

Our new national campaign:



No More Faith Schools

Our new national campaign is dedicated to ending state-funded faith schools across the UK.

No More Faith Schools will highlight the widespread concerns and myths that surround faith schools of all types and urge the creation of an inclusive, secular education system.

Faith schools support religious groups' use of public money to evangelise to children, undermine social cohesion, segregate children on social, ethnic and religious lines and undermine freedom and

equality. Our campaign is taking a stand against this.

Thousands have already signed our petition or written to their MPs in favour of "an open and inclusive education system, free from religious discrimination".

Supporters can also share their stories and reasons for backing the campaign and get free campaign posters. We've also produced a short launch video. Visit NoMoreFaithSchools.org for details.

The campaign comes at a crucial time. Despite dropping plans to

lift the 50% cap on faith-based admissions to new free schools, the government has decided to support the opening of more 100% religiously selective schools across England.

We can mitigate the harm faith schools cause in many ways. We can limit their ability to indoctrinate, discriminate and segregate. But the longer-term battle is over whether we should organise schools around faith identities at all. The No More Faith Schools campaign will make that simple but vital point.

"In today's society, it is more important than ever that our children can enjoy a diverse and fair education, and have the chance to learn from each other's differences."

– Dan Snow, historian and NMFS supporter

"If we are aiming for an inclusive society, the fewer divisions we can impose on our growing children the better."

– Virginia Ironside, journalist, author and NMFS supporter

The tide is turning against religious privilege – especially in schools



One of the most rewarding parts of campaigning is when government ministers recognise the legitimacy of your concerns

and commit to addressing them. This seems to have now happened in the case of illegal faith schools. We were amongst the first to draw public attention to the plight of pupils in unregistered schools, who are systematically under-educated in secular studies and often left unprepared for life in modern Britain. The government has now assured us that tackling unregistered schools is a priority.

Another cause for celebration is the government's U-turn on dropping the 50% cap on faith-based admissions to free schools in England. Given the education secretary's explicit support for scrapping the cap – and the commitment made in the Conservative party manifesto – this

is a significant victory for secularists. Ministers accepted our argument that facilitating a new wave of fully religiously selective faith schools is at odds with efforts to build a more integrated Britain.

The announcement came with a sting in the tail, though. In a move designed to appease the Catholic Church, the DfE will support faith groups to open new voluntary-aided faith schools. These can select 100% of pupils on faith grounds, with a 10% capital contribution from the provider. I'm sure you will join us in opposing these new discriminatory faith schools wherever they are proposed. Our new **No More Faith Schools** campaign will provide a useful platform to do that.

But the ministerial volte-face on the admissions cap is perhaps a sign that the tide is turning against faith schools. A further encouraging sign is a new survey from the Pew Research Centre showing most people across Western Europe

support separating religion from the state. In the UK just 38% said government policies should support religious values and beliefs.

Secularism will face setbacks along the way and will need to face down threats from theocrats of all religious stripes. But the general direction is clear. Increasing numbers of people recognise that the days of special treatment for religions should be over.

Ireland's landslide vote to repeal its near-total ban on abortion is more evidence of this and will hopefully herald a new era in which the Catholic Church no longer regulates the lives of Irish citizens.

Secularists are not concerned with religion when practised among consenting adults. They stand firmly opposed to it being imposed on others. Religion has for too long been privileged in the public and political space. Your support has been instrumental in helping us mount an effective challenge to that privilege. Thank you.

Protecting children's rights beyond the state system

The Department for Education has abandoned plans for the compulsory registration of some out-of-school education settings following lobbying from faith groups, including the Church of England.

But we're keeping up the pressure on the government to protect the rights of children in home education and out-of-school educational settings, as the DfE considers introducing a register of home-educated children. Some parents claiming to home educate are in fact sending their children to unregistered and illegal religious schools.

We've also welcomed draft revisions to independent schools standards which we think strike the right balance between protecting children's rights and the freedoms of independent schools.

NSS meets faith schools minister

Our chief executive, Stephen Evans, and education and schools officer, Alastair Lichten, met with Lord Agnew, the minister responsible for faith schools in England.

