

## British religious belief: diversifying & diminishing

58%  
of Scots have  
no religion

71%  
of 18-24 year  
olds have no  
religion

Only  
6%  
of British adults  
are 'practising  
Christians'

53%  
of Brits have  
'no religion'

3%  
of 18-24 year  
olds say they  
are Anglican

Just  
15%  
of Brits are  
Anglican

As Britain's religious landscape continues to change, we've been stepping up our calls for a serious rethink of religion's public role.

Non-religious people now form a majority in Britain, according to the latest British Social Attitudes survey. New data has shown that 53% of people said they had 'no religion' in 2016. The figure has risen from 31% since 1983.

Affiliation to the Church of England is in particular decline: just 15% of respondents called themselves Anglican. Although religiosity declined in every age group between 2015 and 2016, it particularly fell among the young.

Britain is becoming increasingly irreligious and religiously diverse. And the influence of religious ideas on social attitudes is waning. But, as our members are well aware, the Church of England is the Established Church and the Westminster Parliament remains the only one where bishops have seats as of right. Religious groups run a third of our publicly funded schools (despite the fact the young were the least religious of all in the survey).

It is long past time to change this. Britain's future surely lies in becoming a modern secular state where every citizen can be treated fairly and valued equally, irrespective of their religious outlook.



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

# Human rights in peril

Whatever your position on Brexit, there is one issue that should concern all secularists – the future of human rights in this country.

If present government intentions are maintained, leaving the EU will result in our losing the protection of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. On top of this, Mrs May has announced that she is planning to include in the next Conservative election manifesto her determination to leave the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). If this is carried through, we would then be joining that select group of non-Convention European states: Kosovo, Kazakhstan and Belarus – and the Vatican which is a theocracy and absolute monarchy.

The UK played a key role in the establishment of the ECHR in 1950, long before the EU was established. The court that enforces the ECHR is not an EU institution, although ratifying the ECHR is a condition of EU membership.

A key function of such human rights conventions is to protect citizens from exploitation or injustice, particularly by their own governments. As an instance, the Supreme Court has just awarded the survivor partners in civil partnerships or same-sex marriages the same pension rights as opposite-sex married couples. Previously, despite paying the same contributions they had received considerably lower benefits. The Government refused to correct this obvious breach of natural justice and the court ruling was based on EU law, on which we may soon no longer be able to rely. The Government also continues to defy Parliament and the UN in refusing to introduce caste discrimination laws.

Another key function of the ECHR is protecting hard-won equality laws from subversion (generally by the state or religion). I was therefore proud of the NSS's interventions during my presidency in three cases at the European Court of

Human Rights (Ladele, Chaplain and McFarlane), which prevented religious activists from trumping other protected characteristics and in the process potentially destroying equality law here and in Europe.

Famously, we do not have any written constitution or our own rights framework to guarantee those rights. And I am not overly convinced that a future government will provide one. The present government has stated its intention to remove the existing power under EU law of individuals to sue their state, no matter how strong the case.

Let us not forget that since 2010 the UK has had the best equality laws in the world. These and other human rights protections look very vulnerable to erosion by a slender majority in Parliament. Some parties such as

*Famously, we do not have any written constitution or our own rights framework to guarantee those rights.*

the religiously-dominated DUP are less persuaded of the importance of human rights. We need an effective mechanism to preserve those rights, and I have seen no sign of one.

We need only to look across the Atlantic to see how fragile human rights are and how the vulnerable can suffer from a race to the bottom fuelled by populism, from which we are not entirely immune.

On the plus side, we know that some politicians, human rights and constitutional experts are very

conscious of the concerns expressed above. My plea is therefore for human rights to take equal priority to our trading arrangements in the Brexit negotiation.

No government should be allowed to remove these hard-won rights without simultaneously replacing them with good, preferably better,



**The NSS's legal victories at the ECHR prevented religious demands undermining equality law**

ones. These should be accompanied by robust mechanisms to protect them from erosion.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is likely to hand over unprecedented power to ministers including over the areas referred to above. The NSS has therefore

joined a newly-formed alliance of NGOs, neutral on Brexit, to monitor the passage of the Bill. We hope to strengthen the voice of those expressing similar concerns over key areas including human rights, equality and democracy.

