

UN demands answers from Vatican over child abuse



Following briefings from victims' groups and the NSS – who were invited to meet the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in June – the Committee has demanded answers from the Vatican over its handling of the clerical child abuse/rape scandal. It is the first time the UN has ever done so.

It published a list of questions for the Vatican to address ahead of its public examination by the Committee in Geneva in January 2014. They were prefaced with: "In the light of the recognition by the Holy See of sexual violence against children committed by members of the clergy, brothers and nuns in numerous countries around the world, and given the scale of the abuses". In summary the Committee asked whether:

- reports of abuse were made to the relevant secular authorities and whether co-operation with those authorities was in place;
- those accused of abuse had been removed from having any contact with children;
- the Church had supported children making accusations against abusers or whether the

children were being silenced;

- there were any preventative measures or support for victims in place.

The Holy See and the Human Rights Council

We are convinced that the motive for the Vatican signing up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was to exploit the authority that being a signatory brings. In particular we believe it uses its status of signatory to advance its agenda of imposing Catholic dogma on other countries, for example so-called "pro-life" positions. However, having ratified the Convention, the Vatican undertakes a number of formal obligations.

One of these is five-yearly reporting on the challenges encountered in conforming to the Convention. It is these reports that the Committee on the Rights of the Child is charged with examining. The Holy See failed to file its report due in 1997 until 2011. We complained about this failure on the floor of the UN Human Rights

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Sat 7 Dec Secularism & feminism half-day conference

Sat 14 Dec AGM 2013

◀“UN demands answers” continued

Council in 2009, 2010 and 2011 under the aegis of IHEU. The report was eventually filed, shortly after our complaint in 2011.

Pressure on the Pope

Shortly before the end of Benedict’s papacy, the Holy See had warned that it would feel justified in withdrawing from the Convention if it were to be pushed too hard over child abuse. It also once more rejected the Committee’s requests to withdraw the wide-ranging reservations it had made on signing the Convention.

Whilst the UNCRC has no enforcement powers, it can and does, when necessary, issue highly critical reports. We presume the Vatican would be reluctant to provoke one, given Pope Francis’ commitment to decisive action over clerical paedophiles and to punish those in the Church guilty of crimes against children. It is too early to say whether this is hype or the precursor of a real change.

Given the wealth of evidence of the Vatican’s wrongdoing over decades and of Pope Francis’

The Committee also asked questions about the notorious Magdalene Laundries. These were run by nuns in Ireland over several decades until their eventual closure in 1996, where inmates (some of whom were girls) were used as forced labour. Even though the religious orders have liquidated property worth the equivalent of nearly a billion US dollars in recent years, and profited hugely from inmates’ slave labour, they continue to refuse the Irish Government’s requests to contribute to the modest compensation (which in some cases is an obligation under Human Rights treaties) that the Government has belatedly agreed to pay those victims who are still living.

predecessors flouting the Convention, a frank and open response to the Committee’s questions will be painful. And that presents the Pope with a dilemma. His stated desire to deal with child abuse will take more than the slick PR we have seen so far. It will be a Herculean task, especially as many of the senior prelates have been responsible for shielding abusers from justice and, in some cases, have facilitated the moving of abusers to new locations where they have abused again.

When in 2009 we first drew the attention of the Human Rights Council to the failure of the Holy See to report and to comply with numerous other Articles of the Convention, the Holy See unwisely retaliated in a disingenuous press statement and was slated by the world’s media for doing so. Two years later, we were able to tell the Council that the renowned lawyer and UN Jurist, Geoffrey Robertson QC, also alleged multiple breaches of the Convention by the Vatican over child abuse.

Adjudicator dismisses concerns over non-religiously designated schools admissions

In August, the Office of the Schools Adjudicator rejected a [NSS complaint](#) concerning Tudor Grange, a non-religiously designated academy in Solihull that published admissions criteria giving priority to pupils from a religiously selective Church of England school.

As reported in the previous *Bulletin*, we successfully challenged the Academy’s previous plan to give priority to children at two schools that use criteria in their admission arrangements favouring pupils whose parents attend Church of England services.

However, the academy still opted to prioritise pupils attending another of the religiously-selective schools which concurrently launched a consultation on

proposals to remove its faith criteria for admissions.

Our complaint to the schools adjudicator argued that by naming a religiously-selective school as a feeder school, Tudor Grange Academy could be indirectly advantaging children on the basis of their parents’ religious beliefs and activities.

