


# Bulletin



National  
Secular  
Society

challenging religious privilege

Issue 86 Winter 2024



# BILL TO SEPARATE CHURCH AND STATE

*Disestablishment bill  
introduced in parliament  
with NSS support*

## ALSO IN THIS EDITION:

Faith schools failing  
children with greatest  
needs

Tackling extremist  
religious charities amid  
the Israel-Gaza conflict

The global threat  
of 'blasphemy'  
laws

# Secularism: the game is long, but there's everything to play for



Welcome to your first members' bulletin of the year.

In the 157 years we've been campaigning, the UK has seen a significant shift towards secularism, transitioning from a highly religious society to one where religious influence has diminished in many aspects of public life. We've played a pivotal role in that change.

For all our success, plenty of challenges remain. One of the toughest nuts to crack has been disestablishment of the Church of England - its formal separation from the state.

Attendance at Anglican churches has been in decline since the Edwardian era. Today, just 0.9% of the English population attend a CofE church on a typical Sunday. The latest Census found that Christians now account for less than half the population of England and Wales for the first time since the survey began. Yet the church clings to its established and privileged status.

We're leading the way in challenging this unjust and archaic arrangement.

In this edition you can read about our work with Liberal Democrat peer Paul Scriven to introduce a bill which would set the wheels of disestablishment in motion.

Though it's unlikely the bill will be successful this time round, we're in this for the long haul. We'll continue to make the case until religious privilege is removed and political equality achieved.

With a general election almost certain this year, we're gearing up to ensure that your voice is heard. The

election presents a key opportunity for us to engage with politicians to advocate for policies and legislation that reflect the aspirations of our members.

There is plenty to play for. The public have long supported reform to assisted dying laws. Parliament now appears to be moving in that direction, too. A new intake of MPs may well tip the balance in favour of change. And with parliamentarians increasingly acknowledging that changes are needed to the House of Lords, we'll be ensuring the place of bishops is considered as part of any proposed reforms.

Despite the fundamental changes to our society over the decades, the state's relationship with religion remains stubbornly intact.

That's why faith schools are still inserting dogma, division and discrimination into a school system that should be a beacon of inclusivity and critical enquiry. Religious fundamentalists are exploiting a charity system that still regards the advancement of religion as a charitable purpose. And pandering to religious sensitives is eroding the right to speak freely.

While religious believers have the right to their faith, we need to ensure religion isn't allowed to harm society or impose itself on those who do not want it. Our policy proposals can address this. We need your help to persuade parliamentarians of their merits.

Together, we can create a society that upholds secular principles, protects individual rights and autonomy, and fosters an inclusive and fair society for all.

## Preaching GP given official warning after leaving teenage patient "traumatised"

For several years, we've raised concerns about Dr Richard Scott, who routinely preaches to patients at his NHS surgery. We therefore welcome the decision of a recent medical tribunal to issue him with an official warning after he left a vulnerable teenager "traumatised".

According to the tribunal, 19-year-old 'Patient B' attended Scott's surgery at Bethesda Medical Centre in Margate in 2022 experiencing suicidal thoughts. Instead of prescribing medication, Scott asked to discuss a "spiritual" approach.

The Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service found Scott suggested 'disconnection from God' was the reason for Patient B's feelings, which he attributed to the patient leaving

his Church of England school to attend a secular sixth form. Scott effectively told the patient to apologise to God for leaving him.

Patient B also claimed Scott clasped his hands in prayer, insisted on giving



**Dr Scott admitted he has conducted "an estimated 3000 spiritual conversations" with patients.**

him a Bible, and suggested he attend church.

The tribunal noted Scott "considered God's own laws to supersede professional boundaries" which he considered to be "restrictive and unhelpful".

The tribunal found Scott's behaviour amounted to misconduct. This is the second formal warning Scott has received for imposing his religious views on patients.

NHS patients rightly expect to receive healthcare without having someone else's religion imposed on them. Evangelism that targets people who are ill or vulnerable is exploitative and patients should be protected from it.

