

Religious selection in school admissions: Don't extend it. End it.

The National Secular Society is vigorously opposing controversial new Government proposals for a new wave of 100% religiously selective schools in England. Prime Minister Theresa May wants to allow new and existing faith-based free schools to religiously select all of their pupil intake, rather than the 50% allowed now.

TAKE ACTION

WE MUST END RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION AND SEGREGATION IN OUR SCHOOLS – NOT EXTEND IT.

Please make sure you respond to the consultation AND urge your MP to oppose these proposals and instead call for open inclusive schools.

RELIGIOUS SELECTION IN SCHOOLS is discriminatory, entrenches religious segregation in wider society, and often leads to ethnic and socio-economic segregation too.

In a society as diverse as ours, the Government should be doing everything it can to ensure that children of all faiths and none are educated together in inclusive schools.

The Government bizarrely claims their proposals will “promote inclusivity”, when they are doing the opposite – facilitating greater segregation along religious lines.

The head of the Catholic Education Service was delighted about the success of their lobbying efforts, which could reportedly see up to 40 new state funded Catholic schools opening in England.

A proliferation of faith schools will impede the integration of religious minorities, harm social cohesion, increase levels of discrimination in state funded schools,

and undermine children's and young people's religious freedoms.

Crucially, any increase in the number of religious schools also limits even further the availability of non-faith-based education to which all parents, particularly the growing non-religious majority, should be entitled.

The change will not require legislation but has met with some opposition even within the Conservative Party.

In addition to writing to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State to express our concerns, we've also called on the Education Select Committee to hold an inquiry into this and subject the proposals to proper parliamentary scrutiny. And we're calling on all of our members and supporters to help us to oppose these retrograde plans by contacting their MPs and responding to the Government's consultation.

Message from the President

The 150th anniversary of the NSS is now underway and got off to a flying start with our conference on 3 September. Those who were there will agree that it was a very special occasion, not only because of the fantastic roster of speakers, but also because of the opportunity it presented for seasoned activists and the next generation of campaigners to get together and network.

Such conferences are a great investment for the future. New ideas get shared, information is passed on and human contact cements bonds between those of us who share a common goal of promoting secularism as the idea whose time has come.

One of our speakers, the writer and commentator, Douglas Murray – who has written rather disparagingly about the NSS in the past – said that because of the rise of Islamism, the NSS has taken on a new importance. He remarked that it would have been

easy a few years ago to imagine that we'd achieved most of our goals, that society was secular, and we could retire and sit around drinking cups of tea.

That does not pertain any more. In Islamism, a new and potent enemy of secularism has arisen and it is an insidious threat that hides itself among innocent communities. It cloaks itself in piety, while harbouring murderous plots for those who will not embrace its warped ideology.

One of the lessons from our conference was that achieving a true secular democracy will require good people of all faiths and none. It will require reaching out to the many Muslims who oppose Islamism. It will require challenging the populist anti-Muslim bigotry which feeds the Islamist narrative. We must stand with the reformers and the "apostates" and recognise that it is the empowerment of Muslim women



that will ultimately change things. We will continue to make alliances to work towards that, although it will be a long and arduous road.

Terry Sanderson

Academisation: religious organisations gaining control of community schools

We have been on the forefront of exposing how the Government's academisation agenda is allowing organised religion to increase its influence over state education in England – including in notionally secular schools. The growing number of community schools converting to academy status, and entering into multi-academy trusts (MAT) with faith schools, is seeing the Church of England threatening the secular and inclusive ethos of non-faith-based schools, previously under local authority control.

Around 350 community schools are thought to have entered into what are known as mixed MATs. The Government seek to deflect criticism of this by claiming misleadingly that encouraging mixed MATs will prevent 100% religiously selective schools breeding segregation. In reality they provide a mechanism for religious influence over non-religious schools that religious bodies are only too keen to exploit.

Despite assurances from the Department for Education that community schools' individual characters will be preserved when converted, we have time and again found that the community school ethos is undermined by religious organisations. We are calling for more robust safeguards to be introduced.

