

Issue 48

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Education – England

NSS puts Government under pressure on education discrimination

We have been very active during the passage of the Education Bill through the Commons and have focussed mainly on employment issues.

We obtained specialist legal advice that the Government has breached the EU Employment Directive by refusing to extend existing protections for non-religious teachers in community schools when those schools convert to academies.

The Government is also continuing the existing practice of allowing preferment for all teaching jobs in Voluntary Aided schools in favour of

applicants who are (or say they are) of the religion of the school. (Voluntary Aided schools are publicly funded religious schools controlled by a religious body.) Our lawyers confirmed that this is also in breach of the Directive.

We sent this advice to the Minister, to influential members of the committee considering the Bill, to the Parliamentary human rights committee, and the press, who picked it up. This put the Government under pressure to the point they responded with a public statement. Unfortunately it



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Vatican called to account at UN

A plenary session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in March was the stage for the Executive Director's latest challenge on Roman Catholic child abuse. He emphasised that previous accusations he had made there about the Vatican breaking the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child over child abuse had now been endorsed by a Distinguished Jurist Member of the United Nations Internal Justice Council, Geoffrey Robertson QC.

Keith set out in a report published by the UN all six Articles of the Convention that Mr Robertson

considers the Vatican to have breached.

He repeated Mr Robertson's denunciation of the ineffectiveness of canon law, and assertion that the Vatican deserved expulsion as a Convention signatory. The Vatican representative remained silent – doubtless on direct instructions from Rome. An injudicious response to Keith's interventions in 2009 resulted in worldwide condemnation.

Keith concluded with a list of demands about what the Vatican needs to do, particularly about its secret files and disinclination to report

suspected abusers to secular justice authorities – and then handed the Vatican representative a copy.

Putting these points on the record is likely to encourage international bodies and concerned nations to put pressure on the Vatican. A positive outcome of further meetings in Geneva, including one at the UN High Commission, means that the next phase of the campaign has got off to a good start.

Keith was speaking on behalf of the umbrella group the International Humanist and Ethical Union, to whom we are grateful.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY 2011
 (see back page)

▪ Sharia debate in Parliament
 Tuesday, 28 June

▪ NSS conference on secularism
 Saturday, 10 September

▪ NSS AGM
 Saturday, 26 November

◀ “Education discrimination” continued

was something of a knee-jerk reaction that they were “disappointed with [our] misleading claims”. We retaliated by widely circulating further legal advice making clear that it was their statement, rather than our claims, that was misleading.

The result of the Government’s intransigence is that we have, as we warned them, complained about the alleged breaches to the European

Commission in a dossier that runs to several hundred pages.

It has now been formally accepted and includes a further complaint compiled some time ago by former NSS vice President Anna Behan alleging that Roman Catholic Sixth Form Colleges discriminate against non-Catholic applicants for vocational training courses.

Apart from our latest complaints, only two similar complaints are

outstanding in the whole of the EU – and one of those is one we originally submitted in 2004. It has been the subject of extensive negotiations between the Commission and the previous Government, which appeared to be so in thrall to the Anglican Church it dared not make the legislative changes required.

We have been assured that the new complaints will be dealt with much more quickly.

Religious influence on the increase

 The Government has enthusiastically carried forward the education reforms initiated by Labour under which schools gain independence from local education authorities. Thousands of schools will be converting to academies over the next few years. This will lead to a less secular education system.

There are nearly 2,500 Voluntary Controlled (VC) schools – religious schools controlled by local education authorities. On conversion to academies, they will become entirely religiously controlled. We fear this change will result in a significantly heavier religious, even evangelical, ethos. This will be a disaster for the majority of parents who do not particularly want a religious education for their children but simply want a place in their local school, often the only one within reasonable distance.

The growth of self-governing academies in England (including non-religious ones) is potentially even more serious. It will lead to the demise of local education authorities, whose role the Church is only too anxious to fill. According to Dr John Pritchard, chairman of the Church of England’s board of education: “It may be that there are schools that are traditionally outside the Church family that say [the Church is] providing the kind of thing we need and they would want to relate to us in an affiliated way. It’s all to play for.”