However, in its ruling the Schools Adjudicator found that, as St James had been undersubscribed for several years (and only oversubscribed schools are permitted to discriminate), no indirect discrimination would occur in this instance.

Worryingly, the adjudicator went on to suggest that indirect discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief in non-religiously

designated school admissions could be justified, if (in the words of the Equality Act relating to permissible indirect discrimination) a ‘legitimate aim’ could be established.

The prospect of religious selection creeping into community and other non-religiously designated schools’ admissions policies is deeply alarming.

The designation of faith schools as feeder schools – even those without faith-based selection policies – will serve to further disadvantage the non-religious in our state education system.

We’ll continue to highlight and challenge the injustice, not only of the faith-based admissions criteria, but also of the faith school system as a whole.

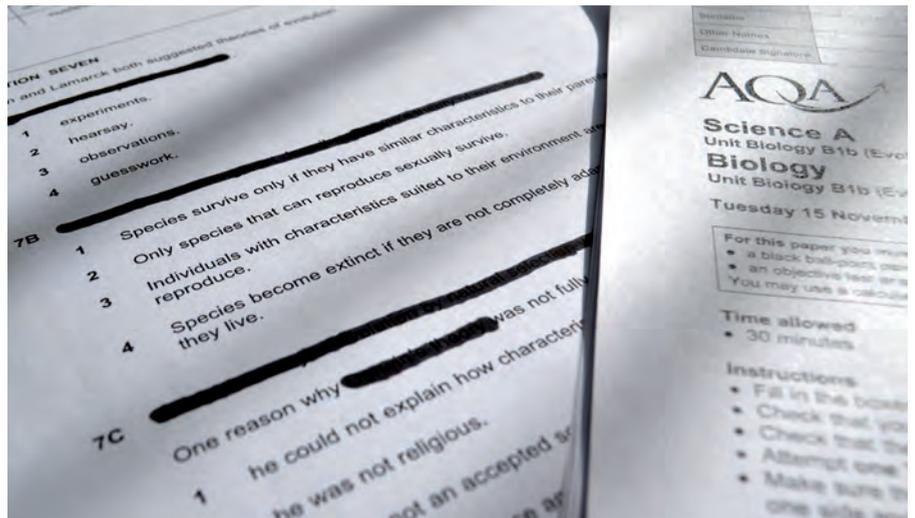
Faith school caught censoring questions on science exam papers

The Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Exam board (OCR) has found evidence of exam malpractice at the publicly-funded Yesodey Hatorah girls' Jewish Voluntary Aided secondary school after the NSS raised concerns with the exam board, the regulator and the Department for Education.

The investigation was launched after the NSS asked the exam board to follow up [unconfirmed reports](#) that Charedi teachers had redacted questions in a GCSE science exam this year that they deemed unsuitable.

The precise nature of questions that were blacked out is not known, but earlier this year a Jewish education consultant warned that evolution in the new GCSE science curriculum could pose problems for strictly Orthodox schools.

Our concerns followed an admission by the Yesodey Hatorah principal, Rabbi Avraham Pinter, that "sometimes Charedi schools, if they find anything in the paper which could be offensive to parents, advise children to avoid that question".



The exam board originally opted to keep details of the investigation's results confidential, but after being pressed by the NSS for information a spokesperson for OCR told us:

"We have tried to respect the religious and cultural sensitivities of this community whilst protecting the integrity of our exams. That said, we do not consider obscuring aspects of question papers to be good exam practice. We are raising the matter with the Department for Education and Ofsted as well as our fellow Awarding Bodies, through the Joint Council for Qualifications. We are also in the process of agreeing safeguards with the centre to ensure good exam practice in the context of today's pluralistic society. Ofqual are also fully aware of our investigation and its outcome."

Yesodey Hatorah was founded

in 1942 and operated as a private school until 2005 when it opted in to the state sector. It was launched as a state school with a high-profile visit from faith school enthusiast Tony Blair, when prime minister.

Pupils being denied the right to answer exam questions by teachers pushing their own religious agenda represents a new low for faith schools. That it took a complaint from the NSS to reveal this malpractice reveals the extent to which not upsetting 'religious sensitivities' is now deemed more important than a young person's right to a rounded education. However, this is simply an extreme example of a common problem throughout our state education system: children's education being compromised by undue influence of religious organisations.

Council prayers back on the agenda?



