

Bulletin

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challenging religious privilege

Time to scrap religion as a charitable purpose

We've published a major report revealing the harm done by charities which exist to promote religion – and calling for 'the advancement of religion' to be removed as a charitable purpose.

Our report, *For The Public Benefit?*, has revealed that over 12,000 charities exist solely to promote religion. Some of these use public money to promote extremism and harmful practices such as 'gay conversion therapy', infant genital cutting and non-stun animal slaughter.

Charity law sets out 13 charitable purposes, which can be grounds for organisations to justify their charitable status. The benefits provided by most of them – such as saving lives or relieving poverty – are clear. But the public benefit of 'the advancement of religion' is far more contestable.

The report generated significant media

coverage and has opened up an important debate around the charitable status of religious bodies.

Under our proposed reforms religious and faith-based organisations could still apply for charitable status but the onus would be on them to demonstrate some benefit to society other than simply promoting and practising their own beliefs.

We've written to the charities minister to highlight the findings of our report and call for the advancement of religion to be removed as a charitable purpose. And we're urging supporters to write to their MPs to do the same.

Read more at secularism.org.uk/charities/.

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Human rights need human rights defenders



The US president's recent state visit to the UK was a timely reminder that the spread of secularist principles and the rolling back of religious privileges cannot be guaranteed.

The Trump administration has trashed human rights, often in pursuit of evangelicals' distorted version of 'religious freedom' that privileges the priorities of religious conservatives and undermines the separation between church and state. This is to the particular detriment of religious minorities, women and LGBT people.

Worryingly, there is evidence that Christian fundamentalists in the US are funding and fuelling Europe's far right, and its attempts to undermine human rights and basic equality. It's clear that if we're going to have human rights, we're going to need human rights defenders.

At our conference in May it was a privilege to meet so many of them, not least our keynote speaker Rachel

Laser, the CEO and president of Americans United for Church and State. Americans United is leading the fightback against Donald Trump's so-called 'religious freedom' agenda.

It was an honour also to award our Secularist of the Year prize to Saif ul Malook, the lawyer who defended and

"Human rights defenders like Saif ul Malook offer hope to those around the world oppressed by intolerant and overbearing religion."

secured the release of Asia Bibi, who spent eight years on death row for blasphemy in Pakistan. Human rights defenders like Saif offer hope to those around the world oppressed by intolerant and overbearing religion.

The UK's traditional deference to religion and a resurgence of religious fundamentalism make the NSS's work as vital as ever. In recent months our phenomenally hard-

working staff have been stepping up our campaigning towards a truly secular state that respects everyone's rights and freedoms fairly.

This has entailed standing up for LGBT equality in the face of fundamentalists who object to children being taught about same-sex relationships. It has involved campaigning against a new wave of divisive and discriminatory faith schools. And our major report on religious charities exposed the many ways in which some religious groups are spreading intolerance and fundamentalism, thanks to an assumption in charity law that advancing religion benefits the public.

This important work is all made possible by our members and supporters. Together, we need to stand up for secularist principles. Only then will we ensure that religious privilege is not allowed to impede the flourishing of anyone's fundamental rights and freedoms.

Rallying MPs to urge an end to parliamentary prayers

MPs from across the political spectrum called for an end to the practice of holding prayers in parliament before the start of official business in a motion which we coordinated.

The early day motion was sponsored by several of our honorary associates including Conservative MP Crispin Blunt, Labour's Nia Griffith, Tommy Sheppard of the SNP and Tom Brake of the Liberal Democrats. Shortly after it was tabled 15 MPs had signed it.

The motion says religious worship should "not play any part in the formal business of the House of Commons".

It says parliamentary meetings "should be conducted in a manner equally welcoming to all attendees, irrespective of their personal beliefs". It adds that "parliamentary prayers

are not compatible with a society which respects the principle of freedom of and from religion".

