

Time to separate church and state



Since its inception 150 years ago, one of the primary aims of the National Secular Society has been the disestablishment of the Church of England.

New figures released by the Church in January revealed weekly attendance at Church of England services has fallen below 1 million for the first time – bolstering the argument for a secular state.

Meanwhile, over a million children are enrolled at

Anglican schools – attending compulsory collective worship daily. It is little wonder that the Church regards publicly funded schools as ‘absolutely core’ to its mission. It realises that without the ability to inculcate children at school, it faces a bleak future.

Inside NSS president Terry Sanderson explains why he thinks the time has now come for the Church to be cut loose from the state so that it can sink or swim on its own merits. [Page 2](#)



Also inside:
NSS challenges threats to free expression on multiple fronts.



Pages 4–5: Consensus among educationists continues to move in a secular direction, but the Government and some religious groups drag behind.

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The time is right to disestablish the Church



One of the primary aims of the National Secular Society since its inception has been the disestablishment of the Church of England. In a modern democracy such an arcane constitutional arrangement is a glaring anachronism. It is ridiculous that in a nation of many religions (and, increasingly, none) this tiny denomination enjoys such political and fiscal privilege.

The historical circumstances that led to this situation have long passed and the time is ripe to make radical changes that better reflect our society as it is now, not as it was in the sixteenth century.

When I discuss this with apologists – as I did recently with Peter Hitchens on Premier Christian Radio – I am told that without Christianity as part of our state there would be no human rights, no democracy – even no morality.

Mr Hitchens claims that Christianity is responsible for all of these. But it takes a complete re-writing of history to reach this conclusion.

The established church has a chequered past to say the least. The

Church of England tried to use its influence in the House of Lords to exempt itself from the Human Rights Act when it went through Parliament. As for morality – you don't have to search very far to find the Church's own history of bloodshed, greed, corruption and sectarianism. The Church didn't teach people morality; it was the people that forced the Church to change its wicked ways.

Several recently-published research papers show that the number who declare they have no religion continues to rise. At the same time, attendance at services in the Church of England continues to plummet. It is now well below a million.

And yet despite the wholesale abandonment of our so-called national church, it still has 26 of its bishops sitting in the House of Lords as of right, having a privileged influence on the legislative process.

In a recent speech to the leaders of the Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury boasted that his bishops had thwarted legislation on assisted dying – despite the fact that opinion polls showed that some 82% of the population (including 79% of religious people)

supported it. He bragged that they had successfully got the Church exempted from the same-sex marriage law, thanks to “the Bench of Bishops [being] ... the most orthodox since WWII”. He also pointed out how deeply entrenched the Church is in education, thereby, on his reasoning, making it an indispensable “partner” with the Government.

The speech, by the way, preceded the sanctioning of the American Episcopal branch of Anglicanism because of its humane approach to its homosexual members.

Instead of welcoming such attempts at tolerance, the Church of England chose to throw in its lot with African bishops, who persecute gay people mercilessly.

The Church of England may be held in fond regard by many members of the Establishment and by those with a sentimental memory of it from their childhood. But to realists it is well past its sell-by date. It needs to be cut loose from the state so that it can sink or swim on its own merits. It should no longer be kept afloat with state subsidies and enforced worship in state schools.

Terry Sanderson, NSS President

Tackling religious fundamentalism

Our executive director Keith Porteous Wood made a well-received keynote speech on education's role in tackling religious fundamentalism in Europe to the vice president of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, and other MEPs. Keith criticised the UK's “highly segregated” education system and faith schools for undermining social cohesion and fuelling religious separatism. The NSS has played a major role in exposing a considerable number of minority faith schools which teach narrow curriculums and promote sectarian religious dogma. Mr Wood said that the education system should instead be used to break down barriers and reduce the tensions and isolationism that can feed Islamist radicalism.

He warned that a lack of integration was fuelling reactionary

attitudes among some young Muslim groups. He also noted that Saudi-funded Wahhabism was reinforcing a “trend of greater conservatism” in many British Muslim groups. His speech was an important opportunity to address senior MEPs – and his remarks clearly made an impression.

Keith also spoke at the European Commission's first Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights. National and EU policy makers and experts in a range of fields tackled



Keith Porteous Wood at a European Parliament Article 17 Dialogue event

anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic violence, which first vice-president Timmermans described as being of “existential importance to the future of Europe”.

Keith stressed to delegates the importance of an integrated education system. He called for schools to actively promote citizenship and human rights.

Keith was the sole secularist speaker at the European Network on Religion and Belief where he criticised calls for ill-defined religious exemptions to human rights laws and other religious attacks on fundamental rights. His example of the UK's failure to enact caste discrimination legislation was criticised by one delegate from a Hindu organisation but strongly supported by others.

