

Bulletin

national
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challenging religious privilege

FAITH SCHOOLS AND THE FLAWS IN THE 'CHOICE' NARRATIVE

Thousands more
pupils sent to
faith schools
against parents'
preferences

Discrimination
locks children out
of local schools

Ethos of secular
schools under
threat



ALSO IN THIS EDITION:

Page 4:
Misogyny in religious
charities

Page 5:
Nazir Afzal delivers
NSS lecture

Page 8:
Push to legalise
assisted dying

Page 9:
Residential schools in
Canada: the Catholic
Church's shame



Dividing schools and society on religious lines is utterly misguided

Some people's first direct experience of religious discrimination is when they start planning their child's education. Religious schools remain part of the state education landscape in all parts of the UK. One-third of publicly funded schools in England and Wales are faith schools. In a religiously diverse and now majority nonreligious country, this is creating practical problems for families.

If their local school is a faith school, they may find themselves locked out; discriminated against on religious grounds. However, in other circumstances they may find their child allocated a religious school against their wishes. For many parents, particularly in rural areas, the only practically available school is a faith school.

An education system that tolerates discrimination against children on religious grounds and at the same time effectively forces others into faith schools is clearly unfit for purpose in 21st century Britain.

The UK government has admitted that it has no idea how many children in England are locked out of their local schools because of faith-based admissions policies. Nor does it know how many families have had to place their children in faith schools because of a lack of secular provision in their area.

"A truly inclusive secular school system that educates children together is best placed to meet the challenges of social division and foster tolerance."

Ministers may not care about this imposition of religion on families, but we do. In this edition you can read about our latest efforts to highlight the 'choice delusion' at the heart of our school system.

Parental choice is always offered up as the justification for state funding of faith schools. But as our research shows, faith schools restrict choices for many families.

Choice sounds good, but what it really amounts to when it comes to

faith schools is privileging religion and turning a blind eye to the indoctrination and segregation of pupils along religious lines. Faith schools build division into the system. And in an increasingly diverse country – where Islam is the fastest growing religion – politicians' emphasis on parental choice brings a risk of increased separatism.

A truly inclusive secular school system that educates children together is best placed to meet

the challenges of social division and foster tolerance. That's why education remains at the heart of our push for a more inclusive secular society.

Wherever religion is allowed to go unchecked – not only in education, but in all other areas of public life – individual freedoms suffer, extremism and intolerance festers and the differences between us are amplified, tearing our communities and society apart. Secularism is the bulwark against that.

NSS pushes for free speech protections

There were encouraging signs that free speech concerns which we raised over proposed communications offences in England and Wales will be addressed.

The Law Commission has proposed replacing offences which criminalise offensive or indecent communications with an individual offence which focuses on the harm they cause.

We responded to the commission's consultation earlier this year and warned that the new offence was too imprecisely drafted, meaning the proposals could have a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

The prosecution would now have to prove that a communication was:

- "Likely to cause harm to a likely audience"
- Intended to cause harm – amounting "at least to serious distress" to a likely audience
- Sent with no reasonable excuse.

Courts would also have to have regard to the context a communication was sent within, and to whether it was meant as "a contribution to a matter of public interest".

Elsewhere, we also warned the bodies which write advertising regulation

COMMUNICATIONS OFFENCE: SOME KEY CHANGES	
Initial draft	Revised version
Sender would only need to be "aware of a risk of causing harm" to be prosecuted	Prosecution must now prove intent
Definition of harm: "emotional or psychological harm, amounting to at least serious emotional distress"	"Emotional" removed

guidelines that new proposals could result in greater religious censorship.

The proposals, from the Committee of Advertising Practice and the Broadcast Committee of Advertising

Practice, would require marketers and broadcasters to "have particular regard to the likelihood of causing harm" – including on the grounds of "religion or belief".

C of E eyes new recruits in further education colleges

In the spring, the Church of England published a report which made clear its intention to expand its influence over further education – a sector in which the church has previously had little involvement.

The self-serving report, entitled *Vocation, Transformation and Hope*, had little to say about what the church might contribute to further education – but much to say about how the church might increase its membership.