Conservative MP Matthew Offord has sponsored a bill to amend the Local Government Act of 1972 to give councils permission to hold prayers at their discretion. The [Local Government \(Religious etc. Observances\) Bill](#) is designed to reverse our legal victory at the High Court in 2012 which established that the saying of prayers as part of formal council meetings is unlawful. Introducing the Bill to Parliament, Dr Offord said "Reading prayers of any religion before meetings is something members of my constituency feel is important. It is something I always liked and I was upset when it was banned."

Needless to say, the NSS will oppose the Bill, but being a Private Members' Bill it stands little chance of ever reaching the statute book.

NSS challenges BBC on its misleading chaplaincy findings

In June, the BBC reported that chaplaincy services had been cut in 40% of English NHS hospital trusts between 2009 and 2013. However, more extensive research based on Freedom of Information requests that had been carried out by the NSS showed that, in fact, the number of chaplains had actually increased over this period.

According to the NSS's research, in 2009 NHS Trusts were employing 546 Full Time Equivalent chaplains. Our most recent research shows that in 2013 they are employing 557, despite cuts to NHS frontline services. In stark contrast, the number of nursing staff was reduced by around 5,780 (3,700 full time equivalent)



BBC website presents its findings – complete with ‘a chaplain’s story’.

between May 2010 and June 2012, according to the Royal College of Nursing.

The NSS has long

argued that churches, mosques, synagogues and temples should be funding their own chaplaincy in hospitals,

instead of using up precious NHS resources to do so, especially when substantial cuts are being made.

Whilst the BBC approached 171 Acute Trusts for its survey, the NSS sent Freedom of Information requests to all of England’s 230 Health Trusts.

Despite our providing the BBC with our more extensive research contradicting their findings, the BBC pursued their own misleading “chaplaincy cuts” agenda.

The NSS’s position on this received substantial media coverage. President Terry Sanderson, executive director Keith Porteous Wood, and campaigns manager Stephen Evans also raised the disparity in local BBC radio coverage.

BBC blocks scrutiny of *Thought for the Day*

It has been revealed that BBC executives blocked an attempt to include Radio 4’s *Thought for the Day* in the remit for a formal impartiality review earlier this year into the BBC’s ‘breadth of opinion’, which included a review of the BBC’s religious output.

The independent review, commissioned by the BBC Trust, was led by former ITV chief executive Stuart Prebble. The NSS president and executive director had a detailed discussion with Mr Prebble and raised once more the issue of the exclusion of non-religious voices from *Thought for the Day*.

Mr Prebble asked for *Thought for the Day* to be included in the



remit for this review because it seemed “absurd” to exclude it, adding that he had no difficulty in including a secular and humanist contribution within *Thought for the Day* if justified on editorial grounds. His co-author, David Elstein, argued that he is “...one of those who think *TFTD* should have regular atheists in it to achieve a full range...”

The BBC has refused our Freedom of Information request for correspondence concerning this, and the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust has refused to even offer an appeal insisting that it would not “revisit” the issue. It was, it says, a matter for BBC management to decide whether *Thought for the Day* should include humanist or secular voices among

its contributors.

Meanwhile, the BBC Trust is due to rule on a formal complaint made by the NSS concerning a *Thought for the Day* slot which we argued breached editorial guidelines.

The slot in question was delivered by Lord Singh and broadcast immediately after our High Court victory over prayers during council meetings. Lord Singh used the slot to portray the legal action as bigoted and as an attempt to impose our own “beliefs and prejudices on others”.

Our complaint to the BBC argued that the three-minute broadcast was used to deliver biased commentary on a topical political controversy, without any right to reply or attempt to provide due impartiality.

We will report the findings of the BBC Trust in due course.

Girl Guides introduce inclusive secular oath for all

In June, Girlguiding UK announced it would update its promise, removing the reference to God in order to emphasise that guiding is open to all girls – regardless of their religious beliefs. The updated promise replaces the phrase “to love my God” with a promise to “be true to myself and develop my beliefs”.

The change was made after a [public consultation](#), with nearly 44,000 responses. During the consultation, Girlguiding UK made it clear that that it was not, and never has been, a Christian organisation.

Our submission to the Guides pointed out that their existing pledge to “love my God” was incompatible with the Girlguides’ aim of being “fair, open and inclusive.” We also argued that one secular Promise, without reference to religion, was the most appropriate way forward.

The secular argument was widely supported and, rather than introduce a new additional atheist pledge, the Girlguides opted for one secular promise for all.

When the new promise came into force on 1 September, a Girl Guide unit in Harrogate defied the movement by insisting it would stick to the traditional wording.

