

Exploring Secularism

We're delighted to announce the launch of a new range of resources for secondary school students and teachers to explore key questions related to secularism and religion's role in society.

Every secondary school in the UK has received information about our *Exploring Secularism* project. Many have already ordered a free teacher's guide and a resource pack on the core principles of secularism.

We're developing more material and covering five more themes:

- Freedom of expression
- Equality and human rights
- Secularism, religion and society
- Secularism, art and literature
- Secularism and history.

Secularism has been recognised by the Commission on Religious Education as a key concept in the study of religion and worldviews. And *Exploring Secularism* helps to enrich schools'

engagement with some pressing debates involving religion's role in society.

We'll also be running a training day on Saturday 9 May next year at Conway Hall in London, aimed at teachers and anyone else involved in education with an interest in secularism. The free event, 'Exploring Secularism for Educators', will cover:

- What educators need to know about secularism
- The relevance of *Exploring Secularism* to the curriculum
- Using *Exploring Secularism* resources
- Who's using *Exploring Secularism* and how they can help.

We'll have more details in due course.

"Really excellent and detailed materials for exploring the ideas and principles of secularism."

— The Online Centre for Religious Studies



Pages 4–5: Standing up for inclusive education on relationships & sex

Pages 6–7: Successes on free speech & public health

**DATES FOR
YOUR DIARY**

Saturday 30 November
2019:
NSS AGM

Monday 10 February 2020:
The 1944 Education Act
and its legacy

Saturday 9 May 2020:
Exploring Secularism
CPD day

We must teach the young how they benefit from secularism



Secularism is worth celebrating. Its principles underpin liberal societies and the political institutions which have been built to protect individual human rights to freedom of thought, speech and expression.

The liberation of human reason from unquestioned subjugation to religious dogma and authority has facilitated the flourishing not only of human rights but also material and health benefits. None of this would have happened if the deadweight of authoritarian dogmatic religious orthodoxy had not been challenged and overcome.

It is bizarre, therefore, that something so significant rarely features in the school curriculum. Our new Exploring Secularism initiative is an ambitious attempt to put this right.

As emerging citizens of 21st century societies, pupils should have an awareness of the importance of secularist principles, such as the

separation of religion and state, and their impact on the lives they lead.

Secularist principles are so embedded in many modern democracies that they tend to be taken for granted. This is dangerous. Unless secularism's role in the development of human rights and freedoms is well

“Unless secularism's role in the development of human rights and freedoms is well understood, theocrats will be well placed to erode them.”

understood, theocrats will be well placed to erode them.

Secularism is misunderstood, sometimes wilfully, and much maligned. Those eager to impose their religious faith on others have groundlessly portrayed secularism as a threat to religious freedom, promulgating misconceptions

– routinely equating it with state-enforced atheism and even totalitarianism.

Secularism needs a place on the curriculum so that students can have a better understanding of it, and not just the false view of it that its opponents promote.

If we're looking for space on the curriculum then the obvious subject to make room would be religious education. Britain's outdated approach to RE should make way for a new broader civic education that encompasses citizenship and human rights. Such a subject should explore a diverse range of worldviews, practices and beliefs, and the role that religious and secular ideas play in people's lives and in society. Secularism should be part of that exploration.

Please encourage your local school to make use of our exciting range of *Exploring Secularism* resources – available for free at exploringsecularism.org

Holding religious groups accountable over child abuse

We're continuing to play an important role at the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) as it investigates child abuse in various religious settings.

Several campaigners who highlight domestic abuse in minority religious communities have been given formal roles in an upcoming hearing. Our council member Yasmin Rehman will be among them as a representative of JUNO Women's Aid, which represents women and girls subject to sexual violence.

Richard Scorer, a lawyer who represents abuse victims at the

inquiry and is also one of our vice-presidents, lobbied for these campaigners' inclusion.

Meanwhile our president Keith Porteous Wood spoke at a seminar on mandatory reporting at IICSA and addressed clerical abuse at the UN's committee on the rights of the child (UNCRC) in Geneva.

