

2017

Annual Report

**CHALLENGING
RELIGIOUS
PRIVILEGE**

National Secular Society Annual Report 2017

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

The NSS sees secularism – the position that the state should be separate from religion – as an essential element in promoting equality between all citizens.

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

THE 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.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

I have thoroughly enjoyed my 17 years on the NSS Council – eleven of which have been as President. But now the time has come to step down and make way for someone else to carry the increasingly important flag of secularism.

It has been an eventful few years which have seen some spectacular gains. The abolition of blasphemy laws in England came about in 2008 – with the NSS at the very forefront of the campaign, achieving one of the NSS's founding goals.

Another major achievement was the fantastic demonstration that the NSS – along with others – organised to protest at the state funding of a visit by the Pope. 20,000 secularists and others gathered in central London for what even the Vatican had to admit was the biggest anti-papal demonstration ever seen. This was preceded by a huge petition that we organised calling for the Pope to pay his own way.

Similarly our High Court win that ruled that prayers on local council agendas were unlawful. This created a major sensation and on the day the court decision was reported new members were joining at a tremendous rate. Christian parliamentarians, however, enacted legislation to overturn the judgment. But many councils that scrapped prayers after the court decision never brought them back.

The Equality Act brought protection from discrimination to women, people with disabilities, LGBT people and also on grounds of race and religion. It was a major step forward for secularism. No longer could people of faith justify discriminating against others by arguing that different lifestyles offended their religious sensibilities.

The more orthodox Christian groups, enraged, portrayed it as an attack on their 'religious freedom'. Such organisations try to exploit the law to argue special privileges for Christians, especially in the workplace, but few of their challenges have succeeded. I am proud that when four of these cases reached the European Court of Human Rights, the NSS submitted a major intervention which was prepared for us by leading human rights lawyers. Only one small concession was made in one of the cases; the rest were rightly rejected. All credit to Keith Porteous Wood who organised this intervention.

It was also during my Presidency that we were granted observer status at the United Nations – after trying for several years. Our application had been thwarted, but eventually we overcame their objections and now have the right to contribute to human rights debates at the UN in Geneva.

Our new campaign, in the light of Brexit, is to protect the rights for which we have fought hard over the years. Those human rights are at risk of being diluted.

The creation of our Secular Charter in many ways changed the direction of the NSS. It gave us a much more focused approach to achieving our aims. The disestablishment of the Church of England has always been top of the agenda and I have noticed that what was once a rather obscure topic is now being discussed more frequently in the press. The Anglican Church is reeling as research consistently shows that support for it has slumped to an unsustainable level. It also now faces a growing scandal of child abuse among its clergy and subsequent attempts to cover it up at senior levels.

You can read elsewhere in this report about our efforts to reduce the influence of religion in our schools, whether in England & Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. Again, such influence was, until recently, taken for granted. However, our consistent challenges to the injustices inherent in the "faith school" system are making unprecedented impact. All credit



to Stephen Evans, our campaigns director, for pointing out so effectively the flaws that undermine the churches' justification for controlling so many of our schools.

A new challenge arising in the past couple of decades is the increasing politicisation of Islam. We have all seen the terrible consequences of this aggressive strain of religion as its baleful influence spreads around the world. We are seeking ways to challenge that spread, particularly by supporting Muslim and ex-Muslim women who are fighting the inferior status that political Islam seeks to place upon them.

And so, the NSS has transformed itself into a purely campaigning and lobby group with tightly defined political goals. We are not offering a personal philosophy by which to live – everybody has their own idea of what is the good life and each of us can discover it for ourselves. What we are offering is an opportunity to participate in the campaign for changes to our constitutional framework that will make society fairer for everyone. Our Secular Charter makes plain what our aims are. Membership is open to all people who share those aims – whatever they believe or don't believe.

All this shows we are making good progress. In our 151st year, the NSS is stronger and more influential than it has been for a long time. I am proud to have contributed to that history and hope that I can continue to contribute in the coming years.

Terry Sanderson

EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS

"I am strongly opposed to the growth of faith schools, which distort the values of what is an essentially secular and liberal democratic country. I believe in religious tolerance and freedom, but not special privileges." – Jeffrey, Whitley Bay

Faith schools

We continue to challenge the Government's plans to expand faith-based education.

The Government hopes to fund at least 140 new Church of England schools in the next five years. We've been campaigning locally to support the opening of inclusive secular schools rather than faith-based ones. The Church now claims that its schools are not 'faith schools' but 'church schools for all' and to serve the needs of the local community. We've taken every possible

opportunity to counter this disingenuous claim.

Far from being 'inclusive', church schools are increasingly imposing a more muscular religious ethos. Whilst pretending to be community schools in all but name, the Church exploits publicly funded schools to proselytise and gain access to pupils and parents who wouldn't otherwise go anywhere near a church.



Chris Sloggett makes the case against faith schools on *Sunday Morning Live*

removal of the existing 50% faith admission cap. Whilst it's clear that we're winning the arguments, there is no guarantee this will translate into a policy u-turn. We await the Government's response to the consultation.

Allowing faith schools to select all pupils on religious grounds is to appease the Catholic Church, which has refused to accept any limitations on faith-based admissions.

Expanding discriminatory faith schools is the antithesis of inclusive, secular education. Religion's ongoing role in the provision of state education is the single biggest hurdle to the reforms we seek, not only in schools, but also wider society. Hence our campaign against the spread of faith schools will remain our number one priority in the year ahead.



Stephen Evans outside the DfE

Faith-based admissions

Perhaps the most pernicious threat to secular education is the threat of yet more religiously-selective schools.

We vociferously opposed PM Theresa May's proposal to open a new wave of faith schools by allowing faith based free schools to select *all* of their pupils on the basis of religion. Members enthusiastically supported us by writing to their MPs and by responding to the consultation. We are very grateful for their support.

Our campaign staff made our opposition to the plans very clear in person to senior civil servants at the Department for Education (DfE). Their proposed "strengthened safeguards to promote inclusivity" were window dressing. Our consultation response stressed that the opening of more religiously selective faith schools would only further entrench religious segregation and discrimination in our state schools – completely at odds with the Government's stated wish for an inclusive and cohesive society.

In July, Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector at Ofsted, said she was "uncomfortable" about the Government's plans, warning that 100% faith-based admission "leads to increased levels of segregation within communities". She suggested the plans could be dropped. The UK's leading authority on community cohesion and NSS honorary associate Prof. Ted Cantele, similarly dubbed the proposals a "very retrograde step" calling on the Government to withdraw them. One opinion poll found that 80% of those surveyed – including two-thirds of Catholics – opposed the

Opposing faith school expansion in Wales

Plans for a new supersize faith school in Gwynedd, North Wales, were abandoned following our successful campaigning. The proposed Church of Wales ethos was strongly opposed by locals who wanted a community school, not a religious one. One councillor said a "loss of trust between church and community" meant the council needed to rethink the plans.

The number of churchgoers in Powys dived from 15% of the population in 1982 to just 7% in 2012. Nevertheless, despite vigorous campaigning, many non-religious parents and pupils in Powys will have no option other than a faith school. This follows the local council approving plans to replace four existing schools with two 'super-schools' – a Welsh language school, and a Church in Wales primary school.

We raised objections with the Welsh Government, but our concerns were met with indifference. Even worse, the Welsh Government failed to provide any assurance that all children would have access to a fully inclusive secular school, displaying contempt for the majority of the population. Having no alternative to a faith school undermines the human rights of both parents and children, and is unacceptable in the 21st century.

"It's time that education policy and practice focused more on children's independent interests and building a society based on shared values, rather than marching to the beat of religious organisations at least in part motivated by their need for self-preservation."

NSS campaigns director **Stephen Evans**, writing for the *Times Educational Supplement*

“I work in the sector and have become worried about the rise of faith schools and the creeping in of evangelism by the back door.”

– Julie

School worship

Responding to a Scottish Government consultation, we again called for Religious Observance (RO) to be removed from Scotland’s schools. We supported proposals allowing schools to rename religious observance as “time for reflection” and to better communicate the right of withdrawal to parents. We also made it clear to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills that improved guidance and more inclusive rhetoric was not enough.



The review came against concerns that RO fails to respect children’s rights to freedom of religion and belief and to recognise significant changes in Scotland’s religion and belief landscape. We urged the Scottish Government to amend the legal framework; a law that is not human rights compliant does not become so by revised guidance.

Meanwhile, in Wales, we were pleased to support a petition launched by two Welsh students calling on Welsh Assembly Members to end mandatory collective worship. We asked the Cabinet Secretary for Education in Wales, Kirsty Williams, to promote child rights by repealing provisions on mandatory collective worship. She offered to review collective worship after curriculum reform.