Jem Henderson, a former Brownie

who joined the Harrogate Guides as a volunteer leader after hearing about the new secular approach, was told by local group leaders that they would be “sticking with the previous promise”.

The group leaders, who are all members of the local United Reformed Church, had previously [written a joint letter with its minister](#) to the local press to express their “dismay” at the change. Their letter described the previous promise “to love my God” as “inclusive” and insisted: “Girlguiding has God at its core and anyone who has issue with this is free to start their own organisation.”

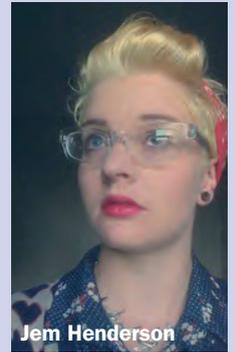
The refusal to implement the new promise made national headlines after Ms Henderson contacted the NSS to seek our support.

The former Bishop of Rochester called on Christian Guide leaders to rebel against what he called “secular totalitarianism”, and suggested the organisation could split if it refused to compromise and allow two pledges. Andrea Minichiello Williams, CEO of Christian Concern, joined the small chorus of condemnation, saying: “These women should be commended for standing up to the forced secularisation of the Guiding

movement.” In a radio interview involving the NSS, Church of England General Synod member Alison Ruoff suggested God would “remove his blessing from the UK” if the new pledge was introduced. Prominent church leaders also called for Guides to be prevented from using church premises. The NSS’s counter-arguments in defence of the Girl Guides were widely reported in the media.

Despite the former bishop’s hysterical rallying call, the rebel Guide leaders bowed to pressure and agreed to use the new secular promise. This followed a meeting with Girlguiding UK. Chief Guide Gill Slocombe said the response to the new promise had been “overwhelmingly positive” and the complaints it had received from members represented “significantly less than 1%” of their membership.

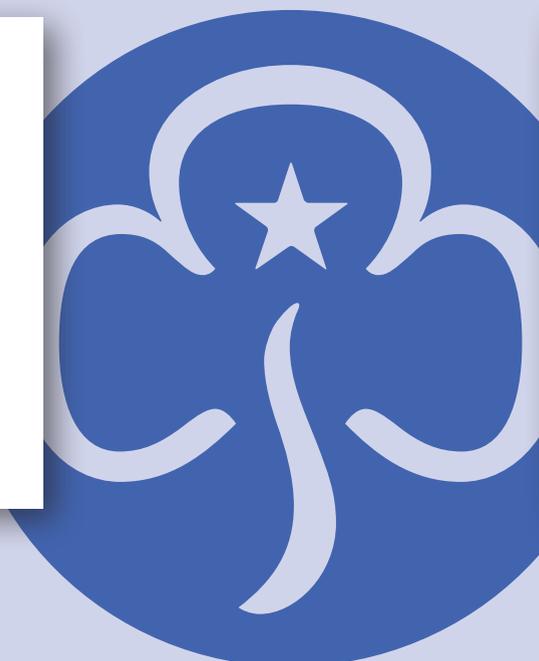
We pay tribute to Jem Henderson for standing up for secular principles and for taking the sudden media interest in her stride.



OLD PROMISE

I promise that I will do my best:

To love my God,
To serve the Queen and my country,
To help other people,
and
To keep the Guide law.



NEW PROMISE

I promise that I will do my best:

To be true to myself and develop my beliefs,
To serve the Queen and my community,
To help other people,
and
To keep the Guide Law.

Religious ceremonies and the legal system

Lawyers for the Scottish Government have rejected a NSS complaint concerning the annual Kirking (protestant) and Red Mass (Catholic) religious services for the judiciary that mark the start of the legal year.

Our complaint centred on a potential undermining of the impartiality, integrity and independence of the Scottish judiciary by its attendance at the ceremonies, all the more concerning because of there being two sectarian events. During the Red Mass ceremony in 2012, Cardinal O'Brien told judges to "remain strong and true to their Christian beliefs".

We argued that such services represent undue interference in the judicial process contrary to



the independence and impartiality rules imposed on the judiciary. The Scottish Government sought to justify the religious services on the grounds that attendance is voluntary. We have been referred to the Lord President's private office if we want to take the matter further. The Lord President is Lord Gill, pictured at last year's Red Mass with receiving a Papal Knighthood from the disgraced Cardinal O'Brien.

