



National Secular Society
Annual Report

2014

FREEDOM **OF** RELIGION

FREEDOM **FROM** RELIGION

About the National Secular Society

Founded in 1866, we work towards a society in which all citizens, regardless of religious belief, or lack of religious belief, can live together fairly and cohesively. We campaign for a secular democracy with a separation of religion and state, where everyone's Human Rights are respected equally.

THE SECULAR CHARTER

Our campaigning and policy objectives are guided by our Secular Charter.

The National Secular Society campaigns for a secular state, 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.

A message from the President



Despite all the available statistics that indicate a steep and continuing decline in interest in religion, (including the churches' own) it is still difficult to find parliamentarians who are prepared to stand up openly for secularism.

As a consequence, the residual privileges that religion enjoys – those it has managed to cling onto, despite the march of secularism – are being expanded with the help of the state. This shows particularly in education where the “faith school” network is being disastrously extended.

Together with the free school and academy system, where schools are permitted to create their own curriculum, religious extremists have been quick to seize their opportunity.

This has resulted in the Birmingham “Trojan Horse” scandal, as well as extremism in Jewish schools and hardline dogmatism in Catholic schools. There has also been a continued incursion of evangelical Christian groups into community schools. Despite the NSS having produced extensive evidence of inappropriate evangelising in our schools, the Government insists that there is no problem.

Similarly, our early warnings of religious extremism in schools in areas with large Muslim populations was ignored. It wasn't until the media started investigating and exposing what was going on that the Department for Education was forced to take off its blinkers.

Now we are told that the extremists have been rooted out and the schools can return to a more balanced curriculum, unsullied by religious bigots intent on poisoning young minds at the state's expense.

But for how long? Even as I write this, alarm bells are ringing in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets that ‘Trojan Horse II’ is developing there.

Defenders of ‘faith schools’ point out that, in all instances, the Islamist infiltration took place in what they call “secular schools”. (Of course, there is no such thing in Britain. All schools are obliged by law to provide worship.) But the reality is that while schools retain the right to impose religion on their pupils, it will continue to be abused by those determined to make recruits for Jesus or Allah.

We are told that ‘faith schools’ bring choice for parents. So if there are single-faith schools, there will always be parents who want extremely conservative versions of their religion taught. Are they entitled to make that choice, whether it is Catholics wanting their children taught that abortion and homosexuality are evil and always wrong, or Muslims wanting their daughters shrouded in veils and refused the opportunity to play sport, hear music or study art? Some Jewish schools want to expunge all mention of evolution and human reproduction from their children's exam papers, some Anglican schools employ a whole team of chaplains (from the school's budget) to ensure that pupils cannot escape from an overweening religious ‘ethos’. It may be choice for the parents, but it amounts to enforced religion for the children and that must surely be a breach of their Human Rights.

But education is only one area where we have been active this year. We're also trying to help those whose property has been blighted by a medieval law that entitles the Church of England to demand money from unsuspecting property owners to pay for repairs to ancient church buildings. We have heard heart-rending stories of people who have received notification of this liability and have fallen into deep depression and anxiety – even in one case suicidal impulses. You can read more detail in this report.

It is not our purpose to take religion away from those who find comfort in it, but we must be ever-vigilant against the incursion of religion into the lives of those who do not want it.

The NSS will continue its work (much of which goes on out of sight and unsung). But we can't do it without you. Please consider making a donation or, better still, starting a direct debit to give regularly to the NSS, or increasing your current standing order. This helps us know more accurately what our income is likely to be and to plan appropriately.

We are up against a strong and determined religious establishment that is trying hard to regain its lost influence. The NSS will – with your loyal support – continue to be on the front line of resistance.

Terry Sanderson

Education

Over the past twelve months the NSS has played a prominent role in the ongoing national debate over the role of religion in schools. The debate intensified this year following revelations that several schools in Birmingham, and possibly beyond, were the subject of an attempted takeover, orchestrated by conservative Islamists intent on running publicly funded schools along ‘Islamic principles’.

None of the schools involved had a religious designation, but the mindset that publicly funded schools are legitimate places to seek to instil religious beliefs in children is very much reinforced by the presence of state funded faith schools that exist to do precisely that.

This has therefore been another busy year of campaigning in favour of secular education, and highlighting the problematic nature of religion in schools – particularly in faith schools – in both the state funded and independent sectors.

Trojan Horse response

In March we welcomed the Government’s inquiry into reports of an alleged plot by Islamist fundamentalists in Birmingham to take over state schools and use them as centres of ‘Islamic education’.

The subsequent investigation uncovered evidence of “coordinated, deliberate and sustained action to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamist ethos into some schools in the city”. We have repeatedly warned the Government against the dangers of extremism in schools.

The Government’s response has been to strengthen powers to intervene when schools are found to be failing to promote “British values” – defined by the Government as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those of different faiths and beliefs.

We broadly welcomed the proposed new standards, but in our submission to the Department for Education (DfE), we argued that the proposals will only play a small part in addressing concerns about extremism in schools. What is really needed is a thorough review of the role of religion in schools.

Our submission also called for the new duty on schools to promote values of equality to include schools having to lead by example. This means the removal of the exemption from equality law that enables faith schools to select both staff and pupils on the basis of faith, and a new duty to ensure that all aspects of the curriculum – including assemblies – are inclusive and respectful of all pupils, regardless of their religion or belief background.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury opportunistically exploited the ‘Trojan Horse’ affair in the national media to promote Anglican schools as beacons of tolerance, we were quick to remind Archbishop Welby that it is not only Islamists who have Trojan Horses.

Whilst it is true that the fundamentalism found in some schools is not seen in Church of England schools, the Church is increasingly imposing its own evangelism in publicly funded schools, regardless of how inappropriate that is in a pluralistic school community.

Our executive director’s outspoken criticism of the Church’s role in education became headline news on the BBC and was subsequently picked up by other national media outlets.

Cabinet at war over Islamic extremist plot to take over Birmingham schools

Fears of ‘Trojan Horse’ plots spread beyond Birmingham schools

Welby defends church schools over ‘Islamic takeover plot’

Over half of voters believe faith schools should lose state funding or be abolished



58% of the adult population oppose faith schools. Just 30% say they have “no objection” to faith schools being funded by the state.

Source: Opinium (2014)

Exam redaction prohibited in schools following NSS campaign

Towards the end of 2013 we uncovered evidence that Yesodey Hatorah, a publicly funded Jewish state school in London, was blacking out questions on science exam papers regarded as being at odds with its beliefs.

Subsequent freedom of information requests, submitted by the NSS, revealed the practice to be more widespread than this particular school. The practice was being supported by the relevant exam boards – who deemed it necessary to “respect the religious and cultural sensitivities of this community”.

When we raised concerns with the Department for Education, the Minister responsible alarmingly justified the exam boards’ facilitation of the practice as being “proportionate and reasonable”.

We therefore took our concerns to Ofqual, and following extensive campaigning on our part, the exam regulator prohibited the practice. The chief regulator, Glenys Stacey, met us and confirmed that exam boards would from now on be required to consider such censorship as “unacceptable malpractice”.

In a letter to all school examination awarding organisations, Ofqual supported our position that denying learners’ access to all the questions on a paper prevents the candidate achieving their full potential and therefore disadvantages them.