Let Pupils Choose, a campaign which challenged compulsory worship and religious privilege in Northern Ireland’s schools, was shortlisted for our Secularist of the Year award.

Challenging fundamentalism in schools

We remain at the forefront of challenging religious fundamentalism in schools.

As we went to press the Court of Appeal ruled that segregating boys and girls in a purportedly mixed sex (state funded) Islamic school in England amounted to unlawful sex discrimination. The ruling vindicated our pursuit of the case. We urged Ofsted to launch the appeal after an initial ruling to the contrary. We also offered financial support to Southall



Protesters against gender segregation outside the High Court

Black Sisters and Inspire, whose influential intervention highlighted the normalisation of fundamentalist attitudes to gender in minority communities.

The result will allow Ofsted to penalise faith schools which practise gender segregation. Approximately 20 faith schools currently teach boys and girls separately.

Meanwhile, the DfE responded positively to our calls to investigate independent faith schools in England implicated in ostracising children of transgender parents. A family court ruling in March drew attention to the intolerant attitudes prevalent in some minority religious schools that lead to “clear examples of discrimination and victimisation”.

Lord Nash ensured the schools concerned were inspected, but regrettably some minority faith schools remain open despite repeatedly failing inspections. Closing a school is disruptive and should be a last resort. Nevertheless we are pressing the DfE and Ofsted to take robust action against independent faith schools that undermine children’s rights.

Our work to expose illegal faith schools is making a difference. This year the Government committed a further £1 million to fund Ofsted’s team that investigates illegal schools. So far, 38 warning notices to illegal schools have been issued – with 27 being either closed or reformed, but no prosecution against an unregistered school.

Making the case for inclusive secular education

Steadfast in opposition to faith schools, we are committed to the positive vision of an inclusive and secular education system.

One such opportunity came this year when the House of Lords launched an inquiry into citizenship and civic engagement.

Secularism is an essential feature of a fair and open society, in which people of all faiths and none can engage on the basis of equal citizenship. Education provides the best opportunity to promote widely the concept of shared citizenship and stimulate future social harmony and cohesion. Our submission warned that this unique opportunity is being squandered by pursuing policies that promote faith-based, sectarian and fragmented schooling, while disingenuously claiming the opposite.

We recommended a move away from faith-based education in favour of inclusive secular schooling which promotes commonly shared societal, rather than religion-specific, values. We argued that the most effective mechanism to boost integration would be to ensure that all publicly funded schools are fully inclusive and open to all children, without regard to religion.

Schools must also play a part in countering the undermining of rights by the forces of fundamentalism and patriarchy within minority communities. Our submission addressed the vital role of education in supporting civic engagement, calling for citizenship education to be strengthened and all pupils be made fully aware of their legal rights and freedoms under UK law.

“I assure you that the Government shares your concerns about unregistered schools which are illegal, unsafe and are denying pupils a good education”

Schools minister **Lord Nash**

We have also been supportive of the duty on all schools to promote ‘fundamental British values’, defined as “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.” The existence of this duty on schools has provided an important mechanism for us to challenge practices including gender discrimination, the promotion of bigotry and hatred against different groups, and the doctrinaire teaching of regressive social attitudes.

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.



Principle 5 of our Secular Charter

Opposing forced Islamic ‘modesty codes’ in schools

We’ve called on the Government and Ofsted to ensure that girls from Muslim backgrounds are supported to have free choices, rather than having so called ‘modesty’ codes imposed on them.

Our research, which was published in the *Sunday Times*, revealed that girls in dozens of schools in England are forced to wear hijabs and other items of religious clothing, with girls as young as four instructed to wear the hijab as part of the official uniform policy.

Out of 142 Islamic schools that accept girls, 59 have uniform policies on their website that suggest a headscarf or another form of hijab is compulsory. This includes eight state-funded schools and 27 primary schools – three of which were state-funded.



Our research was requested by both the DfE and the Equality & Human Rights Commission, for further investigation.

We have also sought to raise awareness of the growing number of non-Islamic schools that are incorporating the hijab into their uniform. Whilst we support efforts to allow children from Muslim backgrounds to better integrate, a desire to be ‘inclusive’ should not automatically lead to the accommodation of illiberal and repressive cultural norms.

Given the ‘justifications’ that lie behind so called ‘modesty’ codes, and their implicit sexualisation of children, it is concerning that so many schools are facilitating young girls being dressed in the hijab. In September we joined a number of feminist and human rights campaigners in calling on the Government to defend hard-won freedoms and progressive values by protecting young Muslim girls, who suffer under the pretext of protecting religious freedoms.

Rethinking religious education

This year we launched a campaign to fundamentally reform religious education.

A key objective of the campaign is to end ‘local determination’ which leads to a ‘postcode lottery’ of provision, with many faith schools allowed to teach their own biased syllabus.

Also problematic is that RE teaching in faith schools is inspected by religious authorities rather than Ofsted. This year, NSS research revealed that the DfE has handed faith groups almost £5m to inspect the religious education in their schools over the last five years.

The campaign argues for a ‘21st century RE for all’ that gives all pupils the same entitlement to high quality, non-confessional education about religious and non-religious worldviews.



In October, an independent commission on religious education, established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, published its interim report, which accepted many of the arguments we set out in our submission.

The commission highlighted the need for “strategic, urgent intervention”, suggested the need for a name change, and concurred with our call for a ‘national framework’ for religion and belief learning. Despite removing the rationale for their existence, unfortunately the commission failed to recommend the abolition of SACREs, the religiously dominated local committees that determine the syllabus for each local authority area.

We will continue to engage with the commission, urging it to go further and push for the degree of reform we consider necessary to make the subject fit for a 21st century education system.

Ultimately, the whole approach to this area of education needs a fundamental change. The original purpose of RE was to inculcate Christian dogma. Now that is largely no longer regarded as acceptable, RE is a subject in search of a rationale. Teaching children about a diversity of worldviews and giving them space to consider moral and ethical issues are laudable aims. Religious education classes are by no means the best way to achieve that.

Relationships and sex education

Following intense lobbying from campaigners, including the NSS, the Government finally agreed this year to make age-appropriate relationship and sex education (RSE) mandatory in all schools.

This is significant progress, but the decision to give faith schools leeway to teach the subject in accordance with their religion means some children are likely to be left behind.

We’ll be urging the Government to rethink these *de facto* exemptions for faith schools and ensure that all RSE is LGBT+ inclusive.

Secular Education Forum

This year saw the launch of the Secular Education Forum (SEF). The Forum provides expert and professional advice and opinion to the NSS, with a view to shaping our policy on all issues relating to education and schools.

Membership of the SEF is open to all education professionals. If you’d like to get involved, please visit secularism.org.uk/secular-education-forum

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

“Free speech has to be just that. Freedom of speech will offend people but that’s one of the prices to pay for allowing people to say whatever they think.” – Miriam

Charlie Hebdo anniversary event

In January we organised a panel discussion in Parliament to mark the second anniversary of the Islamist attack on French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, and to consider the future of free speech.

The audience of parliamentarians, activists and NSS members heard from Caroline Fourest, who helped edit the survivors’ edition of *Charlie Hebdo* shortly after the attack, for which we named the magazine Secularist of the Year in 2015.

Caroline said she welcomed the opportunity to revisit the shocking treatment *Charlie Hebdo* received from some UK media outlets, and spoke about the fearful climate in which her book *In Praise of Blasphemy* – a bestseller in France – could find no UK publisher.

Also speaking were Jim Fitzpatrick MP (who kindly hosted the event), Jodie Ginsberg of Index on Censorship, the writer Nick Cohen, and cartoonist Martin Rowson. The panel addressed threats to free speech from state and non-state actors as well as the responsibility of civil society to challenge genuinely bigoted speech. Jim Fitzpatrick MP said it was an inspiring event and that politicians needed to be pressured to do more in defence of free speech. Keith Porteous Wood, our executive director, chaired the event.



Speakers at the Charlie Hebdo anniversary event. Left to right: Jodie Ginsberg, Caroline Fourest, Nick Cohen, Keith Porteous Wood and Martin Rowson

‘Glastonbury of Freethinkers’

We were proud to be sponsors of the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression, which took place in central London on 22–24 July.

The conference was organised by our honorary associate and former Secularist of the Year Maryam Namazie, a secular and ex-Muslim activist. It was dubbed ‘the Glastonbury of Freethinkers’, as more than 70 notable speakers from 30 countries took part. Our relationship with the conference organisers has allowed us to be involved in a major international conference on secularism in three out of the last four years.

Our campaigns director Stephen Evans, who attended the conference, called it “inspiring”. He said it “gave a sobering insight into the persecution faced by many of those whose only crime is to think for themselves” and “provided grounds to hope that their treatment might change”.

