

The choice delusion

Our groundbreaking report on the negative impact of faith schools on school choice has highlighted a severe lack of reasonably accessible religiously-neutral schooling for families that want it in England.

We found that:

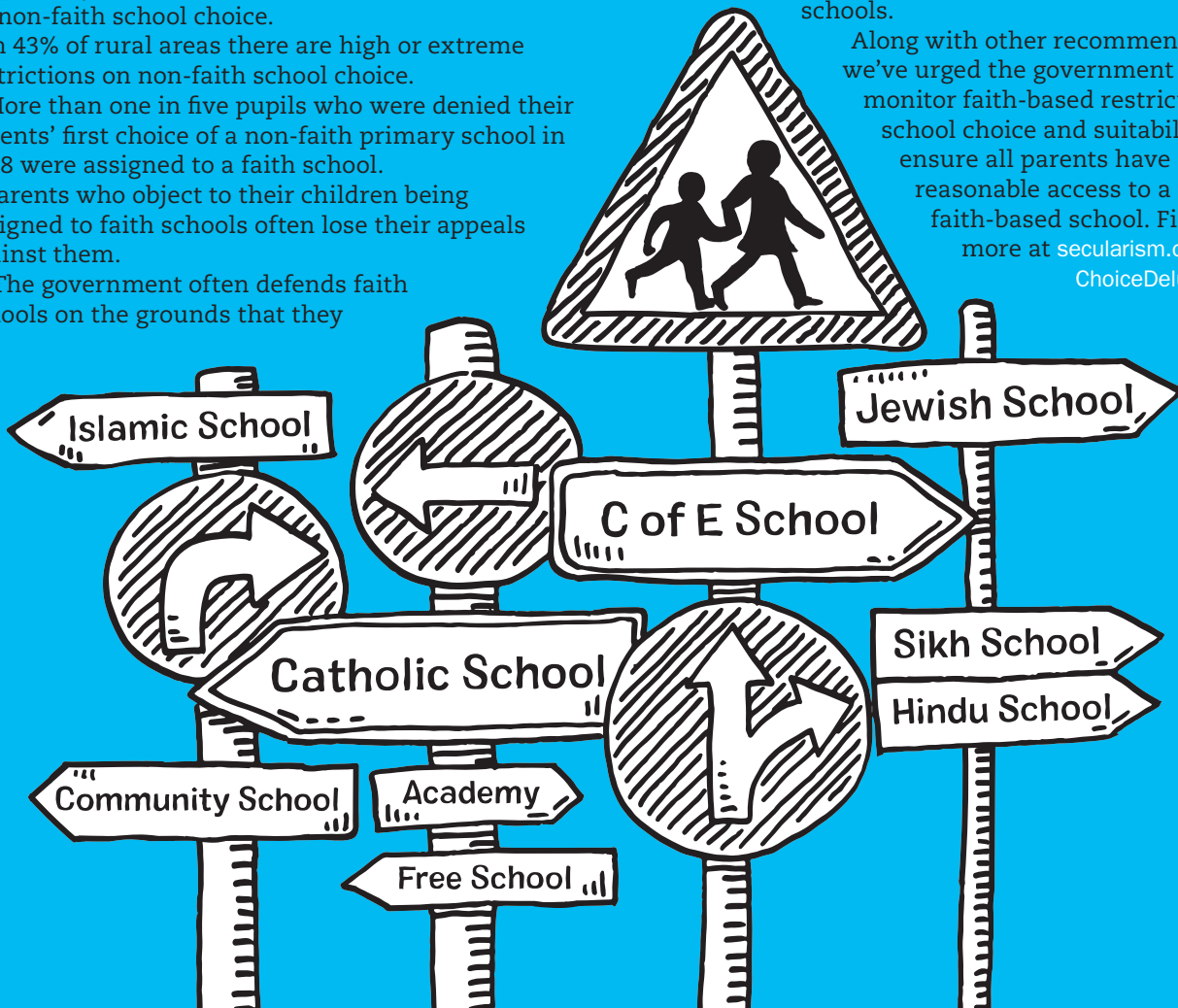
- Almost three in ten families across England live in areas where most or all of the closest primary schools are faith schools.
- Every year between 45,000 and 60,000 families apply for primary schools in areas with extreme restrictions on non-faith school choice.
- In 43% of rural areas there are high or extreme restrictions on non-faith school choice.
- More than one in five pupils who were denied their parents' first choice of a non-faith primary school in 2018 were assigned to a faith school.
- Parents who object to their children being assigned to faith schools often lose their appeals against them.