This was a significant and important victory in establishing that children and young people should not have their education and right to knowledge impeded by religious organisations.

Exposed: Unlawful sex discrimination in Muslim faith schools

In January we submitted evidence to the DfE of Muslim faith schools unlawfully discriminating against teaching and other staff on the grounds of sex.

In one example, the Madani Schools Federation in Leicester advertised for a “male science teacher”. Our attention was drawn to the advert by a suitably qualified but unemployed female teacher in Leicester, whose application for such a post would have been blocked.

We contended that both Capita, the employment agency advertising the post, and school governors were acting unlawfully. The Equality Act exemption on which they were relying, one that permits religious organisations to discriminate on grounds of gender and sexual orientation, is only applicable in a very narrow range of employment – and certainly not to teaching posts.

The DfE were, once more, both reluctant and slow to pick up on our concerns, but after we raised the issue in the national media, the DfE sided with our arguments and instructed the schools to remove the adverts and not discriminate against job applicants on the basis of their gender.

Focus on independent faith schools

A large and growing proportion of independent (private) schools are religious in character and we have become increasingly concerned that some of the teaching in these schools is undermining children’s education, impeding social cohesion and increasing the potential for radicalisation.

Our submissions to the DfE and Ofsted this year have focussed on teaching standards and inspections in independent schools.

Although not directly in receipt of public money, independent schools should, in the interests of both children and wider society, be held to the same educational standards as maintained schools, academies and free schools. Independent schools should also be judged on their ability to equip young people to understand and take their place in modern British society, but evidence is mounting that this is not happening.

We also said in our responses that we do not believe there should be a specialist inspectorate for religious schools. The Bridge Schools Inspectorate (BSI) inspects Christian and Muslim faith schools on the pretext of “understanding the distinctive characteristics of faith based education”.

Our concerns about the effectiveness of such inspectorates in dealing with potential cases of extremism were vindicated this year when it was revealed that a number of individuals associated with BSI held fundamentalist Christian and hardline Muslim views. In October the Government announced a toughening up of inspections.

The Telegraph

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Ofqual: faith schools banned from censoring exam papers

Ofqual, the exams regulator, bars faith schools from censoring GCSE and A-level exam papers on subjects such as evolution – even if they clash with their religious views

Ofqual said schools would no longer be allowed to censor exam questions. Photo: ALAMY

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor
 6:44PM BST 31 Mar 2014

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112 Comments

Faith schools have been barred from screening out exam questions that contradict their religious beliefs, the qualifications watchdog has ruled.

Ofqual said schools found to have redacted parts of GCSEs and A-levels

Education

Call to end compulsory worship in schools

This year we've been stepping up our efforts to bring about an end to the 70-year-old legal requirement on schools to hold acts of collective worship.

Christian worship has been compulsory in all schools in England and Wales since 1944. The law requires all schools, even non-faith schools, to hold an act of collective worship every day, which must be 'broadly Christian' in character.

This has long been problematic for parents who feel they should be the ones to decide what religious upbringing their children receive. We continue to receive a steady stream of calls from parents concerned about the intrusion of religion in their children's school – often in the form of religious assemblies – and often featuring external visitors or local priests on evangelisation missions.

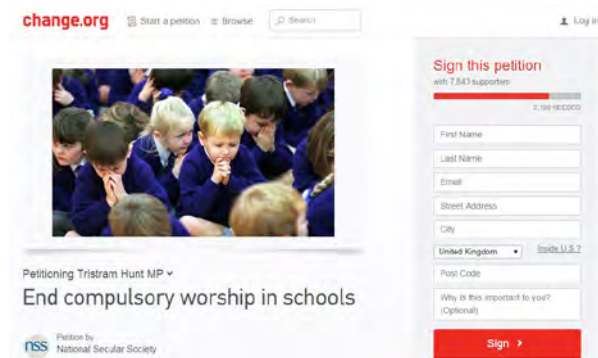
This year we've heard from parents being treated as "difficult" by head teachers after expressing a wish to withdraw. We've heard from parents being denied the right to withdraw – or told that they would have to come in and supervise their children themselves if they exercised their right.

In other cases, withdrawn children have been told to sharpen pencils or sit outside the headteacher's office. We've also heard of community schools where Christian prayers are said four times a day – making withdrawal completely impractical.

In some cases, where schools have acted inappropriately (and sometimes unlawfully), we have been able to advise parents on how to successfully challenge their school. But what's really needed to protect children and parents from the unwanted intrusion of religion in their schools is a change in the law.

It is becoming increasingly clear that a law requiring acts of predominantly Christian worship in schools is out of date and out of step with the attitudes of the majority of British people. The law has been unenforceable for some time, and many schools ignore it, but where it is adhered to, the religious freedoms of children and young people are being undermined.

Ahead of the 2015 general election we have called on all prospective education secretaries across all political parties to commit to changing the law. We've enlisted the support of the public with a Change.Org online petition which is well on its way to receiving 10,000 signatures.



We're pleased to report that at its party conference this year the Liberal Democrats joined the Greens in making abolition of compulsory worship party policy.

We also very much welcomed support for legal reform from the National Governors Association, which represents 300,000 school governors in England. In June it became the latest body to recommend that the religious element of school assemblies should be scrapped, calling it an "anomaly" in a multicultural nation.

In July, even the outgoing Bishop of Oxford, then Chair of the Church of England's Board of Education, suggested that collective worship was more suited to the 1940s and admitted it was "meaningless" to people who do not believe. However, his suggestion that it should be replaced by a period of "spiritual reflection" drawing largely on "Christian values" was simply an attempt to make the promotion of Christianity in schools more palatable.

The potential harm to community cohesion of a requirement to worship in schools was highlighted by the report commissioned by the Government into the 'Trojan Horse' affair. With this in mind, we've also called on the Education Select Committee to investigate the appropriateness of the law.

We seek an end to the law that requires schools to hold acts of worship. We would instead like to see a duty on schools to ensure that all aspects of their curriculum, including assemblies, are respectful and inclusive of all pupils, regardless of their religion or belief, including non-belief.

No more faith schools!

Successive governments have claimed that faith schools help create a “diversity of provision” that offers “greater opportunity for parental choice”. But for the non-religious, and those not of the dominant Christian faith, their choice is often curtailed by such schools.

This year we’ve received an unprecedented number of calls for help from parents who against their wishes have had their children allocated places at faith schools – often with local authorities struggling to find any alternative.

The problem of children being denied places at local schools because of their parents’ religion or beliefs is well known, but this year we’ve also been highlighting the cases of parents who don’t want a religious schooling but are left with little alternative than to send their children to faith schools.

This year we’ve been working with parents of a variety of religious backgrounds to ensure their right to an education for their children that doesn’t run counter to their beliefs. In one case we successfully intervened to assist local parents in blocking a proposal to convert a community school into a voluntary aided Church of England school.

