

Religion in schools under scrutiny



Our schools are regarded by some as places where it is legitimate to promote and seek to instil particular religious beliefs in children and young people. We see things differently.

We advocate schools that encourage independent thinking, develop and open the minds of young people, free from undue religious influence or control. Schools where all young people are educated together, regardless of religion or belief.

We recently uncovered evidence that religious state schools were being permitted to censor exam questions about evolution and human biology on grounds of 'religious sensitivity'. Inside you'll read about how our campaigning has succeeded in putting an end to this.

We've also been highlighting how the lack of religious neutrality in our state schools is impeding parents' ability to raise their children in accordance with their own convictions – and we've recently been

assisting parents whose children have been allocated places at religious schools against their wishes.

The Department for Education is currently investigating allegations that community schools in Birmingham have been hijacked by Islamist hardliners, intent on running publicly funded schools on "Islamic principles".

If the allegations are substantiated, this apparent takeover by stealth is a concerning development, but religious control of state schools is a well-established and growing phenomenon in the UK, and one very much supported by those of virtually all political stripes.

Children of all backgrounds deserve better than to be treated as pawns in a religious power struggle. The

primary focus of schools should be to provide the best academic education possible, and to prepare young people to take their place as equal citizens in a democratic society.

An education system delineated along faith lines not only works against social cohesion, it also undermines children's autonomous rights, and makes it difficult to ensure all parents' beliefs are equally respected during their children's education.

We therefore remain steadfast in our opposition to 'faith schools' and campaign instead for inclusive schools, equally welcoming and appropriate for children of all backgrounds.

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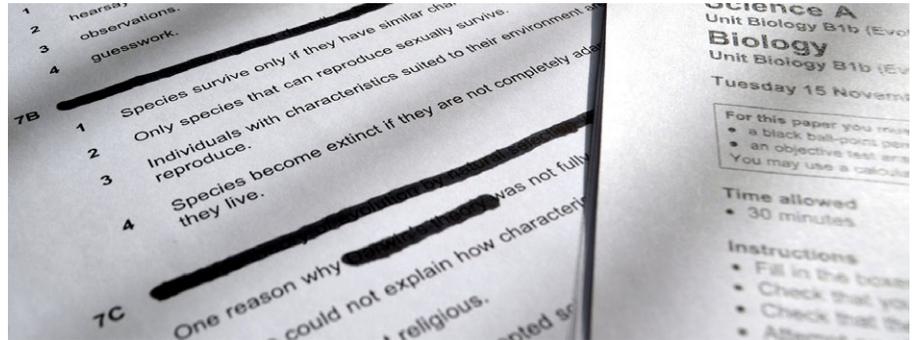
Success! Ofqual bans faith schools from censoring exam papers

The exam regulator Ofqual has confirmed that faith schools in England will no longer be allowed to redact questions about human reproduction and evolution from science exam papers, following months of campaigning by the NSS.

An investigation by the Oxford Cambridge and RSA (OCR) exam board in 2013, called for by the NSS, first uncovered the redaction of questions in science papers at Yesodey Hatorah, a state-funded Jewish school in London.

Subsequent freedom of information requests, submitted by the NSS, revealed that the practice was more widespread than this particular school, and that exam boards, the exam regulator and the Government had been colluding with faith schools.

In correspondence with the NSS, the OCR exam board originally said they intended to “come to an agreement” with schools concerned over “how, when and where the redactions take place – but at the same time respecting their need to do this in view of their religious beliefs”. Similarly, Education minister Elizabeth Truss described this to us as a “proportionate and reasonable response”.



NSS campaigning has put an end to schools censoring questions about evolution and human reproduction.

However, after giving the matter further consideration and at a more senior level following our representations, the exam regulator Ofqual agreed with our argument that students’ best interests should be paramount, and instructed all exam boards to consider any attempt to tamper with exam papers as “malpractice”.

In a meeting with NSS honorary associate Lord Avebury (who tabled a parliamentary question on the issue) and NSS executive director Keith Porteous Wood, the Chief Regulator, Glenys Stacey, reiterated that Ofqual had told the exam boards that this was unacceptable malpractice.

This is a modest but significant

victory for the rights of children and young people to not have their education and right to knowledge impeded by religious organisations seeking to pursue their own agenda.

We remain concerned that some faith schools are failing to teach areas of the National Curriculum that clash with schools’ religious ethos, such as evolution and human reproduction.