The government often defends faith schools on the grounds that they

improve parental choice. But our report, which was covered in *The Sunday Times*, shows that the opposite is true for many families.

The report does what the Department for Education avoids doing: it estimates the number of families living in areas with no reasonable 'choice' but a faith school. It also asks deeper questions around the role of choice in the state education system, how families really choose schools and whether it's reasonable for the state to fund faith schools.

Along with other recommendations, we've urged the government to monitor faith-based restrictions on school choice and suitability and ensure all parents have reasonable access to a non-faith-based school. Find out more at secularism.org.uk/ChoiceDelusion



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SECULARISM 2019:

Saturday 18 May 2019

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Secularism must triumph over separatism and the politics of identity



Every religious privilege comes at a cost. In recent months we've revealed the price paid by thousands of families around the country who don't have access to a secular education for their children because of the prevalence of faith schools. We've shone a spotlight on the harm inflicted on children when society turns a blind eye to their independent rights being denied to them in name of religion. We've also highlighted the unnecessary pain, suffering and distress caused to farm animals by the religious exemption from welfare regulations, which allows inhumane non-stun slaughter. The privileging of religion in law and public life unjustly harms us all in multiple ways.

The reforms we suggest are reasonable, rational and equitable,

but deeply entrenched religious privilege makes them appear radical to many. Challenging religious privilege isn't an attack on religion itself. But too many people perceive or choose to portray it as such, and this frustrates progress. Religion, like politics, forms a part of people's identity, and as soon as you start debating something that's part of someone's identity, they can become tribal and quick to take offence. Religious leaders reflexively defend the special treatment they've become accustomed to.

Throughout our 150 or so year history, the NSS has pioneered many important social reforms and that work continues today. We are making progress – albeit not as quickly as we would sometimes like. But there is little doubt that, in our increasingly diverse country, secularist principles are more important than ever. Societies can only cohere when

citizens have a level playing field and a common set of principles and laws to unite around. Secularism offers us the chance to live in peace with others whose creed is different from our own. That vision must triumph over multi-faithism and the separatist identity politics being peddled by many of today's religious enthusiasts.

A secular state will be achieved if we remain resolute and stand firm in our convictions. For inspiration I can recommend the recently published memoirs of former NSS president Barbara Smoker. See the back page of this Bulletin for a chance to win a copy. Her bloody-mindedness in challenging the accepted and wrong wisdom of her day is an exemplar to us all. For reformers everywhere, Barbara Smoker's life is a lesson in perseverance and principle. I hope, like Barbara, you'll stick with us for the long haul.

Revealed: C of E spent £40m of public money without proper scrutiny

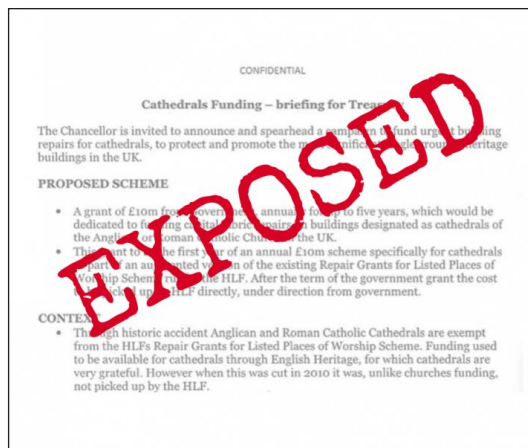
We exposed the fact that the government allowed the Church of England to spend £40m of taxpayers' money on cathedral repairs without subjecting it to proper scrutiny.

Our freedom of information requests found that the government failed to hold the church accountable for the money it received under the first world war cathedral repairs fund.

We showed that the church was not required to make a business case before it was given the money, as bidders for public funds usually are.

The government allowed the church's archbishops' council to administer the fund to save £500,000 in administration costs. This created a conflict of interests and excused the scheme from independent oversight.

