

The case for separation of Church and state

We've published a comprehensive report making the case for the disestablishment of the Church of England and sent it to every MP.

In *Separating Church and State: The Case for Disestablishment*, we argued that the case for disestablishment is “compelling” and the long-term prospects of it happening are “positive”. We've detailed the inequalities created by the current system, the flaws in the common arguments in favour of establishment and the benefits of disestablishment, some of which even benefit the Church of England.

The report enjoyed prominent coverage in

the *Guardian*, which led with our argument that Prince Charles's accession to the throne will be a particularly opportune moment to press the benefits of separating Church and state.

Most of the British public seem sympathetic to our point of view. A YouGov poll published in *The Times* on Christmas Day found that 62% of people thought no clerics should have “an automatic right to seats”, while 65% thought political figures should “keep their religious beliefs cordoned off from their decision making”.

The secularist message is enjoying increasing public support. We'll keep pressing those in power to separate religion from public life.

Page 2: Message from our new chief executive

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Page 7: Pointing out the BBC's cosy relationship with the C of E

The NSS's rational voice is more important than ever



It was all change at our AGM in November. Terry Sanderson, who has been instrumental in ensuring the NSS is more focused and

better prepared than ever to face the challenges ahead, stood down as president after 11 successful years. Our outgoing executive director Keith Porteous Wood was elected president and I was delighted to take on the role of chief executive.

It has always been a pleasure and a privilege to be part of this fantastic Society. We are, I believe, at the forefront of one of the most important debates of our time. With the rise of religious fundamentalism and growing demands for all manifestations of religion to be accommodated, the spread of secular democracy and the rolling back of religious privileges are not guaranteed. We need a vibrant,

diverse and effective secularist movement to promote and push through the changes necessary to deliver a secular Britain that guarantees freedom and fairness for all.

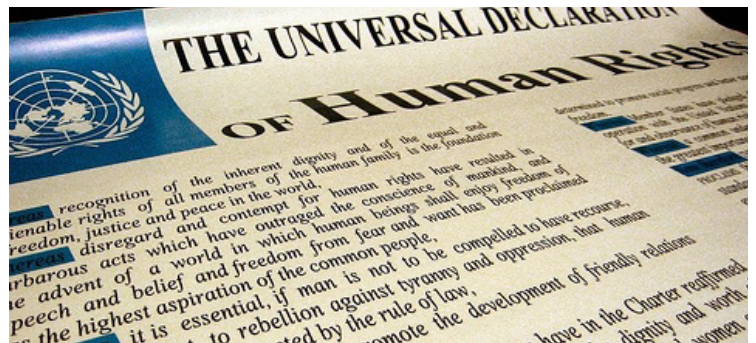
Education of course remains a key battleground in our campaign to separate religion from state. One of my first actions after becoming CEO was to welcome Damian Hinds to his new role as education secretary – and urge him to reconsider his stance on dropping the faith based admission cap, which limits the extent to which new faith schools can discriminate in admissions. The policy was first floated in 2016 to pave the way for a new generation of fully religiously selective Catholic faith schools. The widespread opposition to the lifting of the cap fuelled hopes that it would be scrapped. But Mr Hinds has been a strong advocate of abolishing the cap from the back benches

and he accepted more than £5,000 in donations from the Catholic Church in 2014 towards the cost of an intern. His appointment as secretary of state has raised the likelihood that this regressive policy will be resurrected. That would be a dreadful mistake.

If we are to prevent Britain's increasing religious diversity from becoming a source of tension and conflict, policies that promote segregation and discrimination must be replaced by policies that promote integration and cohesion.

Secularism stands to benefit everyone, irrespective of their own beliefs. The idea that secularism and personal faith are mutually exclusive and at odds with each other must be challenged. That's why the National Secular Society's rational and moderate voice is more important than ever in the increasingly polarised debate around religion's role in public life.

Protecting human rights amid Brexit process



We've joined the Repeal Bill Alliance and we're working in Parliament to prevent the erosion of human rights in the Brexit process. We're neutral on Brexit, but keen to ensure the UK's withdrawal from the EU doesn't lead to any dilution of human rights.