This obsession with decentralising power predictably goes into reverse when it comes to religion. The Government is reportedly enabling the churches to protect academies’

Christian character by giving dioceses the power to appoint governors.

The NSS has been at the forefront of opposition. The *Times Educational Supplement* quoted our warning that: “widespread academy status would put too much power in the hands of the church.

“A mass conversion of faith schools into entirely self-governing academies freed from the moderating influence of local authorities will be the churches’ dream and most parents’ nightmare.

“It is a betrayal of the nation’s children to give the churches virtual control of education, without having to pay a penny, especially while church attendance is in freefall.”

At a roundtable meeting with senior staff at the Department for Education, Executive Director Keith

Porteous Wood and Campaigns Manager Stephen Evans were however assured that admissions arrangements would not become more religious when these schools convert to academies.

We are also pleased that the Government has retained the protections for non-religious teachers and non-teaching staff on academy conversion from VC schools, albeit not from community schools. Another positive development is the Government’s rejection of numerous applications for free schools by extremist groups or those promoting creationism. We were also quoted in relation to this in the *TES*: “It is a perversion to suggest that creationism is part of science. We are pleased that the Government has acted to tackle this extremism.”

NSS joins the Sex Education Forum

The recent inclusion of ‘pro-life’ and pro-abstinence groups in two government advisory bodies makes it even more essential that we campaign for good sex education. We have joined the Sex Education Forum as part of our campaign for sex education to be fact-based and comprehensive. We believe that all schools should equip young people fully and honestly without mixing facts and faith or biasing teaching according to the ‘ethos’ of the school. We are also closely monitoring two Private Members’ Bills on sex education in England, one by Labour MP Chris Bryant, which requests fully comprehensive sex and relationships education, and the other by Conservative MP Nadine Dorries which is informed by her religious beliefs and promotes abstinence teaching – but just for girls.

NSS urges Government to stand firm on Religious Education

Religious groups who want RE included in the new English Baccalaureate have been intensely lobbying the Government. Their petition has attracted the support of over a hundred MPs.

Many advocates of RE have claimed that its inclusion in the EBac is essential for community cohesion. In evidence submitted by the NSS to the Education Committee in March, we pointed out that as RE is already a compulsory subject, this is a completely false argument. Even if RE were not

compulsory, the fact that many faith schools are permitted to teach confessional RE casts serious doubt over the claim that it is the ideal vehicle for good community cohesion.

The NSS has challenged the Government to stand firm in the face of such self-interested pleading from religious groups. We have called for RE to be included in the curriculum review currently underway with a view to radically reforming the subject and bringing it within the National Curriculum.

RE Fact File

→ RE is still compulsory in all English schools, but is not part of the National Curriculum.

→ Many publicly funded 'faith schools' are still permitted to teach confessional RE

→ The curriculum for RE is determined locally by committees (SACREs) dominated by religious interests.

→ The law requires that the main content of RE in non-denominational schools must be devoted to the study of Christianity.

→ SACREs do not require any non-religious representatives. Where non-religious representatives are members, they are the only ones denied the power to vote.

→ In 2010, Ofsted criticised the 'patchy' provision of RE and rated the

subject "inadequate" in one in five secondary schools in England.

→ Recent guidance suggested secular world views should be included in the syllabus. Some SACREs adhere to this, others do not.

→ Parents have the right to withdraw children from RE.

→ Sixth formers have the right to withdraw themselves from RE.

Labelling of meat from religious slaughter back on the agenda

In our previous *Bulletin* we reported that European Ministers had dropped plans to ensure the accurate labelling of meat from religious slaughter without pre-stunning.

This legislation has now returned to the European Parliament where members of the Environment Committee have made a stand and voted to re-insert an identical amendment that

meat from slaughter without stunning should be labelled as such.

Prior to the vote, the NSS contacted all MEPs on the committee urging them to support the amendment.

The latest amendment will now be voted on by MEPs in July. If it is adopted, then the Council of Ministers can either agree or reject it. If they reject it, the amendment goes to conciliation.