We have also raised concerns with Regional School Commissioners and Lord Nash, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System, about how the Church of England is abusing academisation

to consolidate its control over voluntary controlled (VC) schools (where the churches do not have control of the governing body) – sometimes over the objections of school governors.

It is a long established principle that the boards of VC schools are not controlled by the Church, but evidence is emerging of the CofE seeking to ensure that such schools join academy trusts controlled by trustees, the majority of whom are from the Church. This erases the fundamental and long-standing distinction between VC schools and Voluntary Aided schools, where the church trustees are in the majority. This religiosity by stealth is in addition to the agenda of the CofE over the last decade to assert a more robust religious ethos in the schools it controls – and which the taxpayer also pays for.

Meanwhile, the CofE plans to bid for control of more than one quarter of the 500 new free schools due to open by 2020. A paper distributed at the Church's General Synod said the chance of controlling more than a quarter of all new schools in England was a "unique opportunity" in marked contrast to the forecast huge decline in church attendance and the impending split of the Church over same sex marriage.

If a new school is proposed in your area, please let us know and we can assist you in campaigning locally for it to be secular and inclusive, rather than yet another religious school.

UN Committee calls on UK to abolish compulsory worship in schools

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has urged the UK to repeal laws requiring the provision of worship in UK schools, and for pupils to be given the independent right of withdrawal from any religious worship held in schools.

The UNCRC also called for age-appropriate sex and relationship education to become mandatory in all schools, including faith schools.

The recommendations reflect concerns raised by the National Secular Society in a number of briefings submitted to the Committee before the publication of the report.

Our submissions also drew attention to the divisiveness of faith schools across the UK but the UN's recommendations in this area were limited to Northern Ireland, where most children still attend largely religiously segregated schools.

The UN Committee called on Northern Ireland to "actively promote a fully integrated education system and carefully monitor the provision of shared education, with the participation of children, in order to ensure that it facilitates social integration".

The Church of England responded to the recommendations by writing to the UNCRC defending the current legal requirement for all schools to provide a daily act of worship. We countered this with a supplementary submission pointing out the flaws in

the Church's arguments.

Shamefully, the administrations for England and Scotland intend to defy the UN's recommendations. Secretary of State for Education Justine Greening insisted that the Government had "no plans to

change" the current arrangements in England.

There is limited withdrawal from Collective Worship, for older pupils, in England & Wales, following an NSS-sponsored amendment. There is however no opt out for pupils, even adult ones in Scotland, something which is now facing a legal challenge.

In the meantime we are hopeful that the UNCRC's recommendations will encourage the Government to ensure that young people's long overdue right to objective, comprehensive and age-appropriate sex and relationships education is put on a statutory basis. The interference of religious groups and the spread of faith schools have stymied the provision of sex education in the UK for too long.



Josephine Macintosh addressing the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called on the UK to:

- Repeal laws requiring collective worship in schools
- Give pupils the independent right of withdrawal from acts of worship held in schools
- Ensure ALL schools provide pupils with full and comprehensive sex and relationships education

The National Secular Society called on the UN to make these recommendations. We'll be campaigning to ensure that the Government acts upon them.

Special consultative status at the UN

We are pleased to announce that the NSS has been granted special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). This will provide the Society with a platform to address important UN bodies on human rights issues of concern to secularists.

In our first intervention under our new status, council member Josephine Macintosh highlighted the

UK Government's failure to legislate to outlaw caste based discrimination, as the UN has repeatedly urged it to do (see page 6).

In September the NSS also made a wide-ranging submission for the UK's periodic review by the United Nations in which we highlighted a number of areas where individual rights are being obstructed by undue religious influence.