We've warned parliamentarians that the motivation of some of those leading the charge to prevent the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights being codified into UK law could be to elevate religion above other protected characteristics.

We've submitted evidence to the Joint Committee on Human

Rights and we've been working with the Equality and Human Rights Commission over the issue.

We've also stressed the need to: protect UK human rights from erosion by simple parliamentary majorities; incorporate EU directives and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights into UK law; and find effective alternatives to EU agencies and reporting requirements on governments to help ensure human rights are enforced.

We were the first to call for aspects of UK legislation which are

not compliant with EU directives to remain unenforceable. As things stand, for example, UK law allows discrimination against the employment and dismissal of non-religious teachers in faith schools, but this cannot be enforced because it conflicts with an EU directive. We've called for this to remain the case.

As part of our campaign to protect human rights during the Brexit process, we released a suggested letter template that supporters can send to their MP very easily via our website.

NSS gets Amazon to withdraw genital cutting ‘training kits’

In December Amazon UK withdrew infant circumcision training kits from sale after we asked them to do so.

Dr Antony Lempert, the chair of our Secular Medical Forum, wrote to Amazon after we noticed the kits being sold on its UK site. The sales pitch claimed the kits were “made with a soft, lifelike material, which is pliable, delicate, and realistic to the touch”. It misrepresented the health benefits of the practice by suggesting circumcision is primarily carried out for health reasons.

Dr Lempert warned that Amazon was risking normalising risky and unnecessary surgery by allowing these to be sold. As male

circumcision in the UK is wholly unregulated, the kits could result in serious harm.

We also questioned whether allowing the sale of these items was consistent with Amazon UK’s Supply Chain Standards policy, which requires sellers to process the risk of the items they sell.

Our success in ensuring that these kits were removed from sale was widely covered across national and international media.

We’ll continue to campaign for an end to non-therapeutic, non-consensual genital cutting. Infant circumcision has been linked to serious injuries and



deaths, and we’re pleased to see a growing international medical consensus that boys also need to be safeguarded from this unethical practice.

Religious freedom is a qualified, not an absolute, right. It does not justify the amputation of healthy, functioning body parts from babies’ bodies.

Amazon pull 'irresponsible' infant circumcision training kits from sale over child safety fears

Exclusive Secular and medical groups 'concerned' the kits could put infants at risk

The decision was covered in *The Independent* and then very widely across a range of media

Signs of progress on animal welfare standards

In October we wrote to the environment secretary, Michael Gove, urging him to remove the religious exemption from animal welfare legislation. This followed a significant rise in meat which has not been stunned before slaughter. Data from the Food Standards Agency showed that the number of animals slaughtered without stunning had sharply increased in the last four years.

The only exception to long-standing animal welfare regulations is that food killed according to Jewish or Muslim dietary preferences does not need to conform to animal welfare standards on slaughter. In November Lord Gardiner of Kimble, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, told us the Government was “considering” introducing clearer labelling requirements so consumers could tell whether their meat was from stunned animals.



We’re also lobbying for change on a local level. In October Lancashire County Council voted to stop supplying halal non-stun slaughter meat, a change we lobbied for. The council was providing unstunned halal meat to 12,000 pupils at 27 schools. When the council leader called a vote on changing this, we pushed back against the misinformation and bullying of Lancashire Council of Mosques (LCM).

We gained widespread media coverage in the aftermath of the decision, for example in *Telegraph* and BBC articles. But unfortunately

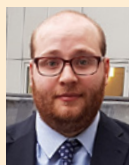
the council appears to have backtracked on its original decision after LCM launched a judicial review against it. The council has launched a new consultation. We hope this will merely mean a delay in implementing the policy, but we’ll continue to be vigilant.

We’re also pushing other local authorities to stop supplying unstunned meat. For example we wrote to Bradford Metropolitan District Council (BMDC) about this issue. BMDC has an 87-page halal manual, where it says animals slaughtered for halal meat “must not be stunned, anaesthetised or otherwise rendered wholly or partially insensible before slaughter”. It’s been written under the guidance of Bradford Council for Mosques and ‘Muslim scholars’. It doesn’t address animal welfare issues.