Take Action!

Contact your MEP and ask him or her to support any legislative changes that require meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning to be clearly labelled. To inform your letter, you can read our Ritual Slaughter Campaign Briefing at: <http://bit.ly/relsruther>

Religious Slaughter – What's the Beef?

Religious groups are granted exemptions from animal welfare legislation which ensures that animals are stunned before slaughter.



The Government's own advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), have recommended that religious slaughter be banned on welfare grounds. Their position is supported by the RSPCA, British Veterinary Association and Compassion in World Farming.

A significant proportion of meat from religious slaughter is sold on the general market. This means that the religious slaughter industry is being subsidised by consumers who do not know they are buying meat from animals that

have not been stunned before their throats are cut and they are bled to death.

The NSS campaigns for an end to religious exemptions from animal welfare legislation. As long as such exemptions are given, we think meat from religious slaughter (without pre-stunning) should be specifically labelled. Consumers should have the right to information which enables them to make an informed choice when purchasing meat killed by a religious slaughter method.

Sophie in 't Veld wins Secularist of the Year

The 2011 Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year was awarded to Dutch MEP Sophie in 't Veld. The event, in central London in March, was again a sell-out and great success with our members, supporters and honorary associates.

Ms in 't Veld was honoured for her work as chair of the European Parliamentary Platform for Secularism in Politics. She is a tireless campaigner for the separation of religion from politics. Receiving the award from Honorary Associate Professor A.C. Grayling, she said: "I feel very honoured to receive this prize. I consider it as encouragement to continue the battle for the complete separation between church and state in Europe."

Claudine Baxter won joint Volunteer of the Year for her most valuable work in the office and at our events. The other winner was Dominic Wirdnam for his work on the hospital chaplains campaign and for leading Bristol Secular Society.

This year's special achievement award went to Marco Tranchino for all his work on the Protest the Pope march last year.

Our deep gratitude to Dr Irwin for sponsoring the £5,000 prize money, which Ms in 't Veld graciously declined, and will go towards future prizes.

Also, our thanks to Neil Edwards for entertaining us with his table magic.



Big Society and the Localism Bill

At the end of March, vice President Elizabeth O'Casey and Keith Porteous Wood met Department of Communities and Local Government Minister Andrew Stunell to discuss the Localism Bill, social cohesion and local services being handed over to religious groups in England and Wales.

The NSS raised long-standing concerns about local services being run by religious groups and the ability of those groups to discriminate against those using the services and also against employees – even though the services are publicly funded. Mr Stunell did not believe that any group performing a public function would discriminate. However, the NSS has evidence from Germany, Australia and America that does not bode well for public services being controlled by religious groups in the UK.



Elizabeth O'Casey

The aim of the Big Society is to decentralise power but, by handing it over to religious groups, the Government is effectively recentralising it and making religious community leaders the gatekeepers of public funding. Both the non-religious and people of the 'wrong' religion could be affected, as well as certain minority groups. Religious

communities are not homogenous – for example women and minorities may not be well represented by their leaders. The Government's approach also sometimes conflates religion and ethnicity.

The NSS expressed its concern that religion is becoming a marker of difference and separate identity and, more worryingly, it is the basis

for discrimination, prejudice and judgement. Funded groups promoting a religious agenda may not serve the whole community or promote social cohesion.

Also, some people who would benefit from the services of a funded group will not approach them if they have the reputation of promoting a religion or religiously inspired ideas. If this service is the only one in that community, people who feel excluded, judged by, or even fearful of the group's ethos will be seriously disadvantaged.

The NSS acknowledges that some faith-based groups provide services without proselytising, discriminating or imposing values. If a group enters into a contract for public services then they should set aside any manifestation of religious attitudes or expectation of privileges such as exemption from equality laws.

The NSS is pursuing the matter further through its political contacts.

