

A remembrance for all?

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War – a war that reached out and touched almost everyone’s life in some way or other. This year’s ceremony of remembrance at the Cenotaph should be particularly poignant.

But as ever, large parts of the ceremony will resemble a religious service, and be dominated by the Church of England.

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

On page 4, historian, broadcaster and NSS honorary associate Dan Snow sets out why he considers remembrance to be one of our most important duties as citizens – and why he considers it vital that the ceremony at the Cenotaph both reflects the society it serves and feels as relevant and profound today as when it was first conceived.

In order to achieve this, he argues, Remembrance Day should be fully inclusive of all members

of British society. In a religiously diverse nation such as ours, where large sectors of the population do not hold or practise religious beliefs (50.6% of the population at last count), and when so many of those commemorated were not Christian, the Church is not best placed to lead the nation in remembrance. Remembrance ceremonies in France are led by the head of state, political or civic leaders and are no less dignified.

The Government claims to be committed to making sure that we participate in important celebrations and commemorations “as a nation”. For the reasons set out above, we have written to the Government calling on them to reconsider the dominant role of the Church in our national ceremony of remembrance.



Also in this issue:

**School standards and
‘British Values’**
page 2

**Compulsory Worship in
schools: help us take action**
page 3

Exclusive:
**Dan Snow’s thoughts
on remembrance**
pages 4–5



NSS responds to Government consultation on school standards and ‘British values’

A Government commissioned report into the Birmingham ‘Trojan Horse’ affair uncovered “co-ordinated, deliberate and sustained action to introduce an intolerant and aggressive Islamist ethos into some schools in the city”. In response, the Government has announced measures to tackle religious extremism in schools by reinforcing principles of equality and fundamental values.

The National Secular Society, which has repeatedly warned the Department for Education against the dangers of extremism, has broadly welcomed the Government plans. But in a submission to the

Department for Education (DfE), has argued that the proposed standards don’t go far enough.

The new proposals will require schools to actively promote the “fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs”.

Our submission argued that any new duty on schools to actively promote the values of equality should include schools leading by example. With this in mind we called for the repeal of exemptions from equality legislation that enable the selection of both staff and

pupils on the basis of faith.

We also argued that schools should be required to ensure that all aspects of the curriculum, including assemblies, are inclusive and respectful of all pupils, regardless of their religion or belief, including non-belief.

The proposed new standards are a step in the right direction, but are an inadequate substitute for a wholesale review of the role of religion in schools and a national debate about whether the religious inculcation of children should be permissible at all in publicly funded education.

Ofsted withdraws guidance condoning segregation in faith schools

In June Ofsted withdrew guidance telling inspectors that segregating boys and girls is acceptable in Muslim schools, after we accused the schools regulator of a capitulation to religious demands.

Ofsted’s guidance on inspecting faith schools advised inspectors that gender segregation in faith schools should not be taken as a sign of inequality. It also suggested that art and music lessons in Muslim schools could be “restricted”, that health and sex education would be taught within Islamic studies and that daily prayers will often “dictate the shape of the school day”.



In a section on “etiquette”, female inspectors were also advised how to dress when inspecting Muslim and Jewish schools.

We are pleased to report that Ofsted subsequently withdrew the guidance, pending a review.

Increase in ‘faith schools’ continues to limit parental choice

In a meeting with Department for Education officials, we raised concerns that the school places crisis in England is being exacerbated by the presence of faith schools.

As many as two thirds of local authorities are predicted to have a shortage of primary school places by 2016. With a finite number of places available, a system of schools delineated along religious lines is clearly inefficient and impractical.

In recent months we’ve been assisting a number of parents experiencing difficulty obtaining a place at a “secular” school. Examples include: a number of families allocated places at a Hindu school despite not listing it as one of their preferences; parents told that the only state education available to them is at a church school; and a child from a Turkish Cypriot family allocated a place at a Greek orthodox free school.

The growing incidence of such cases highlight the need for a secular education system where all schools are appropriate for all pupils, regardless of their religious background.

NSS steps up calls to end compulsory worship in schools

With political parties developing their education policies ahead of the 2015 general election, we've been calling on them to commit to removing the 70 year-old requirement on schools to hold acts of worship.

England and Wales remain the only countries in the world to require children in all maintained schools, even those with no religious designation, to "take part" in a daily act of collective worship (CW) that is "wholly or mainly of a Christian character".

The requirement is as unpopular as it is outdated. An estimated two thirds of secondary school pupils are non-believers and resentment amongst parents is evident from the many complaints we receive. Many schools disregard the law, which has become unenforceable.

But where the law is followed it violates pupils' religious freedom.