We’ve also published research showing how widespread unstunned meat is in UK supermarkets.

The pushback against religious control of schools will continue

A round-up from our faith schools campaigner, **Alastair Lichten**



We're increasingly seeing parents fighting back against inappropriate religious influence in schools.

In Great Yarmouth parents and children protested in the streets against plans to merge a non-faith sixth form into a faith school. Elsewhere people are fighting for their right to withdraw from compulsory worship, and there are more high-profile cases of parents speaking out – and taking collective action – against school evangelism.

With our expanded team, we've been able to put more resources into providing advice, conduct research exposing the extent of religious control in our schools system and create more education-related material including on the new website. We're also setting out

policy changes including reform of religion and belief education and the removal of all vestiges of confessionalism.

The current top priority is opposing the Government's revived plans to scrap the 50% cap on religious selection at new faith schools and open a new range of 100% religiously selective academies.

Scrapping the cap does not need legislation and would increase religious discrimination in schools. It sends a disturbing covert message that the Government is so desperate for religious organisations to run state schools that they are prepared to jettison modest measures to reduce discrimination and increase cohesion, even caving into the absurd claim by the Catholic Education Service that the cap breaks canon 'law'. This could

embolden other religious groups to make religious demands of the Government.

Religious discrimination in faith schools isn't restricted to pupils. In October we called on the Government to make reality match its rhetoric by bringing teaching positions in faith schools under the Equality Act. No qualified teacher should face discrimination where there isn't a genuine occupational requirement. Unfortunately when they were asked about this, education ministers obfuscated and gave misleading responses to Parliament.

Both Church and state know the truth of religious discrimination in our schools is ugly. That's why plans to scrap the cap are dressed up in myths and misinterpretations. We'll continue to expose the reality.

Calling for fundamental reform of religion and belief education

We've continued to engage in the ongoing debate over religion and belief education in schools, and many of our proposals are gaining ground.

The Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) has backed calls for a new national entitlement – which should do away with local faith-based determination. The chair of the Secular Education Forum, Keith Sharpe, and our education and schools officer Alastair Lichten attended a consultation event held by CoRE on its interim report. Keith and our CEO Stephen Evans also discussed the issue with the Department for Education. And we've submitted a response to the next stage of the consultation.

Rather than piecemeal alterations, fundamental reforms are needed to bring this subject into the 21st century. That's why we urged the Commission to remain open minded as to whether worldviews, ethics and values should continue to be



Stephen Evans and Keith Sharpe at the DfE

addressed through a dedicated RE subject.

We also proposed that:

- Teaching should cover broad concepts of religion, philosophy and ethics rather than spending too much time on the in-depth study of particular religions
- The requirement to "reflect the fact that religious traditions in Britain are in the main Christian" should be scrapped
- SACREs, which provide advice on the local education authority's

agreed syllabus for RE, should be abolished. Any programmes of study covering religion and belief should be determined by educationalists, subject specialists and teachers, rather than religious groups. Responsibility for setting up RE networks should be given to teachers and relevant educational professionals.

- Ofsted, rather than religious authorities, should be responsible for inspections in all schools, regardless of faith ethos.
- No RE teachers should ever leave training thinking it is appropriate to teach or promote their own religious beliefs in the classroom.

■ **On Saturday 14 April, we'll be hosting a conference to explore the way religion and belief issues should be taught. Speakers will include AC Grayling and a panel of experts from the RE community. Tickets are just £10! See secularism.org.uk/events**

NSS resists imposition of religious dress in schools

We've urged the Government to ensure no child is obliged to wear religious clothing whilst at school. We wrote to Justine Greening, then the education secretary, after our research revealed that girls in dozens of schools in England, including some as young as four, were being forced to wear hijabs. Our findings were published in the *Sunday Times*.