We responded to the plans through an opinion piece in *FE Week* (pictured) from Keith Sharpe and Chris Higgins of

The Church of England offensive in FE colleges must be resisted

FE WEEK

our Secular Education Forum.

The piece raised the concern that the church's approach to higher education would be theological rather than educational – as it made clear in another report last year.

That report said education and wisdom are achieved by “aligning all our ways – our thinking, acting, belonging – with those of God”.

It also called for “sustained theological attention” on the “content of any particular discipline or field, the methodologies with which these are examined and interpreted, and the curriculum through which it is taught”.

The *FE Week* piece followed another from Keith in *Times Higher Education*, on the ongoing anachronism of faith universities, earlier this year (mentioned in the summer *Bulletin*).

“FE should be integral to the church's strategic planning to build a younger and more diverse church at both a national and a diocesan level.”

The C of E's report

“The Church of England's latest proposals have little to do with education and skills and much to do with reversing its own declining numbers amongst young people.”

Keith Sharpe and Chris Higgins in *FE Week*

Independent faith school's book advocates death for gay people

An independent faith school has failed an inspection after a book calling for gay people to be killed was found in its library.

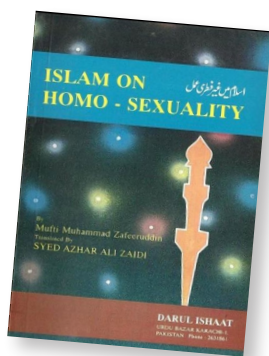
Ofsted inspectors found *Islam on Homosexuality* at the Institute of Islamic Education in West Yorkshire in May.

The book said “participants of the homosexual act should be slain” because “in filth and mischief of this act surpasses adultery” (*sic*).

It also said “the evil doers should be put to death”.

A book with the same title is described on Amazon UK as an “authentic book on the evils of Homosexuality containing discussion in the light of the Quran, Hadith, History and medicine”.

Our head of policy and research Megan Manson was widely quoted in the press in response, including in the *Mail Online* and on *Yorkshire Live*.



Catholic school re-opens as integrated one in NI

There was a landmark moment in Northern Ireland as the new school year began in September.

Seaview Primary School – a former Catholic school in County Antrim – opened its doors as an integrated school (pictured), meaning it will educate children from various religious backgrounds together.

It's the first Catholic school to make the transformation. With a review of education now getting started (more coverage in the summer *Bulletin*), we'll be pressing for bold steps to tackle the segregation, discrimination and inefficiency in NI's education system.

71%

of people in Northern Ireland think integrated schools should be the “main model” for NI's education system

73%

would support their child's school or local school becoming integrated

Source: LucidTalk/
Integrated Education Fund



Image via Facebook

How charity law enables religious misogyny

“What does it mean to look sexy anyway? It is simply to appeal for or suggest sex by the way you dress and apply make-up. No wonder there is increase in rape today and people are not addressing the real problem. You who dress like this is a strong contributor to the problem.”

This was a passage in a leaflet on the website of Holiness Revival Movement Worldwide Europe, also known as Horemow Europe. This Christian organisation registered as a charity at the end of May.

The passage explicitly blamed women's fashion choices for contributing to rape. Elsewhere on the website came a series of rants about the evils of women wearing trousers.

We raised concerns with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, arguing that this material was incompatible with requirements for charities to serve a public benefit and not promote extremist views.

The commission told us it would investigate the charity. We welcome this – but the charity should never have been registered in the first place. And it's far from the only charity promoting misogyny.

Misogyny in religious charities

Several religious charities perpetuate deeply sexist stereotypes, for example by encouraging women to stay at home and do what their husbands tell them.

And it gets worse. Several Islamic charities have hosted or signposted material that endorsed or condoned violence against women. These were taken down only after we raised concerns with the Charity Commission.

'Advancement of religion'

In many of these cases the Charity Commission has intervened and stopped the charities from promoting misogyny. But new charities advancing the same ideas continue to register with alarming frequency. The commission is left trying to play whack-a-mole, which is inefficient and unreliable.