# Research: Faith schools fail children most in need

Most kinds of faith schools are allowed to prioritise children based on their family's religion in their admissions criteria. This discriminatory practice is widely criticised, not least because it leads to religious, ethnic and socio-economic segregation. Now, new analysis suggests it is also impeding opportunities for children with the greatest needs.

According to research published in October, faith-based primary schools admit fewer children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) than local authority community primaries.

The paper said the findings emphasise "the need to question properly the function of faith schools in contemporary England".

## Labour and Conservatives kowtow to faith schools

Despite the obvious discrimination and division which faith schools foster, Labour Party leader Keir

**Catholic schools admit 24% fewer children with SEND recorded in preschool than local authority community schools. They also admit 15% fewer EHCP children.**

**Church of England voluntary aided (VA) schools and academies admit 15% fewer SEND children and 11% fewer EHCP children.**

**Voluntary controlled (VC) Church of England schools admit 8% fewer SEND children and 6% fewer EHCP children.**

Based on analysis of reception year admissions to mainstream state schools from 2010–2020 in England by Dr Tammy Campbell, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

Meanwhile, the government is still committed to supporting faith schools and their privileges. In July, Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Lorely Burt challenged education minister Baroness Diana Barran on faith-based admissions, asking if she agreed that "all children – irrespective of faith and belief background – should have equal right to access schools" funded by taxpayers. Barran replied that the government "supports faith schools' ability to set faith-based oversubscription criteria".

We're disappointed that both government and opposition are backing faith schools – and developments at the end of 2023 have not been reassuring.

## The threat to the 50% cap on faith admissions

In November, Damian Hinds was appointed Minister for Schools. Hinds is a practising Catholic and a strong supporter of religiously selective schools.

In 2018, whilst he was Education Secretary, Hinds said he would press ahead with plans to abolish the 50% admissions cap for new faith-based academies and free schools. This would mean these schools could select 100% of their pupils based on faith criteria when oversubscribed. That's on top of voluntary aided faith schools, which are already permitted to select 100% of their admissions based on religion.

The government decided to retain the 50% cap after we led successful protests against the plans. But Hinds' new appointment, combined with increased lobbying from the Catholic Church, could threaten the cap all over again.

We therefore wrote to Hinds urging him to keep the cap. Hinds responded that there are "currently no plans to review the policy". But he added: "we keep all policy under review".

We'll be watching to make sure no further movements are made to scrap the cap.

## Catholic and C of E primary schools in England 'take fewer Send pupils'

**In response to the research, we spoke out against faith-based admissions in *The Guardian*, *iNews* and local BBC radio.**

Starmer said in September that he "wouldn't tinker" with how faith schools are run, and that a Labour government would be "even more supportive of faith schools" than the current government.

We were alarmed that the leader of a party which claims to be committed to equality and social cohesion would make such a statement. We therefore wrote to Shadow Secretary of State for Education Bridget Philipson arguing that Labour should seek transition towards a fully inclusive and secular education system. We also encouraged our supporters to tell their Labour representatives why faith schools have no place in state education.



**TAKE ACTION!**  
**Write to your Labour representative or candidate and ask them to think again on faith schools. There's a template letter you can use at:**  
[www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/labour-faith-schools](http://www.secularism.org.uk/faith-schools/labour-faith-schools)

## NORTHERN IRELAND

■ We've called on the Northern Ireland Executive to make integrated schools the norm, in response to a consultation in October. Integrated schools proactively teach pupils from Protestant, Catholic and other religious and nonreligious backgrounds together.

■ Regulations brought forward in June mean all post-primary schools must teach about access to abortion and preventing pregnancy. In response to an autumn consultation on the plans, we warned that guidance saying RSE must be taught "in harmony with the ethos of the school" could undermine these plans. Many Christian denominations teach that contraception, abortion and same-sex relationships are wrong.

## SCOTLAND

■ Following NSS lobbying, two more Scottish councils have removed voting powers from unelected religious representatives on their education committees: Edinburgh City Council in August and East Lothian Council in December. In total, six Scottish councils voted to remove religious appointees' voting privileges in 2023.