SECULARISM 2016

Living better together

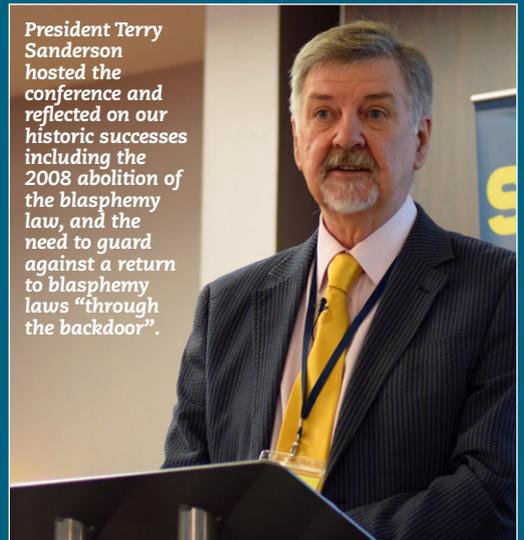
The National Secular Society kicked off its 150th anniversary celebrations with a conference on Saturday 3 September covering everything from collective worship in schools to community cohesion in a secular democracy. The conference was an opportunity to reflect on everything the NSS has achieved in 150 years of campaigning, and consider the significant challenges ahead.



Tehmina Kazi, former director of British Muslims for Secular Democracy, joined Safak Pavey and Keith Porteous Wood on the Human Rights panel. She spoke very strongly in favour of freedom of speech, and against gender segregation.



Turkish opposition MP Safak Pavey, from the secular People's Republican Party (CHP), says that God's role in her country's politics had been "rekindled".



President Terry Sanderson hosted the conference and reflected on our historic successes including the 2008 abolition of the blasphemy law, and the need to guard against a return to blasphemy laws "through the backdoor".



Deborah Lavin opened with a fascinating speech on the history of the NSS.



On the education panel (chaired by Council member Judy Audaer), campaigns director Stephen Evans and Paul Rowe of Educate Together, our Secularist of the Year winner, discussed some of the problems with religious privilege in schools and what an inclusive secular education system would look like.



The panel on Islam in a secular democracy, was perhaps the most anticipated. Pictured from left to right are Afonso Reis e Sousa, who chairs the NSS Council and chaired this panel, with guest speakers Raheel Raza, co-founder of the Muslim Reform Movement; honorary associate Maajid Nawaz of the Quilliam Foundation; and Douglas Murray, expert on Islamism from the Henry Jackson Society.



American academic and author of *How to be Secular*, Jacques Berlinerblau's keynote address was gripping and challenging.



Questions from the audience included representatives of the Kurdish Secular Centre, and a Somali secularist who said she had a target on her back and asked "When can we get support from other communities?"



At the gala dinner following the conference we were delighted to hear from former presidents David Tribe (1963-71, video message from Australia), Barbara Smoker (1971-96, pictured right), Denis Cobell 1997-2006, pictured above), and our current president Terry Sanderson (from 2006). He spoke of the evolution of the NSS from an atheist campaign group to the strictly secularist organisation that it is today.



Government must act to outlaw caste discrimination

Shamefully, the Government is still stalling over caste discrimination, in defiance of Parliament, which directed it to make caste discrimination unlawful in 2013 in a move spearheaded by the late Lord Avebury and our executive director. The UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) repeated the UN's call for action in August. This came after we expressed our concerns to the UN over the Government's inaction.

Just days later, the Government announced a public consultation on caste. The terms of the consultation have not yet been issued, but it is feared – given the Government's abysmal record over caste – that

it will not be asking how best to implement such legislation but whether it is appropriate. This will provide an opportunity the oppressors will welcome to oppose protection for the oppressed.

To date, the Government have never consulted the victims, despite being requested to do so.

When David Cameron resigned as PM, the Hindu press expressed pleasure at how accommodating he had been to their community's wishes, giving a hint about the reason for the previous administration's intransigence. We had hoped for better from his successor, given Theresa May's calls for more equality, promising a



society "that works for everyone".

The NSS and organisations representing victims spoke in a debate in the House of Lords on 11 July. Only one peer spoke in opposition to legislation and the majority of the speakers in the debate calling for legislation were NSS Honorary Associates. Baronesses Flather and Thornton and Lords Cashman and Desai did so, as well as Lord Lester of Herne Hill QC who has acted for the NSS over discrimination.

Sharia review should focus on women's rights, not theology

The Government's review into sharia in England drew criticism of the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, from her very first day in office.