After granting the money the government failed to press the church to justify its expenditure or provide



independent verification that it was being reported accurately. The church did not issue reports or quotes, as it was contractually required to do. And the church warned that the government would suffer "significant reputational risk" if it did not award the money.

Meanwhile we've continued to push the government not to give in to the C of E's scaremongering over the financial support it claims it needs for church maintenance.

We agree that important architectural heritage should be

protected, with government funds if necessary. But we've written to ministers urging them to treat the church the same way they treat other wealthy institutions which own properties of value. This is particularly important given the church's immense wealth and the period of austerity.

Resisting the push for fully selective faith schools

Our No More Faith Schools campaign is pushing back against the government's funding of new voluntary aided (VA) schools, which can select all their pupils on religious grounds, in England.

In November the government announced a new wave of funding for VA schools – just as parliament and much of the press was distracted on a day of acute Brexit-related turbulence.

VA schools can select all their pupils and potentially all their teachers based on religion. They can also teach confessional religious education.

In response we wrote to all local education authorities urging them to resist plans to open new VA schools, and instead to take concrete steps to promote inclusive education.

This would mean rolling back discriminatory faith-based admissions where they can. We also asked them to monitor the impact of faith schools on school choice and suitability, in light of our report *The choice delusion* (covered on the front page of this Bulletin).

And we also urged them to explicitly seek inclusive schools modelled on a community school ethos. VA schools can open if local councils fail to invite proposals for new inclusive schools where there are gaps in provision.

The government's own impact assessment has since admitted that the decision to fund new VA schools will lead to discrimination through their admissions, teaching and employment. The assessment also highlights the risk that the policy could undermine social cohesion.

Unacceptably, exemptions in equalities legislation allow faith schools to discriminate on religious grounds.

The government committed to opening new VA schools last year after our campaigning successfully forced it to abandon plans to lift a 50% cap on faith-based admissions to new free schools.

It's important that these proposals face local opposition – and members' help is invaluable. Our No More Faith Schools campaign will continue to



monitor new VA school proposals as they come in and engage with local councils and activists.

Meanwhile we're keeping an eye on new faith-based free schools, after 33 new ones were announced in the latest wave of applications.

Find out how you can get involved at NoMoreFaithSchools.org:

- Sign the national petition
- Write to your MP and local councillors
- Download resources
- Share your story
- Challenge a new faith school

Warning of faith-based risk to sex education

We've continued to highlight the risk that faith groups will keep distorting sex education in submissions to politicians in England and Scotland.

In England the Department for Education issued guidance that would require secondary schools to provide age-appropriate education to help young people "develop healthy, nurturing relationships of all kinds".

We welcomed this but warned that the guidance showed too much deference to faith groups in several areas. For instance, the guidance says faith schools may teach "the distinctive faith perspective on relationships" and promote "balanced debate" on "issues that are seen as contentious".

"The religious background of all pupils must be taken into account when planning teaching, so that sensitive topics that need to be taught are appropriately handled."

Draft DfE guidance on Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education

We warned that this euphemistic language could allow religious groups to continue to, for example, push negative views of homosexuality, as we revealed many were in our comprehensive report of May 2018.

Meanwhile we wrote to Scottish education secretary John Swinney on a similar subject. We urged the Scottish government to back up its stated commitment to LGBT-inclusive education by tackling faith schools which promote prejudiced attitudes to LGBT+ people.

Our research revealed that nine of Scotland's 53 Catholic schools said they taught sex education through the tenets of Catholicism, while the other schools did not publish their policies.

DfE dismisses calls for RE reform

The education secretary has dismissed calls for the reform of religious education in England after a major report called for a national entitlement to education about 'religion and worldviews'. Damian Hinds said "some stakeholders" (primarily the Catholic Education Service) had expressed "concerns that making statutory the inclusion of 'worldviews' risks diluting the teaching of RE".

The report's recommendations did not address all of our concerns, but if implemented they would have represented real progress in our campaign to reform the subject. It's disappointing that the government is willing to reject even modest and very widely supported proposals when faced with religious opposition.



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Pushing back against non-stun meat in schools

Our research revealed that around one in nine councils which supply meat to schools were providing halal meat which hasn't been stunned before slaughter.

At least 17 councils – around one in 12 of all local authorities across Britain – gave schools non-stun halal meat, reaching thousands of children.