The government remains committed to funding faith schools but the minister explained the rationale for retaining the 50% cap and said he expected very few new voluntary-aided faith schools to open. Lord Agnew shared our concern about pupils being compelled to wear religious dress in some minority faith schools and assured us the schools highlighted in our research were being investigated. He also listened to our concerns about giving faith schools leeway to teach Relationships and Sex Education in accordance with their religion. At the meeting we were assured that tackling the scourge of unregistered and illegal faith schools was a government priority.



We did it! Government U-turn on scrapping 50% admissions cap

Our supporters helped to secure a significant victory in May when the government dropped its plans to scrap the 50% cap on faith-based admissions to new free schools.

The plans – which were announced by Theresa May in 2016 and which the Catholic Education Service lobbied for – would have enabled new faith schools to select all pupils on the basis of faith.

We vigorously campaigned against the decision for 18 months. A range of civil society organisations and public figures, including the former education secretary Justine Greening, joined us in voicing opposition to the plans.

Secretary of state Damian Hinds, who previously supported the removal of the cap, said he had concluded it was “important that our free schools programme establishes schools that are inclusive of children of all faith and none”, after reflecting “long and hard”.

But to appease the Catholic

Church, which is refusing to open schools unless it can discriminate against non-Catholics in all admissions when over-subscribed, the Department for Education announced it would fund the opening of voluntary-aided schools, which have no limits on religious selection. Churches and other sponsors of VA schools will however be required to make a 10% contribution to building costs, which should mean few are opened.

Encouraging more voluntary-aided schools is a back-door attempt to expand faith-based education and increase the number of school places allocated by faith. It flies in the face of the government’s stated wish for an inclusive and cohesive society. We will of course oppose the opening of such schools wherever they are proposed. However, the decision not to scrap the 50% cap for faith admissions in free schools is positive – and a victory for the work the NSS and our supporters have done to campaign against it.



NSS supporters protested outside Parliament against plans to scrap the cap

Highlighting what faith-based sex education really means

We published a report showing that most faith schools in England are distorting sex education and wrote to the government to highlight our findings. Our report comes as the government is preparing to respond to a consultation on changes to the teaching of SRE in England.

Unsafe Sex Education: The risk of letting religious schools teach within the tenets of their faith drew on a study of over 600 state secondary schools. Out of the schools where we found a policy on sex & relationships education (SRE), 77% indicated that the subject is delivered according to the school’s religious ethos.

Many faith schools, particularly Catholic schools, explicitly condemn same-sex relationships and sex outside of marriage. Some call homosexuality itself “disordered”; others say homosexual acts are “morally wrong”.

Catholic schools often stress that Christian marriage is a sacred part

of “God’s plan” – excluding other forms of marriage, including same-sex marriage. Many openly say this means sex outside Christian marriage is unacceptable.

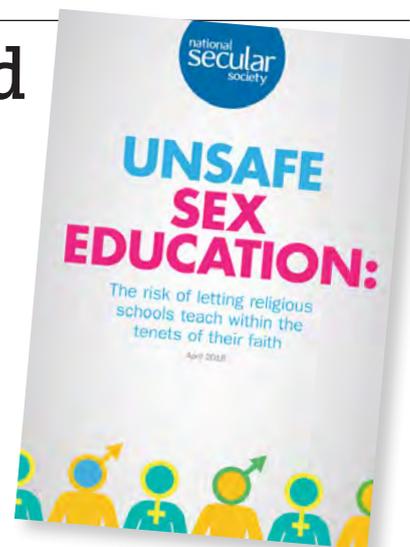
Many Catholic schools teach that divorce is unrecognised; that marriage with children is ideal and contraceptives are wrong; that abortion is wrong; or that masturbation is wrong.

One Muslim school’s SRE policy discourages the use of tampons. Al-Hijrah School in Birmingham says they “may not be appropriate due to insertion”.

We are urging Damian Hinds, the education secretary, to resist pressure from religious groups for leeway on the way SRE is taught. SRE should be consistently based on recommendations from healthcare and educational professionals, rather than dogma.

Our report was widely covered in the press, including in *Tes*, *The Sun* and *Pink News*.