*Terry Sanderson*

# Clerical abuse: bishops above the law?

The Church of England recently published a report — commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby — into the decades of serious sexual wrongdoing of one of its former bishops, Peter Ball. Ball's mendacious, manipulative and sexually insatiable actions ruined numerous lives. But as well as exposing Ball's shocking activities, the Report forced the Church to acknowledge its own serious shortcomings in the matter, admitting it had failed "to respond appropriately to his misconduct, again and again over a period of many years", probably from the 1960s.

The Report shows clearly how:

(a) The Church of England abused its immense establishment power to shield this serial predator from justice, compounding the distress of those targeted by Ball and leading directly to the suicide of one them;

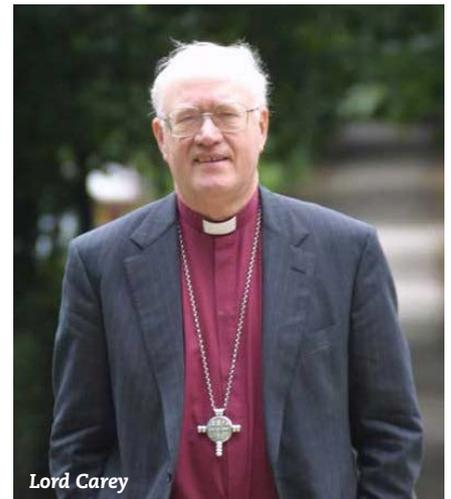
(b) Because Ball was a bishop — the police, Crown Prosecution Service at the highest level (the Director of Public Prosecutions), the judiciary, and probably the Home Office, went along with the Church's demands to conceal the truth. The Police and CPS claimed in a statement that Ball (who had resigned as part of a deal) was spared a trial on the pretext that he had accepted a caution on minor charges. But Ball never

admitted a caution and never had the criminal record that should be the automatic consequence. The CPS acknowledged at the time that it had evidence to justify much more serious charges but this was kept secret, thanks to reporting restrictions.

That was all in 1993 and could well have been the end of the matter but for continued rumblings among survivor groups about the failure to bring Ball to justice. It seemed the Church's sympathy was only for Ball — with little, if any, for his victims. This prompted the subsequent Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to review their files which turned out to include damning documentation which was eventually disclosed to the police. This led, thanks to the actions of some brave victims, to Ball's conviction and imprisonment in 2015 — albeit for a reduced period because of his age and frailty.

Disturbing questions remain about whether Ball received preferential treatment at the justice system's hands in 2015, too. The report points out that it has not been adequately explained why the most serious charges involving males aged 13 and 15 were allowed to lie on the court file, nor is it clear why Ball again evaded a trial.

The C of E report details the



Lord Carey

incredible lengths to which the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey (now Lord Carey), and others went in 1993 to prevent Ball being charged. Lord Carey made high level interventions with the police and CPS, implying Ball was innocent despite the "perception of deliberate concealment" in his offices of victims' letters complaining about abuse.

Last year the NSS wrote twice to the senior Metropolitan Police officer investigating broader issues about Ball, drawing attention to incriminating evidence which had come into the public domain. We have now followed up these letters with a sixteen-page dossier, based largely on the C of E Report, alleging conspiracy to pervert the course of justice and misconduct in public office of senior Church officials.

## NSS presentation to EU vice presidents

The NSS was once again invited to speak to top EU politicians at the European Commission's HQ. This year's meeting was to discuss "The Future of Europe: a value-based and effective Union", focusing on improving democratic relevance and establishing which values should be espoused in future.

