

Is this the best way to build a more cohesive society?



Islamist terror plots, anti-Semitism fuelled by Islamists and the far-right, attacks on mosques by rival sects and other extremists and violent disruptions of inter-faith weddings by Sikh fundamentalists all point to a creeping sectarianism in Britain.

Politicians are at last openly discussing the causes of extremism and how to respond to it. Unfortunately, their response does not yet include an end to the proliferation of religious schools. A secular state with a truly inclusive and secular education system, where children of all faith backgrounds are educated together, offers the best hope for a society in which all its citizens, regardless of religious belief, or lack of religious belief, can live together fairly and cohesively. With your help, that's the message we intend to get across.



Also inside: Our executive director reviews the Prime Minister's recent speech on 'non-violent extremism'.



Page 3: How the Vatican continues to put public relations before justice on child abuse.

Extremism and Community Cohesion



We cautiously welcomed the [Prime Minister's speech on extremism](#) in July. While many secular and liberal groups, including Muslim groups, have made similar points for some time, this was the clearest indication yet of a fundamental rethink by the Government.

It is a far cry from former PM Tony Blair's appeasement of extremists, for example failing to prosecute those threatening to kill Salman Rushdie or the 2007 police attempt to prosecute Channel 4 for exposing hate speech in its *Undercover Mosque* programme. This appeasement left extremism to grow unchecked, abandoned liberal and secular reformers and weakened civil society's ability to defend human rights.

Many of Mr Cameron's newly-voiced areas of concern and his potential solutions have strong echoes of what the NSS has been advocating over the last fifteen years. Examples include the review of 'sharia courts', acknowledging extremist efforts to take over some schools and the failure of universities and other civil society organisations to recognise and confront extremist groups, often using entryist tactics. Alongside this acknowledgment, his claim that "universities are bastions of free speech" seemed more aspirational than realistic.

It's extremely worrying to see so many on the left of politics and civil society acting as apologists, naïvely or otherwise, for Islamist extremists. As Mr Cameron said, we must distinguish between Muslims and the

religiopolitical ideology of Islamism, in order to effectively challenge both Islamism and anti-Muslim bigotry.

Special mention must be made of our honorary associate Maajid Nawaz, a former extremist himself, who founded the counter-extremism think tank Quilliam, for his influence on the speech.

Mr Cameron acknowledged "past mistakes [in anti-extremism strategies] – when funding was simply handed over to self-appointed 'community leaders' who sometimes used the money in a divisive way". He claimed "many strong positive Muslim voices" are being ignored by the media. However a top European news reporter told me recently that when he had tried to quote such voices they refused, for fear it "would be like placing a target on my back".

The "past mistakes" Mr Cameron acknowledged must take some of the blame. When Government treats the most reactionary 'community leaders' as authentic or representative – and the media follow their lead – it privileges them and sidelines the reformers best able to challenge extremism.

We should support those who are prepared to speak out constructively, such as Manzoor Moghal, chair of the Muslim Forum, who said "we Muslims must stop blaming others for the way our young are radicalised". Perhaps the worst example of this is parents and siblings of those leaving to fight in Syria blaming the security services for failing to stop them.

Other aspects of the speech were less encouraging, especially potentially draconian legislation and the cavalier attitude to freedom of expression, examples of which include proposed Extremism Disruption Orders and greater internet surveillance. Restricting free speech and other human rights risks weakening the robust civil society needed to challenge extremism and sectarianism.

Mr Cameron asserts that "this extremist ideology is not true Islam", however he does acknowledge that "[t]o deny it has anything to do with

Islam means you disempower the critical reforming voices".

However well-intentioned, accepting claims that extremism is not "true Islam" risks legitimising the idea that certain interpretations should be privileged. If so – argue the extremists – why not theirs?

The biggest disappointment was how close Mr Cameron came to addressing the [threat faith schools pose to community cohesion](#) ("[i]n our most divided communities the education that our young people receive is actually even more segregated than the neighbourhoods they live in"), before blithely dismissing the obvious solution: "nor should we try to dismantle faith schools".