This shows the need for the reform of charity law. As it stands organisations can become charities, and enjoy tax

“Women wear trousers because of the spirit of whoredom.”

“Female trousers are the uniform of harlots.”

From blogs which featured on the website of Horemow Europe



Heitor Werdt, via Pexels

breaks and public recognition, solely on the basis that they're 'advancing religion'.

But 'advancing religion' can involve many things – one of which is pushing blatant misogyny.

It's high time we rejected the outdated assumption that 'advancing religion' is inherently beneficial and therefore a charitable activity. All charities, religious or not, should be expected to uphold the rights and dignity of women. In the UK in the 21st century, this surely isn't a big ask.

Welcome plans to ban 'virginity testing'

Measures to outlaw 'virginity testing' in England and Wales have been tabled as a clause in the current Health and Care Bill, with backing from the government.

This reflects a recommendation we made when we responded to a consultation on women's health earlier this year.

Virginity testing is an unscientific procedure which involves an intrusive examination to assess whether the

hymen is intact.

Many women from Muslim backgrounds are at risk of so-called 'honour violence' if their spouses or families believe they have had sex before marriage.

Women's rights campaigners have also highlighted clinics which are offering virginity repair – and say they are profiting from women afraid for their safety.

Virginity testing and repair procedures are inherently abusive and exploitative. They reinforce misogynistic religious and cultural ideas about sex and 'purity', and undermine women's equality and dignity.

We'll support this move – and we'll keep making the broader case that religion shouldn't undermine women's rights.

Nazir Afzal delivers NSS lecture:

Culture isn't an excuse for inaction

The former prosecutor Nazir Afzal delivered our 2021 Bradlaugh Lecture at Manchester Art Gallery in September, covering topics including forced marriage, honour-based violence and child sexual abuse.

Nazir, who worked as the chief crown prosecutor for the north-west of England, reflected on his distinguished career and said culture shouldn't be an excuse for inaction.

He said society should be prepared to have "difficult conversations" and spoke of the importance of standing up for the rights of those who often go unheard.

Grooming cases and honour killings

He reflected on his role in the prosecution of 'grooming gangs' in Rochdale and the killers of Banaz Mahmood, a young British-Iraqi who was murdered in an honour killing in 2006.

He also said the authorities should listen to the voices of those affected by the issues he'd confronted, along with NGOs and experts who worked on them.

Marginalising and confronting extremists

Elsewhere he argued that extremist voices within Muslim communities, which are often unduly amplified in public conversation, should be marginalised.

He reflected on his response to the row over Muhammad cartoons in 2006. He was placed on an al-Qa'eda 'death list' after he prosecuted those calling for the beheading of those who insult Islam, on the grounds of inciting murder.

"I made it my responsibility to be her voice."

On a woman he met through his work who was in a deeply abusive marriage, and who wore her wedding ring on the wrong hand as an act of defiance

"I said: what they're doing is soliciting murder."

On his decision to seek prosecutions for those calling for beheadings in response to cartoons of Muhammad

"I've wasted plenty of time talking to community leaders who lead nobody."

A sceptical note on the way those in authority treat 'community leaders'

He spoke of the abuse which Muslims often face, the racism he faced growing up in Birmingham, and far right efforts to delegitimise his work.

He also gave thoughts on subjects including home schooling, relationships and sex education, and safeguarding in the Catholic Church.

There was plenty to learn for anyone with an interest in human rights and social cohesion, and we were very grateful to Nazir Afzal for delivering this lecture. If you missed it, you can watch the lecture on our YouTube channel.



Nazir Afzal and the image of our founder Charles Bradlaugh which hangs in the gallery

Is the Cof E ashamed of religious discrimination in admissions?

"An inclusive, open to all faiths and no faith, co-educational Church of England secondary school."

That's how the Church of England has described a proposed new faith school in Kingston-upon-Thames.

"Our admissions policy is specifically designed to be very inclusive."

That was how a proposed C of E school in Oldham responded to criticism from local campaigners in May.