The review panel's chair is a Muslim academic (albeit a liberal one), and the advisers include two imams, one of whom has expressed extreme views on social issues.

Worryingly, the review's call for evidence is limited so far to "those who work in such councils or those who have used sharia councils to come forward".

We expressed our objections to the new Secretary of State for the Home Department, Amber Rudd MP, and were signatories to an open letter, written by our Honorary Associates Pragna Patel and Gita Saghal, - along with over 200 women's and human rights organisations - which criticised the review's focus on theology.

When the review was announced the Home Office claimed discrimination against women was "contrary to the teachings of Islam." This is worryingly misleading, presumably intended to curry favour, but in any case, the Government has no legitimate role opining about the 'true' teaching of any religion. Its focus should be on protecting women's rights and ensuring that secular law is not being undermined.

We submitted a response to the Home Affairs Select Committee's own inquiry into sharia councils, and warned that tackling the demand for sharia councils through the education system was crucial.

We believe the review should be much more fundamental. In Canada, all religious arbitration has been outlawed, apparently without problems. We would like any review to explore whether such a solution is possible here.

Pharmacists – patient care must come before religious beliefs

The Secular Medical Forum drafted the secular response to the General Pharmaceutical Council's consultation on "Standards for pharmacy professionals". The GPhC called for "balance" between a pharmacist's "personal values and beliefs" and the "care they give people who use pharmacy services" in Britain.

Our response, however, warned of the "significant risk that those pharmacy professionals with strong personal views, almost always religious" will favour their "own personal views".

We pointed out that it would be unacceptable for a lone pharmacist working in a rural community to refuse to dispense or to try to redirect a patient to another pharmacy.

Immediately after the response was submitted, the US Supreme Court in effect endorsed an appellate court decision denying Stormans' family pharmacy the right to refuse to dispense on religious grounds. The Court upheld the right of "citizens [to] have safe and timely access to their lawful and lawfully prescribed medications". Pharmacists could refuse to dispense, provided that "another pharmacist ... provides timely delivery".

The NSS has filed a supplementary submission urging the GPhC to base its new guidance along the lines of the US Supreme Court's judgment.



NSS continues to challenge Church over institutional child abuse



THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

We continue to work energetically, sometimes behind the scenes, to secure justice on these issues.

The scale of historical child abuse and the lack of action to stop it by senior figures within the Church of England has been demonstrated graphically by the release of documents related to the case of jailed bishop Peter Ball that expose an even bigger cover-up than previously suspected.

They show that former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey was seeking to persuade both Gloucestershire police and the Crown Prosecution Service in London not to prosecute Ball, strongly implying the accusations were baseless. Richard Scorer, a specialist abuse lawyer at Slater and Gordon, notes that “the

Church of England was aware of no fewer than six other allegations” against the bishop. The BBC said that “the Diocese of Chichester did not share documents which could have jailed Ball earlier.” Ball was jailed in 2015 for offences committed, many of which were known to the authorities decades earlier.

Meanwhile an independent review into a children’s home in Gravesend run by the Church of England reported “harrowing” findings, including well-corroborated accounts of girls being sedated and abused, leading in some cases to birth defects in their offspring. Complaints to the police made over several decades failed to result in action against any of the perpetrators, and the management committee completely

failed to protect the children in its care. The current bishop of Rochester was reportedly given no information about accusations and claims about this establishment in the handover by Michael Nazir Ali, the bishop in post when many of them arose.

In February 2016 the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said that “if we’re going to abuse establishment as we have done in the past” then disestablishment should be considered. When will the church admit it long ago crossed this threshold?