Other cases we’ve worked on this year include:

- 20 parents of various faith backgrounds whose children were allocated places at a Sikh free school in Buckinghamshire
- A Muslim parent whose child was allocated a place at an orthodox Jewish school in Leeds
- Non-religious and Christian parents whose children were allocated places at a Hindu school in London
- Atheist parents whose children were offered only an Anglican school in Hertfordshire
- A Turkish Cypriot parent whose child was allocated a place at a Greek orthodox free school in Barnet

The Telegraph

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Row as atheist pupils are sent to vegetarian Sikh school

Parents living in rural South Buckinghamshire have been angered after children were allocated places at a Sikh school that operates a strict 'no meat' policy and starts the day with prayers

Children have been allocated places at a Sikh free school in South Bucks despite failing to name it on application forms. Photo: Alamy

By Graeme Paton, Education Editor
 8:00AM BST 06 Apr 2014

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159 Comments
 A row has erupted in the heart of one of Britain's wealthiest villages after local children were allocated places at a controversial Sikh school despite failing to name it on application forms.
 More than a dozen children living in rural South Buckinghamshire – mainly from atheist or Christian families – have been told to attend the Khalsa Secondary Academy in September.

In most cases alternative provision was found after numerous appeals and pleas to the local authority, but it’s clear that the presence of minority faith schools, often opened under the free schools initiative, has exacerbated the school place shortage crisis and is failing to meet the needs of local communities.

The problem will become more acute with the demand for school places rising.

In a diverse and pluralistic society such as ours, these cases illustrate the need for inclusive secular schools where children of all religion and belief backgrounds are educated together.

We would like to see all publicly-funded schools equally welcoming to all children and young people, irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background. We therefore campaign for an inclusive, secular education system in which religious organisations play no formal role.

Freedom of Expression

Censorship challenged on campus

The NSS has once more been at the forefront of challenging multiple threats to freedom of expression – one of the most precious pillars of our liberal democratic society.

Last year we reported that students running the London School of Economics' Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society stall at the LSE's freshers' fair were told they would be physically removed if they refused to cover up their t-shirts. They featured images from the satirical *Jesus and Mo* comic strip, and were deemed offensive by Student Union officials.



LSE Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society stall at 2014 freshers' fair

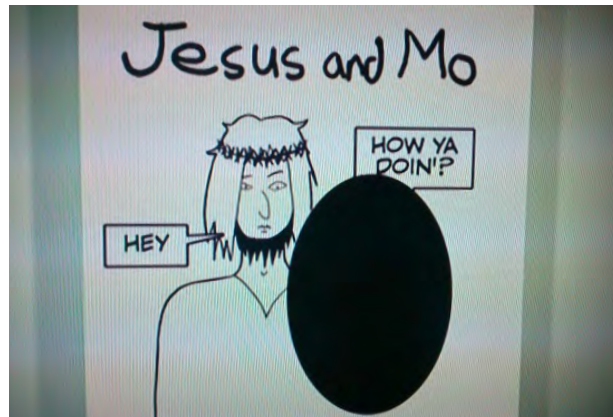
Following the incident, we worked with the students in pursuing a public apology, which took two months to materialise. The LSE's director said it took its duty to promote free speech "very seriously" and that it would "learn from the issues raised by the events". He acknowledged that, with hindsight, the wearing of the t-shirts on this occasion did not amount to harassment or contravene the law or LSE policies, as had previously been claimed.

We're pleased to report that this year, the students were able to attend the freshers' fair sporting their t-shirts without hindrance – and in fact received a warm welcome from the Islamic Society and a constant stream of praise from new students supportive of their uncompromising defence of the principle of free expression.

We warmly congratulate students Abhishek Phadnis and Chris Moos for consolidating their victory with their action this year.

Channel 4 censorship

The *Jesus and Mo* controversy again rose to national prominence in January when Maajid Nawaz, Liberal Democrat Prospective Parliamentary Candidate (PPC) for Hampstead and Kilburn and co-founder and chair of the anti-extremism think tank Quilliam, tweeted the cartoon, saying that he, as a Muslim, didn't find it offensive.



Jesus and Mo, as censored by Channel 4 News

Reacting to the tweet, a number of high profile people, including Mohammed Shafiq of the Ramadhan Foundation, Muslim commentator Mo Ansar and Bradford Respect MP George Galloway, publicly campaigned for Nawaz to be removed as a Liberal Democrat PPC.

Party leader Nick Clegg said that while it is important to show respect to people of all faiths and none, Nawaz would not be dropped as a parliamentary candidate.

However, in its coverage of the controversy, Channel 4 News censored the image of Mo.

In an open letter to the editor we argued that Channel 4's reporting was complicit in the curtailing of freedom of expression and stereotyping Muslims as being inherently prone to extreme reactions.

Our letter also highlighted the risk of creating a dangerous precedent, and stressed the importance of UK broadcasters upholding free expression when blasphemy is still punishable by death in many countries. In its response, Channel 4 simply reiterated that it did not want to cause offence to its audience.

Maajid Nawaz has subsequently become an honorary associate of the NSS.



Presentation to National Police College on free speech

Last year, the unlikely coalition of the NSS, the Christian Institute and Peter Tatchell succeeded in removing the word “insulting” from Section 5 of the Public Order Act – a small, but significant, move in our broader objective of protecting free expression. This year the same coalition reunited briefly to give a presentation on freedom of expression to the National Police College.

Section 5 did not require that the complainant be identified, so the threshold to bring a prosecution was therefore very low and it was widely thought that this had been exploited to stifle protest and free expression when convenient for the police.

We wanted to be sure that police training would reflect the change in the law that we had been instrumental in achieving, so were delighted to be able to have the opportunity to present this to police trainers from throughout the country. They would then include this information in training in their respective forces.

We did not however restrict ourselves simply to this change in the law. The officers were given a thorough grounding in the importance of freedom of expression as part of our democratic process. Our presentations were well received and the vast majority of officers took them on board and seem comfortable with them. There were just a few officers who clearly regretted the demise of the almost automatic prosecutions possible under the former Section 5, or thought that the police should be more heavy-handed over expression with which they did not agree. It was gratifying to see their colleagues stepping in to correct them.

BBC: Free speech?

In May we accused the BBC of censorship after its BBC3 debate show *Free Speech* dropped a debate about being Muslim and gay at the request of Birmingham Central Mosque where it was being filmed.

The live show broadcast a pre-recorded question by Asifa Lahore, self-described as Britain’s “first and only gay Muslim drag queen”. He asked the Muslim community: “when will it be right to be Muslim and gay?”

However, the show’s host interrupted before any of the panel or studio audience had a chance to respond, saying the question had been dropped in response to the concerns of the mosque.

In the media we argued that after the Mosque had agreed to host the filming of a programme called *Free Speech*, it was absurd and counterproductive to concede to their demands to censor the topic being discussed.

Reform Clause 1 campaign

This year we successfully teamed up with a diverse alliance of charities and civil liberties groups to oppose Government plans to criminalise “Nuisance and annoyance”.

Under the Government’s proposals, courts could have imposed injunctions on anyone engaging, or threatening to engage, in “conduct capable of causing nuisance or annoyance to any person”.

We argued that, were the legislation to be worded as proposed, it would have had an even greater chilling effect on freedom of expression than the word “insulting” had in Section 5 of the Public Order Act.



In January, following a Ministerial meeting with the NSS and Christian Institute, the Government finally dropped its plans following a dramatic defeat in the House of Lords. Peers voted by 306 to 178 to back an amendment by the crossbench peer Lord Dear – one of the largest Government defeats ever and the biggest Government defeat on any piece of legislation in the 2013/14 Parliamentary session.

The victory was the result of months of work by the Reform Clause 1 campaign, which included ourselves, the Christian Institute, Justice and the Peter Tatchell Foundation, amongst others.