In both cases these claims downplayed the religious discrimination inherent in the schools' admissions policies. Up to a third of places at the school in Kingston will be subject to religious selection. The school in Oldham will reserve 50% of its places on a religious basis.

In May this year we looked at a random sample of 110 C of E schools' admissions policies to examine how far the rhetoric matches the reality. Forty-four of those schools had some sort of religious discrimination or selection in their admissions. And eight of those schools used potentially misleading language to obfuscate or downplay their religious selection.

Several schools emphasised how open they were to children from the local area, even when that was a low priority within their admissions criteria. Others claimed they were



WHAT C OF E SCHOOLS SAY VS THEIR POLICIES: some examples

What schools say	Their policies
"Not being a church goer will not prevent your children from having a place."	Locality is sixth on its list of admissions criteria – behind church attendance
"We welcome children of all faiths or no faith."	Oversubscription criteria give priority to children from Christian families
"We are a school rooted in the community and welcome applications from all."	A third of places are subject to religious selection; for other places, church attendance is an advantage

"inclusive" or that they welcomed children "of all faiths and none", even as their oversubscription criteria gave priority to children from C of E families.

And in 13 of the schools, language strongly suggested that parents would have to accept all aspects of the school's religious ethos.

State-funded schools should be equally welcoming to children regardless of their families' beliefs or religious identity. And with the C of E clearly embarrassed enough about religious selection to try sweeping it under the rug, it's time its ability to discriminate was removed.

Will the government protect the ethos of secular schools?

We've met with Department for Education officials to urge them to take tangible steps to protect the community ethos of secular schools, which is increasingly coming under threat from religious interference.

As we explained in a recent report (*pictured*), academisation has created opportunities for religious groups to gain greater control over thousands of schools in England (*see the spring Bulletin*).

This includes many schools which are nominally secular. Across the country, schools which supposedly have no religious designation are facing pressure to promote religious groups' interests.

In April, the education secretary announced a new pilot scheme to increase the number of C of E and Catholic multi academy trusts. This will risk exacerbating these problems.



NSS defends inclusive education

The local council in Kingston-upon-Thames has approved proposals to open a discriminatory C of E school – despite significant opposition. We've been working with residents in opposition to the plans.

We've also helped to promote local campaigners' criticism of plans to open a discriminatory C of E school in Oldham.

Elsewhere, we've prompted an investigation into a state-funded Jewish school in north London. We raised concerns about potential racial discrimination in its admissions with the Office of the Schools Adjudicator, which has now said it will consider the issue.

Families across England left unable to access a secular education

Our research has found that three in 10 families in England are left with little choice but a faith school, while thousands are forced into faith schools against their wishes every year.

We've found that 30% of families live in areas where two or three of their three nearest primary schools are faith based. In some local authorities the figure is above 80%.

One in 10 families face the same problem at secondary level, and in some areas this figure is above 60%.

We also revealed that this September, for the third year running, more than 20,000 pupils were assigned faith schools despite their families expressing a preference for a non-faith option.

We've conducted similar research in recent years, but this year we've broken down the figures by local authority – providing an unprecedented level of detail.

Proponents of faith schools often argue that they are good for parental choice. These figures show how flawed that argument is.

But in July, the government again said it had no estimate of how many children are effectively forced into faith schools, or left unable to attend their local school because of religious discrimination.

And although these figures only cover England, similar problems affect families across the UK.

Amid a rapid and sustained decline in Christian affiliation, we're pushing policy makers both locally and nationally to engage with these problems. And we're urging them to confront the narrative that parental choice justifies the segregation, discrimination and promotion of religion inherent in England's schools.

To find out more – and to see the relevant figures in your local area – go to secularism.org.uk/choicedelusion.

"His options were drastically reduced because we refused to get him 'fake' christened. Why should I pretend he is being raised in a faith just to get him a good education?"