Debates focused on the relation between Islam and Islamism; the threat posed to universal rights by communalism; and the use of the term ‘Islamophobia’ in imposing *de facto* blasphemy laws. There was also discussion of the role of art as resistance and promoting

secularism as a human right – a panel on which NSS council member Chris Moos spoke.

There was a focus on the persecution facing Ex-Muslims, and we supported motions including a six-point call for action to protect freethinkers. The motion criticised human rights organisations and governments for failing to investigate transnational networks which promote violence, examine religious fundamentalist ideology and defend freethinkers.

We also supported motions defending the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, after it was threatened with removal from the London Pride march for criticising Islamic homophobia, and supporting our honorary associate Richard Dawkins, who was ‘deplatformed’ for his criticism of Islam.



Panel on identity politics, communalism and multiculturalism – featuring honorary associates Gita Sahgal and Peter Tatchell

Opposing new restrictions on free speech

We’ve continued to campaign against the introduction of new laws to stamp out ‘non-violent extremism’.

A major flaw in the proposals is the failure to define what non-violent extremism actually is. At a meeting with senior Home Office officials, the Defend Free Speech coalition, including the NSS and the Christian Institute, warned that the proposed new powers pose a serious threat to freedom of expression and risk entrapping large numbers of people with eccentric or unorthodox views that are peacefully held.

The promised consultation on the new measures never materialised, with the Government’s own legal advice reaching the same conclusion as our criticisms of the proposals. The Prime Minister then shelved the plans and instead set up a commission to “support the Government in stamping out extremist ideology in all its forms”.

We hope that after trying for at least four years to define non-violent extremism and having failed, this means the Government has kicked this unworkable concept into the long grass.

We are however committed to doing all we can to tackle violent extremism and challenge the Islamist ideology that fuels terrorism. This year we referred a popular Salafi website which advocates violent jihad to the Government’s counter extremism unit. The site is still freely available to view in the UK.



Our coalition campaign to defend free speech

RELIGION AND THE STATE

"I could even go so far as to call myself a 'cultural Christian', however I fail to see the usefulness of including Christian organisations in the decisions on how the British people live their lives." – Andrew, Mitcham

Our manifesto for change

In December we launched a major new report – *Rethinking religion and belief in public life: a manifesto for change*. This was a call for Britain to evolve into a secular democracy and adopt a long term, sustainable settlement on religion's relationship with the state.

The manifesto explains how we would translate our secularist principles into policy. It sets out practically how education, the state and the law should be reformed to separate religion and state and protect the rights of all. It argues that the prevailing multi-faithist approach is "at odds with the increasing religious indifference" in Britain.

Once June's general election was announced, our campaigns director Stephen Evans wrote to all major parties, asking them to commit to our proposals on reforming the role of religion in public life. We also sent copies of the manifesto to all MPs, including those who had been newly elected.

The manifesto contained 59 recommendations, on topics including the role of religion in schools; free expression; religion and the law; civil rights; secular healthcare; and maintaining one law for all.

Twenty of our recommendations related to disentangling religion from the education system. The campaign against faith schools is a long-term process, but we suggested pragmatic reforms that can be made immediately. For example we called for a moratorium on all new faith schools and asked MPs to enshrine the right to a secular education in law. These measures would reduce segregation and discrimination and protect the rights of teachers, pupils and parents.

The *Economist* described our manifesto as "artfully gradualist in its approach", and called many of the proposals "evolutionary rather than revolutionary".

Response to the Commission on Religion and Belief

Late in 2015 the Woolf Institute's Commission on Religion and Belief (CORAB) recommended that religious privileges, such as ex officio membership of the House of Lords for bishops, should be expanded to minority faiths.

We contributed to a critical but constructive reply, *A Secularist Response to the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life*. Our executive director Keith Porteous Wood spoke at its launch at the Shard in London in January. "The need to implement the noble secularist principle of equality for all, irrespective of religion or belief, becomes all the more pressing as society becomes less religious and more diverse," he said. He added that "too many institutions seem hell-bent on obstructing that equality".

In the response Professor Steven Kettell, of the University of Warwick, said the need for a secular state "has never been greater" and the flaws in the CORAB report were "evident from the outset". He wrote: "Despite acknowledging the decline of religion, along with the rise of non-religion and the growing diversity of religion and belief in Britain, CORAB sought to promote an enhanced and more prominent role for

faith in British public life". The response also noted that secular voices had been sidelined in the production of the CORAB report. Just one of CORAB's twenty-one commissioners was from a non-religious organisation.

Opposing the Bishops' Bench

We recommended the removal of the Bishops' Bench to a parliamentary inquiry on reducing the size of the House of Lords in February.

In our submission, our campaigns director Stephen Evans wrote: "There is no reasonable justification for allowing Church of England bishops to act as ex-officio legislators. The Bench of Bishops is an anomaly in a modern, liberal democracy and if a need to reduce the size of the chamber has been identified the Bishops' Bench is an obvious place to start."



Principle 1 of our Secular Charter

Church repairs – who should pay?

Most people accept that the most architecturally distinguished churches form an invaluable part of our built heritage. The Church of England alone has 12,500 listed church buildings and 45% of Grade I listed buildings in England are ecclesiastical.

While they are retained for ecclesiastical purposes and the proprietors are able to pay to preserve them, secularists believe they should do so, as would be expected of any other proprietor. In small steps, however, the Church of England in particular has managed to negotiate an ever-better deal for ecclesiastical buildings and is well on the way to establishing an entitlement to continuing funding.

Up to £42m is available under the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme and £25m p.a. from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Church Roofs Fund has been increased to £40m. The First World War Centenary Cathedral Fabric Repair Fund announced in the March 2014 Budget was £20m; this was then doubled to £40m. The centenary of a war is a bizarre pretext for such grants. Even the Church's former representative in the Commons announced in 2014: "The Chancellor of the Exchequer has been incredibly generous towards the Church."

Particularly as we live in such straitened times, public money should only be expended prudently. Custodians of the public purse should always establish whether the work to be paid for is needed for the conservation of important heritage, rather than for ecclesiastical purposes, and pay only if the organisation as a whole has insufficient funds to pay themselves. Even excluding the massive funds at church and parish level, the C of E has estimated assets comfortably exceeding £10bn. Practically every cathedral



"Covers, succinctly and comprehensively, the many areas within British society where religion is given unfair advantages."

NSS supporter **Liz** endorses our manifesto

has benefited and some, like the Church as a whole, are extremely wealthy. This confirms that financial need is not being appropriately taken into account.

An example of several strands of our ongoing work in this area is the NSS raising concerns with the National Audit Office about grants to Cathedrals – mostly, but not all, Anglican. The NAO identified “a number of areas for improvement in the governance, operation and oversight of the Fund” which it has subsequently reported to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Crucially, one of these was that financial need was not being adequately assessed.

Judges’ services

We wrote to the Justice Secretary to ask him to bring an end to the Anglican services which mark the start of the legal year.

The services are conducted according to the rites of the Church of England. The judges take part fully robed, in their official capacity and during working hours. The Justice Secretary, Lord Chief Justice, Justices of the Supreme Court, other judges and members of the legal profession are among those who pray for guidance during the main judges’ service in Westminster Abbey.

Our letter said this compromised judges’ ability to keep their religious views private, showed “disregard for their duty to avoid acting in a way that is seen to compromise their impartiality” and conflicted with the spirit of the judicial oath.

Our call for change was covered in the *Guardian*.



NSS court win leads to rollback of council prayers in Wales

In 2012 we won a case at the High Court, which ruled that prayers during local authority meetings were not lawful. This July our analysis of research by the BBC revealed that the vast majority of unitary authorities in Wales no longer held prayers as part of official council business. Our campaigns director Stephen Evans told the BBC: “Local councils shouldn’t be clubs for Christians”.

In England the ruling was reversed by legislation in 2015, but happily this appears to have had minimal impact. We continue to campaign for prayers to be clearly separated from official council business.