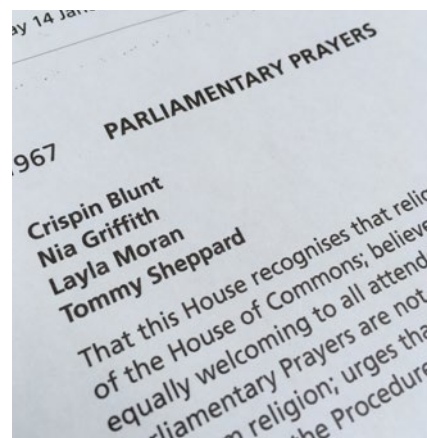
Sittings in both the House of Commons and the Lords currently begin with Anglican prayers. In practice prayers also act as a seat reservation system, meaning MPs and peers who wish to attend or speak in busy sessions often effectively have to attend them.

We wrote to the Commons procedure committee to alert it to the motion and many of our supporters helpfully wrote to their MPs to urge them to sign it.

In response to the EDM Charles

"Whilst religious worship occupies a strong part in some people's lives, it should no longer play a role in the way we conduct our political affairs as an independent, open and diverse nation."

Crispin Blunt, Conservative MP and NSS honorary associate, explains why he tabled the motion



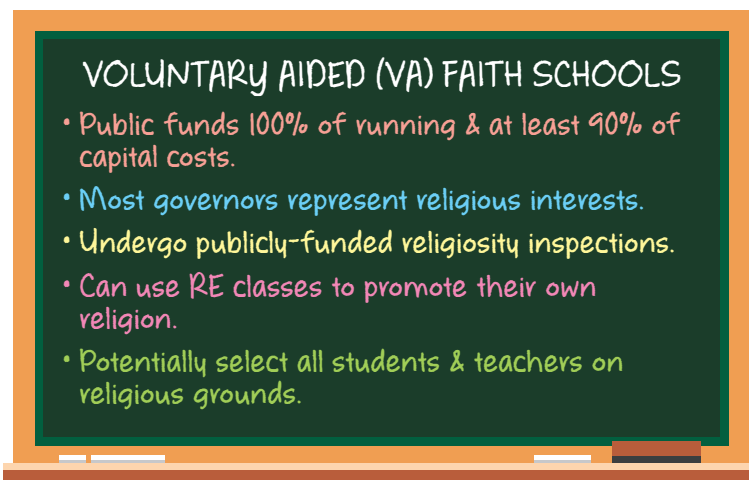
Walker, the chair of the procedure committee, said he was "content to discuss" our proposal with the committee "once we have disposed of currently pressing business".

Opposing government plans for religiously selective faith schools

We've played a crucial role in challenging a new wave of religiously selective faith schools through our No More Faith Schools campaign. In March, the Department for Education announced the first 14 proposals under its plans for new voluntary aided faith schools in England – and we began mobilising opposition.

We've exclusively revealed that some of the proposed schools are in areas which already have a surplus of school places, or are in competition with inclusive school proposals. We've also briefed local councillors and urged them to support inclusive schooling, rather than divisive new VA schools.

In April we joined a broad coalition



of leading public figures, experts and campaigners by signing an open letter in *The Sunday Times* criticising the plans. The letter, which was signed by 180 people, called for all new schools to be "inclusive and welcoming to all children, irrespective of family background".

Last year our lobbying helped to convince the government to reverse its plans to allow new academies to select 100% of their pupils on religious grounds. If those plans had gone ahead we probably would have seen many more discriminatory academies proposed.

We're working to convince the government to reconsider its commitment to religiously selective schooling again, and to

organise opposition at a local level.

With your help we can ensure every new faith school proposal is challenged, and lead local and national advocacy for secular inclusive schools. Find out more and add your support at nomorefaithschools.org.

Leading calls for an inquiry into school admissions

We jointly coordinated an open letter calling for an inquiry into the school admissions system, gaining support from politicians in both houses of parliament, experts, activists and educationalists.

The letter, which we put together with Comprehensive Future, raised concerns about the impact of faith-based discrimination and segregation and called on the education select committee to launch a review.

"School admissions lie at the very heart of our school system, and how fair such a system is perceived to be. Arrangements should be transparent, just, and easily understandable to all families."

[The open letter we jointly coordinated](#)

The letter highlighted the government's commitment to a new wave of voluntary aided faith schools, which can potentially select all their pupils on the basis of their parents' religion.