Tackling Religious Observance in Scottish schools

In Scotland there is no requirement for daily acts of religious observance (RO) in schools. Nevertheless, secularists have been drawing attention to the excessive observance and inappropriate content of this observance in Scotland's non-denominational (notionally secular) schools.

RO has become the playground of evangelical groups seeking to impart inappropriate Bible-based messages, especially on evolution, the role of women and sexual ethics.

With research help from the NSS, the [Edinburgh Secular Society](#) has been campaigning to remove RO from Edinburgh schools and has put pressure on the City of Edinburgh Council to undertake a thorough review of it in the city.

A further debate has been developing about whether the current parental opt-out provision should be replaced with an opt-in. This followed a petition from the Scottish Secular society (a group independent from the NSS) calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to amend the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 to that effect.

Catholic adoption agency continues fight for right to discriminate

St Margaret's Children and Family Care Society in Glasgow, the last Catholic adoption agency in Britain to continue to exclude same-sex couples from consideration as prospective parents, has appealed to the Scottish Charity Appeals Panel after the charity was ruled by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator to have breached both equality and charity law. The outcome of the appeal is awaited.

St Margaret's has raised numerous objections, including procedural ones, with both Regulator and Panel, and lost on all. The latest was an attempt to prevent the Equality and Human Rights Commission from intervening to provide their "view on how the [Equality Act 2010] should be interpreted", something St Margaret's seemingly didn't want them to do.

The Regulator's ruling followed a complaint by the NSS.

St Margaret's [accuse the NSS](#) of seeking to bring about their closure, whereas all we wish them to do is to comply with the law that every other adoption agency does. If the appeal goes against them they have vowed to fight on in the courts despite "frightening" costs.

Legal action suspended after Woking issue 'clarification' on worshippers' parking policy

Following the threat of a [legal challenge](#) from the NSS, Woking Borough Council issued a 'clarification' on its controversial policy that grants car parking exemptions to religious groups.

Councillors responded to the threat of legal action by amending their policy which now makes clear that members of other community groups who promote social inclusion and undertake voluntary work may also park free of charge in the Council's car parks.

The decision as to which groups (faith or community based) are allowed free parking will continue to be for the Council to determine on an individual basis.

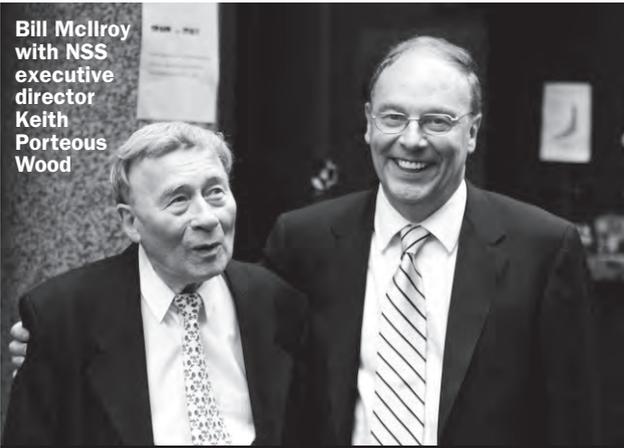
While we welcome the revision, we remain concerned that the revised policy is, in practice, a manoeuvre to

head off allegations of unlawful discrimination while still offering privileged parking arrangements to those attending religious services.

There is doubt over whether Woking's 'revision' sufficiently addresses the alleged discrimination. Equality law expert Michael Rubenstein wrote in the *Equal Opportunities Review*: "The council's defence to a direct discrimination claim seems problematic. You cannot cure less favourable treatment of a protected group, here those who lack religious belief, by expanding the group who are more favourably treated."

We've decided to postpone our legal action for the time being to enable us to assess how the new policy works in practice.

Bill McIlroy with NSS executive director Keith Porteous Wood



NSS mourns the loss of Bill McIlroy

William (Bill) J McIlroy
1928–2013

NSS General Secretary 1963–1977, and more recently a Council member, Bill died peacefully on 22 August 2013, aged 85. He was also *Freethinker* editor for three stints over 25 years.

He was most active in the 1960s when, together with the then president, David Tribe, he helped make the NSS a force to be reckoned with. They played a significant role in making the 1960s the decade in which more social advances were made than any other. They tackled the laws on male homosexuality, abortion, stage censorship, Sunday observance and the last remaining blasphemy statute.

David, who now lives in Australia, told us: "What a pleasure and privilege it was to work with someone of such loyalty and ability".