Campaigning

NSS challenges chancel repair liability

Under archaic ecclesiastical laws, landowners in some areas of England can become liable for the repair of part of a nearby Anglican church: it is called Chancel Repair Liability (CRL).

The laws were thought to be defunct, but were revalidated in 2003 after a lengthy court battle resulted in a farm at Aston Cantlow in Warwickshire being sold off to pay over £400,000 for CRL on its land plus legal fees.

Generally, CRL is not mentioned in the deeds, so Parliament has legislated to enable the liabilities to be registered with the Land Registry by the beneficiary, in this case the relevant parochial church council (PCC). Our research suggests that around 20,000 properties have been registered. The registrations themselves can seriously blight the value or even saleability of the property, and have caused considerable distress to owners. Some have even been made in error. PCCs have sometimes sought to appease owners by claiming there is no intention to collect CRL. This means the property values are blighted without the churches receiving any benefit – in effect vandalising the value. Furthermore, no PCC in an area subject to CRL can guarantee that it will not enforce CRL in the future.



NSS member Helen Bailey discussed CLR on BBC's *Rip-off Britain*



NSS member Elaine Hession and residents of Stottesdon, near Kidderminster



Lord Avebury introduces Bill to abolish CLR into parliament

Since the Aston Cantlow case, those purchasing land have often taken out inexpensive insurance against CRL, but this is not available where the property has been registered for CRL.

We are proud that NSS members have led the fight against CRL. Helen Bailey from Tamworth and Elaine Hession from Kidderminster campaigned vigorously to have their own liabilities either extinguished by the Church or the registrations cancelled. Helen had to take on both her local PCC and the local diocese, and faced a great deal of resistance and obstruction. Such was the success of Elaine's campaign, her local MP said he had never had so many people visit his surgery than the deputation she arranged.

Both cases resulted in national publicity. These victories took a great deal of effort and ingenuity and were only achieved after often distressing battles against an, at best, complacent church hierarchy. We have offered local help wherever possible.

For well over a year now, the NSS has also been working energetically at national level to abolish CRL, and until that can be achieved, to mitigate it. We have been engaging with parliamentarians in both Houses, at Ministerial and top civil servant level and with the top echelons of the Church, with whom we have had lengthy meetings.

We have pointed out to the Church that PCCs will struggle to collect CRL because of the adverse publicity such claims would generate.

In recent decades, the Law Commission and the Law Society have both recommended the abolition or phasing out of CRL, but no legislation has been forthcoming. The Church even accepted phasing out CRL itself at a Synod in 1982. But brokering a settlement will take some time. We have therefore worked with Lord Avebury to table the Chancel Repairs Bill in the House of Lords, to abolish CRL completely. We hope this will give the opportunity to put on record the scale of harm and distress caused by CRL and the powerful arguments for abolition.

We will continue our discussions with interested parties to find innovative solutions to mitigate, and we hope ultimately to abolish, CRL. If you have been affected or have any knowledge that might be useful in our campaign, please get in touch.

Catholic Church under unprecedented scrutiny over child abuse

A further historic milestone was passed this spring in the NSS's work over many years to bring the Catholic Church to account for sexual and other violence against minors perpetrated by clerics worldwide.

The most widely publicised scandals have been in Ireland, the USA and more recently Australia.

The Church is the only religious organisation that has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (using its diplomatic nom de plume, the Holy See, based on the 110 acres of Vatican City State territory).

Until recently, it had escaped UN scrutiny over its treaty obligations in relation to clerical child abuse by simply ceasing to submit any reports to the Committee for the Rights of the Child.

Even when it resumed reports to the Committee, to whom the NSS along with abuse survivors groups had given written and oral evidence, only passing references were made to this type of abuse.

Nevertheless, the Committee questioned senior Church representatives robustly for a whole day at a public hearing in Geneva in front of the world's press and the witnesses.

Few of the Committee's searching questions were answered to its satisfaction – most were evaded. The Church, for example, would not agree to issue worldwide instructions for suspected or actual clerical abuse to be reported to civil justice authorities. Furthermore, while the Vatican demands that such suspicions are reported to them, it refused to disclose any information to the UN about these cases.

More fundamentally, the 'Holy See' maintains that its UN Convention obligations do not extend beyond the tiny Vatican City state. The Vatican maintains an iron grip on the Church internationally, particularly on child abuse accusations. Despite this, the Holy See claims it is not responsible for the actions of individuals even when such individuals claim to be acting on the authority of the Church, of which the Holy See claims to be the "supreme organ of government". The Committee and lawyers disagreed with this self-serving interpretation.

The Committee was not convinced by the Vatican's arguments and the concluding observations it published were a damning indictment of the Church, and the first criticism of it by a United Nations committee.



Holy See representatives at the UN hearing

They made headlines in blanket coverage in printed and electronic media around the world. This was reinforced a few weeks later by more tactfully worded, but nevertheless similarly scathing, concluding observations by the UN Committee against Torture (which some of the abuse also amounted to). The NSS had also joined with survivors groups to give evidence to this Committee.

In September 2013, the Pope's Nuncio (personal representative) in the Dominican Republic, Archbishop Wesolowski, was recalled to the Vatican preventing him being arrested by the civil authorities on charges of child abuse. The Vatican then refused a formal request to extradite Wesolowski to the Dominican Republic to face a trial.

Both UN committees on the Rights of the Child and against Torture expressed concern about this. Revelations about the case caused such a media storm that the Vatican was forced, probably for the first time ever, to make an immediate concession. It was to announce the revocation of Wesolowski's diplomatic immunity.

All these factors have combined to create an unprecedented level of international pressure on the Vatican to take a much harder line on child abuse in its ranks.



Keith Porteous Wood interviewed on BBC News

“The Committee is particularly concerned that in dealing with allegations of child sexual abuse, the Holy See has consistently placed the preservation of the reputation of the Church and the protection of the perpetrators above the child's best interests”

UNCRC – concluding observations

Secularist of the Year 2014

This year's Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year was awarded to Turkish MP and Human Rights campaigner, Safak Pavey. She was presented with the £5,000 Irwin Prize by honorary associate and shadow Foreign Office minister, Kerry McCarthy MP.

Safak Pavey is a member of Turkey's main opposition party representing the Istanbul province. She is known for her international work in Human Rights, humanitarian aid and peace-building. She has worked to promote secularism as well as the rights of women and disabled people.

Safak told the audience about how secularism is under threat in Turkey, which also has a geopolitical dimension, given the country is a buffer between East and West. It is a country where:

- there are religious tests for civil servants and job applicants
- evolution is not taught on school syllabuses
- sex-segregation is commonplace in schools and universities
- 90,000 mosques are being used as propaganda centres for the Government.

She has also worked for an improvement in the protection of minorities and the rights of women in Turkey, against a backdrop of the then Prime Minister, now President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, stating that he does not think men and women are equal.

Also honoured at the award ceremony were Chris Moos and Abhishek Phadnis for challenging their own university (LSE) and Universities UK over freedom of expression and sex segregation.

Other nominees included Nick Cohen, Jem Henderson, Gita Sahgal, and Dan Snow.

We are once again immensely grateful to Dr Michael Irwin for donating the £5,000 prize.

Secularist of the Year is organised by the President, Terry Sanderson.