A parent in Liverpool, on her four-year-old son

30%
of families in England have little choice but a faith school

More than
153,000
pupils have been assigned faith schools despite a non-faith preference since 2014

37%
of primary schools in England are faith schools, along with 19% of secondary schools

Some of the worst affected areas:

ST HELENS
67% at primary;
58% at secondary

WIGAN
81% at primary level

LIVERPOOL
59% at secondary;
53% at primary

KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA
around 10% of applicants at primary and secondary level

HACKNEY
more than 10% of secondary school applicants

WESTMINSTER
94% at secondary;
87% at primary

LONDON more than 5,000

DORSET
66% at primary level

KENT
more than 1,000

KEY

- Children sent to faith schools against parents' preferences
- Residents with little choice but a faith school

Push to legalise assisted dying in the Lords

The issue of assisted dying is back on the agenda in both the UK and Scottish parliaments this autumn.

At Westminster the crossbench peer Molly Meacher (*pictured*) has introduced a private member's bill to legalise assisted dying as a choice for terminally ill, mentally competent adults in their final months of life. Liberal Democrat MSP Liam McArthur has brought forward similar proposals at Holyrood.

Organised religion is likely to mobilise in opposition to the bills.

At Westminster, for instance, a new all-party parliamentary group on 'dying well' has been set up to "stand against the legalisation of assisted suicide" and "promote access to excellent care at the end of life".

It's striking that the vast majority of its officers appear to be committed Christians. Although they present a secular rationale against assisted dying, is there perhaps a desire to impose a Christian worldview on the general populace?

Safeguards and palliative care

In an increasingly secularised society, faith-based 'sanctity of life' arguments hold little sway in the debate over assisted dying. So religious opponents often dogmatically cite other arguments.

It's legitimate to raise secular 'slippery slope' arguments, for example. But they can be addressed through carefully thought-through safeguards.

Improvements in



"I said 'But surely, archbishop, this is about the autonomy of the patient'? And he just said 'Well, I don't know that I believe in autonomy'. So I thought, oh well, end of conversation."

Molly Meacher, appearing on our podcast, recounts a conversation with one of the archbishops over her bill

Official portrait of Baroness Meacher. © Roger Harris (CC BY 3.0)

palliative care are also very welcome. But palliative care can't prevent the dreadful suffering which many patients go through in all situations.

When politicians insist that it's impossible to apply safeguards, or suggest palliative care is always the solution, it suggests an unwillingness to respect individual autonomy in any circumstances.

This is a hallmark of attempts to impose a religious agenda on those who don't share it.

Religious divisions

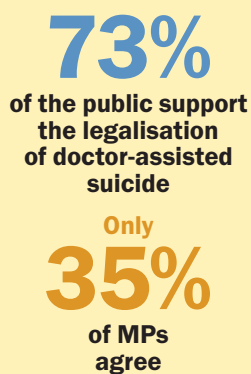
Last time assisted dying was on the agenda, religious leaders including the archbishop of Canterbury, the archbishop of Westminster and the chief rabbi led the opposition to it.

But a recent poll found

that 53% of religious people felt they were wrong to do so. And now a 'religious alliance for dignity in dying' has been formed to challenge the perception that religious people are universally against assisted dying.

Both interested citizens and lawmakers should ensure this debate is guided by evidence and compassion, rather than religious dogma.

Religious leaders don't have a monopoly on morality – and we should beware attempts to impose their view of it on those who want the option of an assisted death.



Source: YouGov, August 2021



Listen to
NSS podcast
episode 56:
The assisted
dying bill 2021, with
Molly Meacher & AC
Grayling



Law Commission urged to address religious privilege in law

We highlighted inconsistencies and unfairness in laws on education, charity, health and animal welfare in response to a consultation from the Law Commission.

The commission was seeking views on what should be included in its latest

programme of recommended legal reforms.

We said it should consider:

- Laws requiring collective worship in schools.
- The provision in charity law which makes 'the advancement of religion'

a charitable purpose in its own right.

- The lack of effective protection for boys in laws on genital cutting.
- The religious exemption to animal welfare laws that allows non-stun slaughter.
- Assisted dying law.



A classroom at Kamloops Indian Residential School in 1950

How many children died at Catholic-run residential schools in Canada?

