

Caste Discrimination: what does it tell us about this Government?

A provision was included in the Equality Act 2010 to enable caste discrimination to be outlawed if a relevant Minister agreed that it should be. This was the result of work by Lord Avebury, assisted by Keith Porteous Wood, as detailed in the 2010 Annual Report.

A report commissioned by the previous (Labour) government to inform the Government in exercising this option is now being examined by the coalition Ministers. It shows that there is, as we maintained, caste discrimination in the UK.

The tone of the summary of the report, however, conspicuously presents the case for legislation in the least flattering light. The many attending a meeting in Parliament to present the report to groups promoting this legislation were disappointed at the absence of any enthusiasm for it from the coalition Minister, who did not even have time to wait to hear what they had to say.

Keith comments: "Taken together, these factors suggest unfortunately that it is unlikely that the enabling legislation will be utilised now but we will continue to press for this. It may be another

unwelcome manifestation of how little we can expect from this Government to please any secularist."

The *Observer* quotes Rt Hon Baroness Warsi (co-chair of the Conservative party and Minister without Portfolio) as "certainly [making] it clear how much less secular she would like society to be". Just how much less secular is laid bare by her reported description of Polly Toynbee's views as "abhorrent", and perhaps even more by her complaint that the previous government was "too suspicious" of faith. As the *Observer* concluded: "given that Tony Blair was overtly religious, his government expanded and promoted faith schools and consistently tried to pass censorious blasphemy laws, it gives pause to wonder how much more religious Warsi would like her own government to be."

On a more optimistic note, we must hope that the Prime Minister's scepticism about multiculturalism and support for human rights translates into something more positive for secularists.

Europe

The European Parliament secularism group (EPPSP) met in November to review the European Parliament's dialogue with religious groups under the auspices of Article 17 of the Treaty of Lisbon. This is the provision requiring dialogue with religious organisations. It has developed over the last 20 years from a mere preamble to provisions that are justiciable (legally actionable). There is an appalling absence of transparency in the dealings between the various entities of the European Union and the Catholic Church in particular. Apparently not content even with Article 17, the Catholic Bishops' conference gave notice that they want this "dialogue to intensify and deepen". We suspect this is code for pre-legislative talks with the European Commission. This would mean that prospective legislation will have been subject to scrutiny by religious bodies and in particular the



EPPSP chair
Sophie in 't Veld

Catholic Church before it gets anywhere near the legislators. Keith represented the NSS and raised the topic of institutional child abuse and how international bodies need to step up to the plate to tackle this.

Sophie in 't Veld has been successful in securing the President of the Parliament's acceptance of her invitation to a meeting of the EPPSP in March to discuss Article 17.

The Society has also been providing information for the EPPSP's new website, for example it was the lead organisation on education.

As reported on page 6, Elizabeth O'Casey represented the NSS at the subsequent meeting in February.

Submissions and complaints

We submitted a [paper on freedom of expression](#) of the media and respect for cultural and religious diversity for the Council of Europe conference in Ohrid, Macedonia. We also contributed to public consultations about free transport to faith schools in the Bristol and Bolton areas. The NSS wrote to both Michael Russell MSP and to Learning and Teaching in Scotland to protest about the Creationist threat to Scottish schools. We complained to the ASA and to Ed Vaizey in the Culture Minister's office about the banning of 'religiously offensive' ice cream adverts after just a handful of complaints.

something special from him.

The winner will be revealed at the Secularist of the Year lunch on Saturday 19 March in Soho, central London. Tickets for a three-course lunch and entertainment are £45 or £15 for students.

Join us for this friendly and congenial gathering, a chance to meet other members from around

the country as well as some of our honorary associates. You can buy tickets online at <http://bit.ly/f59fo3> or by post from NSS (SoY), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. If you buy by post, please include the names of everyone coming and whether there are any special dietary requirements. Hurry – we wouldn't want you to miss this fabulous event.

Education Bill: More religious control and discrimination

The Society has been active in Parliament promoting changes to the [Education Bill](#). Our greatest concern is that, following last year's Academies Act, religious bodies are being given the option to control the board of governors of voluntary controlled (VC) schools (of which there are thousands spread over England) that are converting to Academies. Prior to conversion, as VC schools the local authority appointed the majority of governors. A shift in control to religious bodies has worrying implications for the religiosity of the schools and possibly for discrimination against the non-religious on admissions. The Education Bill gives the Secretary of

State power to make all new teacher posts reserved to those of the relevant faith or denomination, as opposed to a maximum of one fifth, and in practice often none, as is the case for many VC schools.