The potential harm to community

cohesion of a law requiring 'broadly Christian' worship was also highlighted by a report commissioned by Birmingham City Council following the 'Trojan Horse' affair. One of the recommendations of the report was for the Council to consider leading a debate about the requirements of secular schools to provide a daily act of collective worship.

In our representations to all main political parties, we've argued that the removal of the collective worship requirement would encourage schools to provide assemblies that are inclusive, effective and relevant for all pupils, regardless of their religious or non-religious beliefs.

In June the National Governors' Association, which represents 300,000 school governors in England, joined calls for the religious element of daily school assemblies to be scrapped, describing the law as an "anomaly in

a multicultural nation".

Then, in July, even the outgoing Bishop of Oxford and Chair of the Church of England's Board of Education acknowledged that participation in collective worship is more suited to the 1940s and "meaningless" to people who do not believe. He suggested it should be replaced by "spiritual reflection", drawing largely on what he described as "Christian values".

In recent weeks we've discussed our concerns about the requirement to worship in schools with the Department for Education and called on the Education Select Committee to investigate the appropriateness of the law.

We've also launched a petition at Change.org urging parties to commit to remove the statutory requirement at the earliest possible opportunity. Please help us to keep up the pressure!

Take action:

Please sign the petition at <http://bit.ly/endcollectiveworship> or via our website.

Contact your MP: Ask your MP to support calls to remove the legal obligation on schools to hold acts of collective worship and to ensure that assemblies are inclusive, meaningful and relevant for all pupils.



Dan Snow:

A secular remembrance

It is one of the most important events of the year. I remember my Dad taking me when I was a boy. Pressed against the temporary railings, overwhelmed by the power of the British state's simplest yet most moving ritual. On the nearest Sunday to November 11th, the eyes of the United Kingdom and many in the Commonwealth are focussed on Whitehall and the Cenotaph. It is unique. The leaders of the political parties stand side by side,

their bickering stilled for an hour, the Queen in jet black, alone, bows her head with a mournful gratitude and then the veterans march past, obviously enjoying the chance to meet old friends and grieve for old comrades.

If people choose just one event to engage with from all the ceremony and theatre of the British calendar, it should be the Remembrance. There is no greater sacrifice than giving one's life for one's fellow citizens,

and, correspondingly, there is no greater responsibility we have as voters, than to send our armed forces into harm's way on our behalf.

Yet for many of us in today's Britain, this important ceremony is diminished by the dominance of a religion which fewer and fewer people follow. An Anglican bishop presides over a portion of the ceremony. His fellow Imams, Priests, Patriarchs and Primate stand by like also-rans and there is no sign

Following the First World War, the Cenotaph was designed deliberately as a secular commemoration because the war dead were from a dizzying array of peoples, nations and creeds.



The Cenotaph: a brief history

The existing Cenotaph, unveiled in 1920 to replace a temporary structure erected the previous year, was designed at the direction of the Cabinet by Edwin Lutyens as a national secular memorial bearing no religious symbols, in recognition of the religious diversity of the fallen.

There is clear evidence that the Church of England fought strongly against this, determined that all aspects of remembrance would be dominated by Christianity. It proposed that the annual state ceremony of remembrance should instead be a religious one conducted in Westminster Abbey. The public opposition to this was so strong, however, that it was abandoned. The Church did, however, succeed in having a Christian inscription on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Westminster Abbey, in defiance of a contrary cabinet decision that the tomb would be secular.

The Cenotaph: A contested and consensual symbol of remembrance – an academic paper by Professor Norman Bonney examining the origins of the Cenotaph and the ceremonies surrounding it is available at the NSS website. <http://bit.ly/nsscenotaph>

of a secular representative. We live in a country where around half the population say they have no religion. Fewer of us than ever are active believers in the Christianity of the Church of England. There is a great danger that letting a bishop dominate and by refusing to admit a secular presence at the ceremony, it will be diminished or even ignored by modern Britons.

There is nothing new in this desire to better reflect the world in which we live. Following the First World War the Cenotaph was designed by Edwin Lutyens deliberately as a secular commemoration because the war dead were from a dizzying array of peoples, nations and creeds. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, backed him up. He insisted on a secular monument and he rejected an alternative proposal for a huge cross at Admiralty Arch. The Government also rejected Church of England proposals that it should have Christian inscriptions on it or a cross on top of it. The unveiling, by King George V on 11 November 1920, was followed by a simple two minutes silence. Many in the church were appalled by the lack of ritual.

The Cenotaph is a state memorial. It is not a religious one. 26,000 serving members of the Armed Forces today describe themselves as having 'no religion', which makes the non-religious the second largest belief group (after Christianity). We cannot continue to exclude a representative of these serving men and women, not to mention the tens of thousands of people of 'no religion' who served in the World Wars, men like my Grandpa, and many of his comrades.