We also found nearly 60% of state-funded Jewish schools in England had religious clothing as part of their compulsory school uniform. We shared both sets of findings with the DfE, Ofsted and the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

We found that some form of hijab was compulsory at 59 of the 142 registered Islamic schools in England which accept girls – including eight state-funded schools and 27 primary schools, three of which were state-funded.

We urged the Government to

State-funded schools 'force' girls to wear hijab



Our research was reported in the *Sunday Times*

make clear it would support schools' decisions not to incorporate the hijab into their school uniforms, and that the right to incorporate them did not extend to primary schools. Our letter was co-signed by several prominent feminists from Muslim backgrounds.

Our revelations came after *Sunday Times* research revealed that girls as young as five were wearing the hijab to school and thousands of non-

Islamic schools were incorporating it into their uniform codes.

On that issue we joined campaigners calling for a "robust" response and met Ofsted's chief inspector, Amanda Spielman. Ms Spielman responded by saying schools which force only girls to wear religious garments could be in breach of equality laws and saying she would issue guidance for inspectors on tackling the issue.

In November we published a widely-read blog by Yasmin Rehman, one of the campaigners involved. It described the intimidation she had faced for speaking up about the issue. In January the urgent need for clear guidance was illustrated when a campaign of intimidation forced St Stephen's, a top-rated primary school in Newham, to back down from its policy of restricting the hijab and fasting. We'll keep up the pressure on the Government to take the lead.

Opposing gender segregation in faith schools

We welcomed a landmark ruling in the Court of Appeal that an Islamic school's policy of segregating boys from girls in a co-educational school amounted to unlawful sex discrimination.

At Al-Hijrah School in Birmingham boys and girls were completely segregated for religious reasons for all lessons, breaks, lunchtimes, school trips and school clubs. In October three judges unanimously overturned a previous finding that Ofsted inspectors were wrong to penalise the school.

This followed an intervention from women's rights groups Southall Black Sisters and Inspire, which we supported. After the original ruling we wrote to Ofsted to urge it to appeal.

We'll continue to work to expose religiously motivated gender discrimination. In November we urged the DfE to investigate some state-funded Jewish schools after our research suggested they were teaching pupils different religious education lessons according to their sex.

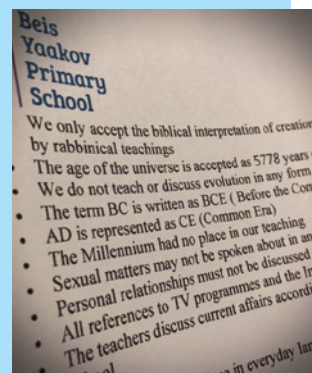


Exposing creationism in faith schools

In October a state-funded Jewish primary school was held to account after our research uncovered its policy of refusing to discuss evolution – despite the fact the topic is on the primary science curriculum. We urged the DfE to investigate Beis Yaakov School, which insisted the universe was 5,778 years old and forbade any discussion of "personal relationships".

The school claimed our findings were based on an "outdated visitors' guide", despite the policy only being updated and posted on the school's website in October 2017. The guide stated parents had chosen the school because its ethos "closely mirrors the values and lifestyles of their homes". It said the girls who attended the school did not watch television or engage with popular culture. It said they rarely accessed national newspapers or libraries.

The school also has a highly restrictive code of personal conduct and dress code. Alarmingly, it was rated 'Good' by Ofsted in 2015.



Fighting systemic bias against secular schools

We've written to ministers calling for a revision of guidance on school mergers after our research found that faith-based provision is treated preferentially during school reorganisations.

We're also lobbying for a new positive duty to ensure every pupil has the right to an inclusive secular school within a reasonable distance.

Our research found that 70% of all schools in England that changed their religious status between 2010 and 2017 went from being religiously-neutral schools to faith schools, usually under the Church of England's control.

A third of schools in England are faith schools, but fewer than 16% of the schools closed because of amalgamation were faith schools.

Current rules explicitly protect faith school places and leave community schools vulnerable to religious takeover. Official guidance from the DfE says decision-makers shouldn't "normally approve the closure of a school with a religious character where the proposal would result in a reduction in the proportion of relevant



Keith Porteous Wood made the case against faith schools on Sky News

denominational places in the area".