Other campaigning

- We recognise the enormous value of cathedrals as part of our architectural heritage. But we’re very concerned with the injudicious and uncontrolled way the Government is dispensing large sums to the Church for repairs. We’ve written to the National Audit Office calling on it to hold the Government to account for spending significant amounts of taxpayers’ money on Cathedrals without the Church – which has estimated assets in excess of £22 billion – demonstrating financial need.
- In July we met with HM Revenue and Customs to discuss the Gift Aid Small Donations scheme. We are concerned that this scheme’s rule unfairly advantages religious charities. We responded to the Government’s consultation on the scheme, calling for changes so that more non-religious charities can also benefit from it.
- Along with dozens of other secularist and human rights groups we wrote to the Greek government urging them to expedite the removal of the country’s blasphemy law from the country’s criminal code.
- In May we called for state-owned crematoria to be made religiously neutral by default, with the option of religious iconography being available when requested.
- Our campaigns director Stephen Evans delivered a presentation to a national meeting of NASUWT teaching union representatives in Birmingham on issues stemming from the role of religion in schools. He was encouraged by the level of support for the NSS’s perspective.
- Executive director Keith Porteous Wood gave two talks recently, both warmly received, one in Manchester to the campaign group Republic on why ‘secularism is key to democracy’, and the other to South Hants Humanists asking ‘how secular is Britain?’
- Keith also attended and spoke at a European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP) meeting on “The Role of Religion or Belief in Asylum Policies”.
- Our complaint about a BBC report was upheld. In reporting the case of Victoria Wastoney, an NHS worker reportedly sacked for ‘praying at work’, the BBC neglected to mention several key, and damning, details of the case. In August the BBC amended their story to give more details about the original complaint made against Ms Wastoney.
- The Defend Free Speech campaign is still holding the Government to account. The group, of which the NSS is part, recently criticised the security minister, Karen Bradley MP, after she gave a baffling and incoherent set of definitions for ‘extremism’, on which the Government have been struggling for several years. We still await detailed proposals from the Government on tackling non-violent extremism, and will be scrutinising them carefully for any needless restrictions of freedom of expression.

NSS receives Aikenhead Award 2016

Vice-President and spokesperson for Scotland, Alistair McBay, accepted on the Society's behalf the annual Aikenhead Award given by the Scottish Secular Society. It was also made in recognition of our 150th anniversary. We are grateful to them for this.

Thomas Aikenhead was an Edinburgh student executed on 8th January 1697 at the age of 20 on a charge of blasphemy. The case was prosecuted by the Lord Advocate, Sir James Stewart, who demanded the death penalty to set an example to others and was supported by the



Church of Scotland, which urged "vigorous execution" to curb "the abounding of impiety and profanity in this land".

Alistair then took part in a discussion on human rights in the wake of the Brexit vote. Charlie Lynch, Secretary of the Scottish Secular Society, said that "the work of the NSS was as necessary today as it had ever been".

Alistair is also working with the Scottish Secular Society on their campaign to remove unelected religious representatives from local authority education committees.



New honorary associate: Baroness Thornton

In August we were delighted to welcome Baroness Thornton as a new Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society.

Glenys Thornton served as Labour's equality spokesperson from 2011 to 2015 and now focuses her work in the House of Lords on issues related to education, equality and human rights.

She has played a significant role in the campaign to outlaw caste-based discrimination and while Labour was in office she was responsible for commissioning a report which confirmed that caste-based discrimination was a problem in the UK and for including a clause – yet to be triggered – in the Equality Act enabling caste to become a protected characteristic.

In July, she spoke in the Lords' debate on caste. She told peers that an apology was owed to the Dalit community in the UK following the Government's failure to legislate against caste-based discrimination.

secularist of the year 2017
SATURDAY 18 MARCH 2017

Nominations open

Secularist of the Year is our annual awards ceremony and an opportunity to celebrate a wide range of secularist human rights campaigners and activists, and to stand in solidarity with important secular causes.

Please visit secularism.org.uk/SotY2017 to find out more and to make your nomination.

Thanks to:

Alex Crawford, Amir Haddad, Shaun Joynson, Sven Klinge, Paul Lopez, Erica Lopez, Anthony Loraine, Alison Meek, Paul Orton, Susannah Rosenberg and Dominic Wirdnam for their help at, and preparing for, our Secularism 2016 conference.

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Barry Thorpe for Parliamentary and general research.



New resources for students and groups

If you would like a selection of these resources for your student, local or special interest group to learn more about or campaign for secularism, please contact the NSS office at admin@secularism.org.uk

national secular society **Bulletin**

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