He urged the UNCRC to recommend the adoption of mandatory reporting of abuse in every country where it isn't in place.

And IICSA has continued to reveal damning evidence of the link between deference to religion and the carrying out and covering up of abuse.

A report on the Church of England's handling of abuse by bishop Peter Ball in Chichester found “serious failings” in its response. And a hearing in July heard significant criticism of senior figures in the Church of England – including the archbishops of Canterbury and York.

NSS CEO challenges circumcision

Our chief executive Stephen Evans called for an end to the non-therapeutic cutting of baby boys' genitals in an opinion piece published in *The Independent*.

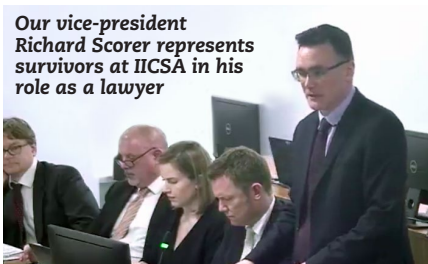
He argued that society should protect children's right to grow up in their own bodies and make their own decisions about religion, rather than having them imposed on them.

His article, which came out shortly after the release of a BBC documentary on circumcision, was widely read and shared on social media.

This is the latest sign that our work challenging circumcision is increasingly driving this issue into the mainstream of public debate.

Whilst you have the absolute right to your beliefs, you don't necessarily have the right to impose those beliefs on others – and you certainly shouldn't assume to have the right to impose them with a pair of scissors or a sharp knife on a non-consenting child.

Stephen Evans is the chief executive officer of the National Secular Society



Our vice-president Richard Scorer represents survivors at IICSA in his role as a lawyer

Remove religious reps from council education committees

We've urged members of the Scottish parliament to remove religious appointees from councils' education committees in a major report.

Our report, *Religious Reps: unrepresentative, unnecessary and unjustified*, argues that reserving a special role in policy making for representatives of religious institutions runs counter to democratic principles.

Scottish councils are legally required to appoint three unelected religious representatives to their education committees. At least one must be appointed by the Catholic Church and one by the Church of Scotland.

The report calls on the Scottish government to change the law and urges councils to revoke religious appointees' voting privileges in the meantime, as Perth & Kinross Council did in April.



Our report revealed that eight of Scotland's 32 councils were willing to consider revoking voting privileges from the representatives.

We've sent the report to all MSPs and councillors across Scotland. It was featured on the front page of *The Times* in Scotland, and our education campaigner Alastair Lichten made the argument for change on BBC Scotland.

We're also working with the Edinburgh Secular Society and the Scottish Secular Society, who have both led recent petitions on the subject to the Scottish Parliament, to make the case.

Working to end collective worship in schools

We're urging the government to repeal the law requiring daily acts of worship in schools in England after a high-profile case pushed the issue into the public domain.

We wrote to education secretary Gavin Williamson to urge him to repeal the requirement to provide "an act of collective worship". We're urging supporters to write to their MPs and help us to make the case.

Our CEO Stephen Evans also rebutted a Church of England defence of collective worship in a letter published in *The Guardian*.

We took these steps after a couple launched a legal challenge against a primary school over its assemblies where children take part in Christian prayers and watch re-enactments of biblical stories such as Jesus's crucifixion.

We've provided advice and support to the couple, Lee and Lizanne Harris, and we raised their case with ministers earlier this year.

At that meeting we also raised broader concerns about coercive worship requirements and the lack of protection for the ethos of community schools which are taken over by faith based trusts.

The Harrises' children's school is not a faith school but it joined a Church of England academy trust in 2015.

Many schools ignore the law on worship with the tacit approval of Ofsted and the Department for Education. Where worship takes place, parents have the right to withdraw children – but many understandably regard this as an unreasonable imposition on themselves and their children.