Even most religious schools that lose their official religious character retain a faith-based ethos. And our study didn't include schools where the ethos has changed in practice but not on paper.

Similar issues affect schools in Wales and Scotland, often exacerbated by changing populations in rural areas. In the Isle of Man the Department of Education even went so far as opening a religious school within a community school to keep faith provision viable. We wrote to the Department and supported local councillors who had opposed this.

NSS helps to get cardinal charged over child abuse cover-up

We were instrumental in getting senior French cardinal Philippe Barbarin tried for his failure to report historical child sexual abuse. Reporting of child abuse is mandatory in France.

Cardinal Barbarin is accused of failing to report a priest, Bernard Preynat, to the authorities after a former scout in 2014 accused the cleric of abusing him in the 1980s. Barbarin left Preynat in his post until 2015, during which time he continued to have contact with children. He has denied any wrongdoing, claiming he did not know how to go about dealing with the allegations.

We were so concerned about the failure to prosecute Barbarin that we drafted a letter for a French affiliate to send to their Minister of Justice, calling for him to be treated just like any other French citizen. The letter received considerable publicity.

Barbarin will go on trial in April next year.

Back at home in January, archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby admitted that the Church of England has, over the past 70 years, "covered up, ignored or denied the reality of abuse". As the UK's Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse turns its attention to the Church, we're emphasising the importance of the UK adopting mandatory reporting of institutional abuse.

Submission on caste discrimination

We reaffirmed our active support of efforts to outlaw discrimination on the basis of 'caste' in our response to a Government consultation on the issue.

Many of Britain's Dalits say that they have been humiliated in schools or at work because of their position in a 'caste'-based hereditary social hierarchy. 'Caste' is mainly, but not exclusively, a Hindu phenomenon.

We said a new law was the only way of providing those discriminated against with an effective remedy. A law would serve as a deterrent by declaring formally that caste discrimination is against public policy and would enable cases to be brought cheaply and with certainty.

In 2013 Parliament ordered the Government to outlaw caste discrimination, and the UN has repeatedly called on it to pass legislation as a treaty obligation. But unfortunately the Government appears to have no intention of legislating, and the consultation seems to have been a tactic to evade its responsibility. We'll keep up the pressure for legislation.



Submission on citizenship

We submitted evidence to the House of Lords select committee on citizenship and civic engagement. We pointed out that secularism is an essential feature of a fair and open society in which people of all faiths and none can engage on the basis of equal citizenship.



End the Anglican judges' service

We wrote to the Justice Secretary to ask him to scrap annual Anglican services that mark the start of the legal year.

In a letter to David Lidington, who has since been replaced by David Gauke, we said the services raised "serious questions about the perception of neutrality and independence of the judiciary". The contents of our letter were reported in the *Guardian*.

The main service takes place in Westminster Abbey, while a similar service is held at York Minster. The Lord Chancellor is among those to attend the Westminster service along with the Lord Chief Justice, Justices of the Supreme Court, other judges and members of the legal profession.

The services are conducted according to the rites of the Church of England and the attendees pray for guidance. The services date back to the Middle

Ages, when the High Court was held in Westminster Hall and judges prayed for guidance at the beginning of the legal term. Judges attend fully robed, in their official capacity and during working hours.

We told the Minister that judges' services "add nothing to judicial competence and serve only to privilege

Christianity". We said they compromised judges' ability to keep their religious views private, showed "disregard for their duty to avoid acting in a way that is seen to compromise their impartiality" and could create "a reasonable apprehension of bias".

We said the services conflict with the spirit of the judicial oath, which requires justice to be administered 'without fear or favour, affection or ill-will', and were a burden on the taxpayer. We also called for stronger guidance on the need for judges to retain religious impartiality.

Secular group calls for judges' Anglican service to be scrapped

Society argues Westminster Abbey service marking official opening of the legal year undermines judicial impartiality



Our report was featured in the *Guardian*

Challenging the BBC's cosy relationship with the Church

We've challenged the BBC over an episode of Radio 4's *Today* show which, we said, amounted to a "PR exercise for the Church of England".