■ We warned the Scottish government in November that allowing Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) to be taught according to a faith ethos would undermine the promotion of health and wellbeing, and threaten LGBT inclusion. The government was consulting on new guidance which would allow RSHP to be taught as part of Religious and Moral Education. Following our response, we were contacted by concerned parents and teachers who revealed they were being lobbied by their Catholic schools to respond to the consultation in a way which reflected the Catholic Church's agenda.

■ In October we responded to the Scottish government's consultation on plans for a new human rights bill, which would incorporate a range of economic, social and cultural rights into Scots law. We raised several issues where human rights are being undermined by religious privilege, including in education.

# Campaigning for secular education around the UK

## WALES

■ We warned the Welsh government in July that schools must not omit education which conflicts with religious teachings, in response to a consultation on proposed changes to standards for independent schools. We cited many examples of independent faith schools in England which repeatedly refuse to teach aspects of RSE, history and science that contradict their dogma.

## ENGLAND

■ In June, we raised concerns over the religious connections of individuals appointed to review relationships and sex education (RSE). One member is a former director of a Christian charity that opposes LGBT rights and abortion. Another oversees an academy trust where RSE is taught in line with Islamic religious beliefs.

■ Our research in September found 50% of individuals legally prohibited from running a school are banned for reasons relating to religion. One of the most common reasons for a prohibition order is a conviction for running an illegal faith school – a school left unregistered to evade inspections. Unregistered schools generally teach an extremely narrow, religion-based curriculum without oversight. Ofsted's annual report in November revealed its investigations into unregistered schools have nearly doubled in one year.

■ In September, we urged the government to replace religious education (RE) with a subject more suited to 21st century schools. Polls have consistently found RE to be the least popular subject.

# Revealed: The Church of England's evangelism agenda for schools

A spiralling decline in membership poses an existential threat to the Church of England. Just 1% of 18-24 year olds in Britain belong to the CofE. Desperate for new blood, the Church has unveiled ambitious plans to get more converts – and they involve using our state schools as their mission fields.

A document published in the summer said the Church aims to double the number of children and young people who are “active Christian disciples” by 2030.

To achieve this, the Church is calling on government leaders to “further deepen the mutual partnership between church and state, at national, regional and local level, to enable the ongoing flourishing of church schools for coming generations”.

It says diocesan leaders should ensure education is “central to the mission of the wider diocese”, emphasising that this vision is “not just for Church schools” and that the Church will “continue to embrace vibrant partnerships with all major education institutions”.

We saw what this meant in September, when the Church of England gave £3.2 million to the Diocese of Guildford to put youth ministers in local schools – including Jubilee High School in Addlestone, which has no religious character.



Diocese of Guildford, YouTube

**A promotional video for the Diocese of Guildford's “Youth Catalyst Project” encouraged viewers to pray that they see “a whole stream of young people finding faith in Jesus”.**

We wrote to Jubilee High urging them to resist this initiative. We pointed out that the diocese did not state how the project would benefit children.

Following our intervention, the school told us it would be “declining this project”.

The Church is unlikely to let this setback stop their child recruitment scheme. We will be ready to assist any schools which feel under pressure to open the door to evangelists.

## School misleads parents on plan to join CofE academy trust

The Church also seeks to increase its influence in schools by absorbing community schools into its academy trusts.

Naturally, this isn't always popular with parents. Which may be why one school appeared to conceal

the religious nature of the multi-academy trust it planned to join.

In September, we were contacted by multiple parents concerned that their children's nonreligious school, Uplands Primary School in Sandhurst, planned to join The Keys Academy

Trust (TKAT), a Church of England multi-academy trust.

A letter to parents responded to concerns about the school retaining its community identity by saying “none of the schools in The Keys are faith schools”. But every one of the 10 schools in TKAT is CofE. According to parents, letters from the school regarding the consultation did not mention that TKAT is a CofE trust.

We urged governors to re-run their consultation on joining TKAT with much greater openness about the faith-based nature of the trust and its current schools. But it appears the move will now go ahead.

**“We love Uplands Primary – the teaching is wonderful. But I fear joining a Church of England trust will put pressure on the school to put even more Christianity into the school day. And that's going to make the school unwelcoming not just for us, but for other families in our diverse community who have different religions and beliefs.”**

– **Alan Parker**, whose son attends Uplands Primary.