Meanwhile, The Welsh



government has said it will make LGBT-inclusive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) compulsory in schools from age five, but it will still let faith schools deliver the subject in a manner “consistent with their ethos”.

We also briefed the Welsh Government on SRE policies in faith schools where the subject is taught within the tenets of Catholicism or the Church in Wales. Their policies include condemnations of contraceptives, homosexuality, abortion, sex outside heterosexual marriage and masturbation.

IICSA lays bare Cof E failure to protect children

Never before has the C of E hierarchy been subjected to such sustained public examination as it was during the three-week hearing of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in March.

Even the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, memorably assured the inquiry “I have learned to be ashamed of the Church of England”.

Just one bishop acknowledged the church’s guilt. The bishop of Buckingham described these hearings aptly as a saga of “religious exceptionalism, stupidity, incompetence, lying, dumping responsibility at every level including the highest, and delusions of grandeur”. And his blunt solution: “Bishops must be accountable. This means not just to themselves”. Archbishop Welby admitted not having the power to sack them.

NSS vice-president Richard Scorer, a lawyer for many of the victims, made similar points when he gave evidence at the inquiry.

He also emphasised that the lives of most survivors had been irreparably damaged by such abuse. Those who have the courage to complain, often decades later, are still seen by many in the church as a blight and treated callously, especially if they make claims.

If the asset-rich church deems to pay anything to the generally-penniless victims, it is only after subjecting them to unnecessarily gruelling cross-examinations. Even then settlements remain insultingly low.

Richard said the church had shown itself incapable of “marking its own homework” on safeguarding. He urged that there must be external oversight



Richard Scorer called for independent oversight and mandatory reporting

of safeguarding and mandatory reporting of suspicions of institutional abuse – including when disclosed in confession.

The church’s strategy appears to be to admit past wrongs but claim all is now well. This didn’t seem to cut much ice with the commission chair who noted that the events heard about in these hearings aren’t historic; they’re recent.

Further Church of England hearings are scheduled.

Calling for an age of consent for genital cutting

We’ve publicised our strong case for a gender-neutral age of consent for genital cutting after lawmakers in Iceland began considering a bill on the subject.

Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir, of the centre-right Progressive party, proposed a measure to outlaw the non-therapeutic removal of any part of a child’s sexual organs. She said: “If we have laws banning circumcision for girls, then we should do so for boys.”

The head of our Secular Medical Forum, Dr Antony Lempert, argued for similar legislation on BBC *Newsnight*, in an episode of the *Godless Spellchecker* podcast and at a conference in California. Our chief executive Stephen Evans appeared on Radio 4’s *The Moral Maze*.

Politicians have proved very reluctant to defy religious groups on this issue but a YouGov poll found that 62% of the public would support banning circumcision of children for non-medical reasons. Only 13% would oppose it.

Unfortunately a similar proposal in Denmark looks unlikely to succeed as the party leading the ruling coalition decided to oppose it.

We’ll keep arguing that parents should be allowed to guide children with regard to religion but not to use it as a reason to make irreversible, unnecessary changes to the most sensitive parts of their bodies.

Genuine religious freedom involves allowing children to decide what to do with their own bodies when they’re old enough, not allowing the violation of their bodily integrity when they lack the capacity to consent.



Dr Antony Lempert on Newsnight

For fair, sustainable coroners’ services

We pushed back against the religious lobbying groups demanding special treatment from a coroner’s service in north London.

In March a judicial review opened into the policy of Mary Hassell, the senior coroner for inner north London. Hassell introduced a ‘cab rank’ policy – meaning no death would be prioritised for religious reasons – after her staff were subject to unreasonable demands from Jewish and Muslim groups.

We wrote to the chief coroner, lord chancellor and lord chief justice after a series of high-profile politicians took the religious groups’ side.

The court ruled that Hassell’s policy was too inflexible. But it acknowledged that coroners have a “margin of judgement” over how they prioritise their work. And subsequent guidance has said coroners in England and Wales aren’t obliged to prioritise requests based on religion.

After the judgement our communications officer Chris Sloggett went on BBC London News. He highlighted our concerns that religious pressure could make public services unfair and unsustainable.