Instead Mr Cameron focussed on half measures such as more integrated schools in divided communities and only allowing new faith academies and free schools to religiously discriminate in half of their admissions. But even when minority faith schools don't discriminate many parents don't want to send their children to schools that may make them feel unwelcome or whose ethos they disagree with.

We've also heard from Sikh and Muslim parents who don't want to feel pressured into sending their children to Sikh/Muslim schools and in February a poll showed two-thirds of Muslim parents wouldn't want their children to go to a Muslim state school, if given the choice.

The NSS is playing an increasing role in this debate. I had the opportunity to make some of these points at round table meetings, with the Vice-President of the European Commission and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. The tide is turning and our voice is now being heard.

Keith Porteous Wood

Catholic hierarchy continue to block access to justice

The Vatican continues to focus on public relations initiatives to create the illusion of effective action being taken over child rape and other violence against minors by clerics.

An example is the much-vaunted commission on child abuse, which is composed of lay members with no power. If it had wanted to be effective, the Vatican should have implemented the damning Concluding Observations of the international panel of experts of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on the Holy See (Vatican). At the top of their list was requiring the Church worldwide to report suspected abusers to secular justice authorities and to release all information on abuse to them. Instead, the Vatican largely ignored the Observations and even attacked the Committee.

The next initiative was a 'tribunal' to examine the behaviour of bishops relative to child abuse. Yet this is to be administered by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, the former Inquisition, which has proved not just ineffective in dealing with child abuse, but has actively shielded perpetrators from justice.

Tellingly, the tribunal was set up

shortly after the first successful criminal prosecutions of senior clerics for being complicit in the endangerment of children. It comes close to providing a "get out of jail free" painless alternative to secular justice; the very worst punishment is defrocking, the same as for allowing women to officiate as priests.

The Vatican responded to the Pope's representative to the Dominican Republic, Josef Wesolowski, being accused of multiple counts of child abuse by secretly returning him to the Vatican as a fugitive, and by refusing requests to extradite him for a criminal trial. Instead, the Vatican, eventually and after a great deal of pressure, initiated its own trial, but almost certainly without vital witnesses or a properly independent prosecutor. And the trial was aborted before it started because Wesolowski was considered too ill to be tried, and he has since died.

The NSS has exploited all opportunities to hold the Holy See to account.

We also [revealed that two orders of nuns](#) (the Poor Sisters of Nazareth and the Daughters of Charity of

St Vincent De Paul) had sought through a judicial review to frustrate the appointment of a chair to the inquiry in Scotland on child abuse. Both orders had a horrific record on child abuse, which they have admitted and had apologised for. While we are concerned that the breadth of the terms of reference of this inquiry are far too narrow, its powers are substantial, and nuns in these orders could yet face charges.

The UK's five-year examination by the UNCRC is coming up. As part of our [wide-ranging briefing](#), we have called on the Committee to demand that all diplomatic avenues are exploited and pressure applied to "secure cooperation and the recovery of necessary evidence" held by the Catholic Church (including under the aegis of the Vatican) concerning sexual and other violence against minors.

We have also called on the Committee to press the UK Government on stalled efforts to introduce mandatory reporting of suspicions of child abuse, including within religious organisations. The Committee has already brought pressure on the government of Ireland to do this.



Religion and the curriculum: some progress!

There have been several significant developments in recent months, most notably [reforms to Religious Education in Wales](#) announced by Minister for Education and Skills, Huw Lewis.

As reported in the previous *Bulletin*, our executive director and campaigns manager met with Mr Lewis in January to discuss our concerns about the role of religion in schools. The Welsh Government's reforms include reforming RE and renaming it "religion, philosophy and ethics", an area the NSS discussed with the Minister.

We wrote to Mr Lewis in August offering further support. We hope the reforms in Wales will set a precedent for the rest of the UK.

In June, our campaigns manager attended the launch event in Parliament of a [new policy proposal](#) from the former education secretary Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead. It called for the abolition of the law requiring collective worship in all English schools as part of a wider review of the role of religion and belief in schools. The proposal called for moderate reform

of RE, but unfortunately supported the continuation of faith schools.