A significant majority of the schools affected were not Islamic faith schools. And the local authorities in Bradford in West Yorkshire and Luton in Bedfordshire insisted all the meat they supply must be non-stun halal.

In response we've been working alongside supportive MPs to urge government ministers to repeal the religious exemption to the animal welfare laws. This national step would be the most effective way to prevent unnecessary animal cruelty and stop non-stun meat from being imposed on children and families who do not want it.

We've added that, as long as the religious exemption remains, there should be a requirement to label non-stun meat clearly.

Our revelations prompted

coverage in *The Times* and pushed the issue on to the agenda in some local areas. In Kirklees in West Yorkshire, which supplies non-stun meat to 43 schools, the council held a debate on the topic in January. Thousands of people also signed a local petition calling for the end of the supply of non-stun meat to schools.

Unfortunately the council's leader responded by making blanket accusations of bigotry against his critics. We then called him out for trying to silence debate; our criticism was featured in the local press and the *Daily Mirror*.

We also reiterated our call for the end of non-stun slaughter after a



ban came into effect in the Flanders region, in northern Belgium, on New Year's Day. Our CEO Stephen Evans appeared on the Iain Dale show on LBC. Our communications officer Chris Sloggett argued against religious exemptions in *Conatus News*.

Meanwhile councillors in Lancashire finally ratified a decision they initially took in October 2017 to stop supplying non-stun meat to schools. We urged them to stand firm throughout a protracted process and lobbied them again shortly before the vote.

The scientific consensus overwhelmingly shows that stunning animals before slaughter is more humane than not doing so. We'll keep urging politicians to prioritise the views of vets and scientists, rather than those of clerics.

Parents left in dark over 'inhumane' meat



Schools with a lot of Muslim children sometimes offer unstoned meat to all pupils
© BBC/PA/ANSA

Our research was covered in *The Times*

Pressing MPs not to force religious holidays on workers

A briefing which we sent warning MPs against introducing more religious public holidays was cited several times in a debate on the issue in parliament.

The debate focused on calls for official recognition of the Muslim festivals of Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha and the Hindu festivals of Diwali and Dassera.

We told MPs a multi-faith approach to public holidays would impede employees' freedoms, undermine social cohesion, create unreasonable inconvenience for employers and harm the economy.

We said the system governing holidays should strike a balance between "employees' freedom to take holidays at the best time for them" and "employers' business requirements".

We added that the holidays in question would be particularly inappropriate as they do not fall on the same day every year. And we called on MPs to consider fixing the date of the bank holidays which fall around Easter, in line with the Easter Act of 1928.

After the debate the government rejected the proposals, while saying employers should "respond flexibly and sympathetically to any requests for leave, including for religious holidays". We support a similarly reasonable approach.

"Compelling those who do not celebrate minority faith festivals to take time off work risks causing unnecessary resentment and would harm efforts to promote a concept of common citizenship."

Our briefing to MPs

NSS president on Sky

Our president Keith Porteous Wood discussed child abuse in the Catholic Church on Sky News, in an appearance which coincided with the pope's visit to Ireland. He also raised the importance of mandatory reporting of abuse at a Catholic Church conference. We continue to work to bring clerical perpetrators of child abuse to justice at home and abroad.

In a separate Sky appearance Keith discussed the C of E's efforts to appeal to the young despite falling levels of affiliation to the church.



Preparing for Secularism 2019



We've been getting ready for our biggest event of the year – our Secularism 2019 conference, where we'll discuss how to defend genuine 'religious freedom': a qualified right that belongs to everyone.

In January we were delighted to announce medical ethicist Brian Earp's confirmation that he will speak at the conference. Dr Earp, a research fellow at the University



Dr Brian D. Earp will address the conference

of Oxford and Yale University, will address children's right to bodily autonomy.

He delivered a superb address about infant genital cutting at our recent Healthcare and Secularism conference (*see below*). He argued that all children should be left intact regardless of their sex unless medical necessity dictated otherwise.

Our other confirmed speakers include the government's lead commissioner for countering extremism Sara Khan and UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Dr Ahmed Shaheed.

Rachel Laser, the CEO of the campaigning group Americans United for Separation of Church and State, will deliver the keynote address.

You can find out more and book your place at secularism.org.uk/secularism-2019.