The Bill also fails to protect the many non-religious staff in community schools that convert to academies. Such staff currently have important statutory protections against discrimination on the grounds of their religion or lack of it. This includes not being required to take religious education lessons or conduct collective worship, something that is likely to be important if this is in contravention of their beliefs, or lack of them. All this

protection is lost when these schools are converted to academies.

We have also proposed amendments to make Collective Worship optional, outlaw privileged school transport for religious schools and tackle the disadvantages for non-religious teachers more generally. As with Labour's Education Bills that preceded it, this Bill makes no attempt to scale back the levels of employment discrimination permitted in faith schools, despite clear evidence presented by the NSS to the Government that this is in breach of an EU Employment Directive.

Religion to remain entrenched in education

The Government has wasted no time in setting about its ambition to "overhaul England's schools system" – but any questioning of the place of religion in schools remains strictly off limits.

In December last year, the Government published the schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, which was followed by its Education Bill in January. For secularists, what was absent from these publications was as alarming as what was in them.

The Bill paves the way for more academies and free schools. As we predicted, these are proving particularly attractive to faith groups. The Bill fails to provide adequate safeguards against indoctrination

and extremism. Of the eight free schools that have received formal approval to open, half have a religious ethos. Almost 250 other groups have sent proposals to the Government; they include creationists and many with a minority faith ethos. At the same time, the proposed Bill removes Ofsted's responsibility to report on schools' commitment to community cohesion.

Collective Worship

Unsurprisingly, the Government has no plans to repeal the requirement for Compulsory Worship in schools. Indeed, on the [BBC's Andrew Marr Show](#), Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, described the current arrangements for Collective Worship as a "classic English middle

way" between the "Richard Dawkins wing" and "the Pope Benedict wing". In reality few, if any, concessions have been made to the "Richard Dawkins wing". And it is difficult to comprehend any legitimate ways in which even "the Pope Benedict wing" could call for any strengthening of the current law to make Collective Worship more religious. The compulsory daily act of worship in England and Wales applies even to community schools and the law requires attending pupils to "take part", not just to attend.

In response to this and the White Paper, the NSS sent detailed proposals to Michael Gove urging him to consider the inclusion of provisions on Collective Worship in the Education Bill.

We are now seeking changes to the Bill to repeal the requirement for Collective Worship.

Take action

Are any of your local Voluntary Controlled schools converting to Academies? Before converting, all schools are required to carry out a consultation. Look out for and get involved with consultations in your area, and use local media to ensure everyone concerned is aware of the implications for converting schools. Please let us know about any concerns you have about the impact of faith schools in your local area at admin@secularism.org.uk.

Campus survey of religion is biased, secularists charge

Equality body's study accused of provoking 'false impression of victimhood'. John Morgan reports

The National Secular Society has attacked higher education's equality body over a new survey of religion and belief, claiming it is biased towards believers and could stir up a false sense of "religious victimhood" among students and staff.

The society has also criticised the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) for awarding the survey contract to the University of Derby, which it says showed "pro-religious bias" in research for the Home Office in 2000.

Keith Porteous Wood, the society's executive director, says in a letter to the ECU that the survey does not allow non-believers to express concerns about religion on campus.

He cites "the increasing incidence of students on biology or zoology courses objecting on religious grounds to the teaching of evolution" and "Muslim female medical students [who] have refused...to bare their arms to scrub up".

The survey is part of a study titled *Religion and Belief in Higher Education*. The ECU said the research will "inform the further development of more inclusive policy and practice".

In a letter to David Ruebain, the ECU's chief executive, Mr Porteous Wood takes issue with some survey

questions, including one asking students if they agree that "the content of my course is presented in a way which is sensitive to my religion or belief".

Such questions are likely to produce responses, he says, that "could be used to imply prejudice or discrimination where none exists and where students'...expectations of their beliefs being shown unqualified respect are neither realistic nor de-

sirable if equality, diversity and cohesion are to be served".

He says the results risk giving "a grossly exaggerated, if not false, impression of religious victimhood".

Paul Weller, academic lead on the study and professor of inter-religious relations at Derby, states on his website that he was a Baptist minister for 13 years.

He said researchers working on the study included "individuals who understand themselves as religious and as secularist", adding that the survey drew on "a high level of participation from staff and students

who do not see themselves primarily in terms of religious identity".

Professor Weller also said he would "strongly contest and reject" allegations of bias in the 2000 research, which "went through a rigorous process of peer review".

An ECU spokeswoman said that Derby was chosen through a "competitive and comprehensive tendering process", and that "assuming that a religious academic wouldn't be able to conduct robust and unbiased research raises several equality issues in itself".