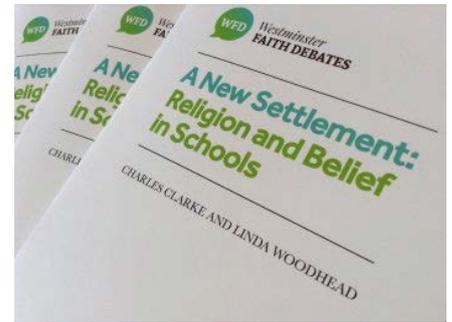
In response to the report, the CofE said that they "strongly supported" the requirement for schools to provide a daily act of (broadly) Christian worship.

Our constructive feedback regarding the proposal's failure to confront the issue of faith schools was invited by the report's authors.

While we advocate incremental reforms within the current system, the NSS continues to focus on one of our most important long-term aims: a secular education system. We hope



Huw Lewis announces his plans for curriculum reform to the Welsh Assembly



to change the long-held view among policy makers that faith schools are off limits, a 'sacred cow'.

The increase in religious diversity and the emergence of a non-religious majority make a faith-based educational system increasingly unworkable. It also exacerbates social segregation, a problem closely linked to radicalisation.

The urgent need for a more integrated society, rising public opposition to faith schools, the precedent of reforms in Wales, and the Clarke-Woodhead proposals give us hope that, with our members' continued support, we can at last make progress towards a truly secular education system.

NSS demands answers after pupils banned from socialising with "outsiders"

In July [we called on the DfE](#) to investigate an independent 'school' run by the Institute of Islamic Education in Dewsbury after it threatened students with expulsion if they socialised with "outsiders". The Minister promised us he would look into the case to ensure compliance with the relevant regulatory standards.

We have also called on Ofsted to justify its previous inspections of the school which judged it to be as "good" – albeit before the new tougher standards were introduced.

Speaking on Sky News, our

executive director warned that single-faith schools that promote their faith above all others risk giving their pupils the impression that people of other faiths, sects or denominations were somehow "inferior".

We have frequently spoken out about insufficient regulation of independent schools and, following our calls for better regulation, the DfE has introduced tougher regulatory standards.

In April, our campaigns manager Stephen Evans warned that children were being left to "languish" in illegal religious schools. For over a year we've urged the Government to look closely into children from religious minority backgrounds being withdrawn from mainstream education – and are pleased the



Keith Porteous Wood on Sky News

Prime Minister raised the issue in his speech on extremism.

Children are going missing from the education system, and powers contained within the Education Act 2002 that can be used to prosecute proprietors of unregistered independent schools are hardly ever utilised.

New Education Bill risks stealth increase in ‘faith schools’

We are concerned that the new Education and Adoption Bill, requiring ‘coasting’ schools to become academies, [runs the risk of increasing the proportion of faith based schools](#).

In a formal submission to the Bill Committee we raised concerns that, without adequate safeguards, schools eligible for intervention which join faith academy chains could be at risk of acquiring a religious designation or a more loosely defined ‘faith ethos’, without parents and other stakeholders being consulted.

We have written to the Schools Minister Nick Gibb seeking assurances that upon conversion, or shortly thereafter, no non-religiously designated school would be permitted to acquire a religious designation or ‘faith ethos’.

We’ve warned that the academisation of local authority controlled schools could risk faith-based organisations gaining greater control over school curriculums, admissions arrangements and employment practices – leading to even greater discrimination and unfairness in our education system.

Seeking to allay our concerns, the Church of England’s representative in the Commons, Caroline Spelman, told fellow MPs that if non-religious schools joined Church federations, it would be possible to maintain the “individuality of each school”.

However, the examples used in



her intervention drew our attention to two cases of community schools being converted into faith schools after being taken over by a federation of Church of England schools.

The Church has made clear, in its *Church School of the Future* review, that where it has non-faith schools as part of an academy chain, it regards such schools as “part of our mission” “to promote the Christian ethos” – at public expense.