We also opened nominations for our Secularist of the Year 2019 award, which will be presented at

the conference. Each year the prize, which is worth £5,000, is awarded to an outstanding group or inspiring individual who has advanced the cause of secularism and related human rights. We are grateful to the anonymous benefactor who is kindly sponsoring this.

In 2018 the prize was won by Phil Johnson and Rev Graham Sawyer for their work campaigning on behalf of victims of child abuse in the Church of England. Other past winners include women's rights campaigner Yasmin Rehman, *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and Turkish opposition politician Şafak Pavey.

Nominations for Secularist of the Year are now open. You can make nominations at secularism.org.uk/secularist-of-the-year-2019.



Healthcare & Secularism conference

In October we held the world's first conference specifically addressing secularist issues in healthcare, such as religiously-motivated opt-outs for doctors, 'gay conversion therapy', genital cutting, sexual health rights and assisted dying.

The key message of the Healthcare & Secularism Conference in Birmingham was that religion should not restrict individual rights or bodily autonomy.

Speakers included Dr Michael Irwin, the former chair

of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, Ann Furedi of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and Professor Michael Thomson of Leeds Law School.

The conference was chaired by Dr Antony Lempert, chair of our Secular Medical Forum, who summed up the quality of the speakers as "outstanding".

We'd like to thank all speakers and attendees for making the conference such a success. Videos from the conference are now available on our YouTube channel.



Ann Furedi encouraged supporters of abortion rights to embrace free speech



Dr Michael Irwin asked when medically assisted rational suicide would become legal



Jayne Ozanne discussed her experience of gay 'conversion therapy'



Dr Antony Lempert of our Secular Medical Forum chaired the conference

Urging government not to adopt 'Islamophobia' definition

We are urging the home secretary to resist calls to adopt a formal definition of 'Islamophobia' which has gained the support of some MPs.

Our chief executive Stephen Evans coordinated a letter to Sajid Javid on the subject after a high-profile report from the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on British Muslims. The letter was co-signed by six other activists, and an abridged version was published in the *Sunday Times*.

We also submitted evidence to the home affairs select committee on the issue.

The APPG's report recommended that the government define 'Islamophobia' as "a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness".

The letter we organised said this definition was

"While we believe that in a liberal secular society individuals should be afforded respect and protection, we are clear that ideas should not."

Our letter to Sajid Javid

"vague and unworkable" and conflated "hatred of, and discrimination against, Muslims with criticism of Islam".

The APPG's phrase "expressions of Muslimness" can effectively be translated to mean Islamic practices. And the APPG based its conclusions largely on the interpretations of groups which claimed to represent the Muslim 'community', rather than those of secularists like us who submitted evidence to it.

High-profile Muslim groups are now pushing the government and major parties to adopt its definition. And supporters of the APPG's report in parliament have spoken of changing the law and taking action against media outlets for 'hate speech'.

Challenging bigoted attitudes towards Muslims is essential but rendering legitimate free speech beyond the bounds of acceptable debate – or, far worse, the law – would be a major error. We'll keep making these points.

Urging the BBC to value free expression

We urged the BBC to treat free expression "as a positive value" in response to a consultation on its latest draft editorial guidelines.

The BBC's guidance made several apologetic references to free speech on religion and consistently erred on the side of censorship.

It said the BBC should "take care to avoid unjustified offence" because "religious beliefs are central to many people's lives and arouse strong views and emotions".

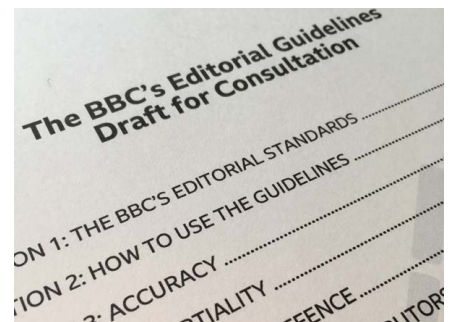
It said content dealing with religion which is "likely to cause offence to those with religious views and beliefs" must be referred to "a senior editorial figure".

And in a clause which treated sets of ideas in the same way as people, it gave "religions" the same protection from "abusive or derogatory treatment" as "individuals, groups [and] communities".

We warned that the BBC's position risked exacerbating "a climate of self-censorship" and acquiescing to "de facto blasphemy codes".