The Secularist of the Year 2015 luncheon and award ceremony will take place in London on Saturday 28 March. Tickets are now available.



NSS President, Terry Sanderson opened proceedings



Geoffrey Robertson QC gave a rousing introductory speech



NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood

“Rather than being opposed to religion, secularism seeks an equal playing field under Human Rights – and that is good for everyone.”

Geoffrey Robertson QC

“If the political order of a country and the public support towards political parties are determined based on piety and religious criteria, where the law is not secular in nature, how can it ever guarantee the lives and livelihoods of those who do not fit their criteria? How can it reconcile the differences of those who believe in different religions?”

Secularist of the Year, Safak Pavey



Safak Pavey's speech was well received



Safak Pavey receives her prize



Gita Sahgal with Kerry McCarthy MP



Abhishek Phadnis and Chris Moos



Jem Henderson with Kerry McCarthy MP

“The freedom to laugh at religion is a fundamental freedom. It floods the supposedly arcane and mysterious inner-workings of religion with sunlight and by force compels us to take the issue of religion less seriously – and thereby contemplate its separation from the affairs of the state. That is the beginning of secularism and therefore very important.”

Abhishek Phadnis

Human Rights

Law Society and sharia

This year we have worked alongside the Lawyers' Secular Society (LSS), and other feminist, Human Rights and Muslim groups, to challenge the Law Society over controversial guidance and training courses in sharia.

In March, the Law Society – a membership body which represents solicitors in England – produced a practice note to advise “Solicitors dealing with clients where Sharia succession rules may be relevant”.

The note advises solicitors, for example, that: “... illegitimate and adopted children are not Sharia heirs ... The male heirs in most cases receive double the amount inherited by a female heir ... Non-Muslims may not inherit at all ... a divorced spouse is no longer a Sharia heir...”

We consider this advice to cover religious rather than legal matters, and is therefore not appropriate to be dealt with in a practice note. Doing so only encourages legitimisation of sharia as if it were law, which we deeply regret.

As the story developed, our extensive reporting helped draw wider attention to the issue. Sadikur Rahman of the LSS was the first to raise concerns about the practice note. We were pleased to feature his thoughtful blogs on it, exploring the issues and correcting many misconceptions. Keith Porteous Wood was widely quoted in UK and international media on this topic.

In April we attended a protest outside the Law Society organised by One Law for All, Southall Black Sisters, the Centre for Secular Space and LSE students. In May the Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, warned that the Law Society risked “undermining” the rule of law and British legal principles by promoting sharia.

In July the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA), the regulatory body for solicitors in England and Wales, withdrew a reference to the Law Society’s practice note from its ‘ethics guidance’ on the drafting and preparation of wills. The SRA confirmed to the NSS that it had removed the reference “in response to concerns that had been raised”.

In August our executive director, Keith Porteous Wood, and campaigns manager, Stephen Evans, met with senior officials of the Law Society to discuss our concerns. Following our discussions, the Law Society’s chief executive agreed to further consider the possible withdrawal of the practice note and, failing that, our proposed amendments to it. We also raised with the Law Society wider concerns about the adverse implications, especially for women, of sharia and religious arbitration, its growing *de facto* use and for the rule of law. We will continue to seek to pursue these issues wherever and whenever we can.

Secularism and feminism conference

In the UK, secular thought has pushed back religious misogyny; but society has not yet adequately recognised the importance of secularism in the fight for women’s rights.

In December we hosted a conference to discuss the common causes of secularism and feminism. The event, chaired by Anne Marie Waters, gave feminist groups and supporters the platform to discuss the advance of women’s rights and the importance of secularism in that struggle.



Nahla Mahmoud, of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, spoke about efforts to end the use of sharia tribunals in the UK and elsewhere



Anne Marie Waters chaired the conference



Pragna Patel, a founding member of the Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism, spoke about the feminist struggle to protect the secular space



Yasmin Rehman, Chief Executive of Greenwich Inclusion Project and member of the Muslim Institute, talked about the intersection of her identities as a woman, Muslim and secularist

NSS attends launch of Human Rights Report

The Society was invited to attend the reception to present the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s annual Human Rights Report, which gave us an opportunity to log concerns at senior civil servant and Ministerial level and meet other Human Rights campaigners and diplomats.

International

EU Presidents' Meeting

In November 2013 our executive director was one of around twenty leading representatives of philosophical and “non-confessional” organisations invited by José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, to discuss European citizenship. Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, and László Surján, Vice-President of the European Parliament, were co-hosts of the meeting, held in the Commission’s boardroom.

The topic was: “Putting citizens at the heart of the European project in times of change”. In his address, Keith Porteous Wood urged the EU presidents to ensure that secularism was at the heart of the European project. Europeans’ personal beliefs – be they religious or otherwise – should bring neither privileges nor disadvantages, whether at the legislative table, or as citizens.



From left to right: László Surján, Herman Van Rompuy, Keith Porteous Wood and José Manuel Barroso

International Association of Freethought: 2014 conference

This was held in London in August. Presentations were made by speakers from around the world, many describing the struggle in their country to achieve secularism and fight against religious privilege. The executive director, who is also an IAFT spokesperson, gave the opening presentation, on clerical child abuse and securing justice for victims. A speaker from Poland described how her country was amongst the European countries where secularism was being resisted most harshly. The director of American Atheists spoke of his success in generating media coverage in his campaign to raise the profile of atheism in the US, where non-believers are the most maligned group. The event was co-chaired by the French Freethinkers and the NSS who were sponsors and hosts respectively.

“Our personal beliefs – be they religious or not – should not bring either privileges or disadvantages whether at the legislative table, or as citizens. This is the heart of the secular ideal, and this, I recommend, should be at the heart of the European project also.”

Keith Porteous Wood at the EU Presidents' Meeting

European Parliament

We have worked closely with secular MEPs and the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics, on whose advisory board we take an active role.

We worked most closely with Sophie in 't Veld from the Netherlands and Michael Cashman from the UK (now Lord Cashman), both of whom are honorary associates. A very effective campaigner, especially on secular issues and gay rights, Michael was a leading figure in the Parliament, but after 15 productive years as an MEP, he retired in May. We thank him warmly for his work there and will sorely miss him. We congratulate Sophie on her re-election. She is the MEP most dedicated to secularism, so we are delighted she will once more be Chair of the Platform.

The task before us will become even more demanding as we have lost other supportive MEPs and the new Parliament will be markedly less secular with a significantly higher proportion of religious conservatives.

Topics we have tackled include the rights of the non-religious in employment, halal/kosher slaughter and countering attempts to limit women’s reproductive rights.

Women’s Reproductive Rights

The NSS has been keeping itself well informed, lobbying and intervening where possible over women’s reproductive rights at the EU, liaising with the European Humanist Federation. These rights have been under increasing attack, and it has been a challenging year.

On Human Rights day the European Parliament rejected a progressive report on sexual and reproductive health rights authored by Portuguese MEP, Edite Estrela. The defeat was a narrow one and followed an extensive and well-organised lobbying effort from the religious right.

We are however pleased to report the failure of a petition to cut all EU funding for embryonic stem cell research and IVF treatments involving the destruction of embryos. This was promoted by a pressure group called “One of Us” and supported by the Pope. It attracted two million signatures in the EU, qualifying it as a European Citizens’ Initiative, so requiring consideration by the Parliament. Michael Cashman, then-member of the European Parliament’s Development Committee, fought strongly against the Initiative, arguing that it would be devastating for women’s health and lives and would have forced women to seek unsafe abortion services. Both the Parliament and the Commission have since declined to take any action on the Initiative.