Secularist of the Year 2018

In March we hosted our annual Secularist of the Year awards. This year we honoured Phil Johnson and Graham Sawyer for their work campaigning on behalf of survivors of child abuse in the Church of England.

Phil and Graham accepted a £5,000 prize from the human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell.

Phil has worked as the chair of a support group for those who have been sexually abused by clerics.

Graham, the vicar of St James' Church of Briercliffe in Burnley, has been a crucial voice against the C of E's failure to treat victims appropriately and its tendency to shield alleged offenders.

The award was handed over the day after the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse concluded three weeks of hearings into the cover-up of abuse in the diocese of Chichester. Phil gave evidence during the hearings.

Our other shortlisted nominees were: Amina Lone of the Social Action and Research Foundation; My Stealthy Freedom, which encourages Iranian women to stand up against state-imposed 'modesty' codes; counter-extremist campaigner and radio host Maajid Nawaz; Meena Varma, the director of Dalit Solidarity Network UK; and the Western Isles Secular Society, which has opposed Sabbatarian control of life in the Western Isles.

"He who allows oppression shares the crime... The bishops and archbishops who have allowed the brutal sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults over many decades continue to share in the crime. This must be exposed. They must face the full force of the law." – Rev Graham Sawyer

"Making representations to religious institutions and campaigning for change and accountability is a very important part of what we do and this award will help me to continue this work." – Phil Johnson



Graham Sawyer (left) and Phil Johnson were honoured for their campaigning



Campaigners stormed the stage in tribute to the Iranian group My Stealthy Freedom



Peter Tatchell paid tribute to the winners as he presented the prize

21st Century RE For All

There was a broad consensus for reforming religion and belief education schools in England and Wales at our 21st Century RE For All conference in April.

In his keynote speech philosopher Professor AC Grayling said teaching about religion should fit into a broader look at "the history of ideas".

A panel of experts also spoke. Keith Sharpe, of the NSS's Secular Education Forum, made a series of recommendations, including a national entitlement to teaching about religion and belief. Kate Christopher, a national RE adviser and former teacher of the subject, said RE should be more focused on "critical intellectual enquiry".



AC Grayling

Martha Shaw, a senior lecturer in education at London South Bank University, said RE's main purpose should be the academic study of religion and belief. Alan Brine, a former national adviser on religious education, said a national entitlement should reaffirm the



Kate Christopher



Martha Shaw



Alan Brine

secular nature of the curriculum within which the study of religion and belief fits.

Attendees took part in two round-table discussions, focusing on issues including how religion and belief literacy should be defined and where religion and belief education should fit in the curriculum.

The event was an important reminder of the case for change. Last year the Commission on Religious Education said the subject needed "strategic, urgent intervention". We'll keep campaigning to ensure all pupils get a broad, rigorous education which covers a diverse range of religious and non-religious worldviews in a critically-informed way.

Holding Christian group's 'lawyers' to account

We wrote to the Bar Standards Board and the Solicitors Regulation Authority to urge them to investigate a Christian campaign group's conduct during the case of the toddler Alfie Evans.



The Christian Legal Centre (CLC) purported to give Alfie's parents legal advice during their campaign to be allowed to take their seriously ill child out of Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool.

Our chief executive Stephen Evans and Sadikur Rahman, the chair of our Secular Legal Forum, told the regulators the CLC had "flagrantly breached" the legal bodies' code of conduct and the law "on numerous occasions".

The CLC implied it was acting for its clients despite not being a regulated body capable of representing parties in court proceedings.

Judges said its officials had given the parents "misleading" advice and made misconceived arguments which had been "comprehensively rejected". They also expressed "dismay and concern" at harassment and confrontations at the hospital, which this advice contributed to.

In one instance a CLC official told Alfie's father it would be lawful to remove him from the hospital. If he had followed the advice both he and the hospital would have breached a court order.

At the Family Division of the High Court one judge called the CLC's Pavel Stroilov "a fanatical and deluded young man" whose 'advice' had come close to contempt of court.

We'll keep pushing back against the CLC's unscrupulous conduct.

