



National
Secular
Society

challenging religious privilege

Annual Report
2023



Our Vision

A secular democracy where everyone is treated equally, regardless of religion or belief.

Our Mission

To build a freer, fairer and more tolerant society where people are free to follow the beliefs they choose and where no particular belief systems are privileged or imposed.

Our Work

We champion your right to live without people imposing their religious practices on you or society.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The coronation has reminded us that the 'divine right of kings' did not end with Charles I. Charles III became king the instant his mother died. Yet in the coronation, Archbishop Welby – on behalf of the Church of England – anointed him behind a screen with so-called holy oil, supposedly making Charles an instrument of God in return for Charles' oath to uphold that sect's unjustifiable privileges. As 19th century American freethinker Robert G. Ingersoll observed: "The throne and altar were twins – vultures from the same egg", just as James I had understood when he declared: "No bishop, no king."

This must be the last time such a charade is tolerated. The next head of state should be inaugurated in a secular ceremony in full view of all, and undertake to serve everyone without any privilege for anyone.

Is there any appetite for disestablishment of the CofE replete with its huge privileges? Some, but I am not convinced that any of the major parties are yet ready to initiate it. They cravenly claim it is up to the Church to do so, while the Church conveniently asserts it is up to parliament.

Disestablishment may come piecemeal however, starting with House of Lords reform removing the bishops' bench, a reform the majority of the public support.

And maybe the appetite for disestablishment will grow the further the Church descends into chaos, irrelevance and scandal. Its normal Sunday attendance is already below one per cent of the English population and falling. Grovelling apology follows grovelling apology over the continuing scandal of sexual abuse by clergy and utter damnation by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. More abuse cases will inevitably be revealed. The Church so completely lost the plot on safeguarding victims, it had to report itself to the Charity Commission (and we did it for them too).

After kicking the can down the road on same-sex marriages for 10 years, the CofE bishops have refused to permit any priests to conduct them, despite most clergy and laity being in favour of this. The resultant discrimination by the established church has angered MPs to the point that they have threatened, seemingly with the Speaker's support, to legislate themselves over the Church's head to permit CofE solemnisation of same-sex marriage. The Church's foundations are shaking like never before.



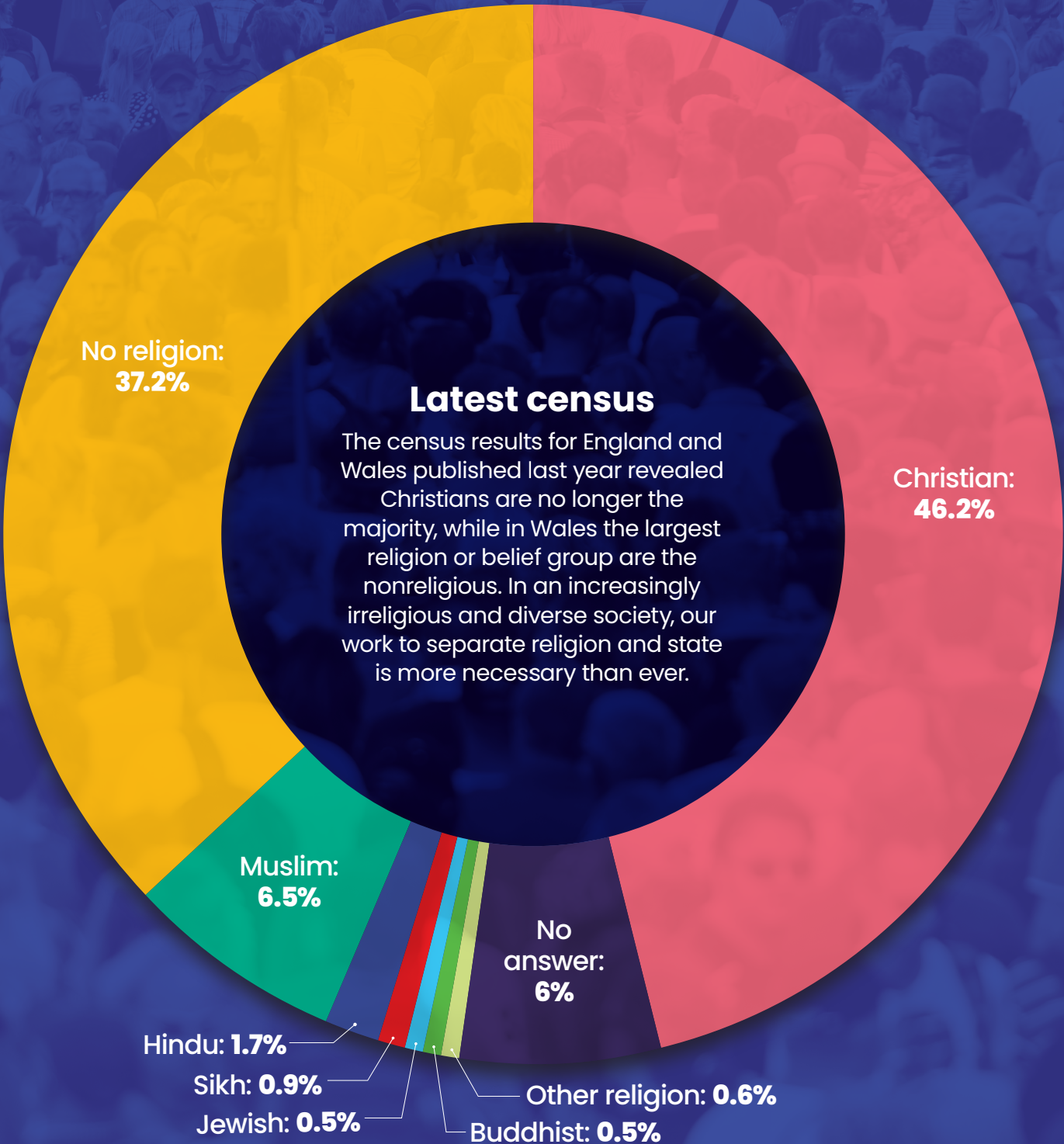
The census finding that the proportion of those identifying as Christians has fallen below 50% is yet more evidence that the nation is no longer Christian. But the signs of Christianity's decline have been present for many years with nearly two centuries of waning church attendance, which has now fallen to less than five per cent of the British population.