# Church of England in the heart of parl

The Church's established status looks less sustainable than ever. Christians are a minority in Britain, while less than 1% of England's population attend regular Sunday services. In August, a YouGov survey found only 34% of Brits would call the UK a 'Christian country'.

Secularists have therefore seized the opportunity to argue that Church and state must separate – and we've taken the issue right into Westminster itself.

## Bill to disestablish the Church introduced

In December, Liberal Democrat peer Paul Scriven introduced a private members' bill to disestablish the Church of England. The bill was drafted with the assistance of the NSS.

### What will the disestablishment bill do?

- Remove the Church of England's established status.
- Abolish the automatic right of bishops to seats in the House of Lords.
- Remove the monarch's title "Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England".
- Give the Church full independence over its doctrine, liturgy, and clergy.
- End legal jurisdiction of ecclesiastical law and courts.
- Transfer regulation of notaries from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Lord Chancellor.

When the bill was introduced in the House of Lords, it was met with cries of "not content" from peers – before members had even had a chance to read it.

Scepticism towards establishment even appears to be growing within the Church itself. A survey in August by *The Times* found 53% of Church of England clerics think establishment should be reviewed, and nearly 12% of priests think the Church should be disestablished altogether.

The disestablishment bill sets out a realistic roadmap to achieving a long overdue reform. We hope parliamentarians will recognise the merits of disestablishment and get behind the bill as a tangible way of supporting freedom and equality for all citizens, whatever their religion or belief.

Ask your MP to support the disestablishment bill:  
[www.secularism.org.uk/disestablishment](http://www.secularism.org.uk/disestablishment)

**"As the United Kingdom continues to evolve, it is time to end the privileges, power and patronage of the established status of the Church of England to build a better, more secular, society for the 21st century."**

– Paul Scriven (below right)



● Paul Scriven is set to speak at our Secularism 2024 conference – see back page for more details...



# challenged liament

## Bishops' bench "gives democracy a bad name", MPs hear

Lord Scriven's bill followed a debate in parliament earlier in the year on the future of one of the most controversial aspects of establishment: the 26 CofE bishops given seats as of right in the House of Lords.

Scottish National Party MP Tommy Sheppard brought forward a Westminster Hall debate in July on the future of the bishops' bench.

He argued bishops in the House of Lords are there to "protect and advance" the Church of England, giving it an "unfair advantage".

He reminded MPs that far from being mere "ceremonial" roles, bishops have "real, effective, political power", with their votes being decisive on many occasions. He said the bishops' bench "gives democracy a bad name" and "doesn't do the Church any favours either". He concluded that the "time is right for a review" of the arrangement.



**Tommy Sheppard noted that bishops even occupy a privileged place within parliament itself, with protocol dictating that other members of the house give way to bishops during debates.**

Other SNP members raised concerns about the bishops voting on issues only affecting Scotland, despite the Church being established in England alone.

We briefed all MPs ahead of the debate, which was organised on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.

Responding on behalf of the government, Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office Alex Burghart MP dismissed the concerns and said the government would not be engaging on the issue.

But the debate was welcomed by prominent Anglicans who oppose the bishops' bench. Simon Barrow, director of the Christian thinktank Ekklesia, said: "Having faith leaders from one denomination of one religion based in only one of the nations of the UK in an unelected second chamber is particularly inappropriate, unnecessary and anachronistic."

**Join our campaign to scrap the bishops bench:**  
[www.secularism.org.uk/scrap-bishops-bench](http://www.secularism.org.uk/scrap-bishops-bench)

## Bill to remove bishop from Manx parliament progresses

The Isle of Man also has a cleric in its legislature: the bishop of Sodor and Man in Tynwald's Legislative Council. But change may be on the horizon. In December a bill to remove the bishop's right to vote in the chamber passed its second reading in the House of Keys, the lower house.

The bill was introduced by House of Keys member Lawrie Hooper, who said unelected appointments to positions of "power and authority" were contrary to the "concept of what a democracy should be".