Other campaigning

Call to secularise NHS chaplaincy services

In October we submitted a response, together with the Secular Medical Forum, to NHS England's consultation on chaplaincy guidelines. We were pleased that the new guidance includes an explicit recognition of the need to provide guidance "for the care of patients and service users who do not identify with a religious faith".

However, our joint submission was critical of the guidelines for being too focussed on religious care rather than the provision of an inclusive service that benefits all patients and NHS staff. Despite purporting to provide 'spiritual care' to all, we objected to the NHS-funded role only being open to individuals who can obtain a satisfactory recommendation and authorisation from their "faith community".

Where chaplaincy is provided, we urged for it to move from being a religious service to one fit for – and equally welcoming to – all.

We argued that, whilst chaplaincy remains a paid job exclusively for religious applicants, any claims to be inclusive of the needs of non-religious patients remains lip-service, and removes any justification for public funding.

Our submission was also critical of the consultation process. Despite being NHS England guidance, and the consultation being an NHS one, no information about the consultation was made available on the NHS England website. Instead, the draft guidelines were hosted by the College of Health Care Chaplains (the chaplains' trade union) website and requests to comment were sent by invitation only. Whilst the views of chaplains were widely sought, we criticised the consultation process for not adequately engaging with patients and other stakeholders on issues that affect the services which patients receive.

Prison chaplains

Prison chaplaincy hit the headlines this year when an investigation by the *Sunday Times* revealed prisoners were being radicalised by imams with links to Islamist groups working in UK prisons as chaplains.

The executive director gave a presentation at London South Bank University at a seminar on prison chaplaincy and religion in prison. We consider that a key challenge for the prison system is Muslim prisoners appointing fellow prisoners as imams in preference to those appointed by the prison service.

Keith also emphasised the importance of ensuring that non-religious prisoners were not disadvantaged relative to those who claimed a religious affiliation.

NSS backs petition to ban non-stun slaughter

This year we gave our backing to a new campaign by the British Veterinary Association (BVA) to end non-stun slaughter of animals to improve animal welfare. A petition launched by the BVA, with the support of the RSPCA, called on the Government to ban slaughter without pre-stunning for all animals.



EU and UK law requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering. The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim religious requirements. We have long campaigned for an end to the animal welfare regulation exemption that allows religious communities to slaughter animals without pre-stunning.

The e-petition has attracted over 75,000 signatures and will be considered for debate by the Backbench Business Committee were it pass the 100,000 signature threshold.

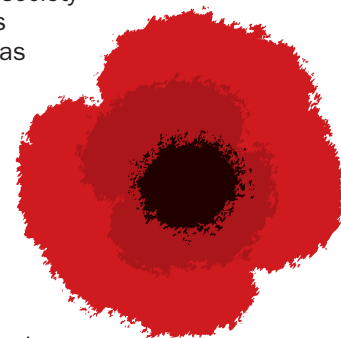
Call for a secular remembrance

The annual Ceremony of Remembrance at the Cenotaph has changed little since it was first introduced in 1921. Exclusively Christian rituals are prominent, and hymns are sung. A religious procession is led by a cross with a bishop invoking the 'Lord Jesus Christ' in a prayer.

In correspondence with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, we stressed the need for the ceremony to reflect changes in the society it serves in order for it to remain as relevant and profound as when it was first conceived.

We asked for the annual ceremony of remembrance to be revised to make it fully inclusive of everyone, whatever their religious perspective, in particular by rethinking the dominant role played by the Church of England.

A paper on the origins of the Cenotaph, which was intentionally designed as a secular monument, is available on our website: <http://bit.ly/nsscenotaph>



Religion and belief consultations and “persecuted” Christians

We have responded to a call for evidence by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) who are mapping out how people’s religion or belief (including non-belief) has affected their experiences in the workplace and in using public services such as schools.

The Commission is assessing the effectiveness of current equality and Human Rights legislation on religion or belief.

Around the launch of the call there was a crescendo of baseless claims in the media of ‘persecution’ of Christians in the UK. Those behind such myths are well placed to orchestrate responses, and doubtless have been hard at work producing responses to the Commission, which we hope it will examine critically.

The latest example was the “victory” of a registrar dismissed for refusing to conduct same sex marriages getting her job back. The story was given such prominence it was even reported as a tribunal decision (and in one incidence even a court case), but in fact it was only an internal appeal. The local authority (Central Bedfordshire) assures us that they would not allow any employee to discriminate in this way, which accords with our reading of EHRC guidance on the law. Furthermore the employee has not returned to her post, so it is not clear what the supposed victory was.

It was however a triumph of propaganda: could it have been intended to intimidate local authorities into allowing registrars to discriminate?

The self-appointed Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (not set up by the Government) is also hearing evidence to consider, *inter alia*, “the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain, and the significance of emerging trends and identities”.

An examination of the credentials of the majority of those behind the Commission leads us to expect it to be little more than a promotion of religion exercise.

Sea of Faith

We responded to an invitation to speak at the Sea of Faith Network’s annual conference at the University of Leicester. The executive director spoke about tackling the secular deficit in the UK where religious influence over government is growing despite the decline in religious adherence.

Keith extolled the benefits of secularism, also summarising its history and that of the NSS. He was asked to share his experiences of campaigning in collaboration with groups we might work in opposition to in other circumstances. NSS President, Terry Sanderson, took a question and answer session. Both were warmly received.

Discrimination against adoptive parents

In response to a complaint by the NSS, the office of the Scottish Charity Regulator had ruled that a Catholic adoption agency – St Margaret’s – was unlawfully discriminating against adoptive parents on a number of grounds, including sexual orientation, and was also failing the charities test. The law on this matter is the same in Scotland as in England & Wales and the unlawfulness of such discrimination has been settled in the English courts, after numerous challenges.

St Margaret’s appealed and unexpectedly the Regulator’s ruling was overturned by the Scottish Charities Appeal Panel, whose members are appointed by the Scottish Government.

Its decision contained some unconventional arguments. It held for example, that the charity itself – rather than any individual within it – possessed Human Rights, and despite not being a religious organisation (albeit allied closely to the Catholic Church) it had a right to manifest its religion.

This was such an alarming development that the Equalities and Human Rights Commission took the unprecedented step of publicly criticising it.

A consolation is that the Scottish Charities Appeal Panel is a lay one, rather than being a judicial body. Otherwise its decision could have broken some worrying new ground and set some legal precedents, for example that organisations as well as individuals can have Human Rights.

Combating ‘witchcraft’

Child abuse cases linked to accusations of witchcraft are on the rise. The Metropolitan Police have investigated 27 cases in 2014 alone. 148 cases have been reported since 2004.

In August, the NSS joined with other Human Rights organisations in successfully calling on the Home Office to deny a Nigerian ‘witch hunter’ entry to the UK.

The controversial Pentecostal pastor David Oyedepo had been due to address a Winners Chapel International (WCI) convention in Dartford.

Oyedepo, who runs WCI, is one of Africa’s richest ‘pastorpreneurs’. Oyedepo associates disobedience in children with witchcraft. In 2011 he was captured on video assaulting a young girl he accused of being a witch.