We also criticised a section of the guidance which said there must be "strong editorial justification for publishing any depiction" of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. We warned against the appeasement of Islamists' unreasonable demands.

And we criticised the ongoing



discrimination against non-religious voices in the BBC's *Thought for the Day* slot on Radio 4 and *Pause for Thought* on Radio 2.

The BBC is due to publish its guidance in full early this year. We'll keep an eye out for the final version.

Resisting blasphemy laws in Pakistan and Indonesia

In October we wrote to the government over the case of Asia Bibi, who was on death row for blasphemy in Pakistan and had almost exhausted the appeal process.

We urged the Foreign Office to "do everything within its power" to secure her release as Pakistan's Supreme Court heard her final appeal.

A couple of weeks later the court ordered her to be

freed, but she remained in hiding and in danger. Thankfully, as we went to press, the court threw out a challenge to her acquittal.

We also wrote to Google to ask it to remove an app which helps Indonesia to enforce its blasphemy law.

The 'Smart Pakem' app, which Google stocks in its Google Play store, encourages Indonesians to report people they suspect of religious 'heresy' to the

authorities. It also lists several religious minority groups, naming their leaders and Indonesian office addresses.

We told Google that stocking it ran contrary to the democratic ideals which it says it stands for.

At the time of writing the app is still available.

We'll continue pressing the Foreign Office to stand for freedom of and from religion and working to hold big tech firms to account when they undermine that principle.



Revealing lack of public support for C of E's privileges

A poll we commissioned revealed that just one in three people in the UK support the retention of the monarchy's ties to the Church of England.

Our results showed the lack of public support for future heads of state remaining at the head of the C of E and committed to upholding its role as the state church.

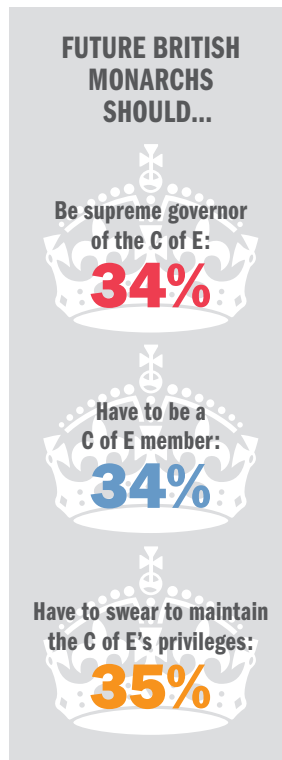
Our pollsters asked three questions – and on all three more people said they supported change than the status quo.

In response we called for the laws that bind the monarchy to the Church of England to be scrapped, reiterating a major point we made in our report *Separating Church and State* in December 2017.

Meanwhile we reported that affiliation to the Church of England had halved since 2002. Our figures were given a mention in a House of Lords debate on disestablishment.

And our chief executive Stephen Evans had a letter published in *The Times* after it emerged that people tend to view the archbishop of Canterbury's involvement in politics as inappropriate.

Stephen's letter said Justin Welby was entitled to his political views but should not be given a privileged platform to promote them.



Standing up to discrimination on the school bus

We urged councillors in Wrexham in north Wales to take a decision on transport to faith schools based on “equality for all families and taxpayers”.

Wrexham is one of many councils which provide generous subsidies to families wishing to send their children long distances to faith schools, even when other more local schools are available.

The council held a consultation on plans to review its provision, which costs £302,000 and serves 17 faith schools. Polls suggested the review was popular locally.

We told the council it should spend its residents' money in a way that benefits all of them, based on genuine need. We said councils shouldn't give unreasonable privileges to some while others get a raw deal.

But the council has abandoned its review under pressure from the faith schools lobby. It is trying to find £9m this year to balance its books, and its cuts and tax rises elsewhere will now be more severe.



© Thomas Nugent [CC BY-SA 2.0]

Stockport Council in Greater Manchester is also considering changing the preferential treatment it gives to families who send their children to faith schools.

Councils are legally required to provide free transport in a way that gives children at faith schools preferential treatment. Wrexham and Stockport are among those which provide discretionary services which go beyond the minimum requirement. We urge supporters who have concerns to write to their local councillors.

We'll keep standing up for equal treatment locally – and pressing the government to end the unjustifiable statutory requirement nationally.