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Religious Education

The Government has also omitted RE from its "systematic and comprehensive" review of the National Curriculum. In doing so, it has missed a perfect opportunity to reform RE into an academic subject fit for purpose in today's Britain. Instead, Michael Gove seems perfectly content to leave the RE syllabus in the hands of SACRES (Standing Advisory Committees on Religious Education), often dominated by religious interests, and for some (Voluntary Aided) faith schools to be legally permitted to continue teaching the subject from their own biased viewpoint.

Understandably, RE was left off the Department for Education's list of core subjects to be included in the English Baccalaureate, a new qualification aimed at driving up academic standards. This provoked predictable fury from religious leaders who have now stepped up their lobbying efforts for the inclusion of RE, encouraged by Michael Gove's promise to "take on board" their concerns and reconsider his decision.

Two representatives from the society attended a Religion, Law & Education Conference in Oxford in October. This provided some useful contacts, particularly in employment discrimination law relative to teachers and gave a valuable insight into the situation in Northern Ireland.

Keith gave a well-received talk to students at the London School of Economics in November. He spoke mainly about education, but students were also keen to learn more about other aspects of the NSS's work.

Student survey criticised

The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) has embarked on a survey of both staff and students of Further Education colleges to establish their thoughts on the role of religion in their colleges. The study was brought to our attention by a number of students and staff concerned about the one-sided nature of the questions. Examples include:

The content of my course is presented in a way which is sensitive to my religion or belief;

The teaching of my course is conducted in a way which is sensitive to my religion or belief;

Views or opinions expressed as part of my academic course sometimes conflict with/challenge my religion or belief.

There was no box for respondents to indicate that they thought that it was not appropriate for religion to be involved in these

situations. The detailed letter we wrote to the ECU explaining our concerns met with a defensive response, although they did agree to let us see the draft report of the results, presumably to give the opportunity to influence its wording in advance of publication.

The ECU had commissioned the University of Derby to conduct the survey, the very same university with whom we crossed swords around 10 years ago over a religious discrimination report they produced for the Home Office. We raised similar concerns about lack of objectivity.

Concerned that our criticisms had not been appropriately taken on board, we took the matter to the *Times Higher*, which gave it good coverage. The ECU handed us an opportunity for a follow up letter by implying, incorrectly, that we had been discriminatory by suggesting that the religious were incapable of being objective.

Archbishop challenged by NSS

In November, the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, gave the annual International Rule of Law Lecture in the Inns of Court in London on the topic Justice in a Secularising and Pluralising Society. During the questions that followed, Keith Porteous Wood tackled him about former Anglican Primate George Carey's demand for a special panel of religious judges who have "sensitivity ... of religious issues" to judge cases "engaging religious rights".

Keith's intervention went down rather well with the distinguished audience, but Dr Sentamu seemed none too happy to answer it directly. He responded that judges should have "religious intelligence", and thought some common ground was achievable with mutual respect on both sides. On balance, however, he acknowledged there must be an absolutely level playing field, so in effect conspicuously failed to support Dr Carey.

Consultation on the Secular Charter: have your say

The Council of Management of the NSS has decided to use the Secular Charter (as set out in the Annual Report) as a starting point for a revision of the principles of the NSS, which will guide our future activities and campaigns. Council intends that the new Secular Charter will replace the Principles and Objects of the NSS included in the Society's Articles of Association, its governing document.

Council is launching a consultation seeking members' views. After considering them, the Council will put forward a motion proposing a revised Principles and

Objects for the 2011 AGM. Members will then have an opportunity to vote on the proposal.

If you are a current member and would like to take part, you can find more information and the Consultation Response Form on the website here: www.secularism.org.uk/consultation. Any members who do not have internet access are welcome to contact the office for a form and details.

Terry Sanderson said of the new Charter: "I am keen that all members are given a voice and a chance to contribute to this review of the direction of the NSS".



The AGM in November had one of the highest attendances ever.

Terry Sanderson was re-elected as President and two new Vice

Presidents were elected: Elizabeth O'Casey and Gerard Phillips – both existing Council members. Stephen Dunkling was re-elected as Treasurer. All the

officers were elected unanimously or something near it.

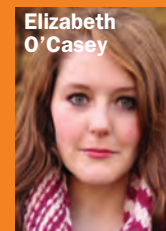
A third of Council members retire by rotation each year. This year's election was the most competitive for years. We welcome three new members to Council:

Professor Norman Bonney is the retired Head of the Department of Psychology and Sociology at Edinburgh Napier

Pope spoke. The BBC is, as ever, a source of religious propaganda. We spoke out about Radio 4 devoting a whole day to readings from the King James Bible and the BBC's new attempts to prevent believers being "offended".