The bishop's seat in Tynwald was defended by the archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell, who sits on Westminster's bishops' bench. He said "it is not really my place to interfere in these matters" – before proceeding to do precisely that, by writing to the Isle of Man's chief minister to make his objections.

The bill has now been adjourned while a consultation is carried out.

## Council replaces prayers at meetings

We've welcomed Newark and Sherwood District Council's decision to replace prayers at meetings with a 'moment of contemplation'. Council chair Celia Brooks said the decision "demonstrates the way in which the council wishes to work to be inclusive of, and truly representative of, all our communities".

We hope other councils will take note – as well as parliament, which still holds prayers before every sitting of both houses.

# The Church of England's abuse crisis

The Church of England is facing another serious crisis: it is failing to protect children and vulnerable people from abuse.

■ In June, we urged the Charity Commission to investigate after the Archbishops' Council (a registered charity) sacked the independent body scrutinising the Church's record on safeguarding. The Archbishops' Council claimed the sacking was a result of working relations with the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB) "breaking down". But former members of the ISB disputed this, saying the Church treated them with "hostility" and a "reluctance to provide information". An independent review into the decision to sack the ISB concluded in December that fault lies largely with the Archbishops' Council.

■ The Church has refused to back mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse disclosed during sacramental confession, despite acknowledging confession is "a safe space" for abusers. In its response to a government consultation

**"...in a state of complete collapse."**

– Labour MP **Ben Bradshaw's** assessment of Church of England safeguarding following the resignation of Meg Munn, the acting chair of the Church's Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB). Munn claimed the archbishop of Canterbury "undermined" her.

in August, the Church answered "don't know" to a question asking whether there should be exceptions to mandatory reporting. Eight bishops actively oppose mandatory reporting of abuse disclosed in the confessional. The NSS also responded to the consultation and said there should be no religious loopholes for reporting abuse.

■ We wrote to the General Medical Council in October, warning that doctors should not be professionally involved in exorcisms. Church of England "Deliverance Ministry" guidance states a medical professional must be consulted when "formal rites of deliverance are being considered", which may involve 'casting out' of "demons". The guidance allows exorcism of children under the age of 16. We said telling a child they are possessed by a

demon may be inherently harmful and doctors should not be involved in deeming a child 'medically fit' to undergo an exorcism.

■ Numerous allegations of abuse have arisen in relation to the Anglican festival Soul Survivor. Over 100 victims have come forward and the Church is alleged to have known of the abuse for 19 years. The bishop of St Albans said he could not call for an independent investigation into the abuse for fear of "disciplinary action".

■ Liberal Democrat MP Tim Farron has called for the police to investigate the deaths of infants at St Monica's Maternity Home, which was run by the Diocese of Carlisle until 1970. Farron said it was extremely likely the babies "died from a lack of care".

## NSS event on tackling abuse in religious communities

This March, we're bringing together a panel of experts to talk about the current threats to safeguarding in religious settings, and what institutions and authorities need to do to ensure all people in all communities are protected from abuse.

Speakers will include NSS vice president and lawyer **Richard Scorer**. Over the last 25 years, he has represented hundreds of victims of clerical sex abuse and has also written extensively about abuse in religious settings.

He will be joined by **Yehudis Fletcher**, co-founder of Nahamu – a think tank

countering extremism and culturally specific harm in the Jewish community. She has been battling violence against women and girls for the past decade.

Finally, **Jordan Alexander** will join from Palm Cove Society, which supports survivors of trafficking and slavery, and individuals fleeing domestic abuse and forced marriage. He has over 20 years' experience specialising in safeguarding, having worked as a Detective Sergeant in multiple police forces across the UK.

### BOOK YOUR PLACE

**When:** Sunday March 17th 2024, 14:00–17:00

**Where:** Manchester Art Gallery,  
Mosley St, Manchester M2 3J

**Booking details:**

[www.secularism.org.uk/tackling-abuse-2024](http://www.secularism.org.uk/tackling-abuse-2024)



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# 'Blasphemy' codes make a worldwide come-back

2023 saw the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Sadly, it comes at a time when human rights around the world are in retreat – not least freedom of expression.