On 14 December the show was broadcast from Lambeth Palace, the C of E's headquarters. Approximately an hour of the programme was devoted to the theme of Anglicanism, including a 15-minute interview with the archbishop of Canterbury.

Our analysis found that the content of the show often portrayed the Church and Anglicanism in a positive light, without giving an opposing or critical view. Church officials were given ample opportunities to promote their views or agenda, while

minimal reference was made to the discrimination the Church promotes or the privilege it enjoys.

Presenter Nick Robinson told the archbishop: "It seems to me now more than ever people look to the church – they look to the leader of the Anglican Church – for hope". The scale of decline in Church attendance suggests the opposite is true.

Our chief executive Stephen Evans wrote to the BBC's complaints department to ask the Corporation to justify the flouting of its editorial guidelines.

We also contributed to the discussion around the *Thought for the Day* slot after two *Today* presenters publicly criticised it. Keith Porteous Wood, our president, appeared on BBC Radio 4's *PM* show to discuss it.

In December the BBC pledged to increase the religious content in its programming when it published its Religion and Ethics Review. It seems its treatment of religion is about to become even less critical than it already is. We'll keep pressing the BBC to treat religion in a fair and critically-informed manner.

Other campaigning

- We told a Joint Committee on Human Rights inquiry that free speech should be protected "not only as a legal concept, but as a positive value" on university campuses.

- We wrote to the Cabinet Secretary to question the wisdom of the civil service appointing a 'faith and belief champion'.

- We called on the Minister for Civil Society to ensure faith groups do not evangelise when delivering public services after she made concerning remarks to charity and church leaders.

- We wrote to the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales in support of a London coroner who faces an investigation for refusing to prioritise religious burials over others.

- The London School of Economics accepted that gender segregation at a dinner held by its Student Union's Islamic Society was unlawful. That vindicated our decision to back a complaint about it.



Secularists make official complaint over BBC's 'PR exercise for C of E'

Premier Christian Radio reported on our letter to the BBC



Shop owner **Leona Rawlinson** with an unwanted package from the Sabbatarians

Resisting Sabbatarianism in the Western Isles

We broke a story revealing the extent of Sabbatarian activism in the Western Isles, helping to generate national press coverage. An independent shop owner in Stornoway published a letter she was sent by Day One (formerly the Lord's Day Observance Society) after deciding to open on Sundays. We got in touch with her and discovered that she had been the victim of sustained harassment and intimidation by Sabbatarians. Our reporting prompted coverage in outlets including the BBC, the *Times* and the *Telegraph*.

Our spokesperson in Scotland, Alistair McBay, spoke out against Sabbatarianism after An Lanntair arts venue in Stornoway screened *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* on a Sunday, defying criticism from Stornoway Free Church.

**Saturday 24 March 2018,
Central London**

secularist of the year

Have you got your ticket to our annual awards ceremony and social? It's a great opportunity to celebrate a wide range of secularist human rights campaigners and activists, stand in solidarity with them and learn more about their work.

This year's shortlist is as follows:

Phil Johnson and Graham Sawyer
For campaigning to expose the institutional abuse of children and vulnerable adults in the Church of England.

Maajid Nawaz
For advocating secularism and human rights and challenging all forms of extremism.

Amina Lone
For challenging both the Islamist and anti-Muslim far right and their apologists in the public sphere, particularly in education.

Meena Varma
For challenging 'caste' discrimination through her work as Director of Dalit Solidarity Network UK.

My Stealthy Freedom
For challenging theocratic attempts to control women's bodies in Iran.

Western Isles Secular Society
For standing up to religious intrusion in its community's lives.

Please visit secularism.org.uk/soty2018 for details.

21ST CENTURY RE FOR ALL

End the RE postcode lottery

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.

To find out more and buy tickets, see secularism.org.uk/events

New honorary associate

We're delighted to welcome Crispin Blunt, the Conservative MP for Reigate, as a new honorary associate. Mr Blunt has been a vocal opponent of plans to open more fully religiously selective faith schools.

national
secular society **Bulletin**

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