Remembrance is one of our most important duties as citizens. The act itself must reflect changing times. The event at the Cenotaph every November must feel as relevant and profound today as it was when it was first conceived. It must reflect the society it serves. If people switch off, they will forget. And when we forget, we repeat.



Image: christodanney / Shutterstock.com

Parliamentary Bill tabled to abolish chancel repair liability

Several NSS members are among thousands who have recently received notices from the Land Registry informing them that a nearby Anglican church has registered claims that they are liable to repair part of the church.

Owners of land that in mediaeval times carried with it a liability to repair a church can still be liable today.

In September, the issue was featured on *Rip Off Britain*, the BBC consumer rights programme.



Helen Bailey on *Rip Off Britain*

The programme featured the story of NSS member Helen Bailey, who campaigned vigorously to challenge the registration after realising that it would reduce the value of her property and impair its saleability.

A number of other NSS members have acted resolutely on having their property registered. Some have succeeded in having the registrations reversed, or look soon to having the liability quashed for a nominal fee. But, for most, the registration remains. Insurance is not a solution for those whose property is registered for chancel repair liability (CRL).

We have now teamed up with honorary associate Lord Avebury to table the Chancel Repairs Bill to abolish CRL completely.

The Bill has passed its first reading and the Bill and its explanatory notes are available on the parliamentary website.

It builds on the recommendation of the Church and the Law Commission



Lord Avebury tabled the Chancel Repairs Bill in the House of Lords

in the 1980s and the Law Society more recently to abolish or at least phase out CRL.

The Bill would only pass through Parliament with the cooperation of the Government, which would probably be contingent on the acquiescence of the Church. However registrations have been very unpopular and our next step is to discuss the Bill with the Church and explore how this unjust liability can be ended.

NSS meets with Law Society over sharia guidance

In August we met with the Law Society to discuss our concerns over it issuing a practice note to guide solicitors where clients have sought sharia-compliant wills.

There are numerous schools of Islamic “law”, which is not codified. As the Law Society’s guidance makes clear, under such wills non-Muslims, adopted children or those born to parents who are not married cannot benefit, only spouses from Muslim marriages are entitled to benefit and women routinely only receive half that of males of the same inheritance category.

We objected to the practice note on the grounds that it encouraged such discrimination, legitimised sharia “law”, and was in essence religious, rather than legal, advice.

Following our discussions with senior officials of the Law Society, they agreed to further consider the possible withdrawal of the practice note and, failing that, our proposed amendments to it.

We also used the opportunity to share wider concerns about the adverse implications, especially for women, of sharia and religious arbitration and its growing *de facto* use undermining the principle of one law for all.



Witchcraft accusations in modern Britain

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

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

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

In August, when we discovered that the Church’s UK branch was seeking to open an independent faith school in Dartford, we raised our concerns with the Department for Education, who are currently considering the school’s application.

They had not been aware of the Church’s association with belief in witchcraft and the actions of its leader. We hope the DfE will give serious consideration to the reliability of the school’s commitment to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.



Pentecostal pastor David Oyedepo slaps a young girl

EHRC consults on religion and belief issues

In August the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) launched a major call for evidence asking people about how their religion or belief (including non-belief), or that of other people, may have affected their experiences in the workplace and in using the services and facilities they need in everyday life.

The Commission says it will use the evidence as part of its work looking at assessing the effectiveness of current equality and human rights legislation on religion or belief.

It may be no coincidence that around the launch there was a rash of uncritically publicised articles promoting the narrative that Christians are somehow persecuted in the UK – including one from the former Attorney General Dominic Grieve. The Christian lobby groups behind the constant promotion of ‘persecuted Christians’ cases are using the consultation to push for conscience exemptions from equality laws, and privileged treatment of

Christians in the workplace generally.

Despite cases of aggrieved Christians gaining national attention, little success has been achieved when they have come before the courts. Courts in both the UK and Europe have overwhelmingly upheld principles of secularism – achieving a fair balance by protecting people’s right to belief, but limiting the

manifestation of that belief where necessary to protect of the rights and freedoms of others.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

One area we hope the EHRC consultation will highlight is the unfair treatment resulting from religion’s dominant role in our education system – including discrimination against teachers in employment and against pupils in admissions.

We have submitted a response and have been urging our members to submit their own experiences to the Commission. Contributions must be made via the EHRC website by 14th October 2014.

Local authority consults EHRC following NSS criticism

In September we criticised a decision by Central Bedfordshire Council to reinstate a Christian registrar who was previously dismissed after refusing to conduct same-sex weddings.