I believe we are making some progress at last with the government on 'back door blasphemy laws' and freedom of expression. Following the victimisation of an autistic child over a prank in which a Quran was scuffed, the Home Secretary issued new guidance on 'blasphemy' incidents at schools, which looked like a cut and paste from concerns we had raised with her.

We were delighted that, following our representations, the UN urged the UK to end faith-based admissions and collective worship in England. Encouragingly, when I was invited to the UN pre-sessions on the UK and France in Geneva, the Secretary of the Committee on the Rights of the Child praised the National Secular Society's work with the Committee.

I pay tribute to our chief executive and staff team for a very successful year, and thank my council colleagues for their counsel and support.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John H. ...". The signature is fluid and cursive.



Success: UN committee calls on UK to end religious selection and worship in schools

For many years we've urged the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to address religious threats to children's rights in schools. This year, the UNCRC took our concerns seriously, stating in its June report that schools in England should be prevented from using religion as a selection criterion for school admissions.

It also recommended repealing compulsory collective worship in schools, another key issue we've raised repeatedly with the UNCRC.

The UNCRC's conclusions have been noted by parliamentarians too. Baroness Lorely Burt asked education minister Baroness Diana Barran if she agreed that "all children – irrespective of faith and belief background – should have equal right to access schools" funded by taxpayers' money.

Predictably, Barran said the government "supports faith schools' ability to set faith-based oversubscription criteria".

Segregated schooling in Northern Ireland has also come under greater scrutiny. The Children's Law Centre submitted three reports to the UNCRC in January detailing how children are segregated by their parents' religion, subjected to compulsory worship and taught religious education "based on the holy scriptures". Successive NI ministers have also backed calls for more integrated schools, where children from Protestant, Catholic and other backgrounds are taught together.

Exposing extreme policies at state funded faith schools

Letting schools select children based on faith is not only wrong in principle. It enables schools to impose coercive and controlling religious practices on families, as our research revealed in February.

Our report documented how at least 14 state funded faith schools use religious requirements in the oversubscription criteria of their admissions policies to control families' private lives – including parents' sex lives.

Minister for Schools Nick Gibb said he would consider the report's findings and recommendations as part of the next review of the School Admissions Code.

Momentum builds for RE reform

How religions and beliefs are taught in schools is in dire need of an update – especially since nonreligious beliefs are frequently sidelined in religious education (RE). Research published last October concluded nonreligious children can find RE lessons "excluding" and that RE "needs to change".

Two encouraging developments this year are building momentum for a more inclusive approach:

- In February, Baroness Lorely Burt of Solihull introduced a private members' bill to replace RE with 'religion and worldviews education' and require the curriculum to be inclusive of nonreligious philosophical convictions. Unfortunately, insufficient time was given for the bill to progress.
- In a landmark ruling in May, the High Court determined that committees responsible for setting the local RE syllabus cannot lawfully bar humanists from membership or voting. The case was raised by Stephen Bowan, a humanist who was refused voting rights on Kent County Council's Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE).

EXTREME RULES FOUND IN FAITH SCHOOL ADMISSIONS POLICIES

Parents must follow Jewish 'purity laws' dictating when couples can have sex according to the woman's menstrual cycle. This may require women to submit evidence of their vaginal discharge to religious authorities to determine their 'purity' status.

Parents and children must follow strict dress codes at all times, such as 'modest' dress for women and girls, including outside of school.

Families must follow religious dietary rules and fast during Ramadan.

Children must be banned from accessing the internet, watching television, or visiting the cinema or theatre.

Keeping RSE inclusive

In March we wrote to schools minister Nick Gibb urging him to consider the potential harms caused by faith-based relationships and sex education (RSE) as part of the government's review of the subject. Our research has found many faith schools teach stigmatising ideas about contraceptives, abortion, same-sex relationships and sex outside marriage.