In May, unmarked graves containing the remains of 215 children were found at Kamloops Indian Residential School – a former residential school in the Canadian province of British Columbia.

The school had been set up under Roman Catholic administration in 1890, taken over by the government in 1969 and closed in 1978.

Just a few weeks after that discovery came worse news: 751 unmarked graves were found at the site of the Marieval Indian Residential School. That was another former residential school, operated by the Catholic Church from 1899 to the 1980s.

During the 19th and 20th centuries Canada's government funded more than 130 compulsory boarding schools for indigenous young people – and the religious authorities ran them.

More than 150,000 children were taken from their families to live in the schools, and the Catholic Church was actively involved in this process.

The schools sought to erase the children's links to their culture and train them as cheap labour for colonial businesses. Physical and sexual abuse were common, and students were often kept in completely unsuitable facilities.

How many died?

In 2015 a commission funded by the Canadian government said it had documented the deaths of over 6,000 residential school students as a result of their experience. The commission added that there were probably more.

Now some experts think the true figure may be far higher, with extraordinary claims continuing to emerge. In July, for example, two experts said the mass death stemming from tuberculosis at the schools was caused by intentional negligence – rather than being an accident.

The episode is a shameful reminder of the importance of preventing religious authorities from holding unaccountable power.

Religious groups' "egregious failings" on child abuse

In September a report from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse outlined "egregious failings" in the way a variety of religious groups have handled abuse.

The report drew on evidence concerning 38 religious organisations of varying size and character in England and Wales.

It identified a range of cultural barriers to the effective reporting and management of abuse, including the fear that exposure would damage organisations' reputation or be seen as a betrayal of a community.

The report's damning findings showed the need to ensure accountability for abuse within religious organisations, including by introducing a mandatory reporting law without a religious exemption.

But there were also valid concerns that the inquiry hadn't done enough to root out abuse in some cases, particularly by failing to demand sufficient evidence from the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Deference to religion, and fear of upsetting religious sensitivities, shouldn't stand in the way of efforts to protect children from abuse and harm.

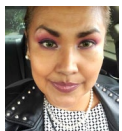
Vatican castigated over sexual abuse

UN special rapporteurs noted that "tens of thousands" of children had allegedly suffered abuse in the Catholic Church over "decades", as they criticised the Vatican in stronger terms than ever before.

A letter from a group of rapporteurs also criticised the church's "obstructionist practices".

The Vatican hadn't responded to a previous communication on the subject, and this one was made public only because it hadn't responded to it either.

We submitted evidence to the rapporteurs on the issue in 2020.



"Not one single residential school was ever built with a playground. But every single residential school had ample space for a cemetery."

Kerry Benjoe, Canadian journalist, on episode 54 of the NSS podcast

Standing up for human rights at the UN



In recent months we've made a number of submissions to the United Nations.

A submission to the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief highlighted numerous barriers to the realisation of the right to freedom of thought – not least religion's role in state-funded schools in the UK.

Another submission went to the special rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence. This

drew attention to the UK's failure to provide legal protection to victims of caste discrimination under the Equality Act, in breach of the UK's international human rights obligations, and raised concerns about child abuse within religious institutions.

And we also highlighted the role of conservative and fundamentalist religion in the continued existence of anti-LGBT laws in former British colonies.

Mixed news in high-profile blasphemy cases

The president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala (*pictured*), has been formally charged over Facebook posts which allegedly contained 'blasphemous' content.

Long after his arrest – in April 2020 – he's now been charged in Kano state under customary law, which means 'blasphemy' is punishable by up to two years in prison.

This is a blatant violation of his fundamental right to freedom of expression.

We're continuing to lend support to efforts to free him, which are being coordinated by Humanists International.

There was better news from a high-profile case in Pakistan. Christian couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel were acquitted of blasphemy in June and have since received asylum in Europe.

The couple had been on death row since 2014.



Picture courtesy of Humanists International

Working to end conversion therapy

We responded to a consultation from the Scottish government on how to tackle 'conversion therapy'.