The Council’s decision was portrayed widely in the media as a “victory” by Christian lobbyists keen to gain exemptions from equality legislation. However, the case did not go to an employment tribunal and the decision sets no legal precedent.

Following our public criticism, Central Bedfordshire contacted the Equality and Human Rights Commission with a view to clarifying their understanding of the law in this area, and look unlikely to accommodate refusals in future.

Existing EHRC guidance is clear that, while employers may consider requests for an opt-out, “when someone is providing a public service, they cannot, because of their religion or belief, discriminate unlawfully against customers or service users”. The case of *Ladele v London Borough of Islington* established that a registrar has no right to an exemption from providing public services to same-sex couples on grounds of religious belief. This ruling was upheld by the European Court of Human Rights following an intervention from the NSS and EHRC.



Christian lobby groups have used a number of spurious ‘discrimination’ cases to argue for greater accommodation of Christian beliefs in the workplace

NSS supports calls for statutory SRE in all schools

In June we called for age-appropriate sex and relationship education (SRE) to be made a statutory part of the national curriculum, amid concerns that children and young people are not being guaranteed good quality SRE.

In a submission to an Education Select Committee inquiry investigating whether Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) ought to be statutory, we called on the

Government to ensure all children receive impartial, evidence-based SRE with no permitted opt-outs or exemptions for any free schools or academies, including those with a faith-based ethos.

In 2013 Ofsted warned that young people denied SRE of a sufficiently good quality are left vulnerable to inappropriate sexual behaviours and exploitation.



Event: A new Magna Carta?

Parliament's Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee has launched a major consultation into the possibility of a 'New Magna Carta'.

While many would like to see a written constitution that declares the United Kingdom to be a secular state, others are concerned that current inequalities and religious privileges, such as the established church, could become entrenched in a written constitution which could not be easily amended.

At a public event at Conway Hall on 4 December, Graham Allen MP, chair of the Committee, and Dr Bob Morris, from the UCL Constitution Unit, will set out the arguments for and against a written constitution for the UK and the secular implications thereof.

This event is free to attend and open to all but you must register to attend by emailing admin@secularism.org.uk or by calling 020 7404 3126.

Refreshments will be provided.

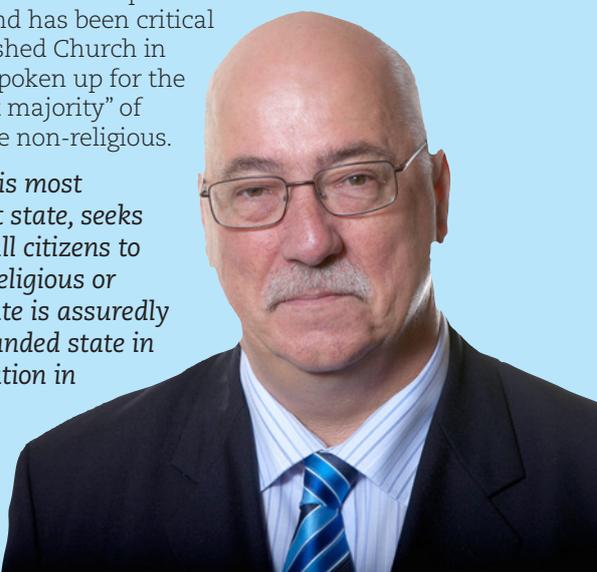
New honorary associate Lord Harrison

This summer we welcomed Lord Harrison of Chester to our panel of honorary associates.

In Parliament Lord Harrison has spoken in defence of secularism and has been critical of the role of the established Church in education. He has also spoken up for the recognition of the "silent majority" of non-worshippers and the non-religious.

"A secular state, which is most avowedly not an atheist state, seeks to protect the rights of all citizens to hold their own beliefs, religious or otherwise. A secular state is assuredly an open and an even-handed state in which people's participation in public institutions does not depend on their religious or non-religious convictions."

– Lord Harrison in 2010



Dates for your diary

Saturday 29 November
NSS AGM

Conway Hall 1.30pm
Registration starts 1pm

Thursday 4 December
A new Magna Carta?

Conway Hall 6pm
Doors 5.30pm

Saturday 28 March, 2015
Secularist of the Year 2015

Central London
12 noon – 4pm

Thanks

Claudine Baxter for her help with membership administration

Nicklas Chapman, Sam Peters and **Will Warley** for their help transcribing evidence from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's ground-breaking public examination of the Holy See.

Bradley Davis of WhiteLight for graphic design.

Peter Fisher, Tom Hart and **Elaine Hession** for their help with research into chancel repair liability.

Barry Thorpe for his huge help in general research and in transcribing, analysing and summarising evidence from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's examination of the Holy See, referred to above.

national secular society **Bulletin**

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