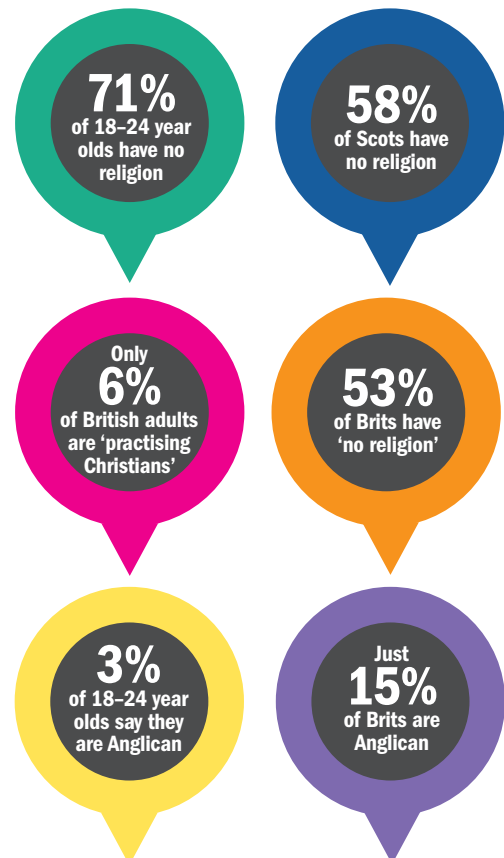
The UK’s increasingly diverse religion and belief landscape

Several polls revealed that the United Kingdom is becoming increasingly irreligious and religiously diverse. The various surveys undertaken in the UK on social attitudes to religion this year revealed the following:

- 53% of British people say they have no religion, which has risen from 48% since 2015. (NatCen, September)
- 71% of 18–24 year olds say they have no religion, a rise of 9% in one year. (NatCen, September)
- Only 15% of people identify as Anglican. Among 18–24 year olds, the figure is just 3%. (NatCen, September)
- Only 6% of adults in Britain say they are ‘practising Christians’ who read the Bible, pray and attend church regularly. (ComRes, September)
- Non-religious people are more socially liberal than believers on a wide range of issues, although religious people are becoming less socially conservative over time. (ComRes, July)



The findings confirm that the need for the secularisation of our institutions is more important than ever. The UK’s systems of government, law and education must be brought in line to match the country’s changing landscape of belief. Britain’s future surely lies in becoming a modern secular state where every citizen can be treated fairly and valued equally, irrespective of their religious outlook.



“No religion should be allowed to operate a separate legal system from the state one.” – Dinah

Equality and human rights commission report ‘Religion or belief – is the law working?’

This year we welcomed a report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission following its inquiry into the effectiveness of current equality and human rights legislation on religion or belief.

The NSS contributed at the highest levels of the EHRC throughout the three years of research and debate leading to the production of this report. We were delighted that the report’s conclusions reflect almost entirely our views and concerns. In particular the EHRC did not buy in to the disingenuous and baseless cries of ‘Christian persecution’ in the UK by those denied privileges to which they thought they should be entitled. Typically this is manifested in demands to discriminate against LGBT people. The EHRC said that a “common sense approach to managing religion” in the workplace was needed and that existing legislation was “generally effective.”

The EHRC heeded our warnings about conforming to demands by some religious bodies to give greater accommodation, exemptions or ‘conscience clause’ opt-outs to religious employees, which would in effect elevate religion to the top of a hierarchy of protected characteristics.

Accordingly, the Commission rejected demands for a duty of so-called “reasonable accommodation” which would entitle employees to greater manifestation of religion in the workplace, and said that no such duty should be introduced.

We particularly welcomed the EHRC’s endorsement of our long held complaint that the law permitting discrimination against teachers not of the faith of a school is in breach of the relevant EU Directive. It called for the appointment of teachers by faith schools to be “modelled on the current occupational requirement exception set out in the Equality Act”.

Similarly, the EHRC called for a review of the law in

Scotland where any teacher wishing to be appointed to a post in a denominational school managed by an education authority has to be approved by representatives of the relevant church or denominational body as to their religious belief and character.

Faith-based schools continue to be permitted lawfully to discriminate against pupils from families not of the faith of the schools in both admissions and collective worship. We continue to lobby the Commission and the Government to repeal Equality Act exemptions that license such discrimination.

Caste discrimination

Castes are hereditary classes of south Asian society, distinguished by relative degrees of ritual purity or pollution and of social status. In 2010 a Government-commissioned report confirmed that caste discrimination has spread to this country. It extends to employment, education and the provision of goods and services. These are all activities covered by the Equality Act, but not yet in respect of caste discrimination.

At the Conservative Party conference the Prime Minister said she would confront “uncomfortable truths” exposed by a review into the way people from ethnic minorities are treated in Britain. Yet the Government continues to thwart Parliament’s direction, and the UN’s repeated urges, to outlaw discrimination on grounds of caste. The UN says this is a treaty obligation – a view endorsed by a legal opinion that the NSS earlier delivered to a Government Minister.



The Government’s latest pretext for inaction is that they await developments in case law. Such developments are extremely unlikely, as such litigation is expensive and unpredictable. If the Government genuinely wanted protection on caste it would legislate. Thanks to earlier legislation for which the NSS was partly responsible, this could be accomplished very simply by Ministerial order.

We have kept a high media profile on this issue. One article ascribed the Government’s reluctance to legislate as “the surest sign of the ascent of the Hindu Right in the UK, a rise propelled by the financial clout of its British Hindu supporters and the tacit support of ... the far-right ideological parent of [Indian Prime Minister Narendra] Modi’s BJP” (the party Modi leads).

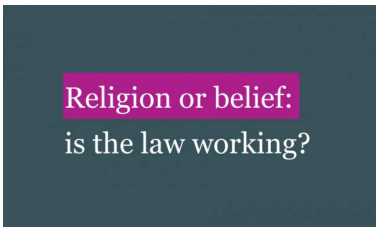
The NSS has played a leading role in pressuring the Government to legislate, but Labour no longer do so; only the Liberal Democrats included caste in their manifesto. We have worked with them on this in Parliament.

The Government recently launched a consultation on caste. It was heavily biased towards developing case law – which in effect meant doing nothing – rather than legislating. We participated in a working group encouraging responses to the consultation. We have submitted a comprehensive dossier of material setting out the legal and Human Rights obligations to legislate, much of it from the UN and EU, plus the legal opinion. We await the Government’s response to the consultation.

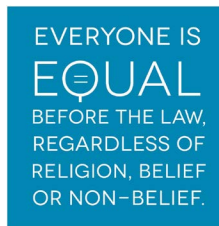
Human Rights and Brexit

The NSS is neutral on Brexit, but established Human Rights protections are now in a state of flux. The role of the European Court of Justice and adherence to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights look set to be curtailed. The Prime Minister has contemplated withdrawing the UK from the (non-EU) European Convention on Human Rights, which would make the UK the only mainstream European nation to do so. There have been no coherent proposals for replacements and no time to draw anything up, given Parliament’s Brexit workload.

These uncertainties are a grim threat to our Human Rights and fundamental freedoms, which are unprotected by



the UK's ad hoc constitution. Parliament cannot in the time available incorporate decades of EU legislation and regulations that include references to bodies to which the UK will cease to be responsible. The workaround is an unprecedented transfer of powers to the executive, rather different to the promised repatriation of sovereignty to Parliament.



Principle 2 of our Secular Charter

The repatriation of regulatory functions from the EU will also allow the Government increasingly to escape independent oversight.

We are working actively with the Repeal Bill Alliance and the Equality and Human Rights Commission to seek to minimise the adverse impact on Human Rights protections and of the loss of independent oversight. Keith Porteous Wood, our executive director, is leading this work. He has also raised these issues prominently at the Palace of Westminster with senior parliamentarians and legal figures.

Sharia 'law'

The NSS submitted evidence to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into the role of sharia councils in UK communities.



We also criticised the approach the Committee had taken. The Committee seemed particularly interested in hearing from Muslim women who have 'personally used' sharia Councils. The inquiry sessions we attended were also highly unbalanced and weighted in favour of those who support sharia councils in some form or other.

Committee member Naz Shah MP accused one witness, Maryam Namazie (who was this year awarded the International Secularism Prize by the French Prime Minister Manuel Valls), of wanting to discriminate against all religious believers.

In response, the NSS wrote to the chair of the Committee, Yvette Cooper MP, to say Shah's comments were "a bizarre and totally unjustified portrayal of Ms Namazie's secularist worldview."

The Committee published powerful testimony from Muslim women gathered by the One Law for All campaign. One woman whose evidence was included for the Select Committee's consideration was trapped in an abusive Islamic 'marriage' and was unable to escape without a sharia 'divorce'. She was referred for a 'divorce' to Anjem Choudary, since convicted for terrorism.

We await the outcome of the Select Committee's inquiry.

In January, Baroness Cox launched a fresh attempt to tackle sharia councils through her Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill, which would provide a "lifeline" to women subjected to sharia councils. She told Parliament "Muslim women are today suffering in ways in which would make suffragettes turn in their graves" and thanked the NSS for our support.

Religion at work

The NSS defended a European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling that banning the wearing of religious symbols might not necessarily constitute unlawful discrimination. It advised that employers can ask their staff to "dress neutrally"

provided rules are consistent and apply to all religious symbols equally.