Among our key recommendations, we said:

- The government should legislate against forced conversion therapy, including any attempts on those under 18.
- Those harmed by conversion therapy should be able to seek proper redress.
- Ministers should formulate a "clear definition" of conversion therapy to avoid "confusion and inconsistency" in legislation.
- The law should be "proportionate" and "prioritise individual human rights", but should not include any blanket religious exemptions.

We said it should be a criminal offence for healthcare professionals to practise, promote or make a referral for conversion therapy.

We also called for reforms to charity law to ensure organisations which promote conversion therapy, or homophobic ideologies which fuel demand for it, can't enjoy registered charitable status.

And we said schools should offer LGBT-inclusive education, and not promote stigmatising ideas about same-sex relationships.

Meanwhile the UK government has said it will set out plans to ban conversion therapy after a public consultation.

OTHER CAMPAIGNING AND NEWS

■ We briefed peers ahead of a debate on collective worship in schools, as we kept up the pressure for the repeal of the law which requires it (*more in the summer Bulletin*).

■ The House of Commons education committee has called for a register of home educated children, and other measures to protect children's rights. We've long called for this, amid concerns that home education is being used as a cover for illegal faith schooling.

■ The High Court in Northern Ireland has granted permission for a legal challenge against laws requiring confessional RE focused on Christianity and collective worship in all schools. A hearing is currently due in November.

■ Our CEO Stephen Evans highlighted the extent of privilege that Christianity enjoys in Britain during an appearance on GB News (*pictured*).



The PM's Catholic wedding and church-state entanglement

In May the prime minister got married.

That should have absolutely no bearing on his suitability to do his job.

But thanks to the entanglement between church and state in Britain, it has effectively barred him from performing part of it – and raised a series of constitutional questions.

Boris Johnson's wedding was a Catholic ceremony. He'd also been baptised into Catholicism as an infant.

And the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829 says nobody "professing the Roman Catholic religion" may advise

"It's an incredibly anachronistic thing that a Jew or a Muslim could nominate a bishop but not a Catholic."

A 10 Downing Street source



© 10 Downing Street, Oct. 3, via Wikimedia Commons

the crown "directly or indirectly" in the appointment of Church of England bishops.

But when there's a vacancy for a bishop, part of the prime minister's job involves passing a name – which is pre-chosen by the Crown Nominations Commission – to the queen. (Until a few years ago, when the system was reformed under Gordon Brown's premiership, the PM chose nominations for bishops from a list.)

But it still seems fair to say the prime

minister's job involves advising the crown on the appointment – at least "indirectly". So the job was passed to Robert Buckland, the lord chancellor at the time and a practising Anglican.

This farcical arrangement highlighted the anti-Catholic discrimination which still lingers on the statute books in Britain. Catholics, for example, are still expressly prohibited from becoming the monarch.

But it also raised the more fundamental question: why should any

government minister be involved in the appointment of bishops?

Handing the job of advising on bishops to another minister saves the government from the task of tackling the state's relationship with the church. But you can't simultaneously have a state religion and a democracy that treats citizens of all religion and belief backgrounds equally.

The problems the PM's marriage has highlighted should prompt divorce proceedings between church and state.

THE NEWS IN QUOTES

"The House of Lords, where 26 Anglican bishops sit as of right, sets a bad example for democracy. The bishops' presence increases the influence of the Church of England on our public affairs to a degree which is generally underestimated... [It is] an absurd constitutional anomaly."

Dick Taverne, Lib Dem peer, in *The House* magazine



"It has been my long held view that prayers have no place in a secular organisation like a local authority... The general view seems to be that it was about time."