Our CEO Stephen Evans's letter in *The Guardian*

Resisting new faith schools

Our opposition has helped to end plans for a major wave of religiously selective new faith schools in England.

In March the government announced plans for 14 new voluntary aided faith schools, as we highlighted in the summer Bulletin. Lobbying from our No More Faith Schools campaign has helped to reduce this to just one Catholic school in Peterborough in Cambridgeshire.

That school could potentially be allowed to select up to 100% of its pupils on the basis of their families' religion, and we're continuing to resist plans to open it.

We revealed that the plan had almost certainly scuppered an alternative proposal for an inclusive secular school to open on the same site. And we were quoted in *The Independent* in response to the news the plan was moving forward.

The local council is set to consult on the plans in November – we'll be responding to outline our concerns and urging supporters to do the same.

Meanwhile the government has announced plans for three new Church of England schools to feature among 22 new schools to open across England. We're working to ensure all new schools are secular.

Standing up for inclusive education on relationships and sex

We've continued to do substantial work resisting religious campaigners' attempts to undermine inclusive teaching on relationships and sex.

We revealed a coordinated effort by ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools to refuse to teach aspects of relationships and sex education (RSE) by exploiting loopholes in Department for Education regulations.

State and independent schools plan to claim LGBT-inclusive teaching is not "age appropriate" or suitable for pupils due to their religious backgrounds.

The revelations, which were reported in *Schools Week*, showed we've been justified to voice concern about government guidance which gives religious schools in England leeway to teach RSE in accordance with their faith (see below).

Ministers warned over RSE 'loopholes' as Charedi schools seek to block LGBT teaching

Our concerns were reported in *Schools Week*

We also exposed comments by a Church of England school governor in South Yorkshire who described LGBT-inclusive education as "child grooming" and said it "opens the door for sexual predators".

The governor, who was in his position because he was the local vicar, made his remarks in a rant in a church magazine. They were subsequently widely reported in the press and the governor resigned from his position after the school investigated.

And we wrote to the education inspectorate Ofsted to challenge its double standards on teaching about

same-sex relationships. We raised concerns that Ofsted was allowing some faith schools to teach that same-sex relationships were wrong while punishing schools that refuse to talk about those relationships.

In our letter we highlighted the findings of our major report *Unsafe Sex Education*, which revealed that many faith schools were teaching that same-sex relationships were wrong.

Meanwhile the government has said it will require schools in England to take "the religious background of all pupils into account" during RSE lessons when they become compulsory next year.

Ministers water down requirement to respect difference

We're concerned that the government has weakened guidance for independent schools on encouraging respect for difference – in an apparent sop to religious groups.

The Department for Education has said schools are obliged to encourage respect for other people in personal, social, health and economic education only "to the extent that is considered age appropriate".

It's also said schools:

- Won't "normally" face enforcement action if they fail to meet "only one or two" of the independent school standards, depending on their "severity"
- May teach that "some religions, all religions, or atheism / agnosticism are wrong"
- Have "wide discretion" to adjust their personal, social and health education content to reflect their "faith ethos".

The government made the changes after receiving feedback on a draft version of its guidance. Many concerns objected to the need to promote equality – and the government said a "significant proportion" of them came from "the Charedi Jewish community".

We responded to the draft guidance and we'll continue to stand against religious efforts to inculcate children into narrow worldviews.



Resisting confessional RE in European court

We've submitted a third-party intervention to the European Court of Human Rights in a key case concerning religious education in schools.

In *Papageorgiou and Others v. Greece*, two Greek students argue that the confessional nature of religious education and arrangements for pupil withdrawal violate their human rights.

The appellants claim Greece's education policies concerning RE breach the European Convention on Human Rights.

Greece's system for exemption from RE classes obliges parents to reveal their or their children's religious beliefs and subjects those beliefs to investigation by the school principal.

Our submission argues that this conflicts with European Court of Human Rights case law.



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‘No Outsiders’ message welcomed at Bradlaugh Lecture

In September our third Bradlaugh lecture – which addressed religious fundamentalist opposition to LGBT-inclusive education – attracted a full house in Manchester.