Its signatories included Labour MP David Lammy, Layla Moran of the Liberal Democrats and Green MP Caroline Lucas, along with Mike Watson, Labour's education spokesperson in the House of Lords.

We, along with Comprehensive Future, also wrote to all committee members in more detail with our research on the entrenched religious division and privilege in school admissions.

Challenging religious groups' council voting rights in Scotland

We've written to all of Scotland's councils to urge them to remove the voting rights of unelected religious representatives on education committees.

Perth and Kinross Council has already voted to repeal religious representatives' voting rights after the Scottish government confirmed councils are under no legal obligation to grant them.

Perth and Kinross's decision came after church

Church cut out of decisions about council's schools

Our response to Perth and Kinross Council's decision was quoted in *The Times*

representatives cast the deciding votes in a decision to close a local school.

Scotland's local authorities are required to appoint three religious representatives to their education committees. We've long campaigned for these positions to be removed. In 2018 the Scottish government declined our request to review religious representatives' positions.

We'll continue to argue for legislation to change that. But moves to repeal the representatives' ability to vote will help to restore democratic legitimacy to Scotland's councils and curb religious control of its schools.

Exposing religious anti-LGBT campaigners' agenda

We've played a major role in standing up for inclusive, appropriate, evidence-based education on relationships and sex in response to reactionary religious groups' attempts to undermine it.

In recent months Muslim groups have conducted vocal and intimidating protests outside primary schools in Birmingham against teaching which promotes diversity. Several schools have suspended programmes of lessons as a result. Another school had to close early just before May half-term.

Meanwhile LGBT activists have been attacked, senior teachers have been threatened and leafleting campaigns against relationships and sex education (RSE) have spread across the country.

Our research has exposed the activities and views being promoted by a campaign called Stop RSE, which has supported at least one of the protests. A key figure in Stop RSE, Dr Kate Godfrey-Faussett, created a petition demanding a parental opt-out from RSE classes. The petition was debated in

parliament after securing more than 100,000 signatures.

We revealed that Stop RSE was promoting homophobic, inaccurate, sexist and shame-based resources and messages. We briefed MPs on our findings and wrote to the education secretary to urge him not to water down guidance on RSE in the face of religious pressure.

We also wrote to the government in March, to urge it to provide "unequivocal support" to a school affected by protests.

And in April, as the campaign spread and escalated, we urged ministers to reconsider a

"There's a concerted effort now where they're kind of queering the Muslim community."

"We don't condone the behaviour but we need to work psychologically or in a mental health capacity with these people (those experiencing same-sex attraction)."

Comments from Dr Kate Godfrey-Faussett which we discovered and publicised



Mainly Muslim protesters have gathered outside schools in Birmingham

requirement on schools to take pupils' "religious background" into account when teaching about relationships. We warned that this requirement was "open to abuse" and encouraging unreasonable demands.

Meanwhile the Health and Care Professions Council launched an investigation into Godfrey-Faussett based on concerns we raised.

We also revealed that a group called Islamic RSE was promoting anti-LGBT, anti-sex and anti-contraceptive messages and encouraging sympathetic parents to get involved in school governance.

New curriculum for Wales

We responded to a consultation on a proposed new curriculum for schools in Wales. We welcomed a commitment to put non-religious worldviews on the curriculum and the Welsh government's reconsideration of parents' right to withdraw children from RSE.



We also said we would only support ending the right to withdraw from RE once the subject had been reformed.

But our response criticised the Welsh government for continuing to allow faith schools to promote religion through RE, for not reviewing requirements to hold collective worship and for retaining SACREs, where local representatives are appointed to oversee RE based on their religious (or now Humanist) identity.

We broadly welcomed the draft curriculum, which will move RE into a wider area of Humanities study, when it was released in April. We've long lobbied the Welsh government in support of RE reform.

New RSE guidance

We successfully persuaded the government to resist pressure from anti-LGBT campaigners to extend parents' right to withdraw their children from RSE in England.

New Department for Education guidance has replaced parents' explicit right to withdraw their children from sex education in secondary schools with a "right to request" withdrawal.

There remains no right to withdraw children from relationships education, which begins in primary school, or a new subject of health education.