Local Government Minister
Andrew Stunell





Bishops may stay in Lords reform proposals

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has been charged with moving forward reform of the House of Lords. Well before he was due to issue his first report we submitted [our own report](#) to the Cabinet Office. Our recommendations included:

- The Bench of Bishops be completely removed from the House of Lords and that the new Second Chamber should not have any specific religious representation.
- Representation should not be extended to other denominations or faiths. Doing so would be likely to lead to large and increasing demands for representation from the many religions and their various sects extant in Britain.

Any extension of religious representation – the worst possible outcome – would become unworkable. Business could be

derailed by sometimes strident sectarian and doctrinal arguments. This unrepresentative (and mostly moral absolutist) group could vote *en bloc* and even hold the balance of power in debates over specialised issues if it were more than minimal in number.

When the draft reform plans were finally published, Mr Clegg recommended a number of options, one of which was a 100% elected House, which would mean no bishops at all. Another option however would include bishops in a slimmed down Second Chamber, but reduce their number from 26 to 12. We have strongly opposed this and will continue to challenge any plans that fall short of the complete removal of unelected Bishops from the Lords. The Bill did not become law.

Challenge to ban on royals marrying Catholics

Two years ago, the (Labour) Government undertook to review the law that prevents the heir to the throne from marrying a Catholic. The NSS has now written to both David Cameron and Nick Clegg, calling on them to confront this discrimination that would be illegal in every other situation. Positive feedback has already been given by senior representatives of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. This issue was addressed by the Royal Marriages and Succession to the Crown (Prevention of Discrimination) Bill introduced by Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris in 2009, assisted by the NSS.

Council prayers campaign

We would like to thank everyone who is supporting our campaign to end council prayers. Your donations so far have helped us bring this case to a judicial review. We're still waiting for a High Court date and will keep you updated.

Secular Charter Consultation

Thanks to our members who took part in the consultation on the new Secular Charter – the results are now being compiled and analysed. Members will be able to vote on the NSS Council motion for the new Charter to replace the old Principles and Objects at the AGM on 26 November this year. If adopted, it will define the direction the NSS takes in future.

Join us on Facebook and Twitter

Join our online community and keep up to date with our latest activities or get involved with discussions on our Facebook page <http://on.fb.me/natsecsoc> and Twitter @natsecsoc.

Chaplains don't make hospitals better

An analysis of NHS trusts in England by an NSS member found that £29m was spent on hospital chaplains in 2009/10. Many of the country's best hospitals spent the lowest proportion of their income on chaplaincy services. One of the worst performing hospital trusts spent twenty-six times more on chaplains as a proportion of its income than the best performer.

The National Secular Society is not trying to end chaplaincy as some of our opponents have claimed. The cost should be met by charitable trusts, supported by places of

worship and worshippers, not by public funds, especially now when clinical services are being cut.

The analysis showed that there was no positive correlation between how much hospitals spend on chaplaincy services and the overall quality of patient care.

If all trusts brought their spending into line with the best performers, £18.5m a year would be saved – which would pay for 1,000 nursing assistants or a new community hospital every year.

The full study can be read online at <http://bit.ly/chaplaincy2011>

Secular Medical Forum

The SMF continues to work to direct British Medical Association (BMA) policy away from religious influence. Two SMF directors will be attending the BMA's Annual Representatives Meeting at the end of June. During the conference, Dr Peter Wilmshurst, consultant cardiologist, BMJ editorialist and winner of the 2003 Healthwatch award for scientific integrity will be speaking as a guest of the SMF.

The SMF has challenged the BMA-funded Religious Reflection and Thanksgiving service taking place at the same time. The organisers have refused to advertise the parallel secular meeting.

Prevention of unintended pregnancy has been shown to improve the health, economic and social well-being of women and their families. The SMF welcomes an American report published in April 2011 showing that most sexually active women use effective methods of contraception regardless of their religious affiliation – demonstrating the increasing irrelevance of religious edicts against contraception.

Antony Lempert, chair of the SMF, debated on the *Jeremy Vine Show* with Dr Richard Scott, the doctor disciplined for preaching to patients. He was also on Premier Christian Radio discussing a recent Christian Medical Fellowship report suggesting health benefits of Christian belief.