We've expressed concern about the impartiality of the review, after we found two of the five appointed panellists have strong religious connections.

In June, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission also highlighted that many post-primary schools are failing to uphold children's rights in how they teach about homosexuality and reproductive healthcare.

Several recent incidents highlight how religious bigotry towards same-sex relationships is impacting on education:

- Teachers at Plashet School in London received threatening complaints accusing staff of "covertly promoting LGBTQ views" in an optional lunchtime equalities club. The club, which covered many different equality issues, was then cancelled by the school. The complaints had been spurred on by SREIslamic, a group founded by former Hizb ut-Tahrir member Yusuf Patel. We revealed that Patel also spoke at an anti-LGBT education conference for parents in London last November, where he told attendees that gay children must be taught to repent.
- In May, Joshua Sutcliffe was banned from teaching after continually harassing LGBT pupils at a Catholic school, including telling them God could stop people from being gay. Sutcliffe says on his personal website that people who have gay sex should be imprisoned.
- A documentary released by *The News Movement* in September revealed an American church partnered with

Anti-gay 'fundamentalist' lectures Parents United conference

We were quoted in the local press on the exposure of religious lobbying against LGBT-inclusive education at London schools.

**Plashet School staff
left in fear over
Equalities Club
complaints**

over 20 schools in Wales and exposed children to homophobic beliefs and creationism.

- Research published by Just Like Us in February found one in three teachers thinks faith acts as a 'barrier' to discussing LGBT+ topics in school. Amongst those who work at faith schools, the number increased to almost half.

Exposing failings at independent faith schools

We've discovered independent schools with a faith ethos are four times more likely to be issued with warning notices for breaching standards than their non-religiously affiliated counterparts.

This is because independent faith schools often refuse to teach ideas which are contrary to their religious ethos. This year, we exposed examples of independent faith schools failing to teach legally required sex education, omitting references to same-sex relationships, teaching the Bible as fact in history and science, and preventing pupils from sitting exams to avoid content that "offends" religion.

These examples are from England, but we've used them to warn the Welsh government on the dangers of giving independent faith schools too much autonomy over their curricula, in response to a consultation on improving regulation of independent schools in Wales.

Tackling unregistered schools

We remain at the forefront of the campaign against unregistered schools, many of which are operated by faith groups so they can impose fundamentalist dogma at the expense of children's rights and welfare.

It was disappointing that last year, the government shelved its Schools Bill which would have introduced several new measures to tackle unregistered schools. But the issue is being increasingly scrutinised. Over 100 new investigations into unregistered schools opened this year, and several individuals have been barred from running schools after being found to operate unregistered settings illegally. *The Times* also published a high profile investigation into unregistered schools in March.

Parliament again debated unregistered schools in July, when peers criticised the government for failing to protect children languishing in these facilities.

The Church's safeguarding scandals

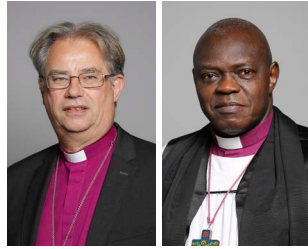
Last year, an internal review into Church of England safeguarding identified 383 new allegations of abuse. Most incidents allegedly took place in the past 20 years. Priests were the most common perpetrators and children the main victims. The review found the CofE suffered from a "culture of deference" towards bishops and other senior members and a "longstanding ethos where individuals felt unable to challenge back over safeguarding concerns".

Developments this year suggest the Church has failed to learn any lessons.

- We urged the Charity Commission to investigate safeguarding practices in the Church of England after the Archbishops' Council sacked the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB) scrutinising the Church's record on safeguarding in June. We said the Archbishops' Council, a registered charity, could be in breach of the guidance that trustees "must take reasonable steps to protect from harm people who come into contact" with the charity. The sacked members of the ISB, which was set up after the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) found the Church to be a "hiding place for sexual abusers", have said there was "clear interference" from the Church with their work.

- In May, an independent review into the case of Trevor Devamanikkam, a priest who raped Matthew Ineson when he was 16 years old, revealed senior bishops Steven Croft and John Sentamu failed to act when Ineson reported the incident. Sentamu's response to the review was: "Safeguarding is very important but it does not trump Church Law". He has since been asked to step back from active ministry. Martin Sewell, a member of the Church of England's General Synod, has called for Croft to be suspended from the House of Lords.

- A legal advisor who delayed the imprisonment of paedophile bishop Peter Ball for decades was struck off in January, following NSS complaints to the solicitors' regulator. Diocese of Gloucester legal advisor Christopher



Steven Croft (left) and John Sentamu (right) are members of the House of Lords by virtue of their rank in the Church of England.

Peak agreed to act as Ball's personal solicitor after the bishop was arrested in 1992, and persuaded the Crown Prosecution Service to caution Ball rather than prosecute him. The Solicitors Regulation Authority found there was a conflict of interest between Peak's duty to the diocese's congregation and working for a lenient outcome for Ball.