This followed a Muslim woman in Belgium being dismissed by G4S "because of her continuing insistence on wearing the Islamic headscarf at work" despite a G4S rule that employees are "prohibited, in the workplace, from wearing any visible signs of their political, philosophical or religious beliefs".

Some commentators described the ruling as an 'assault on Muslims'. But a leading European think tank published an opinion piece in *Europe's World* from our campaigns director Stephen Evans to highlight that this ruling wouldn't amount to any real threat to anybody wanting to wear religious clothing in the UK. And Keith Porteous Wood



Keith Porteous Wood on Sky News

appeared on international TV channels including *Deutsche Welle*, defending the right to expect religious and political neutrality of employees when it is done in pursuit of a legitimate aim.

LGBT+ rights

This year saw the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. The NSS remains committed to defending LGBT+ rights. In August, Keith Porteous Wood wrote an article in the online *Pink News* criticising Church of England leaders for their record on the subject. He was responding to a piece by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York published in the same publication under the unedifying title 'Gay people are not more sinful than anyone else'. He pointed out that the Church had become more hostile to gay rights in the last 50 years.



The NSS also expressed our support for the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain after it was threatened with removal from the London Gay Pride march for criticising Islamic homophobia.

Challenging gender segregation at university

In September this year the London School of Economics (LSE) accepted that gender segregation at a dinner held by its Student Union's Islamic Society was unlawful.

The admission came after LSE students, supported by the NSS, complained that the event had breached the Equality Act 2010 and was unlawful on the grounds of gender discrimination.

At the Islamic Society's Annual Dinner in March 2016, separate tickets were issued to 'brothers' and 'sisters' and participants were divided by a seven-foot screen.

"It didn't impinge at all until a few years ago I found that a priest and a nurse had been praying over my mother who had dementia. She was a lifelong atheist. They were not happy when I told them to go away. It probably did no harm as she didn't know what was going on but to me it was disrespectful." – Sue

Success! Patients' needs above religious beliefs

We notched up a major victory this year when our lobbying resulted in revised standards of conduct for pharmacists. The new standards will protect patients from the small number of very religious pharmacists determined on conscience grounds to refuse to dispense prescriptions even when this could put patients at risk.

The General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) accepted our recommendations to put patients' needs above the religious beliefs of pharmacists. The revised guidance now places the responsibility on pharmacists with conscientious objection and on their employers to take active steps to ensure that the personal beliefs of pharmacists do not obstruct patient care.

Draft GPhC guidance in 2016 unfortunately called for 'balance' where the beliefs of patients and pharmacists were found to be in conflict. The Secular Medical Forum responded by recommending instead that pharmacists with conscientious objections to providing certain services should responsibly choose to work in environments that did not lead to such conflict and that where such conflict did exist the patients' needs should be paramount.

The GPhC responded positively to this suggestion, launching an additional consultation recommending updated proposals that would 'shift the balance in favour of the needs and rights of the person in their care'. A delegation led by Dr Antony Lempert of the Secular Medical Forum had a very constructive meeting with the GPhC standards team in February. They acknowledged that there had been vigorous opposition to the changes by religious groups. In a major advance for patients' rights the new proposals were subsequently agreed and have been effective from May 2017.

This means pharmacies will not be able to refer patients to a different provider just because an individual pharmacy worker has a religious or philosophical objection to their request for medication such as emergency contraception.

Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief.

Principle 9 of secular charter

Abortion rights

Following a Supreme Court ruling that women from Northern Ireland are not entitled to free access to abortions on the NHS, we wrote to the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales calling on them to ensure that NHS abortion services are made available, free of charge, to women travelling from Northern Ireland.

More than 50 MPs from across the major parties backed an amendment to the Queen's Speech calling for such a change and we're pleased to report that this will now be funded, albeit not as a statutory right.

Meanwhile, the British Medical Association (BMA), the professional body for doctors in the UK, this year

NO RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS ON REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS



voted to support in principle the decriminalisation, though not deregulation, of women procuring and administering their own abortion.

Forced genital cutting

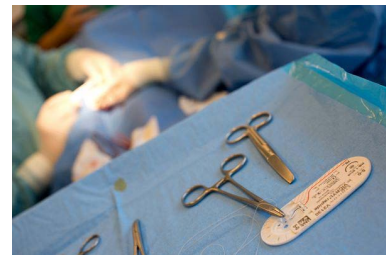
Throughout the year we have continued to raise awareness of the need to end forced genital cutting, irrespective of the sex of who is being cut or what religious, cultural or other justification is made.

The British Medical Association has responded to our lobbying by revising its guidance on non-therapeutic male circumcision, expected to be released early in 2018. At a meeting with members of the BMA Medical Ethics committee we argued that the current BMA policy of 'no policy' is inconsistent with medical ethics. Instead we recommended a policy discouraging the practice of non-therapeutic male circumcision on minors, in line with other equivalent European health bodies.

In September a Belgian federal Government committee became the latest to rule against the circumcision of infant boys for reasons other than medical necessity. The Committee for Bio-Ethics ruled that bodily integrity was more important than religious faith.

The decision by the Belgian ethics committee is a welcome addition to the growing international consensus that the cutting of a child's genitals to satisfy religious or cultural preferences of their parents violates medical ethics; this is a violation that extends to all children including those born into religious communities.

Through our work alongside the Secular Medical Forum, we are proud to be at the forefront of the growing international movement to protect people from harmful religiously-motivated forced cutting of babies' and children's genitals.



Secular Medical Forum

The Secular Medical Forum (SMF) provides expert and professional advice and opinion to the NSS on issues related to healthcare. It seeks to advocate the value of secularism/religious neutrality as a professional standard in healthcare.

Membership of the SMF is open to NSS members who are healthcare professionals (including current, former and trainee professionals) and those with a particular expertise in the intersection of secularism and healthcare. If you would like to join the forum, please get in touch.



INTERNATIONAL WORK

United Nations

The five-yearly United Nations review of the UK by other member states and NGOs has recently been completed. The National Secular Society, which has been an organisation in Special Consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council since 2016, has fed into this process and sought to bring these concerns to the attention of other member states.

United Nations Special Rapporteur Karima Bennouna has recommended that states provide for the separation of religion and state to help counter religious extremism. Her report to the UN Human Rights Council on protecting cultural rights warned of “rising tides of fundamentalism and extremism” that “represent major threats to human rights worldwide”. She highlighted the work of experts and civil society groups, including the NSS, in combatting religious extremism.

The NSS was a co-signatory to a joint oral statement delivered by the International Humanist and Ethical Union at the September Human Rights Council (36th Session) General Dialogue on the need to recognise and promote freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief as a human rights concern globally.

UN Secretary General and Human Rights

Ban Ki-moon has stepped down as secretary-general. We add our endorsement to that of many NGOs given at a reception in November last year “honouring in particular his track record on promoting and defending human rights”.

He responded: “Throughout my time in office, I tried to highlight the centrality of human rights. At every turn, our progress would not have been possible without the strong voice and activism of all of you – think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and concerned citizens. Thank you for a decade of effort. ... Human rights protect us, including during wartime. They are the path to durable peace and to post-conflict justice and reconciliation. They are our best tools for countering terrorism and violent extremism. And they are the basis of stable, resilient, inclusive societies in which all people enjoy dignity and opportunity.”

It was announced in October 2016 that Antonio Guterres would be appointed as the next UN Secretary General. In response, we expressed concern about his questionable record over abortion, women’s rights and gay rights when he was a politician in Portugal and ultimately its Prime Minister. We noted that a French news agency described him as a “fervent Catholic”.

One religious news website disingenuously claimed “Sorry Secularists, But Yes, The UN Can Be Led By A ‘Fervent Catholic’”. We had not objected to him because he was a Catholic but because of his unedifying human rights record. The website was severely criticised for doing so.

The *National Catholic Register* later confirmed that Guterres’ “years of involvement with the Socialist Party represented a break from the party’s historical secularism because Guterres never shied away from his Catholic roots”.

We hope that in his new post Mr Guterres will follow his predecessor’s exemplary record on Human Rights.

NSS makes a bid for integrated education in the EU

The European Commission again invited the NSS to a high level meeting with non-confessional organisations. There are parallel meetings with religious organisations. We were asked to address both the First Vice-President of the Commission and the Parliament on “The Future of Europe: a values-based and effective Union”.

Keith Porteous Wood expressed concern that segregation, sectarianism, religious conservatism and to a degree migration were all increasing. They were reversing the “historic pattern of gradual integration of successive generations of those of minority religions”. This may lead to European values not being “as widely shared across Europe as was once the case”.

Mr Wood urged political leaders and civil society to robustly promote “democratic values such as the separation of religion and state, the rule of law, human rights and equal treatment”. He advocated integrated publicly funded education, as opposed to single faith schools, as the most powerful tool to achieve this.