OTHER CAMPAIGNING

■ We wrote to the Charity Commission to ask why an Islamic preacher who has praised Osama bin Laden is a trustee of a registered charity.

■ We wrote to the justice secretary, David Gauke, to reiterate our call for the end of the Anglican judges' service which takes place each autumn. We also raised the case of Mr Justice Haddon-Cave, the judge who described Islam as “a religion of peace”. We reported on his remarks in more detail in the autumn Bulletin.



■ Our chief executive Stephen Evans (*above*) took part in a lively panel debate on faith schools at the Battle of Ideas festival at the Barbican in London. He also attended a series of fringe events at the Conservative Party Conference.

■ Our staff represented the NSS at events including: a major conference on sharia, segregation and secularism in London; a science and scepticism convention attended by around 800 people in Manchester; and a debate on tolerating religious fundamentalism at the University of Exeter.

■ We called on the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the body which enforces Britain's equality laws, to back an “inclusive and secular education system” in response to its latest strategic plan.

Secularism 2019: Saturday 18 May

What do we mean by ‘religious freedom’ – and who is it for?

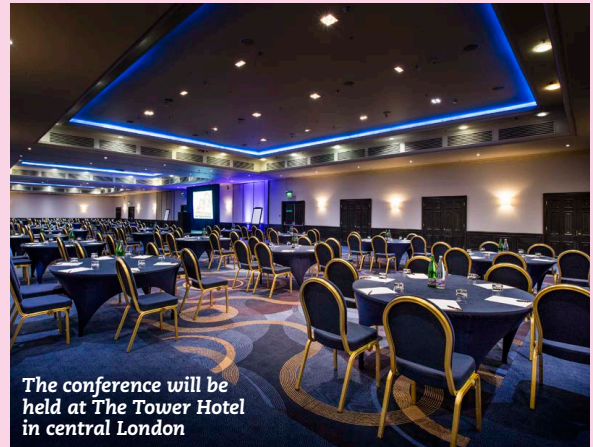
Religious groups often misuse the phrase ‘religious freedom’ to demand privileges or to trample on the freedom of others – including by undermining the right to freedom from religion.

Join us at The Tower Hotel in London as we explore how best to protect freedom of belief for people of all faiths and none.

Discussion will focus on topics including:

- Defending **free speech on religion**, including for those who criticise, leave or change religion
- Protecting **secularism in healthcare**, so patient care and autonomy comes before religious dogma
- Non-stun slaughter and navigating the relationship between **pluralism and religious orthodoxy**.

Tickets are £50 – or just £25 for NSS members. Don’t miss out – book yours now at secularism.org.uk/events.



The conference will be held at The Tower Hotel in central London



Rachel Laser



Dr Ahmed Shaheed



Gita Sahgal



Sara Khan



Dr Brian D. Earp



“The state has an obligation to treat everyone as equals, regardless of gender, ethnicity or religion. And yet we are witnessing greater numbers of faith schools and increasing dispensations for religious rights in the workplace. I believe this creates more division and potential for conflict.”

New honorary associate

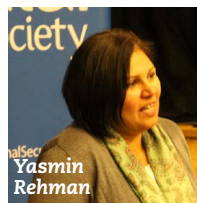
We’re delighted to welcome journalist and presenter **Beverley Turner** as our newest honorary associate. Beverley has championed women’s equality and worked for outlets including the BBC, ITV and LBC.

AGM

At our AGM in November women’s rights activist Yasmin Rehman joined the NSS council. Council member Josephine Macintosh, who has promoted human rights on the NSS’s behalf at international level, became a vice president in place of Terry Sanderson who stood down. Keith Porteous Wood was re-elected president.



Josephine Macintosh



Yasmin Rehman

national secular society **Bulletin**

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WIN a copy of Barbara Smoker’s memoirs

We’re offering members a chance to win a copy of our former president Barbara Smoker’s book *My Godforsaken Life: Memoir of a Maverick*.

To enter, answer the following question:

Complete this sentence (no more than 30 words in total):

“Secularism is essential because...”

Email your answers to admin@secularism.org.uk. Please write ‘Barbara Smoker book competition’ in the subject line and include your address or membership number in the email.

The answer we judge as the best will be the winner. Competition closes on Thursday 28 February.

