@secularism.org.uk.

Barbara Smoker 1923–2020



One of our longest serving presidents, Barbara Smoker, died this year at the age of 96 after a long illness.

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

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

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

You can read a full obituary on our website.

“

THE NORTHERN ECHO ONCE DESCRIBED ME AS 'THE MILITANT MARTINET OF THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY'! THAT WILL DO AS MY EPITAPH.”

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

WHY SUPPORT THE NSS?



I HAVE BEEN A SUPPORTER FOR A LONG TIME. I WENT TO A RELIGIOUS SCHOOL AND HAVE FELT STRONGLY EVER SINCE THAT RELIGION HAS NO PART TO PLAY IN EDUCATION, MEDICINE, OR ANY ASPECT OF THE STATE.”

Philippa, London



I CONTINUE TO SUPPORT THE CAUSE OF SECULARISM AND BELIEVE IT TO BE VITALLY IMPORTANT IN CREATING AND MAINTAINING A FAIR AND PEACEFUL SOCIETY.”

Michael, Lancashire



RELIGIOUS BELIEF IS A PERSONAL MATTER.”

Ray, Northumberland



WE HATED DEALING WITH OUR KIDS' SCHOOL APPLICATIONS AND THE FACT THAT RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS DISCRIMINATE AGAINST ATHEIST FAMILIES.”

Marie, Oxfordshire



I AM A CHURCH-ATTENDING CHRISTIAN BUT FIND NO CONTRADICTION IN SUPPORTING NSS. ITS VIEWS ON FAITH SCHOOLS, UNELECTED CLERGY AS PART OF OUR LEGISLATURE, ITS CAMPAIGNING AGAINST CHURCHES COVERING UP SEXUAL ABUSE BY CLERGY ETC. ARE ALL SUBJECTS WITH WHICH I HOLD THE SAME STRONG VIEWS.”

Peter, Berkshire



WE'RE STRUGGLING WITH THE HORRIBLY UNFAIR RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS' ADMISSIONS IN LIVERPOOL. IT IS DISCRIMINATORY AND MANY PEOPLE HAVE VERY LIMITED CHOICE OF SCHOOLS BECAUSE OF IT.”

Rachael, Liverpool



ORGANISED RELIGION HAS TOO MUCH OF A HOLD ON OUR SOCIETY AND THIS NEEDS TO BE CHALLENGED. IN PARTICULAR, FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS ARE DIVISIVE AND NEED TO BE REPLACED BY SCHOOLS FIT FOR THE MODERN WORLD.”

Clive, Greater Manchester



YOU ADDRESS ISSUES OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS, OF EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY THAT MATTER VERY MUCH TO ME AND YOU SPEAK ABOUT THEM CLEARLY AND DETERMINEDLY.”

Mary, Sheffield



I AM A HUMANIST AND STRONGLY BELIEVE IN COMPLETE SEPARATION OF RELIGION AND STATE AND EQUAL TREATMENT FOR ALL, REGARDLESS OF THEIR CASTE, COLOUR AND CREED.”

Khadija, Berkshire



I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALSO VERY CLEAR ABOUT THE NEED FOR COMPLETE SEPARATION BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE.”

Mohammed, Manchester

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