- An Anglican group backed by eight bishops, including one member of the House of Lords, urged the government in August to exempt religious confession from proposed mandatory reporting laws. If introduced, the proposals would make it a legal obligation for those working with children, or in a position of trust, to report incidents of child sexual abuse. We've told the government it must not give in to demands for religious exemptions.

It's no wonder Labour MP Ben Bradshaw said in July that Church safeguarding is "in a state of complete collapse". Even the archbishop of Canterbury admits it is "a catastrophic and total failure". We'll continue our work to hold the state church to account for its appalling safeguarding record.



Our president Keith Porteous Wood continued to campaign against the injustices faced by victims of abuse in the Catholic Church worldwide. He was interviewed in February on DW News about a new report on abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church, which he said whitewashed the true number of victims. He was also interviewed by the BBC Sunday program in August where he stressed that admissions of child abuse during confession should not be exempted from mandatory reporting laws.

At his coronation, King Charles swore on a Bible before the archbishop of Canterbury to uphold the Church of England's privileges as the state church. This prompted much debate about the appropriateness of a religious ceremony for the inauguration of our head of state. It also called attention to the relationship between church and state, giving us ample opportunity to speak out against the coronation and the state church in national and international media.



Same-sex marriage sets Church alarm bells ringing

Last year, we launched our “It’s a Sin” campaign to raise awareness of the Church of England’s continued opposition to same-sex relationships, and to argue that an officially homophobic organisation has no business being part of our constitution.

The campaign is working: our calls are now being echoed by people all over the country, including Anglicans and parliamentarians.

Anti-LGBTQ+ Church of England can’t be fixed by MPs – they should disestablish it instead

Stephen Evans called for the disestablishment of the Church of England in a piece for *PinkNews*.

The General Synod, the Church’s decision-making body, voted in February to allow priests to bless people who are already in a civil same-sex marriage – but made no changes at all to Anglican doctrine, which still states that gay sex is a sin and gay marriage is incompatible with scripture.

The vote prompted MPs from various parties to publicly express their dismay. They included Labour MP and gay Anglican Ben Bradshaw, who in March introduced a widely supported Ten Minute Rule bill to permit CoFE clergy to choose to hold same-sex weddings.

Meanwhile, 10 of the 42 provinces of the international Anglican communion opposed the Church’s supposedly ‘softened’ stance on same-sex relationships, and responded to the Synod vote by rejecting the leadership of archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby.

The controversy over same-sex marriage is threatening the relationship between the Church and its parishioners, the

wider Anglican communion, and parliament. Disestablishment seems an obvious answer: it would release the state from this increasingly archaic and unpopular institution and allow the Church to determine its own doctrine free from parliamentary influence.

Building momentum for disestablishment

The census results, coronation, abuse scandals and criticism of homophobia and sexism in the Church of England prompted us to redouble our efforts campaigning on our core issue: separating church and state.

Throughout the year we held talks on the theme of disestablishment, including at national and international conferences and to local affiliate groups. Our biggest event took place in the Houses of Parliament in May. Sponsored by Tommy Sheppard MP, this discussion on the future of Church and state saw prominent Anglicans and atheists come together in agreement that the Church’s privileges must end.



(From left to right) Theologian and priest Dr Martyn Percy, Tommy Sheppard MP, NSS chief executive Stephen Evans and gay evangelical Jayne Ozanne came together in agreement that establishment isn’t working. They were also joined by writer and broadcaster Polly Toynbee. We held a similar event online in February.

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN FIGURES

Less than 1%

of England’s population attend Sunday services.

[Source: Church of England Statistics for Mission, December 2021]

Over half

of CoFE priests want the Church’s established status reviewed, including **12%** who support formal disestablishment.

[Source: *The Times*, August 2023]

73%

of CoFE priests think modern Britain cannot be called a “Christian country”.

[Source: *The Times*, August 2023]

MPs and celebrities speak out against the bishops' bench

The bishops' bench – 26 seats reserved for Church of England bishops in the House of Lords – is one of the most unfair and undemocratic aspects of the established Church. The increased focus on the Church of England this year led to an unprecedented level of criticism of the bishops' bench:

- Scottish National Party MP for Edinburgh East Tommy Sheppard argued for an end to the bishops' bench in a Westminster Hall debate brought forward on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group in March. We briefed all MPs ahead of the debate.
- In February, writer and broadcaster Sandi Toksvig launched a petition to remove the bishops appointed to the House of Lords. We widely shared the petition, which has gained nearly 239,000 signatures.



Amnesty International UK, CC BY 2.0

“There are only two countries in the world where representatives of the state religion automatically get a seat in the legislature. They are the UK and Iran. A curious and indeed uncomfortable club of two to belong to.”

SANDI TOKSVIG in a video accompanying her petition to scrap the bishops' bench.

● In March, the Commission on Political Power said the bishops are an “anomalous” presence in the House of Lords and recommended their removal in a reformed second chamber. We called for this reform in our submission to the commission in October. We made the same arguments in response to a call for evidence in August from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on membership of the House of Lords.

● Justin Welby's use of biblical references to oppose the Illegal Migration Bill during a House of Lords debate in May prompted MPs to demand that bishops keep out of politics. We pointed out that while faith leaders are entitled to lobby decision-makers, they should not have a privileged platform in parliament from which to do so.