In the UK, several recent reports have warned that religious reactions to 'blasphemy' accusations can inspire violence and threaten free speech. The reports cite recent examples such as Batley Grammar School, where a teacher was forced out of his job and into hiding after showing an image of Muhammad in an RE lesson.

The problem is exacerbated by institutions adopting a definition of 'Islamophobia' which conflates criticism of Islamic doctrine with racism. One report found one in seven local authorities has adopted this definition, and in November we discovered that 21 universities also use it.

The findings reflect a worrying global trend: 'blasphemy' codes are making a resurgence.

In July the UN Human Rights Council voted in favour of a resolution for the public burning of religious texts to be prohibited by law. The resolution followed several incidents in which Qurans were burned in protest against Islam in Sweden and Denmark.

The resolution was introduced on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, an intergovernmental

**In August we warned the United Nation's special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief that allegations of religious hatred are used to stifle criticism of religion in the UK and abroad.**

organisation of 57 states which has long pushed for de facto blasphemy laws.

Another UN resolution in August falsely claimed "acts of violence" against religious texts are "in violation of international law".

Denmark buckled under the pressure. In December, it made it illegal to publicly damage the Quran and other religious texts.

Sweden is also considering a ban. In October, two Swedes were shot dead in Brussels in an incident linked to the Quran-burnings.

Attempts to appease religious fundamentalists and to trade freedom for security will fail. Efforts to reintroduce blasphemy laws by the back door across all free societies must be resisted as a matter of urgency.



Loredana Sangiuliano, Shutterstock

## Nicky Campbell speaks out for free expression at Bradlaugh Lecture

Broadcaster and journalist Nicky Campbell championed free speech at our Bradlaugh Lecture in October.

Nicky delivered an entertaining and persuasive talk punctuated with anecdotes from his 14 years as host of BBC's *The Big Questions*.

He said public debate provides an opportunity for people to hear themselves outside of their own echo chamber. However, he described a process of "climate change" in which broadcasters have become increasingly reluctant to air contentious topics. He said the one-time desire to have "a bloody good row" had been overtaken by a fear of causing offence.



**Nicky Campbell and Stephen Evans discussed the importance of open dialogue at our Bradlaugh Lecture, which had to be held online due to train strikes.**

## Mayor ousted for criticising circumcision

We teamed up with men's health charity 15 Square to protest against Neyland town council's decision to oust its mayor for criticising religious circumcision.

In June, the council voted to remove the mayoralty from Andrew Lye over a blog he wrote in 2008, which questioned why circumcising children was necessary if God "made man in his own image".

Our joint letter to the council said religious beliefs and practices must remain open to debate, and that circumcision has been listed as a "harmful" practice by the UN.

**Join our campaign to end non-consensual, non-therapeutic genital cutting:**

[www.secularism.org.uk/religious-surgery](http://www.secularism.org.uk/religious-surgery)

**"I will always be Jewish but the practice of circumcision is one I can no longer support."**

– Actress **Miriam Margolyes** – of *Harry Potter* and *Blackadder* fame – has lent her voice to our campaign against religious genital cutting. She told us: "I value my heritage enormously, but I can disagree where I wish. And I profoundly want to protect all children"



Celebheights.com, CC BY-SA 4.0

# Anti-abortion group protests against NSS history talk

Our supporters were left baffled when an anti-abortion group staged a protest at an NSS event on Victorian-era birth control – which aimed to reduce abortion.



CBR displayed graphic images of aborted fetuses outside Conway Hall.

The UK branch of the Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform (CBR), a US Christian group which campaigns to “end abortion”, picketed Conway Hall in London when it hosted our history talk in November.

The talk explained how NSS figureheads Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant were put on trial in 1877 for republishing a pioneering birth control pamphlet, “Fruits of Philosophy”. The pamphlet, which provided basic contraceptive information, argued that contraception would reduce abortion and infanticide.



NSS council member Bob Forder, who delivered the talk, said: “Our event is about contraception in the 19th century – which aimed to reduce abortion. It’s bizarre that this group want to picket it.”