Bill devoted himself to the movement and had a phenomenal work output. He will be remembered for his wonderful sense of humour, integrity and kindness.

His funeral in Brighton was attended by the president, two directors and the executive director, who also paid a warm tribute to him there on behalf of the movement.

A memorial meeting will be held at 11.30am in Conway Hall on Saturday, 14 December 2013, shortly before the NSS AGM. Non-members are equally welcome to the memorial meeting.

NSS welcomes new Honorary Associates



Ms Asma Jahangir

Asma Jahangir, former UN special rapporteur on religion and belief, is a human rights activist who has been working courageously both in Pakistan and internationally for decades to prevent the persecution of religious

minorities, women, and the exploitation of children. She is President of the Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan. Ms Jahangir recently called for an inquiry into reports of Pakistan's security apparatus's plot to assassinate her. Keith Porteous Wood and Terry Sanderson have worked with her at the UN in Geneva.

Baroness Tessa Blackstone

Baroness Blackstone of Stoke Newington is a Labour politician and Life Peer. From 1997 to 2001 she was Minister for Education, and Employment and Arts Minister from 2001 to 2003. In the Lords, Baroness Blackstone has been opposition spokesperson for Education and Science, for Treasury matters, for Trade and Industry, and principal opposition spokesperson for



Foreign Affairs. She is a member of the Economic Affairs Committee, the Public Service and Demographic Change Committee, and the Freedom of Information Advisory Panel. She was appointed to the Privy Council in 2001. In 2009, she became the Chair at Great Ormond Street Hospital, and in 2010, Chair at the British Library.

Kerry McCarthy MP

Kerry McCarthy is the Labour Party's shadow Foreign Office Minister. After being elected to represent



Bristol East in 2005, Ms McCarthy worked on Select Committees involving borders, offender management, mental health and finance – in which she has held some shadow ministerial posts. She has spoken out about religion in politics and campaigns on animal welfare issues. Ms McCarthy is a vegan and Vice-President of the League Against Cruel Sports.

NSS keeps up high media profile

We were quoted worldwide in the recent debate over the burka. While opposing a full-scale ban on niqabs or burkas, we supported the right of institutions to place restrictions on them in certain circumstances.

We were also quoted in national and international media over the court ruling allowing a Muslim woman to wear a niqab while standing trial for witness intimidation, only needing to remove it whilst giving evidence. NSS council member Anne Marie Waters was interviewed on Sky News and Channel 5 news following the controversial ruling.

The NSS was first to report the story of the renegade Girl Guide leaders refusing to implement the new secular promise, which was subsequently picked up by the national press, with the NSS widely quoted.

Our executive director appeared on *BBC Breakfast* to discuss the need for reform of religious education, and NSS spokespeople



Anne Marie Waters on Sky News

have also been quoted by the national media on a host of other topics including hospital chaplains, the Church of England's plans to dominate state education and the UNs scrutiny of the Catholic Church over child abuse. We also countered the outgoing Chief Rabbi's claim that increasing secularisation was causing Britain to 'lose the plot', arguing that the decline of religious authority had led to a more tolerant and equal society.

We have also regularly contributed to debates on regional and national radio stations at home and abroad.

Dates for your diary:

Saturday 7 December
Secularism and feminism: a common cause – half-day conference.
 Conway Hall 2pm – 6pm

Saturday 14 December:
Bill McIlroy memorial.
 Conway Hall. 11.30am

Saturday 14 December:
NSS AGM, Conway Hall,
1.30pm. Registration starts 1pm

Saturday 29 March:
Secularist of the Year 2014.
Central London 12 noon – 4pm

Secularism and feminism – a common cause

On the 7 December the NSS will be holding a half-day conference to discuss the common causes of secularism and feminism. The event will be chaired by Anne Marie Waters and speakers will include Pragna Patel (Southall Black Sisters), Nahla Mahmood (Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain), Helen Palmer (Central London Humanists), Helen Nicholls (Lawyers Secular Society), Yasmin Rehman (The Muslim Institute) and Julie Bindel.

The conference will take place from 2pm – 6pm at Conway Hall in central London. It will be followed by an evening of comedy as Terry Sanderson presents his film compilation show "Women in Comedy". Conference admission is free, but requires prior registration by email. Admission to the evening event is £5 payable on the door, no prior registration needed. To reserve your place at the conference please email admin@secularism.org.uk.



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the Irwin Prize for
Secularist of the Year 2014

Saturday 29th March
 Tickets available now