While academisation isn’t a secular issue *per se*, it has created new challenges for secularists and new avenues for those who want to use state education to advance their religion. For example, the expansion of “faith ethos” academies – schools without a formal religious designation but whose curriculum and approach can follow religious lines. The Government doesn’t keep a record of which schools have a ‘faith ethos’ and we’ve called on the DfE to do so, allowing us to monitor whether secular education is being negligently and unwittingly eroded.

Free schools’ religious admissions cap to stay

The Government has assured us that it has no intention of permitting faith-based free schools to increase the proportion of places they can allocate on the basis of religion. At present, new academies can admit up to 50% of pupils on the basis of religion.

The Society sought an [undertaking from the Government](#) after learning that the Catholic Church in England and Wales has been lobbying the DfE to lift the faith-school admissions cap. The Church is reluctant to open new free schools and academies because they fear that, without the ability to select their pupils on religious grounds, schools will lose their ‘religious focus’.

We called on the DfE to recognise that separating children on the basis of their parents’ religion is inimical to building a cohesive society, but Lord Nash, the minister responsible for faith schools, said the Government had no intention to completely remove faith schools’ freedom to admit pupils by reference to faith.

State of PSHE in faith schools exposed

In recent months we’ve exposed the truly shocking way in which personal, social and health education (PSHE) and sex and relationship education (SRE) are delivered in some faith schools and faith ethos academies.

The Diocese of Portsmouth insists that Catholic schools must promote “chastity” as the “underlying theme” of SRE. In guidelines for their schools, the Diocese claims that “Chastity can be achieved” through “supernatural means” and insist that abstinence should be promoted in SRE and that students be ‘enlightened’ about “Christian values”.

In Middlesbrough, the King’s Academy starts its SRE policy



statement by asserting that “human beings are created to a Divine design”. It warns children of the “consequences” if they ignore the “Maker’s Instructions”. It is outrageous that the taxpayer must fund such religious activity that undermines pupils’ education.

These cases highlight the

importance of the attempt by Green Party MP Caroline Lucas to [make PSHE and SRE compulsory in England](#), a reform we and other members of the Sex Education Forum wholeheartedly support. Currently, academies and faith schools can teach both subjects with a faith ethos. Even in some non-faith schools SRE is delivered by external religious groups.

In our submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in July, we urged them to [follow up on their previous formal recommendation](#) that the UK require all state schools to provide age-appropriate and objective SRE.

Anti-witchcraft' church drops plans to open UK school

We're pleased to report that a Christian group which linked child disobedience with witchcraft has withdrawn its application to open an independent school after the NSS called on the Department for Education (DfE) not to grant it registered status.

The organisation behind the proposed school, which has its headquarters in Nigeria, is known as Living Faith Church Worldwide and also Winners' Chapel International.

The organisation's bid to open its first UK school in Kent was [thwarted by the NSS](#) after we drew media attention to the Church's teachings and footage of its leader slapping a young girl after accusing her of witchcraft.



Council Prayers: "a bit of an oddity"

Council prayers have been back on our agenda after a number of councillors contacted us to express their desire to remove prayers from their council's meetings. A dwindling number of local authorities begin their meetings with prayers, but where they do we are working with local councillors to assist them in challenging the practice.

In July, our campaigns manager Stephen Evans appeared on local BBC News after Lyme Regis Town Council proposed to reintroduce prayers during its meetings. Our appeals to the Council to ensure that local democracy was as open and inclusive as possible were reported in the local media.

Responding to criticism, Mayor Owen Lovell said if a councillor were elected who objected to the practice, the Council would "reconsider its position" and accepted that Lyme Regis was "a bit of an oddity".

While the Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Act 2015 made it lawful for local authorities in England to hold prayers in meetings, we continue to argue that it is wrong in principle for councils to do so and are hopeful the practice will fade away.