This provoked interest from both vice presidents and he had the opportunity to expand on this at the subsequent press conference.



Keith Porteous Wood with vice presidents Mairead McGuinness and Frans Timmermans (Image © European Commission)

“Many minority faith communities, or their leaders, isolate themselves from the majority community and reinforce that isolation by sending their children to schools that are largely mono-religious, mono-ethnic and mono-cultural. In them these ultra-conservative values too often grow unchallenged.”

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS executive director

OTHER CAMPAIGNS

Establishment cover-ups place bishops and cardinals above the law

In June the Archbishop of Canterbury published a review into the role that his Church had played in covering up the activities of former bishop Peter Ball.



Ball was jailed in 2015 for numerous offences against young males committed in the decades before he resigned in 1993. There are thought to be hundreds of victims: one committed suicide. The report showed clearly that the Church at the highest level, including around a dozen bishops, knew of Ball's unlawful behaviour long before he was brought to justice. Senior churchmen withheld damning evidence from the Police and the Crown Prosecution Service; they implied to them that Ball was innocent and then pressurised them not to prosecute him. They even sought an indemnity for all past offences.

The Church itself now acknowledges that Ball was not prosecuted sooner because of his role as a bishop.

A parallel scandal, little known, is that the Church was given everything it asked for – and more – from the Police, CPS and Director of Public Prosecutions. Ball was a friend of an inspector in the investigating police force. They were concerned that charging Ball would, according to the review, “have a devastating effect on the Church which is already in turmoil”. Far worse, a Church-funded private investigator, who happened to be a defrocked priest, alleges that he “persuaded the police that he should carry out some investigative interviews and report back to them” although the police deny this.

Despite all the foregoing, the review rather complacently concludes that this couldn't happen again.

The Crown Prosecution Service had “sufficient admissible, substantial and reliable evidence” in 1993 to justify charges of “indecent assault and gross indecency”. It has recently admitted that the failure to prosecute Ball in 1993 on DPP instructions was wrong.

The NSS has submitted detailed dossiers to the police commander now investigating the Church's role setting out why senior clerics involved in this scandal should be charged with conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and misconduct in public office. Ironically, the latter charge is feasible only because the Church is established.

Other cases continue to arise of very senior Anglican clerics covering up abuse, repeated complaints from victims being ignored and the Church unnecessarily subjecting those claiming compensation to harsh cross-examination by insurance lawyers. The NSS has publicised such failures.

Turning to the Catholic Church, Cardinal Murphy O'Connor, the senior Catholic in England & Wales in the 1990s, was lauded when he died in September. He had

even been chosen by the then Pope to conduct a visitation into the horrific levels of clerical child abuse in Ireland.

To its credit, the BBC were among those who reminded us that the cardinal had blighted his own career when, as a bishop, he transferred an abusing priest to another unsuspecting parish. Finally, O'Connor moved this same serial abuser to Gatwick Airport, where he predictably abused again, and was jailed.

O'Connor and Ball were both bishops in a sexual abuse hotspot along the south coast. They were friends and there is convincing evidence that they co-operated to shield from justice numerous clerics who were abusing minors. O'Connor, no stranger to 10 Downing Street, used his great influence to stifle investigations into his past and their exposure in the media.

The NSS issued an alternative obituary of Murphy O'Connor to set the record straight. Reference was made in other obituaries to the NSS having written to the then Prime Minister to explain why he should not give O'Connor a peerage, as it had been suggested he would.

In France, there was a positive response to the letter we drafted to the French Ministry of Justice calling for the most senior French Catholic, Cardinal Barbarin, to be prosecuted for his admitted failure to report a child abusing cleric, as is mandatory in that country. Local prosecutors had repeatedly failed to do so. The Cardinal will face a trial next year.

Keith Porteous Wood addressed the International Association of Freethinkers annual conference in Paris on the subject of clerical abuse. He noted that Cardinal Pell had been appointed by the Pope as his third in command in the knowledge of numerous accusations of Pell covering up abuse and being an abuser. He denies charges he is now facing in court proceedings in Australia. A Royal Commission there received 4,444 complaints from victims about abuse in Catholic institutions. Mr Wood drew attention to devastating criticism (largely as a result of NSS work) by the United Nations of the Vatican over clerical abuse in the Catholic Church. He chided the Vatican for its intransigence in failing to facilitate, as had been urged by the UN, the prosecution of suspected abusers or the compensation of victims.

Despite all the above, the Archbishop of Canterbury tried to deflect attention from his own Church by trying to make other institutions seem worse. He told the *Today* programme in September “I haven't seen the same integrity over the BBC's failures over Savile as I've seen in the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, in other public institutions.” This sits uneasily with his admission when the review was published: “The church colluded and concealed rather than seeking to help those who were brave enough to come forward. This is inexcusable and shocking behaviour”. Inevitably – and with justice – he was roundly condemned and accused of hypocrisy of the worst kind.

From Dame Moira Gibb's independent report into the Church's handling of the Bishop Peter Ball case

“I managed to keep the matter out of court... [and] thereby saved the Diocese and the Church enormous embarrassment.”

– Diocesan Registrar (solicitor)

“The Church appears to have been most interested in protecting itself.”

– Gibb's damning conclusion

“Ball's conduct stands in a class of its own for the level of deception dressed up in the cloak of holiness and piety.”

– Unnamed complainant with national reputation within the Church

“The failure to pass six of the letters to police ... – while providing them with the one which was of least concern – must give rise to a perception of deliberate concealment.”

Religious Non-Stun Slaughter

We've been stepping up our calls for an end to the legal exemption that allows religious groups to slaughter animals without prior stunning.

UK animal welfare law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to render them insensible to pain. The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim dietary preferences. All kosher and some halal food is prepared without stunning of animals prior to slaughter.

In a letter to the Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, we expressed alarm at new figures published by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) which revealed a sharp rise in the number of animals being slaughtered for religious reasons without pre-stunning over the last four years.

We urged the Government to review the regulations around animal welfare at the time of slaughter in the context of the UK's exit from the EU.

We've also raised concerns about the supply of meat from non-stunned animals greatly outstripping the demand from the communities for which it is intended, and entering the mainstream market without labels identifying it accurately.

In September, we lobbied councillors in Lancashire urging them to end a policy of supplying non-stun halal meat for school dinners across the county.

We also called for clearer labelling in response to a consultation from the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB).

In the UK we are part of growing coalition of campaigning organisations calling for an end to non-stun slaughter. This coalition includes both the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and the RSPCA.

We have made clear to the Government our position that unless non-stun slaughter is banned, there should be clear labelling of meat as 'stunned' or 'non-stunned' to allow consumers to make an informed choice.

Meanwhile, in May, we welcomed the decision of the Walloon region in Belgium to ban non-stun animal slaughter on the grounds that this practice causes unnecessary suffering to animals.



Calling for reform of *Thought for the Day*

We have long campaigned for the *Thought for the Day* slot on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme to be scrapped or opened up to non-religious voices. But the BBC hierarchy seems as determined as ever to block this proselytising, discriminatory programme from any reform.

Shortly after her appointment as the new *Today* programme editor in January, Sarah Sands suggested that *Thought for the Day* be opened up to humanists, only to be slapped down by the BBC.

The NSS had written to Ms Sands, urging her to reform the slot. We suggested that *Thought for the Day* should be opened up to non-religious contributors, turning the daily segment into an ethical current affairs reflection slot. Otherwise, we advised, it should be renamed 'Religious thought for the day' and moved away from Radio 4's flagship news programme and into a more suitable timeslot reflecting its niche status.



In June, the BBC allowed Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby to use the slot to promote the Church of England's latest evangelism campaign, which invites "more people to come to know Jesus Christ".

Operation Christmas Child

In the run-up to every Christmas, parents contact us about the registered charity Samaritan's Purse and their 'Operation Christmas Child' shoebox scheme.

Operation Christmas Child is a method of proselytising evangelical Christianity to vulnerable children living in poverty. Well-meaning schools, offices and individuals participating in the scheme fill shoeboxes with toys to be sent to children in developing countries. Once they reach the country of destination, the boxes are distributed together with promotional, conversion-focused literature to invite the children receiving it to follow-up Bible studies.

This year we published information debunking Operation Christmas Child, exposing its evangelical nature and highlighting its many problems. The information also recommends ethical alternatives to those who want to contribute to humanitarian efforts.



Urging action on charity behind monk-brewed tonic wine

We prompted the Charity Commission to investigate whether the religious charity behind the sale of Buckfast Tonic Wine should have its charitable status revoked. Buckfast Abbey Trust, which made £8.8m profit in 2014-15, does not pay tax on its profits from selling wine because it is a charity which exists "for the advancement of the Catholic faith".