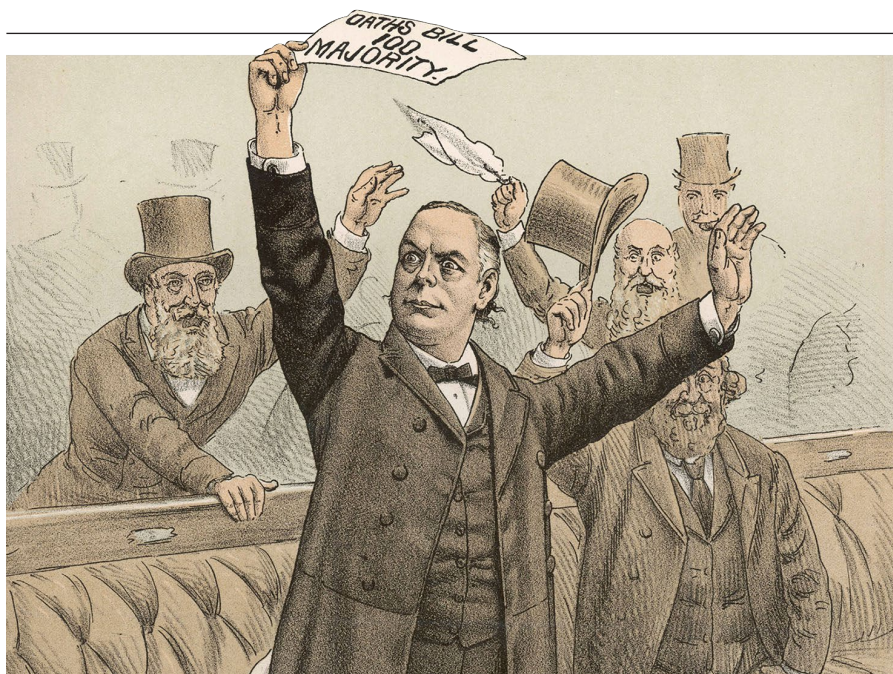
Geoff Brodie, the chair of Isle of Wight Council, on his decision to scrap prayers at the start of meetings

"For me and millions of Muslims across this country, there is not a single thing in the world that we commemorate and honour more than our beloved prophet. When bigots and racists defame, slander or abuse our beloved prophet, the emotional harm caused upon our hearts is unbearable... It's not just a cartoon."

Naz Shah, Labour MP, in a speech which effectively called for a blasphemy law in the Commons

"It is often the case that organisations have already themselves recognised their errors and have undertaken meaningful attempts at improvement by the time of the inquest. This was not the case here."

A damning coroner's report on the Church of England's response to the suicide of a gay priest, who faced unfounded accusations of child exploitation



Restoration of Charles Bradlaugh's grave

We're very grateful to all those who have given donations to restore the grave of our founder Charles Bradlaugh.

We'll be holding an event to mark the restoration of Bradlaugh's grave at Brookwood Cemetery on Sunday 17 October.

Bradlaugh was a 19th century radical who argued for the abolition of the blasphemy law, the disestablishment of the Church of England and the end of the monarchy.

He faced a prolonged struggle to enter parliament as an MP, as he was barred from taking his seat because of his

atheist beliefs. He effectively secured MPs' right to take a secular affirmation, rather than a religious oath.

And he, along with Annie Besant, was also charged after publishing rudimentary information about birth control at a price which poorer women could afford.

You can continue to donate to the appeal through our website, at secularism.org.uk/bradlaugh-appeal.

And if you'd like to attend the event, please email us at events@secularism.org.uk to let us know.

From our latest podcast episodes

"It's putting parents in a really difficult situation, and I just don't believe that separating children based on religion is a good thing... Children are children. They might have Catholic parents, but that doesn't make them Catholic."

Terri Haynes, councillor in Peterborough, on the decision to open a discriminatory Catholic school there in episode 52



"Having a secular education is the key to a more harmonious society, to breaking down barriers, divisions and prejudice... For me, battling against faith schools is part and parcel of the battle for LGBT+ rights."

Peter Tatchell in episode 53, on religion and LGBT rights



Listen at secularism.org.uk/podcast

WHY I SUPPORT THE NSS

"There is no fair or rational argument against secularism. It is the only system that protects both a person's right to believe in any god, demon or spirit they wish and also everyone else's right not to believe in such nonsense."

Ricky Gervais



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AGM

Our 2021 AGM will take place on **Saturday 27 November** as an online event, for paid-up NSS members and representatives of affiliated groups only. More details on the AGM, and on the opportunity to stand for council, are enclosed in this Bulletin.

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