● The Labour Party released a report in December calling for the House of Lords to be replaced with an elected second chamber – something incompatible with the bishops' bench. It was criticised by bishop of St Albans Alan Smith, who called its lack of reference to the link between the Church and parliament a “serious” omission.

Church uses state schools as mission fields

In May, we told the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief that the lack of separation between Church and state is undermining freedom of religion or belief in the UK. In addition to the Church's interference with democracy, we highlighted how faith schools and collective worship – which are propped up largely by the established church – undermine children's human rights.

But with its membership figures plummeting, the Church increasingly sees our state education system as a mission field. In the summer, it unveiled plans to double the number of children and young people it converts by 2030. Its strategy involves increasing partnerships between churches and schools – including those with no religious character.

In September we raised the alarm over one of the projects launched under this plan – a £3 million child evangelism initiative by the diocese of Guildford. Under the plans, youth ministers would be placed in local schools, including at least one nonreligious school. We've written to the head of Jubilee High School urging him to protect the school's inclusive, secular ethos from the Church's evangelistic agenda.

NSS stops public money funding extremist religion

The government has been trying to deepen its ties with religious institutions by targeting them with funding schemes to deliver public services. This included a report published in April by faith engagement adviser Colin Bloom, which recommended increased government engagement with faith groups. The report was based on a biased 2020 review that sidelined the opinions of nonreligious people.

Throughout the year we've exposed the dangers of this anti-secularist approach – and successfully stopped the flow of public funding into some of the more extreme groups:

- The government terminated funding to a Christian charity after we uncovered a video of its chair and trustee saying Islam is “demonic”, “spiritual wickedness” and “engaging in warfare against the Lord”. The charity, Zion Projects, was one of 16 groups awarded a total of £1.3 million last year as part of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities’ ‘faith new deal’ grant exclusively for religious groups.

Christian charity whose chairman called Islam ‘demonic’ has Government funding pulled



We were quoted widely in media reports on the government’s decision to cut Zion Projects’ funding.

- In August, the government paused its £2.2m Youth Investment Fund to Green Lane mosque after we exposed its history of hosting antisemitic, homophobic and misogynistic sermons.

Defending secularism at the local level

- We’ve continued to urge Scottish councils to revoke voting privileges from unelected religious representatives appointed to education committees – with great success. This year, five Scottish councils have voted to remove religious reps’ voting powers.
- We defended two councillors who were punished by their local councils for legitimate criticism of religion. In May, Mike Gilbert was denied the mayoralty of Boston for a Facebook post he made during the World Cup in Qatar, in which he raised concerns about the rights of women and gay people under Islam. The following month, Neyland Town Council stripped Andrew Lye of his mayoralty after decades-old

posts criticising religious circumcision came to light. We wrote to councillors in Boston and Neyland expressing alarm at their contempt for free speech.

- In November, we welcomed Aberdeenshire Council’s decision not to adopt the notorious ‘Islamophobia’ definition pushed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims. After hearing representations from our chief executive, where he warned that adopting the definition could silence criticism of Islam, the council voted instead to simply “note” the definition and “agree to address any anti-Muslim bias”.
- We successfully lobbied the government to launch an independent review into unrest between Hindus and Muslims in Leicester last year. The review originally commissioned by the Mayor of Leicester prompted widespread concern over its apparent biases and the views of the academic appointed to lead the review.
- We applauded Newark and Sherwood District Council’s decision in July to replace prayers at meetings with a ‘moment of contemplation’. We hope other councils which still hold prayers will follow suit.

Exposing religious bias in the justice system

In October, we referred judge Richard Marks to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office after he said a murderer’s actions were “more” shocking because of her “religious devotion”. We said Marks breached impartiality guidelines by implying religious people are more moral than those without a religion.

The JCIO concluded that the remarks “did not cross the threshold of misconduct as to require any disciplinary action to be taken” and said it was “at the judge’s discretion whether or not to follow the guidance of the Equal Treatment Bench Book.”

In April, we publicised research by Royal Holloway University which found defendants who do not “swear by Almighty God” in court are at greater risk of being found guilty by jurors who themselves take a religious oath. The research prompted Green peer Natalie Bennett to ask the government if it would update the rules or guidance on court oaths. The government’s refusal to do so is shortsighted, as the research stresses the need to replace court oaths and affirmations with a single, secular promise to tell the truth.

A renewed push for blasphemy laws around the Quran

This year we pushed back against the emergence of ‘de-facto blasphemy laws’ when a child at Kettlethorpe High School in Wakefield faced death threats after he allegedly scuffed a Quran.

One local councillor called the Quran-scuffing “serious provocative action which needs to be dealt with”, while the police recorded it as a ‘non-crime hate incident’.

We urged the government to adopt a recommendation from the February review of the Prevent programme, which said a strong pro-free speech narrative should be incorporated into strategies to counter violence associated with ‘blasphemy’.

Home secretary Suella Braverman subsequently issued new guidance on non-crime hate incidents which said school-based incidents should be a matter for school management.