The *Scotsman* ran a prominent article following our criticism of the Catholic Church seeking to have a Scottish referee sacked for circulating a cartoon about the Pope.

As usual, Christmas is a source of Christian complaint – including



Elizabeth O'Casey



Norman Bonney



Dennis Penaluna

Council activity



Gerard Phillips is the new Chair of Council, an active member of the Staff Sub-Committee and the Finance Sub-Committee. He is also part of the group working on the new Secular Charter.

He is exploring holding a conference on secularism in September 2011 and would invite the views and suggestions of members on this. Please e-mail Gerard these directly to gerard.phillips@gmail.com.

Norman Bonney has recently published an article in the Political Quarterly urging a radical rethink of the more than 300 year old coronation oaths. He blogs at www.normanbonneyonreligionandthestate.blogspot.com

Elizabeth O'Casey attended the European Parliamentary Platform for Secularism in Politics meeting in Brussels. While in Brussels, she met with officials at the European Commission to discuss our concerns about faith-based discrimination.

Dennis Penaluna met with the Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham to discuss redundancies of NHS chaplains and possible alternative funding arrangements. In January, he organised "Meeting the City", with the Nottingham Secular Society in the Market Square promoting the secular message. They are also planning to do this in Mansfield and Newark.

Peter Vlachos spoke to Lewisham Humanists on 'Town Hall Religion' and our Bideford campaign. He will be representing the NSS on the Equality and Diversity Forum.



Peter Vlachos

Media

Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson continue to spearhead building our profile in the media, an important way of spreading the secular message, publicly challenging religious claims and attracting new members. We are regularly quoted in the national and international press, TV, radio and online.

The after-effects of the Pope's visit continue. We have commented

on the extent of child abuse in Roman Catholic institutions in England, the Pope's comments on AIDS and the cost to the public of the visit – including money taken from the foreign aid budget. Member Sue Cox's negotiations with Federico Lombardi at the Vatican also made the media.

Keith Porteous Wood set out in stark detail on the *Today* programme how unsuitable the Pope was to be asked by the BBC to give the Christmas Eve *Thought for the Day* just minutes before the



European Ministers drop plans to ensure accurate labelling of halal and kosher meat

University, Dennis Penaluna from Nottingham has led the research for the chaplaincy campaign and Dr Robert Stovold, who is active in the Brighton group, has a PhD in zoology. Another external



Robert Stovold

candidate for Council was unsuccessful, however. Afonso Reis e Sousa was re-elected as a Council member.



Carla Revere

Carla Revere has left Council

because of professional commitments and was thanked for her hard work during her term as Vice President and Chair of Council. Surendra Lal left Council after 22 years' service and was thanked for his contribution.



Surendra Lal

In December, European Ministers dropped plans to ensure the accurate labelling of halal and kosher meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning.

Despite MEPs voting in favour of the proposals last June, the European Council of Ministers approved a new draft of food information legislation that did not include the amendment on ritually slaughtered meat.

The move to drop the proposal followed a Europe-wide lobbying campaign by the kosher food lobby group Shechita UK, which targeted European Ministers representing their various governments at the Council of Ministers.

The NSS had pressed the UK Government to support the amendment. We argued that consumers are entitled to be informed if meat is from an animal killed without being pre-stunned. The current absence of labelling deprives consumers of basic information and consequently artificially fuels the demand for meat from slaughter without stunning.

In a letter to the NSS, Jim Paice MP, Minister of State for Agriculture and Food, indicated that he had recently met with Shechita UK to

help him “understand the concerns driving their opposition to labelling” and he signalled the Government’s intention to oppose the labelling amendment. He referred to forthcoming proposals on welfare labelling, implying they were a more appropriate vehicle – which they are not. We suspect the chance of achieving what is needed with the welfare labelling is almost nil.

Electrical pre-stunning is not allowed under strict Jewish traditions, whereas the practice is acceptable to many British Muslims. Indeed, despite the constant media focus, the majority of halal meat comes from animals stunned before slaughter.

The European food information legislation will shortly return to the European Parliament, and we will continue to press MEPs to make a stand on the issue and see what if anything can be achieved from fresh proposals specifically on welfare labelling later this year. We are also pressing for labelling proposals to go beyond unprocessed meat sold in shops to that served in schools, canteens, take-aways and restaurants, something for which there have been no formal proposals at all.

the complaint that Belfast’s Christmas market is lacking Christianity and the Archbishop of Canterbury’s claims that nativity plays were being “banned”.