When we discovered that the church’s UK branch had applied to register an independent faith school in Dartford, we immediately raised concerns with the Department for Education (DfE).

Kingdom Heritage Model School did not open as planned in September. The DfE says it is still considering the school’s registration.

Scottish referendum

The Scottish independence referendum saw a victory for the “No” side, with 55.3% voting against independence.

Some argued that independence would bring about greater secularism in Scotland by severing the connection with the bishops in the UK’s revising chamber. However, such analysis may have underestimated the intimacy of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Holyrood, Scotland’s single-chamber parliament.

While the Church of Scotland maintained a neutral position on the referendum, as did the NSS, the Catholic Church – at least privately – took a vigorous pro-independence stance.

Prior to the referendum, our encounters with the Scottish Government at Ministerial level had demonstrated how protective it was of Roman Catholic schools. An unorthodox Ministerial intervention expressing regret that the Charity Regulator rejected St Margaret’s case – a quasi-judicial process (referred to on page 15), also had the effect of defending a Catholic institution, even though it is generally thought to have been operating in breach of the law. As has been noted, the Scottish Government appointed the members of the Charity Appeal Panel, whose decision was criticised the EHRC.

There has been credible speculation that the Catholic Church worked hard to deliver the “Yes” votes as long as the Government party guaranteed

the continuance of RC schools. The few, albeit densely populated, areas where “Yes” votes were in the majority in the referendum, were also those with a high proportion of Catholics.

Had the Church ever been able to maintain that a “Yes” victory was only secured by their support, its power over the SNP Government would have been substantial and deeply unsecular.

However, even with the rejection of independence, the Church has demonstrated its ability to deliver votes in large numbers that will do nothing to reduce its ambitions to maintain a hold over the governing party.

Secularists need to tackle this problem head on. The Government should be constantly reminded of its repeated statements during the referendum campaign of commitments to Human Rights and equality. It should also be reminded of the Church’s dwindling support in the pews and how few support its deeply intolerant views on social questions – such as start and end of life, women’s reproductive health and other sexual issues.

But there is some room for hope. To its credit, the Government proceeded with same-sex marriage legislation despite (the now disgraced and exiled) Cardinal O’Brien’s ludicrously self-important threat to cut off relations. Maybe the appointment of a new First Minister will present some opportunities for progress.

2013 AGM

Members agreed by a majority in excess of the required 75% to change the Articles of Association to replace the Society’s formal objects with the Secular Charter, shown on the inside cover.

Members also backed a motion to reword Article 3 to read: “The National Secular Society asserts that people of different religions and beliefs and none should be equal before the law, and that a secular state is the best guarantor of this equality.” This replaced wording about belief in god(s).

Although there were competitive elections, all retiring officers and council members were re-elected.



Afonso Reis e Sousa proposes the Article changes



Delegates vote at the AGM

Communications

During 2014 we've kept up a high media profile and continued to be a trusted source of news and comment for the print and digital media.

In April, the public debate over Prime Minister David Cameron's assertion that the UK is a "Christian country" provided an opportunity for us to promote the need for a secular state that protects everyone's beliefs equally. Our executive director and campaigns manager both debated the issue on national television.



Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood on BBC News



Campaigns Manager Stephen Evans on BBC News

We have also been frequently called upon to provide commentary on the role of religion in schools. Our investigations into the redaction of exam papers at a Jewish faith schools made national news, as did our uncovering of gender discrimination at a Muslim faith school.

Our executive director appeared on national television following the Holy See being held to account over child abuse by the United Nations and NSS spokespeople have been frequent contributors to both national and local radio debates.

Our website secularism.org.uk received over 1.2 million visits this year and continues to keep our supporters informed of breaking news on key issues. Over 220 news articles and 100 opinion pieces were published during the year.

Newsline, our free Friday email, which keeps over 18,000 subscribers up to date on a weekly basis, saw over 1,400 people sign up in the last year.

Our daily media roundup, published every morning, also continues to be a popular way for members and supporters to keep up to speed with the latest developments relevant to secularism.

Our Facebook page has grown steadily from just under 9,000 to just over 11,000 likes. On an average day almost 600 people engage with our Facebook page by commenting on, liking or sharing stories.

Our Twitter following has increased from 12,500 to 17,900 followers. Tweets from the NSS Twitter account appear on more than 17 thousand timelines on the average day.

We've maintained our printed communications, and with the help of our graphic designers at WhiteLight have given our members' *Bulletin* a new look. Both the *Bulletin* and the annual report are distributed well beyond our membership base.



The new-look Bulletin

I find your web site a fantastic resource, especially the media roundup and the articles on the blogs and opinion. I check it every day!

NSS member Gijbert Stoen, Glasgow

Farewell to Bill McIlroy

A well-attended memorial meeting was held in December 2013 for Bill (William James) McIlroy (1928 – 2013), who had been the NSS's Secretary in the 1960s, when the Society's profile became very much more prominent. It was led by the executive director.



Bill McIlroy with Keith Porteous Wood

Your Council as of 30 September 2014

President

Terry Sanderson

Vice president

Gerard Phillips

Afonso Reis e Sousa (co-opted from Council member to Vice president). He is also Chair of Council.

Treasurer

Clare Wadd

Other members of Council

Dan Bye

Clare Coghill (co-opted)

Alistair McBay (co-opted)

Ray Newton

Peter Revell

Robert Stovold

Adrian Tippetts

Peter Vlachos

Norman Bonney and Anne Marie Waters resigned during the year.

Executive director: Keith Porteous Wood FCCA

Campaigns manager: Stephen Evans



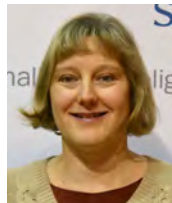
Terry Sanderson



Gerard Phillips



Afonso Reis e Sousa



Clare Wadd



Dan Bye



Clare Coghill



Alistair McBay



Ray Newton



Peter Revell



Robert Stovold



Adrian Tippetts



Peter Vlachos

Honorary associates

Graham Allen MP
 Prof Peter Atkins
 Lord Avebury
 Baroness Blackstone
 Prof Colin Blakemore
 Edward Bond
 Nick Brown MP
 Prof Ted Cattle CBE
 Lord Cashman of Limehouse
 Nick Cohen
 Prof Richard Dawkins
 Prof Lord Desai
 Angela Eagle MP
 Baroness Falkner of Margravine
 Jim Fitzpatrick MP
 Baroness Flather
 Michael Frayn
 Ricky Gervais
 Lord Goodhart
 Prof AC Grayling
 Nia Griffith MP
 Dr Evan Harris
 Lord Harrison of Chester*
 Patrick Harvie MSP
 Prof Ted Honderich
 Mary Honeyball MEP
 Kelvin Hopkins MP
 Dr Julian Huppert MP
 Sophie in 't Veld MEP
 Virginia Ironside
 Dr Michael Irwin
 Asma Jahangir