Executive director Keith Porteous Wood told the vice-presidents of the Parliament and Commission that maintaining fundamental European values could become increasingly difficult. A major factor would be the increase in — and inevitable estrangement from wider society of — those subscribing to fundamentalism, as well as political extremism. Mr Porteous Wood suggested that the best solution to this important and growing problem should be the integration of publicly-funded schooling. He expanded on the subject in the subsequent press conference and later with the vice president of the European Parliament, Mairead McGuinness (from Ireland). She had asked whether this could be seen as impinging on religious freedom. Keith explained briefly how he thought such objections could be successfully countered.



Keith Porteous Wood with Mairead McGuinness MEP and Vice-President Frans Timmermans

# Making the case against faith-based education

We are still awaiting the Government's response to its consultation on proposals to open a new wave of fully religiously selective faith schools by removing the current 50% cap on faith-based admissions. The Catholic Church lobbied for the changes, and is stubbornly refusing to open new schools unless it can apply 100% faith selection. We've argued that intolerant religion mustn't be allowed to dictate England's education policy and warned that the plans will harm equality and social cohesion. Our communications officer Chris Sloggett recently went on the BBC's *Sunday Morning Live* to make the case against the changes.



Chris Sloggett on Sunday Morning Live

We've vigorously opposed the measures from the outset, and now we're seeing plenty more support for our case. In July Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector at Ofsted, criticised the Government's plans. She told the *Sunday Times* that 100% faith-based admission "leads to increased levels of segregation within communities". She said this made her "uncomfortable" and suggested the plans could be dropped.

One hundred and forty Church of England schools are expected to be created in the next five years with Department for Education approval. This is a worrying development which we strongly oppose. We urge our supporters to lobby the Government or write to their MP on this issue.

Some welcome international news helped to highlight the folly of the government's positions. In South Africa, a court ruled that schools may not teach one religion at the expense of others or hold compulsory religious observances. And Ireland's education minister proposed that state-funded Catholic primary schools should lose



the ability to discriminate on the basis of religion in their admissions policies.

Discrimination, though, also affects teachers. In July the leader of Scotland's 'biggest teachers'

union said fewer non-Catholics were teaching in the country's Catholic schools because teachers could be vetted according to their religious views.

## NSS supports appeal against gender segregation ruling

Last year the High Court ruled that gender segregation at Al-Hijrah, a co-educational, voluntary aided school in Birmingham, did not amount to sex discrimination. In response we urged Ofsted to appeal against the ruling.

The appeal was heard in July. We lent our support to Southall Black Sisters and Inspire, who intervened in the case to highlight the normalisation of fundamentalist gender norms in minority communities. At the time of going to press we were awaiting the verdict.



Protesters against religious gender segregation gathered outside the High Court

## NSS calls for end to school 'religiosity inspections'

Our research has revealed that the DfE has handed faith groups almost £5m to inspect the religious education in their schools over the last six years.



In response we wrote to the schools minister, Nick Gibb, asking him to ensure that Ofsted – rather than religious authorities – inspected schools' RE provision. Our call was covered in the *Times Educational Supplement* and *Schools Week*.

Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005, the inspections evaluated schools' distinctiveness and effectiveness as "religious institutions", including their provision of collective worship and RE. The vast majority of the money went to the Church of England and the Catholic Church. The Association of Muslim Schools, the Board of Deputies of British Jews and two Sikh organisations also received tens of thousands of pounds.

Part of the problem is that under the current legal framework the RE syllabus is decided locally, by committees dominated by faith representatives or by religious bodies responsible for running faith schools. Stephen Evans, our campaigns director, told *Schools Week* that the RE syllabus should be determined in the same way as other subjects and taken out of the hands of 'vested interests'.

And at a time where Ofsted is facing a 'funding black hole', the NSS argues that getting rid of Section 48 inspections and giving the money to the school inspectorate could help them meet over 10% of their budget deficit.

# NSS sponsors 'Glastonbury of Freethinkers'

We were one of the sponsors of the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression, which took place in central London on 22–24 July. Organisers said the event featured 'the largest gathering of ex-Muslims in the world'.