NSS defends pastor in free speech row

Together with Christian groups, an imam and free speech activists, we have [protested against the prosecution](#) under the Communications Act 2003 of Pastor James McConnell over a sermon in which he described Islam as "satanic" on the grounds that it was "grossly offensive".

While we clearly do not share Pastor McConnell's views, we will continue to defend his right to free speech, particularly given that we have seen no evidence that he incited violence.

The Public Prosecution Service of Northern Ireland rejected our complaint that their decision to prosecute McConnell was not in the public interest and was a violation of freedom of expression.

Even if the case fails it is likely to have a chilling effect on free expression. Some Christian groups have already stopped posting sermons online for fear of prosecution.

The NSS' role in defending McConnell has drawn welcome attention to this important case. *The Belfast Telegraph* revealed that the first complaint about the sermon was received by a man who had also praised the Islamic State's rule of Mosul, and that he is now the key prosecution witness, adding a particularly sinister dimension to the case.

Secularists continue campaign to outlaw caste discrimination

The NSS and honorary associate Lord Avebury have [written to the Prime Minister](#) to complain about the Government's continuing failure to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of caste. We argued that this fails to honour Parliament's twice-expressed will for such legislation and the Government's express undertakings to the UN, and constitutes a breach of our UN treaty obligations. Attached to our letter was a copy of the expert legal opinion we had commissioned concluding this.

A report, commissioned by the previous Labour government, confirmed that caste discrimination had become prevalent in the UK in a number of areas that would be covered by the equality legislation, were it extended to specifically include caste. Some attempts have been made to develop case law to include caste discrimination, but none have so far succeeded. Doing so will always be problematical and expensive, way beyond the resources of victims of caste discrimination, who because of its very nature, are likely to be economically disadvantaged.

We have worked with Lord Avebury for five years to secure this legislation, but, rather than protect the vulnerable, the present Government seems much more interested in appeasing the mainly high caste dominated Hindu organisations, many of whom are highly influential and well-resourced.

The National Council of Hindu Temples came under fire from the Charity Commission after it urged Hindus and others to back the Conservatives in the general election as they would resist legislation to specifically outlaw caste discrimination.

Our honorary associates actively supported the introduction of such legislation in a recent debate in the Lords. Powerful contributions were made by Lord Avebury, Lord Cashman, Lord Desai and Baroness Flather.



Our honorary associates Lord Cashman, Lord Desai and Baroness Flather speaking in the debate on caste discrimination

Faith in the Public Sector?

In June our campaigns manager addressed local authority representatives and other stakeholders at a Government Knowledge briefing event on the role of religion in the delivery of public services.

Community initiatives, both secular and religious, provide significant benefits to local communities across Britain and social action by faith based organisations continues to make a significant contribution to the welfare of our society. However, in an age of the 'Big Society' and marketisation of public services, the Government seems increasingly keen to contract out public services to faith based organisations, which carries with it with it a number of significant risks.

Campaigns manager Stephen Evans stressed that where religious organisations are contracted to deliver public services, they should do so without discriminating against their employees, without withholding services from users on grounds of religion or sexual orientation, and without abusing their position for proselytization.

He pointed out that if faith schools offer a model of the role of faith organisations in public service delivery we can look forward to a huge level of unfairness and misuse of public money.

New research reveals NHS spends over £23m a year on chaplaincy

New research has revealed that NHS Trusts in England spent over £23 million on religious chaplaincy in the last financial year – the equivalent of employing 1,000 new nurses.

Despite chaplaincy services ostensibly being for everyone only a minuscule proportion of patient visits by religious chaplains are to patients of 'no faith'. Paid positions to provide such support are still ring-fenced for religious people with the necessary authorisation from their faith community. It is outrageous that religious bodies can determine who will and who will not be appointed to a publicly funded position.

The expenditure and discriminatory nature of chaplaincy services provoked considerable debate and our campaigns manager was interviewed about it by a number of local BBC stations. We were supported by some chaplains who agreed that if chaplaincy is a religious service [then the organisations they are attached to should pay](#).



Secularists challenge attempts to block access to reproductive healthcare

Together with the Secular Medical Forum (SMF) we've been working to protect women's access to reproductive healthcare.