Prof Steve Jones
 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead
 Prof Lawrence Krauss
 Stewart Lee
 Graham Linehan
 Baroness Massey of Darwen
 Kerry McCarthy MP
 Jonathan Meades
 Sir Jonathan Miller
 Baroness Murphy
 Maryam Namazie
 Taslima Nasrin
 Maajid Nawaz*
 Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan
 Pragna Patel
 Lord Peston
 Sir Terry Pratchett
 Philip Pullman
 Geoffrey Robertson QC
 Martin Rowson
 Gita Sahgal
 Joan Smith
 Dan Snow*
 Dr David Starkey
 Peter Tatchell
 Lord Taverne
 Lady Tonge
 Polly Toynbee
 Baroness Turner of Camden
 Lord Warner of Brockley
 Baroness Young of Hornsey*



Lord Harrison of Chester



Maajid Nawaz



Dan Snow



Baroness Young of Hornsey

*Honorary associates we have been pleased to welcome over the last year (all pictured, right)

Affiliated groups

Local groups

Bedfordshire Humanists; Belfast Humanist Group; Birmingham Humanists; Bradford Atheist & Humanist Society; Brighton Secular Humanists; Bristol Secular Society; Cambridge Humanist Group; Chester Humanists; Chiltern Humanists; Cornwall Humanists; Cotswold Humanists; Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists; Devon Humanists; Dorset Humanists; East Kent Humanists; Edinburgh Secular Society; Essex Humanists; Farnham Humanists; Greater Manchester Humanists; Hampstead Humanist Society; Humanist and Secularist Liberal Democrats; Humanist Society of West Yorkshire; Isle of Man Freethinkers; Lancashire Secular Humanists; Leeds Atheist Society; Leicester Secular Society; Ludlow and Marches Humanists; Milton Keynes Humanists; Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group; North Kent Humanists; North London Humanist Group; Nottingham Secular Society; Oxford Humanists; Plymouth Humanists; Sheffield Humanist Society; South East London Humanist Group; South Hampshire Humanists; Suffolk Humanists and Secularists; Sutton Humanist Group; UK Society of Celebrants; West Glamorgan Humanist Group; West London Humanists and Secularists.

Student groups

Birmingham Atheist, Secular & Humanist Society; Bristol University Atheist, Agnostic and Secular Society; Cambridge University Atheist and Agnostic Society; DASH (Durham Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society); FLASH (Freethinkers of Leicester; Atheists, Secularists, and Humanists); Kent Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Society; Kings College AHSS; LSE Atheist Secularist Humanist Society; NU-Think (Newcastle University Sceptics' Society); Oxford Atheists, Secularists & Humanists; Queen Mary Atheism Secularism and Humanism Society; Reading Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Society; SHAFT Dundee (Secular Humanist Atheist Free Thinkers); St. Andrews University Atheist Society; UCL Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society; University of Lincoln Secular Society; University of Nottingham Secular Society.

Not a member?

The most tangible way of supporting our work is by becoming a member and contributing funds to enable us to work; the more we have, the more we can do. If you believe, as we do, that a secular Britain is our best way to achieve true equality for all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs, then please join us and become part of what is possibly the most important debate of the 21st century. Together we can create a fairer and more equal society.

You can join us online at www.secularism.org.uk/join.html, by contacting the office at enquiries@secularism.org.uk or by calling 020 7404 3126

Thanks

As a non-profit campaigning organisation, the NSS is not eligible for charitable status – and we neither seek nor receive funding from publicly-funded bodies. We are therefore reliant on members' subscriptions, donations and legacies to fund our campaigning work. We are immensely grateful for this support. You are the NSS.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who has donated money in the last year or remembered us in their wills. If you would like to take out a direct debit, please contact the office. If you would like to leave a legacy to the NSS to help secure secularism for future generations, the executive director will be pleased to assist.

We also thank the many people who generously donate their time, expertise and advice to the NSS.

We are particularly grateful to those who have provided legal advice and support over the last year; James Chegwidan; John de Waal QC; Michael Hall; Dr Ronan McCrea; Geoffrey Robertson QC; Christopher Smith; Richard Stein; and David Wolfe QC.

Thanks also to Charlie Klendjian and Sadikur Rahman of the Lawyers' Secular Society and to Dr Antony Lempert, Chair of the Secular Medical Forum. Both organisations have provided valuable assistance to the NSS throughout the year.

We are enormously grateful to NSS members Elaine Hession and Helen Bailey, and all the other residents of towns and villages across England who have worked so tirelessly in challenging the injustice of chancel repair liability. Special thanks to Lord Avebury for tabling a Bill to abolish it. We are also grateful to Tom Hart, Peter Fisher and Greg Yerbury for their valuable advice and analysis on the matter.

Throughout the year Barry Thorpe has given his time to assist with research and his work is very much appreciated. We are also grateful to Nicklas Chapman, Sam Peters, Will Warley, Ralph Seccome and Kirsten de Vries for their translation and transcription work.

A heartfelt thanks to Claudine Baxter, who regularly assists us with membership administration in the office. Thanks also go to all of the volunteers who helped out at our events. We are particularly grateful to Trevor Aston and Sven Klinge for photographing our events.

Thanks also to all of those who spoke at our events; Nahla Mahmood; Kerry McCarthy MP; Chris Moos; Helen Nicholls; Helen Palmer; Pragna Patel; Safak Pavey; Abhishek Phadnis; Yasmin Rehman; Geoffrey Robertson QC and Anne Marie Waters.

We also thank Dennis Penaluna, Dominic Wirdnam and the many other members and supporters that have assisted with our research and campaigning work.

Thanks also to all those who ran stalls at freshers' fairs and local events and got involved with campaigning at a local level. Thanks also to members and supporters who have alerted us to issues in their local area.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY...

"It is a great comfort to know that this society exists and fights the good fight for equality for people of all beliefs and non-belief so no-one is at any advantage or disadvantage."

John, Stockholm

"I decided to join the NSS because I am fed up with politicians acting as though equality and civil rights are in conflict with religious freedom. This is evident in the policies on religious slaughter, equal marriage, and evangelism in schools. No such dilemma exists. Secularism presents the ideal compromise which would lead to a truly equal and multicultural Britain. I live in hope that the political parties will eventually realise this."

Tom, Cornwall

"I have recently moved to the UK from America and had difficulties with my daughter's primary school and the fact I wanted her pulled out of worship. I contacted the NSS and the campaigns manager helped me every step of the way. He was supportive and knowledgeable with the topic. Thank you for all your help."

Heather, Preston

"I heard about the NSS through listening to a podcast featuring the NSS President and I agreed with everything he said. I thought it was refreshing to hear someone who was voicing my opinions without being offensive or belittling those who have religious beliefs."

"I'm an atheist myself and I have no problem with others believing whatever they like as long as it doesn't impact upon everyone else. I feel everyone should be treated equally regardless of gender, sexuality, colour, religion, etc and that nobody should have different treatment or rules over anyone else. I find it quite scary that our education and legal system is pandering to religion. Keep up the good work!"

Madeleine, Hertfordshire

"I have long resented the special privileges given to religion in our society. However, apart from arguing my point, I have pretty much remained in the shadows; it was the Prime Minister's speech on the UK being a 'Christian Nation' which made me realise that I need to be counted and I should put my money where my mouth is."

Marcus, Milford Haven

On your behalf, The National Secular Society works tirelessly to promote secularism and to challenge the disproportionate influence of religion on government and in public life.

Your support enables us to be there when it matters, defending freedom and equality as a counterbalance to the powerful religious lobby.

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www.secularism.org.uk

 [@natsecsoc](https://twitter.com/natsecsoc)

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