## Defending women’s rights and healthcare

- In response to an autumn consultation on abortion access, we said gestational limits for abortion in Jersey should be brought in line with those in Britain. Abortions in Jersey are generally available only up to 12 weeks of pregnancy, compared with 24 weeks in Great Britain.
- In 2022, we wrote to the minister for women’s health voicing concerns that women have been denied internal ultrasounds because of medical staff’s religious beliefs around virginity. The government has now replied saying this is “very concerning” and falls foul of General Medical Council (GMC) guidelines. The GMC has agreed to investigate the matter.
- Our head of operations Helen Nicholls gave a talk on religious threats to women’s rights at the Filia conference in Glasgow in October. The UN’s 2023 Gender Social Norms Index found there’s been no improvement in worldwide biases against women in the last decade, and that gender hierarchies in religious practices can “strongly influence behaviours and attitudes”.
- A Policy Exchange report published in September said the government should ensure schools do not require children to wear hijab. Our 2017 research found policies which suggest hijab is compulsory were widespread at Islamic schools, including some state-funded primary schools.

## Progress made on assisted dying law reform

The campaign to reform laws on assisted dying has seen some positive developments:

- A bill to legalise assisted dying on the Isle of Man passed its second reading in October, paving the way for it become law as soon as 2025. We responded to a public consultation on the bill in January, calling for mentally competent adults to have the right to make a voluntary and settled decision regarding the time and manner of their death.
- In June, the Royal College of Surgeons decided to adopt a neutral stance on assisted dying. It previously opposed it, but a survey of members showed 72% supported a change in position. Meanwhile, a poll conducted at the Association of Anaesthetists’ annual conference in Edinburgh found four fifths support a Scottish Parliament bill which would enable adults who are terminally ill to request assistance with ending their life.
- Doctors at the British Medical Association’s annual meeting in July rejected a motion tabled by religious opponents of assisted dying. The motion made unsubstantiated claims about the effects of assisted dying reform on palliative care. Prior to the debate, we raised concerns that speakers with links to faith groups which campaign against assisted dying reform had not declared this conflict of interest.
- An Ipsos survey published in August found two thirds of the British public support legalising assisted dying for adults of sound mind with less than six months to live.

Join our campaign to reform assisted dying laws:  
[www.secularism.org.uk/assisted-dying](http://www.secularism.org.uk/assisted-dying)

# NSS tackles religious charities spreading hate amid Israel-Gaza conflict

The Israel-Gaza conflict has unleashed hate and division throughout the world. We've played a key role in highlighting how the charity sector is being exploited by extremists to set communities against each other.

In November, we co-signed an open letter to the Charity Commission calling for an urgent investigation into eight Islamic charities, after videos emerged of sermons promoting antisemitism and glorifying terrorism in the wake of the 7 October Hamas attack.

We followed this by sending the commission a dossier of over 40 Islamic charities whose social media output raised concerns.

One of the charities was Green Lane Masjid, which was awarded £2.2m by the government in August.

The commission has since announced it is investigating 70 charities for alleged extremism or



**The charity Abdullah Quilliam Society posted a video on Facebook calling the coverage of the Israel-Hamas war "complete lies". The preacher said Muslims should "continue waging your war for Allah".**

antisemitism relating to the Israel-Hamas conflict.

All charities we reported to the commission are registered under the charitable purpose of "the advancement of religion". We've long advocated for this charitable purpose to be removed, as it enables charities to promote harmful religious dogma despite the requirement for charities to serve a public benefit.

Other religious charities we've recently sounded the alarm on include:

- The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), which has long been criticised for its exploitative financial practices. A new exposé by BBC Panorama in December revealed UCKG is also accused of 'exorcising' children and conducting 'conversion therapy'.
- The newly-registered Belfast branch of Mountain of Fire and Miracles, a church with a history of conducting extreme 'conversion therapy'. In April, the Belfast branch promoted a sermon on 'witch hunting' on social media.

Encouragingly, public awareness of the problems caused by 'the advancement of religion' charitable purpose is growing. Throughout 2023 we were widely quoted in the press on this issue, including in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mirror*, *iNews* and *The Belfast Telegraph*.