The conference was organised by our honorary associate and former Secularist of the Year Maryam Namazie, a secular and ex-Muslim activist. It was dubbed 'the Glastonbury of Freethinkers', as over 70 notable speakers from 30 countries took part. NSS council member Chris Moos spoke on a panel focusing on secularism as a human right.



Image credit @SarahPeace

## Collective art protest remembers 99 victims of blasphemy/apostasy laws

action to protect freethinkers. It also criticised human rights organisations and governments for failing to investigate transnational networks which promote violence, examine religious fundamentalist ideology, and defend freethinkers.

Several stories this summer demonstrated why the conference was so necessary. The US government released a report which found that blasphemy laws were "astonishingly widespread" worldwide. Dozens of countries from all over the world retain blasphemy laws, and most punish the 'crime' severely.

It was revealed that Pakistan's government is punishing people for social media posts which it considers blasphemous, and placing pressure on social media companies to help it do so. The UN's Human Rights Committee told Pakistan to abolish its blasphemy laws and do more to protect religious minorities.

A photo of ex-Muslims taking part in an atheist meeting in Malaysia went viral, prompting death threats from Islamists. Their government has announced that it would "take action" against, and "educate", ex-Muslims who took part.



NSS Council member Chris Moos on the panel on secularism as a human right

Our campaigns director Stephen Evans, who attended the conference, called it "inspiring". He said it "gave a sobering insight into the persecution faced by many of those whose only crime is to think for themselves" and "provided grounds to hope that their treatment might change".

Debates focused on the relation between Islam and Islamism; the threat posed to universal rights by communalism; and the use of the term 'Islamophobia' in imposing *de facto* blasphemy laws. There was also discussion of the role of art as resistance and promoting secularism as a human right.

A screening of *Islam's Non Believers*, a film by Deeyah Khan, showed the persecution facing Ex-Muslims. The conference passed a six-point call for



Panel on identity politics, communalism and multiculturalism – featuring honorary associates Gita Sahgal and Peter Tatchell

## Support for 'deplatformed' Richard Dawkins

Our honorary associate Professor Richard Dawkins was due to address an event hosted by KPFA Radio in California, but the station announced it had cancelled the event because of his "abusive speech against Islam".

We supported a resolution regretting the attempt to silence Professor Dawkins at the International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression. We also said "healthy societies require free and open debate" and KPFA Radio had "sided with religious fundamentalists who wish to hide from criticism".



Image credit @Spellicheker

Professor Dawkins spoke on the 'blasphemy' panel

# NSS still working for LGBT+ rights 50 years on

Fifty years after the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales, we're continuing to make the case for LGBT+ rights.

In August our executive director Keith Porteous Wood wrote an article in the online *Pink News* criticising Church of England leaders for their record on the subject. He said the Archbishops of Canterbury and York should be "judged by their actions rather than their words", after they wrote a piece in the same publication under the unedifying title 'Gay people are not more sinful than anyone else'.

Keith pointed out that the evidence suggests the Church has become more hostile to gay rights in the last 50 years. Clergy opposing these rights have become "much more entrenched and outspoken", while its parishioners have become more liberal.

Church doctrine still holds that same-sex intimacy, even within a

committed relationship, is sinful and 'to be met by a call to repentance'. At least one member of the Church's General Synod is working internationally to retain laws criminalising homosexuality. Gay clergy in lawful same-sex civil marriages have even been barred from jobs.

We also expressed our support for the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain after it was threatened with removal from the Pride march for criticising Islamic homophobia.

We said CEMB had raised awareness of vital issues and urged Pride's organisers not to place religious ideas beyond criticism. The International Conference on Freedom of Conscience and Expression also expressed its support for CEMB's right to free expression.

Homosexuality, or at least



homosexual activity, especially by men, has long been subjected to extreme opprobrium by religious 'authorities'.

Homosexuality was partly decriminalised in England and Wales in 1967, but it took around a further fifteen years for this to be extended to Scotland and finally to Northern Ireland.

Worldwide, there are 76 countries where homosexual acts remain illegal. In 14 (mainly Muslim) countries, they are a capital offence; in around five of these executions are carried out.