Andrew Moffat, an assistant headteacher at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham, delivered the lecture. Andrew is the creator of ‘No Outsiders’, a programme for teaching about equality and diversity in primary schools.

The lessons aim to prepare children for life in modern Britain by teaching that everyone should be respected and accepted, no matter what their race, religion or sexual orientation.

Andrew and No Outsiders became the targets of aggressive protests and threats at the beginning of 2019. The protesters, most of whom were Muslim, objected to children being taught about LGBT people because they said it went against their religious beliefs.

Andrew said that he created No Outsiders as a means of teaching the values of equality and tolerance in order to counter social problems such as hate crimes, homophobia and extremism.

He countered myths and misinformation that opponents have circulated about No



A Muslim family presented Andrew with flowers and a card in a show of support



Andrew Moffat with Stephen Evans in front of the Bradlaugh portrait

Outsiders. He brought examples of story books used in the programme to demonstrate that they are age-appropriate and do not feature any content relating to sex education or any ‘hidden agendas’.

He added that unclear guidance from the Department for Education has made it extremely difficult to resist pressure from religious lobbyists to stop teaching that some children have two fathers or two mothers. The DfE says schools must take parents’ religions and belief into account when teaching about relationships.

For those of you who didn’t make it, a video of the lecture will soon be available on our YouTube channel.

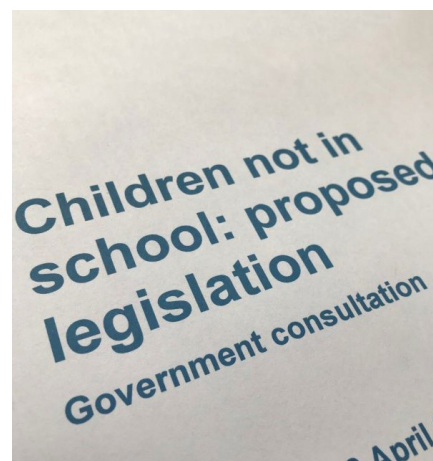
Backing home schooling reform to protect children’s rights

We’ve backed government efforts to tackle illegal faith schools and protect children’s rights by introducing a registration system for children who don’t attend state-funded or registered independent schools.

We responded to a government consultation to say all children’s educational rights must be protected, irrespective of their religious background.

We highlighted concerns that pupils in unregistered Jewish yeshivas and Muslim madrasas are often schooled in squalid conditions where safeguarding is lacking.

Earlier this year we also passed a file containing a number of known unregistered schools in the Stamford Hill area of London to the Department for Education.



Man sacked for blasphemy is reinstated

We helped a man who was sacked by Asda for sharing a quote from the comedian Billy Connolly mocking religion on social media – and he was duly reinstated.

Brian Leach was sacked in June after a colleague complained that a sketch he shared, in which Connolly said “religion is over” and called suicide bombers “wankers”, was anti-Islamic.

He was employed as a checkout assistant at Asda’s Dewsbury store in West Yorkshire.

We got in touch with Brian, helped him throughout an internal appeals process and made public that we were exploring the possibility of a legal challenge.

In July we revealed that Brian had been given his job back.

The decision was a victory for common sense, but the case raises broader concerns about the extent to which employers can legitimately restrict their employees’ freedom of expression on social media.



Resisting ‘Islamophobia’ definition

We’ve continued to push back against the drive to adopt a censorious definition of ‘Islamophobia’ proposed by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims.

We were among free speech advocates who had essays published in a major anthology outlining concerns with the definition, published by the think tank Civitas.

We’ve written to local councillors urging them to reject the definition – and we convinced Lancashire County

Council to do so.

As we reported in the summer Bulletin, our opposition has already helped to convince the government not to adopt the definition.

The APPG’s definition says Islamophobia is “a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness”. We’re continuing to argue that this vague and broad definition will curtail freedom of expression and shut down legitimate criticism of Islam.