Given the Government’s *laissez-faire* approach to the redaction of questions on science exam papers we have little confidence that it will ensure children’s education is not undermined by science classes being influenced by religious precepts, particularly in minority faith schools.

Defending parents’ and children’s rights in state education

In recent months we’ve assisted a number of parents to assert their rights in a state education system increasingly influenced by religious organisations.

In one example almost 20 parents were allocated places at a Sikh free school in Buckinghamshire, despite not including the school in their list of preferences.

With public support from the NSS, parents argued that they should not be forced to attend a faith school with a religious ethos that ran counter to their beliefs.

We’re pleased to report that all children have now been reallocated places at other schools.

The anachronistic legal requirement for an act of worship (daily in England and Wales) is also a source of anger for many parents who contact us from

both south and north of the border. Our staff have been busy advising parents of their rights in this area, including one parent who was told by a Church of England school that she could only withdraw her child if she came in to the school to supervise the child herself. The school has now backtracked and admitted it was wrong to demand this.



Non-Sikhs were angry about being allocated places for their children at the Khalsa Academy, a faith school with a Sikh ethos.

For many parents, the local school will always be the most appropriate school for their needs, regardless of the type of school it happens to be. We’ve been contacted by a number of parents whose children have been refused places at their local faith school because they don’t attend church, or haven’t had their child baptised. Regrettably, such discrimination, despite causing hardship to many, is currently lawful. The Catholic Church is strongly lobbying the Department for Education to increase its freedom to discriminate by scrapping the 50% cap on faith-based admissions to free schools in England.

We will continue to vigorously oppose any attempt to increase the discrimination permissible in publicly funded schools.

Unlawful sex discrimination exposed in Muslim faith schools



Madani Schools Federation advertised for a “Male science teacher”

Following concerns raised by the NSS, three Muslim state schools have been told not to discriminate against job applicants on the basis of gender.

In January, we submitted evidence to the Department for Education (DfE) of a number of adverts placed by the Leicester-based Madani Schools Federation that prohibited women from applying from teaching and non-teaching jobs at an Islamic boys' school. Additional adverts were placed for the Madani Girls' School requiring 'female only' teachers.

Employment agencies are liable to prosecution if adverts they place breach the Equality Act. The job adverts were placed by Capita Education Resourcing, who fervently refused to accept our assertions that the advertisements were unlawful. They maintained that the discrimination was permissible under exceptions to the Equality Act that permit religious organisations to discriminate on grounds of gender and sexual orientation. We sought to convince them that such exceptions

are only lawful in respect of a very narrow range of employment – which did not include these teaching posts. The DfE agreed with our reasoning and stated there “did not appear to be any justification as to why these post holders would need to be of a particular sex”. The schools have since been ordered to withdraw the adverts.

It is concerning that some faith schools, and their employment agencies, appear to be acting unlawfully and with impunity until such matters are exposed by organisations such as ourselves.

‘Lawful’ discrimination in faith schools

Meanwhile, discrimination against teachers on grounds of religion and belief is common in publicly funded education, particularly faith schools. They are permitted to apply a religious test in appointing teachers and most schools take advantage of the exemption from equality law

that permits this. In April a publicly funded Catholic school in Wales withdrew a job offer from a potential new headteacher because he failed to live up to its idea of Catholic morality, citing an unspecified concern regarding his marriage, reportedly a separation from his wife.

Our lawyers agree that the level of discrimination permitted in ‘faith schools’ against non-religious teachers and those who do not share the faith of the school goes beyond that which is permitted by the EU Employment Directive on equal treatment. Following a complaint from the NSS, the European Commission is currently investigating the UK in this respect.

Calls for more robust inspections of independent ‘faith schools’

In recent months we’ve responded to two consultations concerning the inspection of independent schools in England.

A large and growing proportion of independent schools are religious in character, and without objective, well-informed and balanced inspections, we’re concerned that some of the teaching in such schools could impede social cohesion, increase the potential for radicalisation of young people and undermine children’s education.

In May, an investigation by the *Sun on Sunday* newspaper revealed a number of fundamentalist Christians and Muslim hardliners to be involved

with the Bridge Schools Inspectorate (BSI), the body responsible for inspecting private Muslim and Christian schools. One of the BSI’s inspectors, Tahir Alam, is alleged to be a ringleader of the “plot” to seize control of community schools and academies in Birmingham and run them on “Islamic principles”.