On the latest attempts to round up more believers, Lord Carey’s “Not Ashamed” campaign, the Bishop of St Alban’s similar comments and the CofE’s recent advertising campaign to get people back into church came under fire from us.

We also commented on a whole range of education stories. These

included the threat to cohesion of minority faith schools, collective worship, a biased survey on religion and belief in higher education, the abuse of admissions procedures to a Muslim school, the vulnerability of the new academies and free schools to takeover by religious extremists, creationists in Glasgow who plan to send propaganda into schools and religious school transport subsidies.

We were also widely quoted in the media discussing the Christians who refused to let a gay couple stay

at their hotel in Cornwall.

The imminent royal wedding is a new source of internationally reported comment for us. Other stories we commented on were religious slaughter of animals, faith-based welfare, the ASA’s decision to ban a ‘religiously offensive’ ice cream ad, Ed Miliband’s atheism and the allegedly homophobic foster parents.

Honorary Associate Joan Smith held the flag high for the [NSS on Newsnight](#) about whether religion is “persecuted” in Britain.

Donations

The NSS Council is very grateful to all members who have made donations recently. Particular thanks go to one donor who gave us £20,000, to one who gave £3,000, two people who gave £1,000, one £700 and two £500. We also received a generous donation from a liberal Catholic organisation. The NSS is also grateful to the growing number of members who have started standing orders as these allow us to plan ahead and expand our campaigning. If you would like to join them, you can request a standing order form from the office or click the Donate button on the website. The NSS receives no grants or public money, so we rely on your support and generosity.

Volunteers

Our thanks to all of our volunteers who work with us, particularly to:

BRAD DAVIS of [WhiteLight](#) who designs the *Bulletin* and Annual Report

CLAUDINE BAXTER and ALASTAIR BANTON for their work in the office
BARRY THORPE and DOMINIC WIRDNAM for research and campaign work

We would particularly like to thank all volunteers who helped out at the AGM

We would also like to thank members in the Bristol area who responded to the school transport consultation

■ If you would like to volunteer to help us with our campaigns or general office work, please contact the NSS office. Legal and accounting experience especially welcome.

Follow us on Facebook & Twitter



Our Facebook group is now moving over to a brand new [Facebook page](#). 'Like' us on Facebook to join our online community and keep up to date with the latest news from the NSS. We also want to hear from you, so please join the discussions and share your views. <http://on.fb.me/natsecsoc>



You can also follow us on Twitter to keep up to date with our campaigns and the latest news and views from a secular perspective. Find us [@natsecsoc](#).

Secular Medical Forum



SMF Chair, Dr Antony Lempert, took part in a European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics debate about conscientious objection in healthcare focussing on women's reproductive rights and access to abortion services. He stated: 'in contrast to so-called religious needs, there are professional obligations to respond to well-defined healthcare needs which themselves may be jeopardised by acceding to religious demands for special privileges.' The SMF advocates an end to widespread conscientious objection in healthcare and an easily accessible register of objectors.

The SMF responded to a GMC consultation on doctors' roles and responsibilities in child protection, for example Jehovah's Witness parents refusing life-saving blood transfusions for children or parents asking doctors to perform non-therapeutic genital surgery on children. The SMF urged the GMC to highlight doctors' important role in educating and informing parents.

Conference examines apostasy and Sharia

The campaigning group One Law for All marked Human Rights Day in December with a conference on *Apostasy, Sharia Law and Human Rights* at London's Conway Hall.

From his experience at the United Nations, NSS Life Member Roy Brown argued that Islamism is primarily a political movement and should not be exempted from criticism on religious grounds. Keith Porteous Wood spoke about political lobbying on sharia and disturbing trends in support for hard-line sharia

in many Muslim countries. There was clear consensus among delegates that resistance to sharia and apostasy needs to focus more on secularism. Alliances need to be built with women's and gay rights organisations and the wider human rights movement.

The speakers also included NSS Honorary Associates Maryam Namazie and Joan Smith. A pdf on apostasy can be downloaded at <http://bit.ly/cF7YhH> and Roy Brown's speech is at <http://bit.ly/eUulcU>

Amazon

You can raise money for the NSS while shopping online with Amazon. Simply connect to Amazon through the link on our website home page and we'll receive a percentage of whatever you spend. Free for you, fantastic for us!

New secular groups

The newly formed Edinburgh and Kirkcaldy Secular Society meets monthly on the last Sunday of the month at 2pm. For further information please contact the Secretary Veronica Denyer at veronique16943@btinternet.com There is also a new group for the Bristol area and all enquiries are welcome to secularism@virginmedia.com

national secular **Bulletin** society

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