We remain concerned that faith schools will have too much leeway to teach these subjects in accordance with their faith.



Our education work increasingly requires collaboration with volunteers and members of our Secular Education Forum. For more information and to add your support, please visit secularism.org.uk/get-involved.

Lawyer who defended Asia Bibi stars at Secularism 2019

We named a lawyer who defended a woman on death row for blasphemy in Pakistan as our Secularist of the Year at our Secularism 2019 conference in May.

Saif ul Malook has risked his life defending those prosecuted under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. In 2014 he took up the high-profile case of Asia Bibi, helping to secure her acquittal in October and a court ruling upholding her acquittal in January.

Saif has faced death threats from Islamists. He's also worked

in the knowledge that in 2011 two politicians were murdered after they spoke in Asia Bibi's defence and called for reform of blasphemy laws. And since securing Asia Bibi's acquittal he's taken up another blasphemy case.

Former NSS president Barbara Smoker also picked up a lifetime achievement award for her longstanding commitment to secularism and human rights.

The awards came as we wrapped up Secularism 2019. Our biggest event of the year brought together

speakers from fields including campaigning, journalism and academia to discuss subjects including bodily autonomy, education, equality and freedom of expression.

More than 200 people attended the conference, and we'd like to thank the speakers, audience and volunteers who made it such a success.

For those who couldn't make it, we're currently making videos of the speeches available on our YouTube channel.



Geoffrey Robertson (left) presented the Secularist of the Year award to Saif ul Malook

"I assure you that I plan to continue my mission in providing legal aid to all blasphemy victims even in future regardless to the threat to my life."

Saif ul Malook, our Secularist of the Year



(From left) Dr Ahmed Shaheed, Pragna Patel and Nick Cohen addressed the conference



Izzy Posen (left) and Brian Earp defended children's rights from religious impositions



Sara Khan said we should challenge extremism "without fear of upsetting religious sensibilities"



Our CEO Stephen Evans with Rachel Laser, who delivered the keynote speech on religious freedom in Trump's America

Saif ul Malook accepted our Secularist of the Year prize



Our former president Barbara Smoker accepted a lifetime achievement award



"A healthy democracy requires a healthy and diverse civil society. And the NSS's work in standing up for religious freedom but also in exposing and tackling religious extremism, through the prism of human rights, is much needed."

Sara Khan, lead counter-extremism commissioner, at Secularism 2019

Protecting children from genital cutting

We've pushed the children's charity the NSPCC and two bodies which register and represent doctors to take consistent stances on the harm caused by ritual infant circumcision.

We called on the General Medical Council (GMC) to "explicitly address" the harm caused by non-therapeutic genital cutting in response to GMC guidance on decision making and consent.

The guidance endorsed the general principle of patient autonomy, including over patients'

"future choices". And it said doctors should be aware of patients' vulnerabilities. But it did not mention ritual genital cutting.

Our Secular Medical Forum questioned the compatibility between the guidance's stated principles and the GMC's position on circumcision.

We also highlighted and criticised guidance from the British Medical Association which said decisions on whether to circumcise boys should partly be influenced by their "social and cultural interests".

And we urged the NSPCC to reconsider its position on non-therapeutic male circumcision.

Our chief executive Stephen Evans wrote to the NSPCC after it deflected a question about the similarities between infant male and female genital cutting on Twitter.

The charity claimed the "evidence on MGM" wasn't "strong enough to suggest that male circumcision should be considered a form of child abuse, when considering the physical, religious and social implications".

In his letter Stephen said this position was "difficult to reconcile with a consistent approach to other forms of non-therapeutic body alteration on children".

"We recommend that this draft guidance explicitly addresses this issue and no longer allows parental beliefs, however strongly held, to be a determining factor in nonessential surgery on babies and children."

[Our submission to the GMC's consultation](#)

Holding religious institutions accountable for child abuse failures

We urged the prime minister to raise the issue of child abuse with the Vatican as the Catholic Church appallingly failed to cooperate with an official inquiry.

In February the IICSA inquiry said it had received no substantive response from the papal nuncio in Britain after several requests for a statement on abuse in Catholic schools.