The BSI is a specialist faith schools inspectorate which, it claims, makes it better able to “respect the distinctive ethos” of religious schools. In our consultation submission to the Department for Education we highlighted our longstanding concerns about BSI and warned against having an inspectorate

dedicated to inspecting religious schools only.

In a response to an Ofsted consultation we also called on the schools watchdog to ensure that independent schools are judged the same way as all the other schools, including reporting on how well schools equip young people to understand and take their place in modern British multi-cultural society.

In both consultations we urged the Government to fulfil its duty to protect children and young people in schools from harm, including exposure to intolerant or extremist views.

NSS backs petition to end non-stun religious slaughter

We've given our support to a national petition launched by the British Veterinary Association (BVA) to end non-stun slaughter of animals.

Animal welfare regulations in the UK, and mirrored in the EU, require animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering. The only exemption specified in the Regulations is for slaughter by the Jewish or Muslim method.

We have opposed these exemptions, both in the UK and EU, for many years. In February this year, Denmark prohibited non-stun slaughter under any circumstances. They join a growing list of countries, including Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland.

A significant amount of meat from animals killed by religious non-stun slaughter methods is routinely sold into the general food chain. Therefore, while the exemption stands, we've also been campaigning for mandatory labelling of meat from non-stun slaughter, to ensure consumers aren't unknowingly buying such meat – and at the same time, subsidising the religious slaughter industry.

Much of the recent controversy in the media focuses on halal food, partly due to its prevalence on the high street and in our public

institutions, such as schools and hospitals where it is increasingly being served as a default with no alternative. There is however no single clear definition of halal meat and, unlike kosher meat (none of which is stunned), over 80% of halal meat is from pre-stunned slaughter, and therefore not killed under the religious exemption.

In May, Conservative Philip Davies introduced an amendment to the Consumer Rights Bill which would have forced shops, supermarkets and anywhere serving food, including schools and hospitals, to clearly label products containing halal or kosher meat. MPs rejected the amendment by 281 votes to 17.

While food outlets serving halal and kosher meat should make this clear to consumers, we believe the focus for labelling should be on non-stun meat from animals (killed under the religious exemption).

We continue to campaign however for an end to the religious exemption that allows it in the first place.

If you haven't already done so, please sign the online petition to ensure religious demands no longer take precedence over animal welfare laws in the UK.

<http://bit.ly/nonstun>



Secular lawyers challenge Law Society over sharia wills guidance

The Law Society, the professional association that represents and governs solicitors in England and Wales, has courted controversy and disapproval from lawyers and human rights campaigners by publishing a practice note providing guidance on drawing up sharia compliant wills. The Law Society has also organised a number of training courses in sharia.

Lawyers and human rights activists argued that by publishing such guidance, the Law Society was implicitly legitimising sharia, giving it the unwarranted status and credibility of a legal discipline.

The Lawyers Secular Society (LSS) has been particularly active in highlighting the inappropriate legitimisation by the Law Society of a deeply discriminatory form of inheritance rules.

The LSS wrote to the Law Society arguing that whilst it did not dispute testamentary freedom under English

law (everyone is free to draw up their wills as they please), the Law Society should not be offering guidance on drafting wills that would give effect to a set of rules "avowedly discriminating on the grounds of gender and religion". The LSS also highlighted a reference in the guidance made to a book by Muhammed Al Jibaly. He is known for his misogynist and violent statements (for example that Muslim girls should be beaten if they refuse to wear the hijab by the age of ten and that Muslim parents should discourage their children from mixing with "the kuffar").

The LSS's letter was followed up with a protest outside the Law Society's building. It included representatives from the LSS, One Law for All, British Muslims for a Secular Democracy, Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation, Southall Black Sisters, the Peter



Tatchell Foundation and the NSS.

Nicholas Fluck, president of the Law Society, defended the guidance, saying it was intended to help its members "better serve their clients' lawful instructions on the distribution of assets, including those who may adopt sharia principles".

Following the protest, Justice Secretary Chris Grayling reiterated that sharia law has no jurisdiction in England and Wales, and that the Law Society should satisfy itself that nothing in the guidance undermines the principle that sharia law is not part of the law of England and Wales.

Secularist of the Year awarded to Turkish MP and Human Rights campaigner Safak Pavey

This year, we were proud to announce Safak Pavey, Turkish MP and human rights campaigner, as the winner of the Secularist of the Year award. Safak was presented with the £5,000 Irwin Prize by honorary associate and shadow foreign office minister, Kerry McCarthy MP.