We recently [joined other groups and campaigners in an open letter](#) urging the Government to protect abortion service providers and patients' right to access healthcare without harassment, after one clinic was apparently forced to close following intimidation by religious groups.

In June we and the SMF warned that the Conscientious Objection (Medical Activities) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords, would greatly expand the number of staff able to opt-out of peripheral involvement in procedures such as the termination of a pregnancy, significantly compromising the provision of patient care.

The SMF has warned that the proposed bill could even result in doctors and nurses withdrawing from providing treatment to "vulnerable patients who have different beliefs and values".

The Bill could significantly upset the delicate balance between legitimate conscientious objection and the need for safe, comprehensive healthcare. We will be carefully monitoring the Bill to see if it makes progress.

BBC fails to respond to criticisms of its approach to religious programming

Earlier this year the NSS responded to a BBC Trust consultation on the BBC's radio output, arguing that the Corporation devotes excessive resources to "exclusively religious programming, particularly when research has shown that very few people listen to it".

Research commissioned by the BBC Trust confirmed this, finding that religious radio programmes were both the "least popular" and "least well received".

According to the report, just 15% of Radio 4 listeners tune in to religious programmes, and they had the [lowest satisfaction rating of all](#) programme categories. However, the BBC is defiant: it "has no plans for changes to its output". We also argued that this content was becoming increasingly anachronistic.

We also raised our continuing objections to *Thought for the Day*, having first done so over fifty years ago. In response to our calls for the

slot also to feature non-religious speakers or be abolished, the BBC Trust stated that it featured "contributors from different faiths" – completely evading the call to provide non-religious guests.

The response was exactly as we expected, but disappointing given that the week prior to the report's release the NSS had asked whether religious programmes were effectively beyond criticism; [a suspicion which now seems to have been confirmed](#).

Defending secularism in Scotland



Our Vice-President and spokesperson for Scotland, Alistair McBay, has been busy debating the merits of secularism with the Free Church of Scotland Moderator across the opinion pages of Scottish press in recent months.

The Reverend David Robertson, who regards 'secular humanism' as the greatest current threat to civilisation, regularly uses the

Scottish press to launch broadsides against his strawman version of secularist principles.

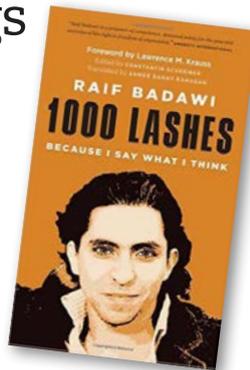
Rev David Robertson, who is also director of the Dundee-based Solas Centre for Public Christianity, recently called on the Scottish Government to "resist pressure" from secular groups who he bizarrely claimed were seeking to "remove all traces of Christianity" from Scotland's state schools.

We will be closely monitoring the Free Church Moderator's attempts to undermine secularism in Scotland and countering his claims at every opportunity.

COMPETITION

Win a copy of the writings of Raif Badawi

We're giving away a copy of *1000 Lashes: Because I Say What I Think* – a collection of writings from Raif Badawi. Raif Badawi was sentenced to 1,000 lashes, ten years in prison, and a fine of 1 million Saudi Riyals – over a quarter of a million U.S. dollars – for sharing his opinions on life in an autocratic Islamic state under the Sharia and his perception of freedom of expression, human and civil rights, tolerance and the necessary separation of state and religion. You can win a copy of Badawi's pivotal writings by answering the following question:



Name the only European country that reserves places for clerics in its legislature.

Email your answer to admin@secularism.org.uk or post it to NSS Bulletin, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL by 10 October 2015.

Dates for your diary

Saturday 28 November
NSS AGM 2015

Conway Hall, 1.30pm
Registration starts 1pm

Saturday 26 March
SECULARIST OF THE YEAR 2016

Central London
12 noon – 4pm
Tickets on sale January

Saturday 3 September
SECULARISM 2016

Central London
All day conference
Tickets on sale November 2015

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