Combating Sectarianism in Scotland

Before the Scottish elections in May, the NSS wrote to all of the major Scottish political parties calling for fundamental changes in the role of religion in their state-funded education, particularly primary schools. We recommended that the Scottish Parliament should:

- move to eliminate faith-based state schools
- remove religious representatives from local authority education committees
- make the educational system more responsive to the children of atheist, agnostic and non-believing parents
- end discriminatory practices on the grounds of religion or belief in relation to teachers in faith-based

schools and their appointment, promotion, terms of service and dismissal.

In this way Scotland can work towards a state education system suitable for removing sectarianism and religious prejudice.

■ NSS Council member Norman Bonney has suggested that tensions between Scottish football fans such as Glasgow Celtic and Rangers and some other teams may be fuelled by sectarianism entrenched by the educational system and supported by laws which require a new monarch to uphold protestantism and maintain presbyterian church government in Scotland.

Raising the profile

Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson, assisted by Stephen Evans, took part in numerous TV and radio broadcasts and were widely quoted in the media, both in the UK and abroad. Terry Sanderson is also editor of *Newsline* and compiles the daily *What the Papers Say* on the website: <http://bit.ly/wtbsnss>.

We have been called on to talk about education issues including the new free schools being controlled by religious groups, the majority of church schools becoming academies and free transport to faith schools.

Keith's comment about the beatification "This sprint to sainthood is to deflect examinations into JPII's unedifying record on clerical child abuse – and, with it, Benedict's own role" went around the world on the press wires and was surprisingly picked up by the BBC and even Australian TV.

In politics, we received good coverage on prayers both in Parliament and local councils along with the census and the continued exclusion of Catholics (and women) from the royal succession.

We were also quoted over gay marriage and Catholic adoption agencies discriminating against LGBT people, as well as foster parents justifying homophobia by their faith.

As usual, there are believers trying to flout laws and company rules; this time, a man insisting on displaying a palm cross in his van. Hospital chaplains continue to be a bone of contention too. We also spoke about the Christian doctor in Margate preaching at his patients.

Thanks to all of our members who have written to their local papers about both national and local secular issues. It is important to keep doing this as NSS members are often the only balance to strongly expressed religious opinions.

A new prize will be presented at the Secularist of the Year event for the best Letter to the Editor on a secularist topic. If you have had a letter published in the mainstream media that you want to enter for this prize, just send a URL to tas@secularism.org.uk or the cutting to NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL marked "SoY Prize".

NSS on campus

In March, the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS) held their annual convention in Conway Hall. Students, academics and others from all over the UK and Ireland were there. NSS Vice President Gerard Phillips gave a talk while Council member Ray Newton and Senior Campaign Officer Tessa Kendall ran a stall.

NSS Honorary Associate Professor A.C. Grayling presided over the first AHS prize-giving – our congratulations to all the winners.

In February, Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson spoke at "Oxford Think Week" about education. Other speakers included NSS Honorary Associates A.C. Grayling, Richard Dawkins, Colin Blakemore and Peter Atkins.



AHS President, Richy Thompson, with other student members at Secularist of the Year

Council activities – not reported elsewhere

As well as his media activities and directing Secularist of the Year, President Terry Sanderson spoke to Sheffield Humanists 'In Praise of Secularism'.

Vice President Elizabeth O'Casey chaired a session at the One Law for All conference on International Women's Day.

Vice President Gerard Phillips has given talks including 'What is secularism and why is it relevant?' as part of Durham University's Reason Week, and to Bristol Secular Society. In May he attended the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association event marking the global International Day Against Homophobia



Gerard Phillips,
vice President and
chair of Council

activities taking place in over 60 countries. He has also spent considerable time working on the Secular Charter consultation, together with Afonso Reis e Sousa and the President.

Professor Norman Bonney had an article about David Hume in the *Edinburgh Evening News* and a letter about the Act of Settlement in the *Scotsman*. He also met with NSS members and members of affiliated groups in Belfast in May 2011.