Safak is a secularist and member of Turkey's main opposition party. She is known for her international work in human rights, the promotion of the rights of women and minorities in Turkey, and for humanitarian aid and peace-building. She has spoken out about the need for secularism in Turkey.

In her country there are religious requirements for civil servants and job applicants, no evolution theory is taught in schools, and schools and universities are segregated by gender. Freedom of expression is under threat; YouTube and Twitter have been banned in the past and pianist and composer Fazil Say received a suspended 10-month prison sentence for "insulting Islam".

Safak has also worked to protect the rights of women, against a backdrop of one out of three marriages involving child brides, honour killings having increased 14 times in the past seven years and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan opposing gender equality.

Safak's moving acceptance speech



Safak Pavey receives the Secularist of the Year award from Kerry McCarthy MP

concluded with a warning about the geopolitical implications of Turkey abandoning Human Rights and turning its back on the West.

Also honoured at the award ceremony were two nominees, Chris Moos and Abhishek Phadnis, both students from the London School of Economics who successfully challenged it over its suppression of *Jesus and Mo* cartoons. They also actively opposed Universities UK over gender segregation.

Gita Sahgal, founder of the Centre for Secular Space, was similarly honoured for her advocacy of secularism and work to combat fundamentalism, blasphemy laws, and violence against women. Girl Guide volunteer Jem Henderson was also recognised for standing up for the rights of all guides, to take the new secular oath after her local guide leaders refused to drop God from the promise.



Geoffrey Robertson QC opened the proceedings



Abhishek Phadnis and Chris Moos with Kerry McCarthy MP



Jem Henderson with Kerry McCarthy MP

Our sincerest gratitude goes to Dr Michael Irwin for so generously again sponsoring the prize.

Videos of the awards are available on our YouTube channel <http://bit.ly/SOTY2014>

Church under fire over chancel repair liability

In our previous *Bulletin* we highlighted our campaign to end chancel repair liability (CRL), a medieval anomaly which has been revived to allow some Anglican churches to charge landowners for repairs to the chancel of their parish church.

At least 250 parochial church councils (PCCs), who administer Anglican parishes, have registered CRL against 12,000 properties in England and Wales where ancient deeds permit it. Another 5,000 PCCs are thought to have been able to have registered but have so far not done so.

However, facing a backlash from local communities, several PCCs have revoked registrations, or have undertaken to do so.

In the village of Stottesdon, near Kidderminster, the Church sought to both justify the registration and take credit for the *volte face*: the vicar, Rev Colin Resch, said: "The consequences of chancel repair liability

in our parish have made it very difficult for us to carry out our prime objective of sharing God's love within our community". Their press statement was entitled "Church decision brings hope to divided village", omitting to acknowledge that it was the actions of the PCC that caused the resentment in the first place.

The removal of the registrations means that, when the land is sold on, CRL will not normally be enforceable against the owner. Until such a sale, however, the properties are still subject to any CRL levied.



Residents of Stottesdon were unhappy about their possible liability for repairs to their local church

So far, there have been few revocations of registrations, although we are trying to encourage more. CRL continues to blight the value and even saleability of thousands of properties. One of our members who has led the campaign against CRL in their community told the *Independent*: "We are all upset by the stress and anxiety this legal requirement is causing".

The NSS is continuing to campaign for abolition, but until that is achieved, we'll continue to put pressure on the PCCs and dioceses to do more to help those whose property is blighted by CRL. This could be done by facilitating inexpensive buyouts of CRL rather than – as in most dioceses who have been approached – obstructing it at every step.

The Government says it has no plans to change the current law but will keep the situation under review. We suspect it is concerned about the Church seeking compensation from them if they abolished CRL.

If you haven't already signed our petition to abolish chancel repair liability, please do so and help us consign CLR to history where it belongs. <http://bit.ly/abolishCLR>

UN Torture Committee censures Vatican over child abuse

The rape of children and other violence against them breaches both the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT), which the Vatican/Holy See has ratified. The CAT Committee conducting the quinquennial review of the Holy See has repeated and reinforced the fundamental admonishments made earlier this year by its CRC equivalent. These include the failure to instruct the Church worldwide to report accusations to civil authorities and to release the database of accusations to them that the Vatican alone holds.

Having reported this in a slightly less confrontational way, and avoiding any references to

doctrinal matters, the Committee made it more difficult for the Vatican to dismiss the reprimands out of hand, as they so shamelessly did with the earlier report.