We argued that the social harm that can be associated with the consumption of Buckfast was an important reason to remove its charitable status. The drink has been associated with violence and other anti-social behaviour in the area east of Glasgow. Multiple attempts have been made by the Scottish authorities to limit its sale. In 2015, the Scottish Prison Service found that 43.4% of inmates had consumed Buckfast before their last offence.



Opposing sabbatarianism on Lewis

We backed a crowdfunding initiative by local campaigners in Scotland's Western Isles to secure funding to open a popular swimming pool on Sundays – pressing the council to abandon its unpopular decision not to.

Despite raising the necessary funds with the support of NSS members across the UK, sabbatarians on the council are still intransigently resisting opening the sports centre on Sundays.

Lewis has a long history of religious fundamentalists blocking services from opening or running on the 'Sabbath'. The campaign continues!

EVENTS

We have held several events this year, many of which have been related to our 150th anniversary celebrations.

Bradlaugh bust unveiled in Parliament

In November 2016 we held a special reception in Parliament to unveil the newly commissioned portrait bust of Charles Bradlaugh MP, responsible for the Oaths Act. The National Secular Society donated the portrait bust of Charles Bradlaugh to the House of Commons, supported by very generous donations from our members and supporters. Bradlaugh founded the NSS in 1866.

The bust will serve an important educational function and fill what Alison McGovern MP, Chair of the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art, called "a long-standing and major gap in the Parliamentary Art Collection". Ms McGovern paid tribute to Bradlaugh's "perseverance in the



Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson unveiled the statue

face of opposition, his dedication to principle, and his steadfast determination to represent his constituents (which) drove crucial changes in UK law". She also thanked Suzie Zamit, who became the fourth female sculptor to have work represented in the Parliamentary Art Collection. We thank Suzie Zamit for her unstinting work in almost bringing back Bradlaugh to life. The sculpture was featured as the Parliamentary Artwork of the Month in December.

It is now prominently displayed in the Lower Waiting Hall, an area to which the public is admitted adjacent to Central Lobby. We are grateful to Parliament for agreeing to display the sculpture and generously to host the reception to mark its unveiling. Also to Malcolm Hay, the Curator of Works of Art and his department, for all their assistance in commissioning the sculpture. Keith Porteous Wood conceived the project and liaised with Parliament and the sculptor.

Charlie Hebdo anniversary event

In January, we returned to Parliament to mark the second anniversary of the Islamist attack on French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, and to discuss the future of free speech. See page 5.

Secularist of the Year 2017

In March, we hosted our twelfth Secularist of the Year awards. Yasmin Rehman won the main prize, the £5,000 award sponsored by Dr Michael Irwin. Yasmin has spent much of the past two years persuading the Government to recognise the dangers faced by ex-Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims from Islamic extremists. She has even used her own home as a shelter for women at risk of domestic abuse.

She gave a powerful and moving speech on the many facets of Islamic fundamentalism that curtail and limit the lives of Muslims here in Britain, fracturing wider society. President Terry Sanderson applauded her work and courage.

The other nominees shortlisted for the prize were Dr Steven Kettell for his work on a secular response to the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life, Houzan Mahmoud of the Kurdish Culture Project, integration and social cohesion expert Prof Ted Cantle, former UN Special Rapporteur Ms Asma Jahangir and Scott Moore, founder of the Let Pupils Choose award.

Dr Michael Irwin has generously funded all the awards over the last twelve years and Terry Sanderson has organised all the nominations and overseen the events. We thank them both.



Winner Yasmin Rehman (right) celebrates with Gita Sahgal



Journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown presented the award



Yasmin with NSS President Terry Sanderson

Defending Progressivism conference

In April, we sponsored the 'Defending Progressivism' conference with Conatus News and the Kurdish Culture Project. The event covered many topics including secularism, freedom of expression, and LGBT+ rights. NSS president Terry Sanderson spoke on the challenges to the secularist movement today, and Council member Chris Moos spoke about secular activism. Three NSS honorary associates were among the other panellists.



International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression

In July, we sponsored the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression in the 21st Century, organised by One Law for All and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain described on page 5.

Bradlaugh lecture

In September, 151 years to the day of the NSS's founding, we brought our 150th anniversary year to an end – and marked a new beginning – with the inaugural Bradlaugh Lecture at Manchester Art Gallery. Professor Bryan Niblett, author of the definitive biography of NSS founding president Charles Bradlaugh, presented a lecture based on his highly acclaimed book *Dare to Stand Alone*.

Referring to Bradlaugh as “the greatest backbencher of the 19th century”, Niblett revealed the key role Bradlaugh played in the promotion of liberty and freethought in the UK, through championing issues such as access to birth control, republicanism and, of course, secularism.

Guests also heard a 'brief history of the NSS' from NSS historian Bob Forder. The re-hanging of Walter Sickert's famous portrait of Bradlaugh was timed to coincide with the event. It is huge and required the assistance of two abseilers to be hung overlooking the main staircase.

This was the first time for generations the portrait has been on view to the general public. It had been gifted to the gallery by the NSS's Manchester Branch in 1911. We thank Mr Forder, who is the great grandson of Bradlaugh's first secretary (of the same name), for his work with the Gallery resulting in the portrait being re-hung for the anniversary.

The lecture aims to provide an annual opportunity for a distinguished speaker to explore an aspect of secularism in depth, and we're glad it got off to such an acclaimed start.



"I enjoy reading the newsletter each week as I like to keep abreast with what's happening in the secular world." – Frank, Crewe

One of our most important tasks is to provide a voice for secularism in the media, to challenge religious privilege, stand up for equality and counter the powerful religious lobby.

This year we spoke or were quoted in the media 233 times. This included over 130 media sources with 12 TV appearances and 75 radio interviews. We also were quoted 93 times in major newspapers plus 18 letters.

Our site secularism.org.uk had a major redesign by Cuttlefish Multimedia, with more prominent campaign pages, a whole new history section and a new focus on ways to get involved.

This year we had around 851,000 unique page views.

Our media roundup

(*In the Media*)

which highlighted

around 2.7k

articles of interest

to secularists this

year is read around

300 times a day,

and had around

8.5k unique views.

210 news pieces

and 67 opinion

pieces were published. Our news and opinion pages

received around 430k unique views.

On social media, our Facebook page grew from just under 15.9k to just over 17.5k likes. On the average day 1.4k people engage with the page, with 3.1k seeing our content. On Twitter, our followers grew from 28.5k to 31.8k and on the average day our tweets are seen 32k times. *Newsline*, our email newsletter, keeps over 17.6k subscribers up to date on a weekly basis and continues to grow, up from over 16k in the previous year.

NSS staff and Council members have visited societies and several schools. We've given talks at local groups in the North East, East Midlands, South West, London and the Home Counties. Topics have included gender segregation, education reform and how Britain's changing religious landscape affects secularism.



Keith Porteous Wood on *Daily Politics*

State-funded schools 'force' girls to wear hijab

Sian Griffiths

Girls as young as four are being "forced to wear the hijab" as part of approved school uniform in state-funded Islamic schools, campaigners have told ministers.

According to research by the National Secular Society, the hijab appears to be compulsory in eight state-funded Islamic schools in England, including three primary schools.

A further 51 private Islamic schools of the 176 surveyed by the society also require the headscarf to be worn by female pupils. Eighteen schools said wearing the head covering was optional.

One school says on its website that "the face must be covered outside the school" (as well as in class).

Another, in Bradford, says: "It is very important that the uniform is loose fitting and modest and that the hijab is fitted closely to the head. The uniform is compulsory."

The research has been sent to Justine Greening, the education secretary, with a letter asking if school inspectors can "ensure girls from Muslim backgrounds are supported to have free choices, rather than having so-called 'modesty' codes imposed on them".

The letter describes the

practice of requiring young girls to wear the hijab as "illiberal and repressive".

It says: "No child should be obliged to wear the hijab or any other article of religious clothing while at school."

It is signed by several Muslim women activists including the journalist and author Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Amina Lone, a former Labour parliamentary candidate.

Campaigners argue that the hijab's inclusion as an optional item of uniform encourages the sexualisation of children because it is worn from puberty as a sign of modesty in front of men.

Last month a survey by *The Sunday Times* revealed that nearly a fifth (18%) of 800 state primary schools, including Church of England primaries, in 11 regions of England now list the hijab as part of their uniform policy, mostly as an optional item.

Ofsted inspectors are investigating whether head teachers have come under pressure from parents or religious leaders.

The Department for Education said: "Uniform policies are a matter for the individual school. If a school decided to allow a pupil to wear a burqa that would be up to the school."