But lobbying at the international level could see people even in democratic nations imprisoned for damaging religious texts.

In July, the United Nations Human Rights Council approved a resolution for the “deliberately and publicly” burning of the Quran or other religious texts to be prohibited by law. The resolution was introduced on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which has long supported efforts to silence ‘blasphemous’ speech.

The UK and 11 other countries voted against the resolution but were defeated.

The following month, the UK “reluctantly” joined consensus on a separate UN resolution which falsely claimed “acts of violence” against religious texts are “in violation of international law”.

The resolutions follow a series of Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark, causing Sweden’s terrorism threat to rise to its highest level since the second world war. The Danish government has proposed banning burnings of religious texts.

Burning books is provocative and anti-intellectual. But imprisoning those who damage religious texts is far more abhorrent as it obliterates the fundamental principle of freedom of expression.

Speaking up for freedom of expression

We highlighted the menace of ‘blasphemy’ codes to free speech at an event in March where we hosted Professor Steven Greer, who was left fearing for his life after a university society accused him of ‘Islamophobia’.

In 2020 the University of Bristol’s Islamic Society launched complaints about a human rights law module taught by Prof. Greer, which included discussion of the traditional death penalty for ‘blasphemy’ in Islam. He feared Islamist attacks because of the allegations and was forced to take time off due to the stress.

Prof. Greer criticised the university for failing to support him. Although an inquiry officially exonerated him of all allegations, the university cancelled his module.

Our chief executive Stephen Evans also raised the plights of Prof. Greer and the children at Kettlethorpe High School when speaking at an event hosted by the Free Speech Union in May, which discussed how to strike a balance between tolerance for diverse beliefs and the right to ridicule or criticise religion.

Protecting free speech in policymaking

- In April, advertising regulators announced they would not adopt stricter guidelines around protected characteristics including religion or belief, after we warned the guidelines could lead to more censorship of adverts which might offend religious sensitivities.

- Northern Ireland’s Department of Justice has decided not to broaden hate crime definitions or remove protections for private speech within homes, after the NSS and others warned this could chill free speech.

- We told a House of Lords inquiry into the Office for Students (OfS) that the OfS failed to act on concerns we raised about theological colleges. These colleges may be breaching their conditions of registration by restricting academic freedom and freedom of speech.



SUPPORTING SECULARISM WORLDWIDE

2023 marks the 75th anniversary of one of humanity's greatest achievements: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Sadly, human rights are not universally applied today. One of the biggest barriers to the flourishing of rights is religion, particularly where it enjoys proximity to political power. Our work campaigning for secularist principles worldwide continues.



In April, Keith Porteous Wood and Stephen Evans attended the unveiling of a new statue of François-Jean "Chevalier" de la Barre in Paris. La Barre was the last person executed for blasphemy in France. The unveiling was part of a two-day international conference on secularism, where they spoke about the work of the NSS.

Changing the tune on blasphemy laws

We briefed MPs ahead of a debate on blasphemy laws in Commonwealth nations, expressing concerns that the government frequently refers to the 'misuse' of blasphemy laws – and so implies the existence of a legitimate usage. Our concerns were repeated by MP Fabian Hamilton, and several other MPs expressed support for the abandonment of blasphemy laws.

Solidarity with dissenters in Iran

Iran has been in the grip of civil unrest since Mahsa Amini was reportedly beaten to death last year by 'morality police' for 'improper' hijab. Protests against Iran's Islamist regime and its treatment of women have met a brutal response from authorities.

We've continued to show solidarity with the majority of Iranians who, according to research last year, support a secular state and oppose mandatory hijab.



Stephen Evans joined the London demonstration against Iran's regime last year.



In February our head of campaigns Megan Manson spoke at a vigil for jailed atheist Soheil Arabi and other Iranian political prisoners. Arabi has since been released on bail.

We work to raise awareness of how the charitable purpose of 'the advancement of religion' leads to the charity sector being used to promote extremist and harmful ideology. This year we had considerable success, as our work on charities was featured in a wide variety of third sector magazines and publications, including *Civil Society*, *Third Force News* and *Third Sector*. Prompted by our work, *Third Sector* even ran an in-depth article on the controversy of religious charities.

Some of our work exposing harmful religious charities this year includes:

- We urged the Scottish Government to reform charity law after the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) refused to penalise religious charities promoting misogyny, homophobia and other harmful ideologies. These charities include Moray Coast Baptist Church, which registered with OSCR last year and whose pastor says the "primary function" of women is cooking, cleaning and washing up. The government said it will begin reviewing charity regulation this year.



- We referred Carryduff Free Presbyterian Church to the Northern Ireland Charity Commission after we found a sermon by one of its trustees comparing same-sex marriage to bestiality. The church registered as a charity in February. Unfortunately, the NI Charity Commission has a history of ignoring homophobia promoted by religious charities, including 'gay conversion therapy'. We highlighted this issue in a submission to the United Nations in January on the relationship between religious freedom and discrimination against LGBT people.