Opposing recognition of sharia 'law'

We welcomed the Home Office's rejection of proposals to regulate sharia 'courts' after a government review recommended the measure in February.

The review proposed the state creating a body which would "design a system of self-regulation of sharia councils, including a code of practice". The body would include sharia council panel members and family lawyers, and could be used to monitor and audit compliance with the code of practice.

The Home Office said it would not take the recommendation forward.

Our CEO Stephen Evans warned regulation risked "being a halfway house towards sharia becoming *de-facto* law". He said it would lend sharia courts legitimacy, undermining anti-discrimination and human rights law and taking the UK further down the road towards parallel legal systems.

The review, which was chaired by theologian Mona Siddiqui, also recommended state recognition of Islamic 'marriages'. We're also opposing this and arguing that the law should treat marriage as a civil institution.

The review also called for awareness campaigns to inform women in minority communities of their rights. This is a sensible idea which we've long been calling for.

There is no official figure of the number of sharia councils in the UK, but we'll keep making the case that the state should stick to the principle of one secular law for all.



Urging the repeal of Scotland's blasphemy laws

We're urging the Scottish government to get on with repealing the country's blasphemy laws after the Scottish National Party made it party policy to do so.

In March the SNP's national council passed a resolution calling for there to be no chance of a prosecution under the laws. Our spokesperson for Scotland, Alistair McBay, said the issue was "remarkably straightforward" and pointed out that the laws undermine solidarity with freethinkers and religious dissidents around the world.

Unfortunately there are more troubling signs on education in



Scotland. We've been highlighting the Scottish government's efforts to cultivate a cosy relationship with the Catholic Church, rather than to stand up for children's interests. Both Nicola Sturgeon and John Swinney, the deputy first minister, have praised Catholic schools in recent weeks. The first minister has also just announced a 450% increase in spending on a Catholic teacher training programme.

We've also written to City of Edinburgh Council after we discovered that the ashes of babies who have shared cremations are interred in the garden of remembrance at Mortonhall crematorium, which has a large cross. No alternative arrangements are available for bereaved parents who opt for shared cremations but do not wish for their babies' ashes to be interred in a space with Christian symbols.

We urged the council to ensure secular cremation arrangements are provided as standard.

Meanwhile we've continued to stand up for the right of an arts centre on the Isle of Lewis to screen films on Sundays.

Standing up for taxpayers over church repairs

We've urged the government to take the Church of England's significant wealth into account before handing out any more grants to assist it with building repairs.

Our treasurer Ed Moore, president Keith Porteous Wood and chief executive Stephen Evans met with the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to discuss the issue. The meeting came after we expressed concern about the findings of an official review, which called for more local authority and central government funding for the care, maintenance and repair of listed C of E buildings.

We warned that government payouts were unlikely to improve church sustainability and said no further grants should be made without properly assessing the C of E's financial need.

We also later criticised plans for a pilot scheme to fund church repairs in Manchester and Suffolk.

The Church of England is thought to hold assets in excess of £15bn,

but at least £810m of public money has been channelled into it via government and lottery sources since 1999. Meanwhile it has recently announced plans to spend £24.4m on evangelism projects, including opening new churches.

Heritage buildings are a valuable asset, and those of architectural, cultural and historical significance should be preserved. But we're warning the government that the state should

think twice before handing over taxpayers' money to a wealthy institution with a labyrinthine financial structure and a missionary zeal. The church is campaigning for one-off grants to become regular commitments.

Meanwhile we've reiterated our call for the abolition of chancel repair liability, which requires certain landowners to pay for repairs to local Anglican churches. The Law Commission is planning to look into the liability in its forthcoming work programme.



Calling for an end to non-stun meat in Lancashire schools

We urged Lancashire County Council to proceed with plans to stop supplying non-stun meat to schools.

In October the council voted to stop supplying non-poultry meat to schools and other establishments unless the animals were stunned before slaughter. But its leaders then said they would review the decision when they came under pressure from Lancashire Council of Mosques.

We responded to a consultation on the issue, saying any change would have "nationwide implications".

Councils have a duty to provide healthy and nutritious school meals and to ensure the food they provide is sourced ethically. They do not have a duty to cater for every family's religious dietary preferences, particularly if they contravene basic

welfare standards.