Instead, the Vatican highlighted the absence of (direct) accusations of Convention violations, disingenuously misrepresenting the many coded references to violations expressed as numerous "regrets" and "concerns" and even more direct ones such as the Holy See "should in accordance with Article 14 of the Convention...". This will not hoodwink the lawyers for whom the Committee's findings have potentially opened up a whole new route to justice, bringing charges of torture in the courts.

The Vatican did however bridle

Catholic adoption agency: Equality and Human Rights Commission criticises Appeal decision

In the previous *Bulletin* we reported that the Scottish Charities Appeal Panel (SCAP) upheld the appeal by St Margaret's Catholic adoption agency against the ruling by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. It had ruled that by not giving equal access to its services to same-sex couples, and in some instances, non-Catholics, St Margaret's was in breach of equality law in several respects and charity law by not working in the best interests of children.

SCAP found that, despite the charity receiving most of its money from the taxpayer, it was bound by the teachings of the Catholic Church and offering its services to same-sex couples would be contravening canon law. SCAP worryingly decided that the Charity was protected under Article 9 of the Human Rights Act – despite not being a 'natural person', but a corporate body.

The Equality and Human Rights

Commission (EHRC) described SCAP's decision as "not easy to follow" and "mistaken in its understanding of direct and indirect discrimination". SCAP's rejection of the Regulator's ruling followed Michael Russell MSP, the (Scottish) cabinet secretary for education, having taken the extraordinary step of stating publicly that he was "disappointed" at the Regulator's ruling.

Fortunately the decision does not create a legal precedent as SCAP is not a court.

The EHRC formally asked St Margaret's to publish that they wouldn't discriminate against couples in partnerships as opposed to opposite-sex marriage, but as we go to press their website has been stripped down to a home page giving only contact details.

The full statement from the Equality and Human Rights Commission can be found at <http://bit.ly/EHRCstmags>

at the statement that it has an "obligation to ... prevent violations of the Convention, including by non-State officials ... under their effective control", i.e. by the Church worldwide. It had defiantly objected to the same point being made by the CRC Committee, but this is a clear breach of the Conventions.

New ground was struck with the Vatican being required to investigate and if appropriate criminally charge the Polish Archbishop Wesolowski, the Dominican Republic Nuncio accused of multiple child abuse there. He was recalled, presumably by his line manager Pope Francis, to the Vatican as a fugitive from justice. Poland's call for his extradition was refused, a possible

breach of the Convention, and this has been further frustrated by Wesolowski renouncing his Polish citizenship, thanks to having a Vatican passport, but this places him fairly and squarely under Vatican law which has recently been very much tightened up by Francis and includes acts committed abroad.

The Committee also expressed its concern about concordats undermining the Convention.

We pay tribute to the excellent work done in informing the Committee by SNAP (the US-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) and by Survivors Voice Europe (led by Sue Cox). The NSS gave evidence with both organisations to the CRC Committee in Geneva last year.

A voice for secularism in the media

The public debate over Prime Minister David Cameron's assertion that the UK is a "Christian nation" provided a good opportunity for us to advocate the need for secularism and a secular constitution that respects and protects everyone's beliefs equally. Our executive director and campaigns manager both debated the issue on national television.



NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood on BBC News

We also debated the privileged position of Christianity on national and local BBC radio and were widely quoted in the national press.

In recent months we've also been frequently called upon to comment on the role of religion in education, and when the Archbishop of Canterbury sought to use the 'Trojan Horse' scandal to praise Anglican schools, we were on hand to point out that many Church schools prioritise evangelisation and also push their religion as hard as they can. The Press Association told the story from our perspective, with the headline "Welby criticised over faith schools", and it was picked up by newspapers around the country.

We have also spoken out in the media on a range of other issues including the right to freedom of expression, religious exemptions from animal welfare legislation and chancel repair liability.