- We raised concerns about a branch of Mountain Of Fire And Miracles (MFM) Ministries which registered in Belfast in July. The charity promoted a sermon on 'witch hunting' on its Facebook page, which risks fuelling the 'spiritual abuse' of children and vulnerable adults accused of being witches. MFM has also been criticised for practising 'gay conversion therapy' in the UK.

Church that promoted sermon on witch hunting and practises gay conversion therapy registered as charity

Belfast Telegraph

Our exposure of MFM was reported in the *Belfast Telegraph*.

- The Charity Commission agreed to engage with trustees at Islamic Centre Leicester after we raised concerns about sermons which implied blasphemers should be executed and Jews have "greed of long life" because they fear punishment in the afterlife.
- We urged ministers to review the charitable status of 'crisis pregnancy centres' after a *Panorama* investigation in February found 21 centres giving "misleading medical information and/or unethical advice" in order to dissuade women from having abortions. 'Crisis pregnancy centres' are often run by religious groups that are ideologically opposed to abortion.



Exposing the harms of circumcision on children

Original NSS research revealed dozens of children are suffering life-threatening, painful and permanent complications from circumcisions performed by doctors – including those performed solely for religious or cultural reasons.

We found that between 2012 and 2022, the General Medical Council (GMC) dealt with 39 complaints relating to circumcision. They revealed circumcisions on babies and young children had led to deformity of the penis, “excessive pain”, and bleeding so severe it required blood transfusion.



NSS campaigns officer Dr Alejandro Sanchez, who led the research, spoke about our findings at the Worldwide Day of Genital Autonomy in Cologne in May.

Complaints to the GMC relate only to circumcisions performed by qualified doctors. The harms caused by individuals who are not medically trained, but can legally also carry out circumcision, are likely even greater.

We sent our findings to public health minister Neil O'Brien. We hope these will shatter the myth that circumcision is a simple, painless and risk-free procedure, which is so often repeated by religious proponents.

For compassionate laws on assisted dying

In January, we called for legal reforms in response to the first ever parliamentary inquiry into assisted dying in England and Wales.

We said religious institutions have been a key driver of opposition to greater patient choice at the end of life. The

religious views of some should not restrict the choices of others, we argued.

Unfortunately, key players in the debate keep their religious affiliations hidden. In June, we wrote to the UK's largest doctors' union, the British Medical Association, to raise concerns that several representatives failed to declare their membership of the Christian Medical Fellowship at the 2021 Annual Representative Meeting.

Revealing the problems of hospital chaplaincy

We published new figures in April which reveal the NHS has made an approximately 20% real terms cut to chaplaincy over a 10 year period.

This apparent deprioritising of chaplaincy may indicate the increasingly questionable necessity and appropriateness of hospital chaplains. Despite Christians being a minority in England and Wales, 80% of hospital chaplains are Christian.

What's more, there have been several incidents where chaplains' religious beliefs have come into conflict with their duty to patients. The latest example came in August, when we raised concerns with St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust after photographs emerged of their Muslim chaplain Suliman Gani meeting with a Taliban minister in Afghanistan. Gani is also reported to have made anti-gay and anti-woman statements.

Women's health

We've continued our work this year to protect women's health and wellbeing from the threat of patriarchal religious ideology:

- In December, we wrote to the minister for women's health voicing concerns that women are being denied vaginal ultrasounds because of medical staff's religious beliefs about virginity. The government confirmed this denial breaches GMC guidelines. The GMC agreed to investigate the matter further.
- We've said the government must tackle religious ideology fuelling so-called 'honour-based' abuse in response to a Women and Equalities Committee inquiry on violence against women and girls.



Nicky Campbell discusses the ‘big questions’ at Bradlaugh Lecture

We were delighted to host broadcaster and journalist Nicky Campbell for the 2023 Bradlaugh Lecture.

Campbell is perhaps best known amongst secularists for hosting *The Big Questions* – an ethical and religious debate show which ran on BBC1 between 2007 and 2021. Through this show, Campbell provided a crucial space for religious and nonreligious people alike to come together and robustly debate often highly controversial topics with candour and good humour.

At the lecture, Campbell reflected on his work exploring issues of religion and society and shared his insights into the media’s treatment of religion. He said robust debate should serve as a “stress test” for beliefs and could lead to moments of consensus and mutual understanding. But he warned the desire to have “a bloody good row” had been overtaken by a fear of causing offence.

A tribute to Barbara Smoker

In June, we celebrated the life of one of our longest-serving presidents: Barbara Smoker, who died in 2020.

Family, friends and colleagues gave speeches remembering Barbara at a memorial event at Conway Hall in London. All agreed she had been ahead of her time and that many of the causes she fought for are now taken for granted.