**Join our campaign to reform charity law:**  
[www.secularism.org.uk/charities](http://www.secularism.org.uk/charities)

## Wales Green Party drops opposition to non-stun slaughter

We're dismayed that during its autumn conference, the Wales Green Party voted to drop the party's policy to end non-stun slaughter.

Animal welfare law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter to minimise their suffering. The only exemption is for Jewish and Muslim communities to meet religious dietary preferences.

An October survey found the Green Party is the most popular among Muslim voters.

**Join our campaign to end non-stun slaughter:**  
[www.secularism.org.uk/religious-slaughter](http://www.secularism.org.uk/religious-slaughter)

## NHS chaplain meets the Taliban

One problem with public bodies hiring chaplains is that it can open the door for clerics with extremist sympathies.

We raised concerns with St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust in August, after photographs emerged of their Muslim chaplain Suliman Gani meeting with a Taliban minister in Kabul. Gani subsequently appeared on Afghan state television praising the "amazing vision" of the Taliban. To our knowledge, Gani is still employed at the trust.

The Charity Commission has since launched a probe into the charity involved in Gani's Afghanistan trip, Human Aid and Advocacy. Gani serves on the charity's "Islamic Scholars Board".

Attitudes to chaplaincy may be changing, at least in the military. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has terminated its relationship with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), which was advising on military chaplains despite a government ban on engaging with MCB. Meanwhile, in a step towards greater inclusivity, the MoD will recruit 'Non-Religious Pastoral Officers' on the same terms as religious chaplains.



**Suliman Gani (right) meeting with Taliban Minister of Foreign Affairs Amir Khan Muttaqi (left) in July. Muttaqi has been described as "a key figure in the Taliban's ideological projects" and as more "extreme on social issues than most of the Taliban".**

# Graham Smith speaks at first ever NSS Members' Day

For the first time, we held a Members' Day ahead of our annual general meeting in November at Conway Hall. We were delighted to be joined by Republic CEO Graham Smith as our guest speaker, who talked about the relationship between the monarchy and the established church. The Members' Day also included a forum in which NSS staff answered questions from members.



Graham Smith was arrested ahead of the coronation to stop his peaceful and lawful protest. The coronation sparked renewed discussion on the appropriateness of the UK head of state also being Supreme Governor of the Church of England.



We were pleased to welcome Daniel Sharp as the newest member of the NSS council at the AGM. Daniel is an independent writer and assistant editor at *The Freethinker*.

# NSS supports international conference on secularism in Paris

Secularists from around the world discussed separation of religion and state at a conference in France, which was sponsored by the NSS.

The conference, organised by *Laiques Sans Frontières* and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, took place at Paris's city hall in December. Over 40 speakers from across the globe participated in panel discussions on themes

including the importance of secularism to democracy, Iran's uprisings, and the global threat of religious extremism.

At the end of the conference, the organisers launched the "Paris Appeal" affirming that "the separation of religions and the state protects the rights of all regardless of their personal convictions, be they atheists, believers or agnostics".



NSS head of campaigns Megan Manson joined a panel discussion on uniting secularists around the world.

## SAVE THE DATE:

# National Secular Society conference 2024

We're excited to announce we're holding a conference on secularism in October – the first of its kind in five years.

The theme of the conference is protecting liberal values; an essential component of secularism, and one which has become increasingly challenging to uphold.

Speakers will include writer Kenan Malik and Lib Dem peer Paul Scriven, the architect of the disestablishment bill. We'll be announcing other speakers as they're confirmed – watch this space!

**When:** Saturday, 19 October 2024

**Where:** De Vere Grand Connaught Rooms, central London

*Booking details coming soon!*

# Make secularism your legacy

Legacies are a vital source of income for the NSS, and we are very grateful to those who choose to support our work after their death by remembering us in their wills.

We've therefore partnered with FreeWills, an online will writing service, which makes the process of creating a legally binding will easier through a simple online form. The service includes checking by experts.

For more information, please see [www.secularism.org.uk/legacies](http://www.secularism.org.uk/legacies)

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