@siangriffiths6

The *Sunday Times* covered our research on hijab wearing in schools

Remembering David Tribe

We were saddened to learn of the death of David Tribe, who served as president of the Society from 1963 to 1971. David died in Australia at the age of 86.

He wrote a number of books and pamphlets, including a biography of Charles Bradlaugh (*President Charles Bradlaugh MP, 1971*) and a history of the NSS (*100 Years of Freethought, 1967*). David was a formidable speaker and debater, and fondly remembered by those who knew him and for his extremely effective contribution to the Society.



HONORARY ASSOCIATES

Graham Allen
Prof Peter Atkins
Joey Barton
Baroness Blackstone
Prof Colin Blakemore
Edward Bond
Nick Brown MP
Prof Ted Cantle CBE
Lord Cashman
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Dr David Starkey
Peter Tatchell
Lord Taverne
Baroness Thornton
Polly Toynbee
Baroness Turner
Lord Warner
Baroness Young

*Honorary associates we were pleased to welcome this year



Lord Knight, formerly Jim Knight MP (Lab): critic of religious discrimination in school admissions and advocate of a secular state



Lord Soley, formerly Clive Soley MP (Lab): former Chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party and critic of religious selection in schools



Raheel Raza: author of *Their Jihad, Not My Jihad!*; secular, interfaith and gender equality activist

YOUR COUNCIL

As of 1 October 2017

President

Terry Sanderson



Terry Sanderson

Vice-Presidents

Alistair McBay

Adrian Tippetts



Alistair McBay



Adrian Tippetts



Ed Moore

Treasurer

Ed Moore

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Chris Moos

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Peter Revell

Richard Scorer

Dorothy Smith



Judy Audaer



Josephine Macintosh



Chris Moos

Executive director and company secretary

Keith Porteous Wood, FCCA



Gerard Phillips



Sadikur Rahman



Afonso Reis e Sousa*

Campaigns director

Stephen Evans



Peter Revell



Richard Scorer



Dorothy Smith



Keith Porteous Wood



Stephen Evans

*Afonso Reis e Sousa has customarily chaired Council meetings during the year

AFFILIATED GROUPS

Local, student and special interest groups are a great way of raising local awareness of secular issues, running localised campaigns and socialising with like-minded secularists. Below is a list of groups affiliated to the National Secular Society.

These groups are independent of the NSS.

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| Basingstoke Humanists Group | FLASH (Freethinkers of Leicester; Atheists, Secularists and Humanists) | Plymouth Humanists |
| Bedfordshire Humanists | Gloucestershire Humanists | Queen Mary Atheism Secularism and Humanism Society |
| Belfast Humanist Group | Greater Manchester Humanists | South East London Humanist Group |
| Birmingham Humanists | Humanist and Secularist Liberal Democrats | South Hampshire Humanists |
| Bradford Atheist & Humanist Society | Isle of Man Freethinkers | South London Humanists |
| Brighton Secular Humanists | Kent Humanists | Suffolk Humanists and Secularists |
| Cambridge Humanist Group | King's College London Atheist Humanist and Secular Society | UCL Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society |
| Cambridge University Atheist and Agnostic Society | Lancashire Secular Humanists | UK Society of Celebrants |
| Chester Humanists | Leeds Atheist Society | University of Birmingham Atheist Secular and Humanist Society |
| Chiltern Humanists | Leicester Secular Society | University of Bristol Atheist Agnostic Secular Society |
| Cornwall Humanists | LJMU Student Secular Society | University of Leicester Atheist Humanist and Secular Student Society |
| Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists | London School of Economics ASH Society | University of Lincoln Secular Society |
| Dorset Humanists | Ludlow and Marches Humanists | University of Nottingham Secular Society |
| Durham Atheist Secularist and Humanist Society | Milton Keynes Humanists | University of Surrey Atheist Humanist and Secularist Society |
| Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society | Norfolk Humanists | University of York Atheist, Secularist & Humanist Society |
| East London Humanists | North East Humanists | Watford Area Humanists |
| Edinburgh Secular Society | North London Humanist Group | West Glamorgan Humanist Group |
| Essex Humanists | Nottingham Secular Society | West London Humanists and Secularists |
| Farnham Humanists | NU-Think (Newcastle University Sceptics Society) | |
| | Oxford Humanists | |



Stephen Evans with Secular Society students at Godalming College's freshers' fair

In addition the National Secular Society has three internal groups, the Secular Education Forum, Secular Legal Forum and Secular Medical Forum. The SEF, SLF and SMF provide expert advice and support to the NSS in their respective fields.

More can be found at secularism.org.uk/groups

Student groups can affiliate to the NSS without charge. Students and student societies play a vital role in campaigning for secularism, and we're always keen to expand our support for them.

More can be found at secularism.org.uk/student

THANKS AND VOLUNTEERS

Fundraising

As an organisation solely focused on campaigning, 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' and supporters' generosity.

In the last year our 150th anniversary fundraising appeal had 238 donations. The appeal helped us to sponsor a world-class secular conference in 2016, in 2017 it allowed us to put a bust of our founder Charles Bradlaugh in Parliament and to begin redeveloping our website and campaigns resources.

This year we also launched our 2020 fundraising appeal, an ambitious plan to further develop our education and campaigns resources and expand our office space. 210 donations were received in this reporting period, helping to increase our impact and ability to campaign for change on the issues our members care most about.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who has donated money in the last year or remembered us in their wills. Every donation big or small helps our work. You can find out more at secularism.org.uk/donate

If you would like to leave a legacy to the NSS to help secure secularism for future generations, we would be delighted to assist. Please contact the office.

Volunteers

We now have over 100 people interested in volunteering with the Society, and have ambitious plans to increase volunteering opportunities and our support for local activists. Please see secularism.org.uk/work-with-us and our 2020 fundraising appeal.

We are always most grateful for the many people who donate their time, expertise and advice to the NSS. As well as all those who ran stalls at freshers' fairs and local events and got involved with campaigning locally.

Thanks to:

Amir Haddad, Ben Iorio, David Mackie, Helen Nicholls, Paul Orton, Alan Paton, Connair Russell, Angela Sandford and Ben Young for their research into academisation and related education topics.

Helen Nicholls and **Susannah Rosenberg** for their help with events and research into access to secular education.

Rosalind Hulse and **Barry Thorpe** for parliamentary monitoring and general research.

Dene Smart for his work on education research and evidence.

Adele Walker for her research into evangelism in schools.

Sven Klinge (awarded volunteer of the year) for event photography. **Daniel Klembara** and **Stephen Knight** for event photography and filming.

Bradley Davis of WhiteLight for his work on the Bulletins, Annual Report and other publications and graphic design.

Bob Forder, NSS historian, for his help researching the history of the NSS and content for the website.

We are grateful to all of the barristers, solicitors and lawyers who have provided us with invaluable pro bono assistance over the year.

A heartfelt thank you goes to **Claudine Baxter**, who regularly assists us with membership administration in the office.

Thanks also to the chairs of our secular forums for their valuable assistance throughout the year: **Dr Keith Sharpe** (Secular Education Forum), **Sadikur Rahman** (Secular Legal Forum) and **Dr Antony Lempert** (Secular Medical Forum).

WHY I JOINED

Member feedback over the last year

“There is no place for religious privilege in such a society where all groups should be treated equally and no preference given to those with any particular belief. I think the National Secular Society plays an invaluable role in promoting such a society and also in exposing all the ways in which religion tries to further its own interests.”

– June, Aberdeen

“I do not think that religion should be in any way privileged in our society. Whilst many religious believers may be good and kind individuals, the institutions frequently seem to care far more about retaining and building their own power than protecting vulnerable people, many of whom have themselves been victimised by religious institutions.”

– Anne, London

“I have no problem with people choosing to have a faith and follow a particular creed, but this must not be at the expense – by way of privilege or other – over those who do not share the same outlook.”

– Paul, London

“I am a committed Christian but I fervently believe that religion is personal choice and absolutely should not play a part in education, politics or the criminal justice system. I feel faith schools are dangerous and a corrosive effect on society and will only lead to intolerance and suffering.”

– Ryan, St Leonards On Sea

“I am horrified that at this point in history where our society seems to be under pressure from various forms of religious extremism, our Government seems to think that faith schools are a good idea.”

– Bryan, Colchester

“I am particularly concerned about the impact of religious influence on issues relating to gender equality.”

– Rachel, Kinnesswood

“We’ve made progress on this, but eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. The law needs constant monitoring so that freedom of speech is not compromised by someone perceiving offence. The tendency towards no platforming and safe spaces at universities is worrying.”

– Helen

“FGM, along with the tradition of circumcision of Jewish males, is an appalling physical assault on those too young to defend themselves. It encourages a belief that it is acceptable for religious authority to alter people’s bodies without their consent.”

– Stuart

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