In response we wrote to Theresa May to encourage her to apply "all the pressure you can" to ensure the Catholic Church could not "refuse to be held to account".

Meanwhile we welcomed an announcement that IICSA will open a new investigation into child abuse in religious organisations and settings which have previously been beyond its remit. The inquiry will now consider abuse linked to religions such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Methodists, Judaism and Islam.

As part of our work on institutional child abuse we responded to a direct approach by IICSA to explain why sexual abuse of minors was more prevalent in religious settings.

We also welcomed the conviction of the most senior Catholic official in France, the archbishop of Lyon Philippe Barbarin, on charges of covering up sexual abuse. Barbarin failed to report a priest's repeated sexual abuse of 70 minors.

The charges against him were dropped after Pope Francis publicly intervened in the case in 2016.

This forced a victims' group to bring a low-budget private prosecution. We donated to the group during the prosecution to help it with its efforts.

Convincing government not to adopt 'Islamophobia' definition

We've continued to push back against a parliamentary group's proposed definition of 'Islamophobia' (see spring Bulletin), helping to convince the government not to adopt it.

We briefed MPs ahead of a parliamentary debate, wrote to councillors in local authorities under pressure to adopt the definition and signed an open letter criticising its "uncritical and hasty adoption".

The letter, along with our opposition specifically, were

mentioned in several major press outlets.

In May the government said it would reject the definition, which defines Islamophobia as "a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness".

The Labour party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the mayor of London and all five major political parties in Scotland are among those who have adopted it.



Standing up to Brunei's barbarism

We convinced at least one university to revoke an honorary degree awarded to the sultan of Brunei after his country introduced draconian new laws based on the Islamic sharia system.

New laws making gay sex, adultery and 'defamation' of the Islamic prophet Muhammad punishable by death came into force in Brunei in April.

We wrote to the vice-chancellors of the University of Aberdeen, the University of Oxford and King's College London to urge them to strip the sultan of honorary degrees.

We also wrote to the RAF and the Royal Navy to urge them to cut ties with the sultan, who has honorary

RAF and Royal Navy urged to cut ties to sultan of Brunei over anti-gay law

Our letters were reported in *The Observer*

ranks in both.

Our letters were reported in *The Observer* and the *Daily Mail*.

In April Aberdeen decided to revoke an honorary doctor of letters degree which it had previously awarded to the sultan. At the time of going to press King's was reviewing its position and Oxford said it had not yet taken a decision.

And in May Brunei extended a moratorium on the death penalty to

cover the new legislation, suggesting it was considering a retreat.

The changes come five years after Brunei introduced sharia law. Alcohol is already banned in Brunei and there are fines and jail sentences for having children out of wedlock and failing to pray on Fridays.

The country's new penal code also prescribes the amputation of a hand and a foot for theft.

"Brunei's deplorable new laws are a breach of basic human rights and contrary to the values these universities and services profess to uphold. Stripping the sultan of the honours they have bestowed upon him would send out the important message that they do not wish to be in any way associated with this kind of medieval barbarism."

Our CEO Stephen Evans

Challenging 'faith tests' in asylum policy

We helped to convince the Home Office to reconsider its use of crude 'faith tests' in its handling of asylum applications amid a series of dubious refusals.

And our interventions helped to convince the government to rethink its decision to refuse asylum to Hamza bin Walayat, a Humanist ex-Muslim who was rejected after he did not name Plato or Aristotle during a Home Office interview. In May Hamza was granted asylum in the UK.

We wrote to Caroline Nokes, the immigration minister, after the department justified its decision to refuse asylum to a man who converted from Islam to Christianity by quoting Bible passages.

The Home Office sent him a refusal letter which said passages in the Bible

"Decisions on the merits of an asylum appeal should be based on a careful assessment of the geopolitical situation in the country of origin and the evidence at hand – and not on the state's interpretation of any given religion or belief."

Our letter to Caroline Nokes



were "inconsistent" with his claim to have converted to Christianity after discovering it was a "peaceful" faith.

We said it was "wholly inappropriate for the government to use theological justifications for refusing asylum applications".

We raised a case we're aware of in which a man who feared persecution as an ex-Muslim atheist in Egypt saw an asylum claim rejected. He was told he could guarantee his personal safety by "living discreetly".