Dan Bye debated the motion "This house believes that religion and



Dan Bye

politics should not mix" at Princethorpe College, a private Catholic school in Rugby. The motion was carried with two thirds of the audience voting in favour. He also spoke at Sheffield Atheist Society on Religion In Schools.

Peter Vlachos spoke at the "Do Women Need Secularism?" conference and at the Hampstead Humanist Society AGM. He also spoke at a conference on Religion and Health at the University of Greenwich, on the subject: "Saving lives, not saving souls: Is there a role for religion in health care in modern multi-cultural Britain?"



Peter Vlachos

Donations

The NSS Council is always grateful for members' donations. We would particularly like to thank the people who recently gave us £300 and £500, two members who took out Life Memberships and a donation of £1,000.

We were exceptionally grateful for a legacy of £53,000 from a former member. We do urge members to remember the NSS in their wills. The staff or Executive Director are happy to assist anyone contemplating this, and we have a helpful leaflet on the subject available from the office.

An increasing number of members are taking out standing orders and we would like to thank them, as these allow us to plan ahead and take our campaigns into new areas. If you would like to start one or increase an existing one, the office will send you a form – or you can click the Donate button on the website.

We receive no grants or public funding, so the support and generosity of our members is vital to our work.

Volunteers

We are always grateful to the volunteers who give us their time and talents. We would particularly like to thank:

BRAD DAVIS of WhiteLight for designing and producing the *Bulletin*, Annual Report and promotional material

CLAUDINE BAXTER for her work in the office

BARRY THORPE for research work

DOMINIC WIRDNAM for campaign and local group work

SVEN KLINGE and TREVOR ASTON for photographing our events

REBECCA SHARKEY for campaign work

If you would like to help us with our campaigns or general office work, please contact the office. We would particularly welcome legal or accounting experience.

Sharia debate in Parliament

Members are invited to a debate in Parliament jointly organised by the One Law for All Campaign and the NSS. The practice of sharia law will be debated and in particular whether it should be permitted under the powers of the Arbitration Act.

Sharia tribunals and councils are in free operation across the United Kingdom – some operate under the power of the Arbitration Act 1996. The debate will be chaired by Jim Fitzpatrick MP.

When: Tuesday 28 June 2011, 6–8pm. Allow 30 minutes for security checks

Where: House of Commons, Committee Room 16

More Info: <http://bit.ly/shariadebate>

One Law for All's recently published report: *Sharia Law in Britain: A Threat to One Law for All and Equal Rights* is available for download at: <http://bit.ly/shariareport>

Secular Europe Campaign



This Campaign draws together diverse groups every year to demand an end to religious privileges and that European institutions remain secular, with a special focus on the Vatican. It also supports freedom of religion, conscience and speech, women's equality and reproductive rights, equal rights for LGBT people as well as opposing state-funded faith schools and religious tribunals.

There will be several events

between **10–17 September**, culminating in a march and rally in central London on Saturday 17th. Details are still being arranged and all information will be on the website <http://secular-europe-campaign.org/> and Facebook <http://on.fb.me/facebookseceurope>. The Campaign is organised by Marco Tranchino who played a leading role in the Protest the Pope march last year.

NSS conference on secularism

The NSS is holding its first conference on secularism in conjunction with the Secular Europe Campaign <http://secular-europe-campaign.org/> on Saturday **10 September 2011** at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. **Nick Cohen, Dr Evan Harris and Sir Jonathan Miller have agreed to speak.**

There will be more details in *Newsline* and on the website closer to the date.

We will also email members – if you are not sure the NSS has your current email address, please email it with your name and postcode to emails@secularism.org.uk.

To give us an idea of likely numbers, it would be helpful if anyone hoping to attend would email their name and the number of people coming to 2011conference@secularism.org.uk

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National Secular Society
25 Red Lion Square,
London WC1R 4RL

Telephone: (020) 7404 3126
Fax: 0870 762 8971

www.secularism.org.uk

Executive Director

Keith Porteous Wood FCA
kpw@secularism.org.uk

Senior Office Staff

Stephen Evans and Tessa Kendall
admin@secularism.org.uk