The government has said it will establish its own working definition of the term, and we’re planning to engage with that process.

Pushing the government on blasphemy laws

We asked the government to review its stance on blasphemy laws amid concern that ministers only criticise their “misuse” rather than their existence.

In recent months several ministers have condemned the “misuse” of blasphemy laws in Pakistan in parliament without condemning the existence of the laws.

“The best way to champion the rights and freedoms of those who live in fear of religious persecution in Pakistan and elsewhere is to demand the repeal of blasphemy laws, without apology or qualification.”

[Our letter to the Foreign Office](#)

We wrote to the Foreign Office to call for a review of the government’s public statements. We said criticisms which solely focused on the ‘misuse’ of the laws suggested there were legitimate uses for them.

Defending free expression online and in the press

We warned the government against plans to require social media companies to censor “hateful” and “offensive” content in response to a consultation on online harms.

A government white paper has outlined plans to create a regulator with the power to fine online platforms and block websites, who will be required to create guidance outlining what constitutes “hateful content” online.

The guidance would include content which is “not necessarily illegal”, content which may “directly or indirectly cause harm to other users” and some “offensive material” in that definition.

We said censoring content that could be considered offensive would “severely restrict freedom of expression, including the freedom to criticise or satirise religion”.

We also wrote to the press regulator Ipso and met with its representatives over its plans to publish guidance on the way Islam and Muslims are reported.

We raised concerns that the guidance could dilute the freedom to criticise Islamic practices and exacerbate a climate of censorship and self-censorship on the subject.

Ipso’s guidance will be published in the autumn, and we’ll continue to urge it to prioritise free expression on religion.



Success: NSS lobbying changes public vaccination advice

Our lobbying convinced Public Health England (PHE) to change guidance which encouraged parents to seek advice from “faith leaders” over whether to vaccinate their children.

We wrote to PHE after it encouraged parents to seek advice from religious leaders over whether to get their children vaccinated.

PHE said parents should “seek

advice from their faith or community leaders” to “inform their decision” on vaccination.

The statement came as it emerged that some Muslim parents were refusing to let children have a flu vaccine. But PHE was using similar language in an official booklet on vaccines and pork gelatine.

We asked PHE to explain its

rationale for advising people to consult “faith leaders”, saying its statement sent “a confusing and potentially harmful message”.

PHE wrote back to us to say it had reviewed our concerns and removed the line from the booklet.

The change of policy was then reported in *The Times*, with our response quoted.

“In principle, a public health authority should not refer the public to authorities with no medical expertise or certification on matters relating to medicine.”

Our letter to Public Health England

Fluenz: ‘Don’t ask faith leaders for vaccine advice’

Our success was reported in *The Times*

Defending patients’ freedom from evangelism

We raised the case of a GP in Kent who continued to proselytise to patients despite a warning not to do so, prompting an investigation into his conduct.

We wrote to the General Medical Council (GMC) and a local clinical commissioning group to highlight the case of Dr Richard Scott, whose use of prayer made a vulnerable patient uncomfortable.

An acquaintance told us the patient felt unable to express discomfort and wasn’t able to raise the matter formally or change GP practice.

In our letter we also highlighted comments Dr Scott had made on a BBC radio show earlier this year. On the show he said he most commonly introduced faith into consultations when “dealing with people with depression or anxiety”.

The GMC is now considering disciplinary action against Dr Scott. It previously warned him in 2012 after he distressed a patient by trying to persuade him to change his religion. In the BBC documentary he

described the warning he received as “disgraceful”.

Our letter said it was clear Scott felt no remorse for the actions that earned him the warning, held the GMC in contempt and hadn’t stopped using his position as a doctor to evangelise.

The case generated press coverage in outlets including *The Sunday Times* and *The Telegraph*, and our president Keith Porteous Wood discussed it on LBC.

We also wrote to the BBC earlier this year to register concerns that the show featuring Scott breached its editorial guidelines on impartiality.