## Calling for clearer labelling on halal meat

We have again called for clear labelling on meat slaughtered by religious methods. Our latest call came in a response to a consultation from the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), which has proposed two labels for halal meat from sheep: one to show where the animal has been stunned before slaughter and one for 'traditionally slaughtered animals'. To describe non-stun slaughter as the benign-sounding "traditionally slaughtered" is misleading in the extreme.

We expressed support for AHDB's stated goals, which were to "add transparency to the supply chain" and "boost customer choice in the product they are buying". But we said that the proposed labels were "not clear enough to ensure customers have the information they need to make an informed choice".

We also expressed concern that the opposition to unambiguous labelling is driven by those intent on the public's subsidising the non-stun religious slaughter industry. The NSS has long argued for an end to religious exemptions to animal welfare laws. But until we end the exemption, consumers should be provided with precise information to enable them to avoid meat from animals killed by non-stun slaughter methods.



Labels for non-stunned (top) and stunned

## NSS in Scotland

Our vice president Alistair McBay has been representing the NSS in Scotland, and helping the campaigns team with Scottish casework.

At Glasgow University, Alistair represented the Society at a meeting with secularist and humanist groups to discuss education reform. We're concerned that Holyrood intends to give greater powers to headteachers which could see some schools effectively turned into churches, given the largely unchecked influence and presence of clergy in both assemblies and religious and moral education classes. However, it was also reported that the Government was considering ending the automatic position of unelected religious representatives on education boards – a move we've long called for.

In Stornoway on the Western Isles, Alistair has been continuing to support the FiSH campaign to allow a leisure centre to open on 'the Sabbath', and a related proposal to allow the arts centre to show films on Sundays. A local Free Church of Scotland reverend said he didn't wish to impose his Sabbath observance, but was worried about 'competition' to church services. The Free Church Continuing in Stornoway has led opposition to the town's first mosque.

# NSS campaigning helps prompt abortion change in Northern Ireland

We welcomed the Government's decision to allow women in Northern Ireland to get abortions on the NHS in England.

The decision came shortly after we wrote to the prime minister and the first ministers of Scotland and Wales on the subject. We called on them to ensure that NHS abortion services were made available, free of charge, to women travelling from Northern Ireland.

Our letters were in response to a Supreme Court ruling that Northern Irish women normally resident elsewhere in the UK did not have

the same right to abortions from NHS England as other UK citizens. The court said the health secretary of state could order NHS England to provide the abortions.

More than 50 MPs from across the major parties backed an amendment to the Queen's Speech calling for the change.

Abortion has been illegal in Northern Ireland since the Victorian era, despite being decriminalised in the rest of the UK since the 1960s.

But a change there seems unlikely, as in August the DUP reiterated its tough anti-choice stance.

The party's leader Arlene Foster met Precious Life, which describes itself as "the largest 'pro-life' group in Northern Ireland". Afterwards the group said Foster "was unequivocal in her pro-life conviction and assured us that the DUP will use their power to keep abortion, and the 1967 Abortion Act, out of pro-life Northern Ireland".

Foster also told an event organised by the Methodist Church in Ireland that "marriage is between a man and a woman" and that "remains my position very firmly".

## NSS court win prompts rollback of council prayers in Wales

Almost none of Wales's local authorities now hold official prayers during meetings following our successful court battle over the practice.

Our analysis of new research from the BBC found that 18 of Wales's 22 unitary authorities did not hold prayers as part of council business.

Only one, Denbighshire, said it did so regularly. Thirteen others regularly hold, presumably Christian, prayers – but as these are held separately from council business, we do not object to them. In theory this means that non-believers or those of other faiths do not have to attend, but in at least

two cases there appears to be no clear separation between the end of prayers and the start of official business.