Our first ‘secular social’

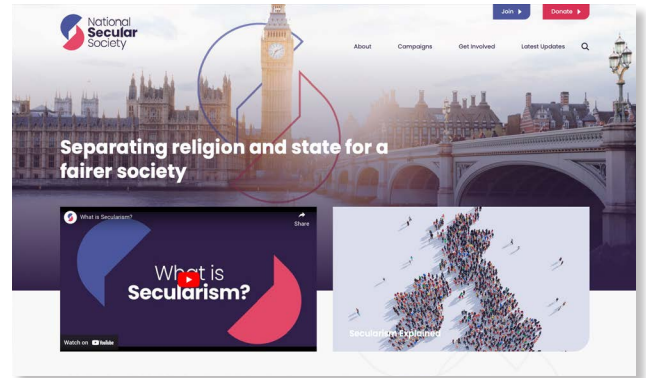
In July, we held our first ever ‘secular social’ for NSS members at the Old Nick pub in London. It gave our members a chance to meet each other and the NSS staff team in a relaxed social setting. It was well attended and received excellent feedback. We plan to hold similar events in the future.

A bold new look for the NSS

This year we rolled out our fresh new brand and website, complete with a new logo designed to represent the values we stand for – equality, balance and open dialogue.



It’s a bold new look for a bold vision: a secular democracy where everyone is treated equally, regardless of religion or belief. We’re grateful to members and supporters who gave their input to the rebranding process.



WHO WE ARE

Council



Keith Porteous Wood
President



Josephine Macintosh
Vice-President



Richard Scorer
Vice-President



Mike Harley
Treasurer



Eoin Carter



Robert Forder



Sadikur Rahman



Richard Shoykov



Dorothy Smith



Julius Weinberg

Staff



Stephen Evans
Chief Executive Officer



Megan Manson
Head of Campaigns



Helen Nicholls
Head of Operations



Fódhla Brady
Membership and
Engagement Officer



Jack Rivington
Campaigns Officer



Alejandro Sanchez
Campaigns Officer

THANKS

Thanks to:

Claudine Baxter, our longest serving volunteer, for many years of administrative assistance.

Dominic Wirdman and Tom Shaw for research assistance.

Barry Thorpe for parliamentary monitoring, copyediting and proof-reading.

Stewart Ware for copyediting and proof-reading.

Alastair Gordon for office assistance.

Richard Duncker for event filming.

Bradley Davis of WhiteLight Design.

Antony Lempert, head of our Medical Expertise Network.

Keith Sharpe and Christopher Higgins for their assistance on education campaigns.

If you are interested in volunteering for the NSS, please send an email to admin@secularism.org.uk. Please let us know a little about yourself and what kind of volunteer work you are interested in.

Affiliated groups

We would like to thank all our affiliated groups, especially those who have hosted NSS speakers. Groups can request speakers and NSS materials by sending an email to membership@secularism.org.uk.

Any group or organisation that supports our aims can affiliate to the NSS. See www.secularism.org.uk/join-an-affiliated-group for more information.



NSS head of operations Helen Nicholls (centre; front) spoke at NSS affiliate group North East Humanists in April.

Members and supporters

We would like to thank all our members for their support and commitment. There are many ways to support the NSS and we would like to thank everyone who supported our cause by making donations, assisting with campaign work, sharing our content, coming to our events and keeping us informed of relevant issues.

We would also like to thank all those members who have remembered us in their will. We are very grateful that so many members make us part of their legacy. Their generous support secures the future of the NSS and allows us to continue our campaigns with confidence.

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





Why support the NSS?

"Born and raised an atheist, I rebelled against compulsory religious education at my grammar school. Now that Christianity is becoming a minority religion in the country it's time for the disestablishment of the CofE and all its privileges. So all power to your collective elbow!"

Sandra, Yorkshire

"I want to see an end to religious interference in normal life at every level from infant school to the House of Lords. As a retired RAF officer, I object to religious ceremony being automatically included in national and local remembrance events."

Colin, Devon

"As an Iranian ex-Muslim I am a strong believer in ideals of secularism and wish to do my part to advance secularism in any part of the world, in any way I am able to."

Soorena, Oxfordshire

"NSS needs all the financial and intellectual support it can get to challenge the vested interests that stand in the way of the many necessary reforms that religious privilege continues to obstruct."

Geoffrey, Gloucestershire

"Secularism must be promoted and protected if citizens are to be free."

Glenn, Worcestershire

"The UK should remove any religious privilege around free speech. It's only through the right to free expression that we can search for truth and enjoy shared values. Any limit on our ability to critique privilege is a limit on our freedom and growth."

Lisa, Worcestershire

"I totally agree with the secularisation of schools. My grandchildren have to attend CofE primary schools purely because of the proximity to where they live. Some families have no choice. This made me start to wonder why this is the case and I found your organisation. I totally support your cause."

Bridget, Lancashire

"The bishops in the House of Lords have never represented secularists like me, and they never will. Indeed, their failure to deal with child abuse within the Church of England demonstrates that they are totally unfit to wield power in today's world."

Valerie, Sussex

"You will make the world a better place."

Ian, Wiltshire

The Secular Charter

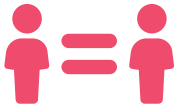
The National Secular Society campaigns for a secular democracy, where:



There is no established state religion.



The state does not express religious beliefs or preferences and does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine.



Everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief.



The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.



The judicial process is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.



There is freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion.



Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.



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



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.



Individuals and groups are neither accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.