The council currently supplies non-stun halal meat to 12,000 pupils at 27 schools.

Local authorities should be free to pursue policies that promote animal welfare without being bullied into submission. We'll keep urging the council to take a stand for animal welfare and the principle of one law for all.

But ultimately this requires a national solution. We'll keep campaigning for the end of the religious exemption to animal welfare laws. The scientific consensus is clear that it's more humane to stun an animal prior to slaughter than not to do so. The government should take its advice on the slaughter of farm animals from veterinary experts, not clerics.

OTHER CAMPAIGNING

■ We criticised Surrey Police for engaging in evangelism after it accepted 1,000 bibles emblazoned with the force's badge for distribution amongst officers and staff. Our criticisms were widely reported in the local press.

■ We wrote to the lord chief justice to ask him to ensure judicial office holders refrain from theological interpretation after a judge told the Parsons Green bomber Islam was "a religion of peace".

■ We launched a scholarship to support students who conduct research relevant to secularism and the promotion of human rights.

■ Our chief executive Stephen Evans and campaigns officer Megan Manson made the case against the promotion of religion in the workplace during a meeting with the civil service's new 'faith and belief champion'. At the meeting we criticised the Foreign Office for "fetishising Islamic head coverings" after it encouraged staff to mark 'world hijab day' by donning free hijabs.

■ Stephen and Dr Antony Lempert of the Secular Medical Forum met the head of the Faculty of Sexual & Reproductive Health to discuss new guidance on personal beliefs and delivering care.

■ We met with Sara Khan, the government's lead commissioner for countering extremism, to discuss secularism's role in her work.

■ Our president Keith Porteous Wood attended a conference in Athens on Religion and the European Court of Human Rights.

■ Our communications officer Chris Sloggett gave a talk at Somerville College, Oxford, entitled 'Promoting and defending one law for all'.

Asma Jahangir and Baroness Turner

We were very saddened by the deaths of two of our honorary associates in February.

On 11 February Asma Jahangir died at the age of 66. Asma was a former UN special rapporteur on religion and belief. She worked courageously both in Pakistan and internationally for decades to prevent the persecution of religious minorities and women and the exploitation of children.

She was the co-founder and chair of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the first female president of the Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan.

She campaigned against Pakistan's blasphemy law, defending minority Christians charged with blasphemy, and was respected for her outspoken criticism of the country's militant Islamist groups.

She won several international human rights awards for her work and was included in *Time* magazine's list of the 100 most influential women.

Baroness Muriel Turner died aged 90 on 26 February. She was appointed a Labour Party peer in 1985 and became one of the NSS's most loyal supporters in parliament.

Muriel helped us fight many battles, especially over the role of religion in publicly funded schools. From her position in the House of Lords she spoke out about discrimination in faith schools, the imposition of collective worship and the need to reform religious education.

She will also be remembered with particular fondness and gratitude for her efforts as a champion of gay rights, at a time when the Labour party was very much more socially conservative on the issue.



BRADLAUGH LECTURE 2018

'The men who killed Gandhi': Secular India and the rise of Hindu nationalism

Gita Sahgal

SATURDAY 8 SEPTEMBER,
MANCHESTER ART GALLERY

Our honorary associate Gita Sahgal will discuss the troubling rise of Hindu nationalism and place it in a historical context when she delivers the second Bradlaugh lecture.

Her talk will pay particular attention to Britain and India. It will include discussion of the history of secularism in India and the Indian people's role in drafting a secular constitution.

Gita is the executive director of the Centre for Secular Space, a writer and documentary film maker.

The Bradlaugh lecture celebrates the NSS's birthday and was named after NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh.

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**BRADLAUGH
LECTURE**

Dates for your diary

Sunday 9 September

LEICESTER

**Chapman Cohen: Teacher, hero,
secularist**

Saturday 27 October

BIRMINGHAM

**Secularism and healthcare
conference**

Saturday 24 November

LONDON

AGM

To find more events and to let us know about an event please visit secularism.org.uk/events We particularly encourage people to get in touch with events outside of London.

national
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