In 2012 we won a case at the High Court, which ruled that the prayers during Bideford Town Council meetings were not lawful. Prayers could lawfully take place only where



councillors had not been formally summoned to attend. Three years later, however, legislation to reverse the ruling was passed applying to England, but not elsewhere in the UK. Happily the evidence suggests the legislation has not had a discernible effect. We continue to campaign for prayers to be clearly separated from official council business.

NSS campaigns director Stephen Evans told the BBC: "Local councils shouldn't be clubs for Christians. Unless acts of worship are properly separated from official business, the religious freedom of non-Christians will not be adequately respected."

## Other campaigning

- Following the general election, we sent all incoming MPs a copy of our report 'Rethinking religion and belief in public life: a manifesto for change', setting out our vision for a secular state.
- Two Welsh school students whom we helped to launch a petition on collective worship won support from the petitions committee of Assembly Members. David Rowlands, the chair, said the committee would write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education to ask the Welsh government to consider reviewing the current law and guidelines.
- A working group on outlawing caste discrimination, with which our executive director

Keith Porteous Wood works closely, compiled guidance for those completing the Government's consultation on the issue.

- We reiterated the need to defend all victims of religious persecution after a Government Minister said the UK would focus "in particular" on Christian communities under threat.
- Our staff and council members gave speeches to secular and humanist societies across London, as well as in Leicester, Plymouth and the North East. The topics covered included "rethinking religion's public role", "towards a secular education system," gender segregation and "how secular is Britain?"

# NSS 150th anniversary year ends with inaugural Bradlaugh Lecture

The ending of our 150th anniversary celebrations marked a new beginning, with the launch of the inaugural Bradlaugh Lecture at Manchester Art Gallery on 9 September, to the day of the 151st anniversary of the NSS's foundation.

Professor Bryan Niblett, author of the definitive biography of NSS founding president Charles Bradlaugh, presented a lecture based on his highly acclaimed book *Dare to Stand Alone*.

Referring to Bradlaugh as “the



greatest backbencher of the 19th century”, Niblett revealed the key role that Bradlaugh played in the promotion of liberty and freethought in the UK, through championing

issues such as access to birth control, republicanism, and of course secularism.

Guests also heard a ‘brief history of the NSS’ from NSS historian Bob Forder.

The event was timed to coincide with the re-hanging of Walter Sickert’s famous portrait of Bradlaugh. It is huge and required the

assistance of two abseilers to be hung overlooking the main staircase.

This was the first time for generations it had been on view to the general public. It had been gifted to the gallery by the NSS’s Manchester Branch in 1911. It was a pleasure to hold the event in a place of such significance to the history of our organisation.

We aim to hold the Bradlaugh Lectures every year, and we were delighted to see them get off to such an acclaimed start.



## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY RE FOR ALL CONFERENCE



**Saturday 14 April 2018, Central London**

We will be hosting a one-day conference to consider the future of religious education. The conference will make our case for an end to the arbitrariness and unfairness of RE being decided by local determination, and how a truly non-partisan subject would work.

The event is aimed at teachers, educationalists and activists.

More details coming soon, see [secularism.org.uk/events](http://secularism.org.uk/events)

## secularist of the year 2018

**Saturday 24 March 2018, Central London**

Secularist of the Year is our annual awards ceremony and social. It’s an opportunity to celebrate a wide range of secularist human rights campaigners and activists, stand in solidarity with them and learn more about their work.

Please visit [secularism.org.uk/soty2018](http://secularism.org.uk/soty2018) for details. Nominations and ticket sales will open in December.

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## Make a donation

The resurgence in religious power-seeking brings new challenges for the NSS and we must increase our income to rise to those challenges. Our *Fundraising 2020* campaign aims to raise £200,000 by 2020 – on top of current income levels, to enable us to increase our education and campaigning resources. Please consider donating today at [secularism.org.uk/donate2020](http://secularism.org.uk/donate2020)

## Our 2017 AGM

Our 2017 Annual General Meeting will be held at Conway Hall on the afternoon of Saturday 25 November. It is open only to paid-up members and details have been sent to them.

See [secularism.org.uk/2017-agm](http://secularism.org.uk/2017-agm) for more information