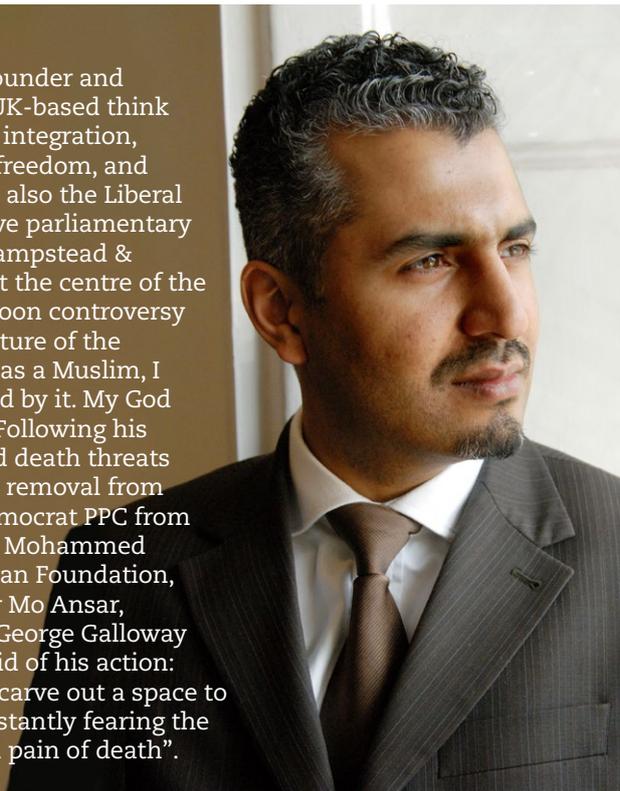


NSS Campaigns Manager Stephen Evans on London Live

New Honorary Associates

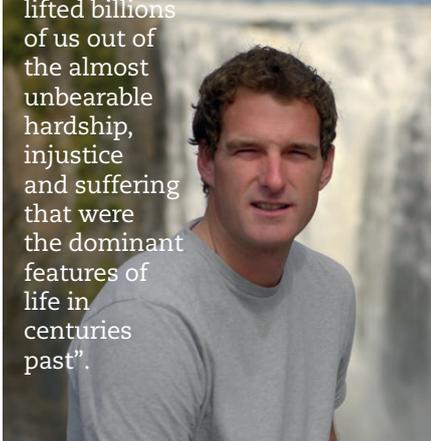
Maajid Nawaz

Maajid Nawaz is co-founder and chair of Quilliam – a UK-based think tank which promotes integration, citizenship, religious freedom, and anti-extremism. He is also the Liberal Democrat's prospective parliamentary candidate (PPC) for Hampstead & Kilburn. Maajid was at the centre of the recent *Jesus & Mo* cartoon controversy after he tweeted a picture of the cartoon, saying that, "as a Muslim, I did not feel threatened by it. My God is greater than that". Following his tweet, Maajid received death threats and vocal calls for his removal from the post of Liberal Democrat PPC from public figures such as Mohammed Shafiq of the Ramadhan Foundation, Muslim commentator Mo Ansar, Bradford Respect MP George Galloway and others. Maajid said of his action: "My intention was to carve out a space to be heard without constantly fearing the blasphemy charge, on pain of death".



Dan Snow

Dan Snow is a historian who has presented and appeared in many popular history-related programmes on the BBC. He has been vocal in his criticism of the Church of England's dominant role at the Remembrance Day ceremony, arguing that as Britain is now effectively a secular country it should be open to a wider range of groups including the non-religious. Dan says of secularism, "Studying the past has taught me one thing above all else, that we are spectacularly lucky to live in the present. Secularism and science have lifted billions of us out of the almost unbearable hardship, injustice and suffering that were the dominant features of life in centuries past".



Baroness Young of Hornsey

Baroness Young has written and broadcast extensively on culture, identity, film, arts and media, and advised national organisations on culture and diversity issues.

Since being appointed a life peer in 2004, she has worked in the House of Lords to combat discrimination and called on Parliament to establish a Select Committee on Discrimination and Intolerance, supporting the NSS in its Parliamentary campaigns. In Parliament she has lamented the frequent confusion of secularism with atheism and attacked the BBC

for its pro-Christian bias. She was a member of the Joint Committee on the draft House of Lords Reform Bill. She was awarded an OBE in 2001.



Bid for NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh to be commemorated in Parliament

With the 150th anniversary of the NSS approaching, our thoughts are turning to how to mark this special occasion.

The Society was founded in 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh. He was later elected to the House of Commons, but on account of his well-known atheism, opponents objected to him taking the oath. This happened four times, prompting by-elections, but eventually, after imprisonment in the Palace of Westminster and other hardships, he eventually took his seat.

Given his acknowledged prominence as an MP, we have approached the House of Commons with a view to a portrait or commemorative bust of Bradlaugh being installed there, hopefully in 2016. Watch this space!



national secular society **Bulletin**

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