And we expressed concern that the case was part of "a clear pattern of the Home Office using crude 'knowledge testing'", contradicting the department's official policy.

In response the minister told us the department was reviewing its "decision making".

Defending free speech

We urged the Scottish government to protect free speech as it considered proposals to change legislation around hate crime.

We raised concerns that the introduction of new offences related to the "stirring up of hatred" could pose a threat to freedom of expression. We also urged ministers to abolish Scotland's blasphemy laws.



We wrote to the Advertising Standards Agency, which regulates UK advertising. We challenged its censorious and patronising advice on 'avoiding causing religious offence during Easter' and wider guidance on religious offence which reveals a deeply-embedded aversion to freedom of expression.

And we welcomed new guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission which aims to ensure universities "remain a forum for open and robust enquiry".

OTHER CAMPAIGNING

■ Our staff and officers represented us at events including a debate on ‘hate speech’ at Queen Mary University of London, an event on LGBT and secularist rights in Bangladesh and a conference on sharia, segregation and secularism. We also held our first secular social in Belfast.

■ Our chief executive Stephen Evans met with the leadership team at the Baitul Futuh Mosque in south London to discuss secularism, social cohesion and the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims.



■ We questioned why the government required someone with “a faith background” when advertising for a non-professional board member of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), a regulator overseeing fertility treatment and research. We wrote to the HFEA and the Department of Health and Social Care, which placed the advert.

■ New government guidance has said crematoria should accommodate the needs of people of “all faiths and none” and encouraged “the provision of interchangeable iconography”. This was broadly in line with recommendations we made in response to a consultation on the subject.

■ We wrote to the equalities minister to urge the government to ensure same-sex marriages are made available on military bases within the armed forces.

■ Our campaigns officer Megan Manson met with the Civil Aviation Authority to discuss gender discrimination and the accommodation of religious requests as it prepares new guidance.

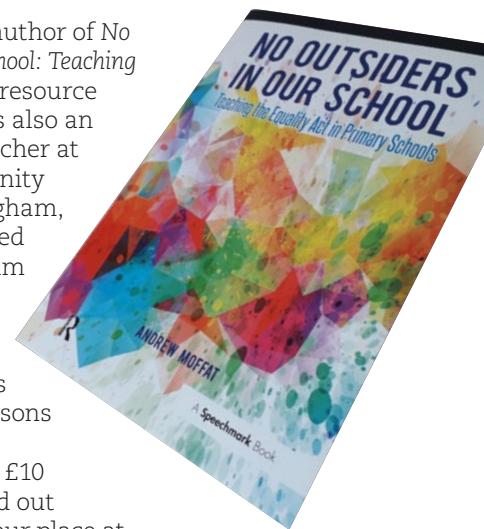
Andrew Moffat to deliver Bradlaugh Lecture 2019



Andrew Moffat will deliver our annual Bradlaugh Lecture on **Saturday 7 September** at **Manchester Art Gallery**.

Andrew is the author of *No Outsiders in our School: Teaching the Equality Act*, a resource for teachers. He is also an assistant headteacher at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham, which was targeted by hardline Muslim protesters who objected to references to LGBT people in its ‘No Outsiders’ lessons earlier this year.

Tickets are just £10 for members. Find out more and book your place at secularism.org.uk/events.



New NSS podcast

We’ve launched a new series of podcasts featuring interviews with leading experts and activists on secularism.

We’ve already released 10 episodes. In the run-up to our recent Secularism 2019 conference several of our discussions explored the idea of religious freedom, and how to reclaim it.

So far we’ve interviewed people including conference speakers Rachel Laser and Izzy Posen and our honorary associates Maryam Namazie and Geoffrey Robertson. To listen to the episodes we’ve released or find out more details go to secularism.org.uk/podcast.



Barbara Smoker book competition winner

Congratulations to Leslie Dubow, who won a copy of Barbara Smoker’s memoirs in the competition we ran in our spring Bulletin with the following entry:

“Secularism is essential because only in a secular society can justice, freedom and equality under the law be guaranteed to all.”

national secular society **Bulletin**

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