Defending the right to access contraception

We asked a medical regulator to investigate an incident in which a pharmacist reportedly refused to serve a woman contraception for “personal reasons”.

We wrote to the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) after a woman was refused the morning after pill at a branch of Lloyds Pharmacy in Brighton.

She was told she should come back the following day or travel to the nearest open pharmacy, which was 10 miles away. Most local chemists were closed because it was a Sunday.

We highlighted relevant GPhC guidance which places the onus of responsibility on pharmacies and pharmacy owners to ensure personal beliefs do not restrict patient access.

In response the GPhC said it was “looking at what Lloyds Pharmacy is doing” to ensure its policies and procedures were compliant with its guidance. Lloyds Pharmacy apologised to the woman affected.



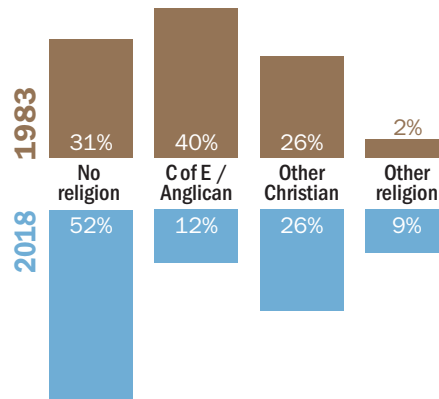
Just 12% of Brits affiliate to C of E

We've called for a serious rethink of religion's public role after the latest British Social Attitudes survey showed that just 12% of people in Britain are affiliated to the Anglican Church.

The highly-respected survey showed that:

- Affiliation to the C of E had dropped by more than two-thirds in a generation – and had almost halved in just a decade
- The proportion of Brits who don't affiliate to a religion was above 50% for the third year running
- Trust in churches and other religious institutions was very low.

After the results were released we argued that Britain's constitutional settlement should catch up with the opinions of its population.



Our chief executive Stephen Evans appeared on Sky News, talkRADIO and LBC and was quoted in several reports. Our communications officer Chris Sloggett also went on talkRADIO.

OTHER CAMPAIGNING

■ We challenged guidance from the NSPCC which withheld and altered information and advice for those raising concerns about child abuse within "Jewish communities".

■ We reported four Islamic charities to the regulator, the Charity Commission for England and Wales, over their promotion of deeply intolerant attitudes to 'apostates', women and gay people.

■ The BBC diluted some of its protections for religious ideas in new editorial guidelines after we urged changes in response to a consultation.

■ Our president Keith Porteous Wood attended a conference on the establishment of the Church of England at the Ecclesiastical Law Society.

■ We wrote to councillors in Norfolk and Denbighshire to urge them to scrap the practice of holding prayers before meetings. We also urged an equality charity in Kent to reconsider its support for prayers.

■ We asked the Saatchi Gallery in west London to review its decision to cover two paintings in cloth in response to complaints from Muslim visitors.

1944 Education Act event

Date: 10 February 2020, 7pm

Location: Conway Hall, London, WC1R 4RL

The 1944 Education Act brought hundreds of faith schools into the state sector in England and Wales and introduced daily worship in all schools. The chair of the NSS's Secular Education Forum, Keith Sharpe, will look at the history of the act and consider the profound legacy it has on schooling today.

Tickets are free. We recommend registering in advance at secularism.org.uk/1944event.



New honorary associate

We're very pleased to announce that bestselling author and priest GP Taylor, an outspoken critic of religious privilege in education, has become an NSS honorary associate.

"The work of the NSS is of vital importance at a time when religious voices are getting louder and louder. It is now time for the state and church to become separate and religion of any kind to play no part in politics, education or public life." – GP Taylor

national secular society **Bulletin**

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National Secular Society
25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL
Registered Company No. 1418145

Telephone: (020) 7404 3126
Email: enquiries@secularism.org.uk
Twitter: @NatSecSoc

Design by Bradley Davis of WhiteLight
Contact us for additional copies