Challenging the Church of England over the Lord's Prayer advert 'controversy'

After cinema chains declined to show an advertisement made by the Church of England featuring a recitation of the Lord's Prayer, the CofE launched a major public relations exercise promoting a false narrative of victimisation – essentially a publicity stunt to promote its new online initiative encouraging people to pray.

The NSS countered the CofE's misleading claims and came out in favour of cinemas' right to refuse all religious and political advertising if they wanted to. The Church spuriously claimed discrimination and even threatened at one point to sue cinemas that refused to screen it. The resulting controversy resulted in huge media exposure for both the Church and the NSS.

News of the supposed 'ban' on the Lord's Prayer (which was actually the cinema chains simply enforcing their own existing policy) was given great prominence, predictably, by the

BBC and the *Daily Mail*. The release of the story was timed to coincide with the launch of the Church's website encouraging 'prayer in a digital age'.

The NSS regularly defends the freedom of speech of religious groups – even if we strongly oppose what they say. But no such defence was appropriate here where a commercial organisation declined the advert because it had a policy not to accept political or religious advertising.

Most concerning of all was that the Equality and Human Rights Commission offered its 'legal

expertise' should the Church decide to take legal proceedings against Digital Cinema Media (DCM), the agency that handles advertising for cinemas.

It is the Commission's duty to uphold the right of anyone who has suffered unlawful discrimination. We are however advised that in this matter there are no grounds for any legal case on freedom of expression, discrimination or any other grounds. Indeed, forcing a commercial entertainment organisation to screen the advert would have been a significant breach of their commercial freedom. Our legal advice concluded that DCM had acted lawfully in exercising its commercial freedom not to screen religious and political advertisements – a prohibition which could also prevent the NSS from producing and screening a cinema advert. We have been invited to consult with the EHRC about the issues raised.



Stephen Evans on ITV's *This Morning*

Extremism Disruption Orders

We are working once more with the Christian Institute, and other partners including the Peter Tatchell Foundation, English PEN and Big Brother Watch, on the 'Defend Free Speech' campaign.

This initiative is in response to the Government's proposals for 'Extremism Disruption Orders'

(EDOs), an ill-defined measure that we fear would have a chilling effect on free speech.

The campaign was launched at an event in Parliament in October 2015 addressed by the NSS executive director and attended by MPs of many parties and campaigners.

There is already a plethora of

laws that regulate and restrict speech, more than enough to target genuine examples of extremism and/or incitement to violence. The Government cannot identify any legitimate target which could not be tackled with existing powers.

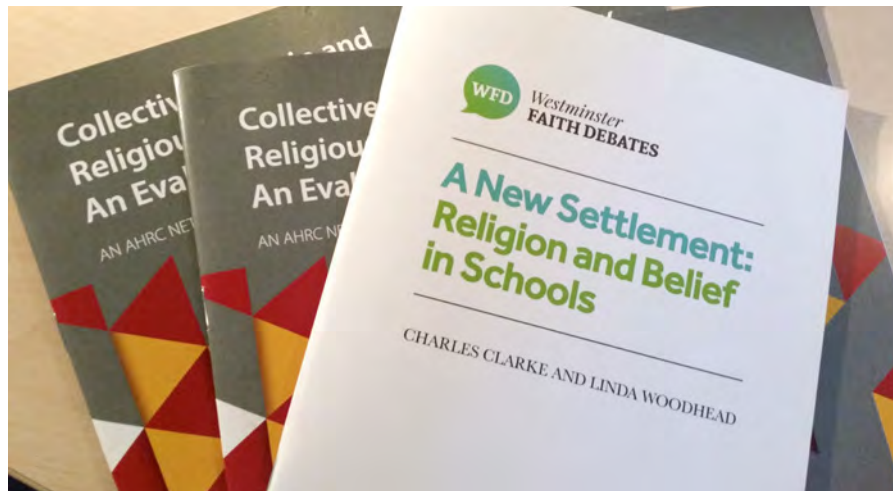
Meanwhile, the existing laws are being used to prosecute speech that is not violent or 'extremist'. Pastor James McConnell was finally found not guilty after being prosecuted under the Communication Act 2003 for sending a "grossly offensive" message in the form of an anti-Islamic sermon he posted online.

While civil society should challenge intolerant and divisive views, we wrote to the Public Prosecution Service and campaigned vigorously in defence of his right to free expression.

Further legislation risks further prosecutions like this and a chilling effect on free speech. We are still waiting for a formal consultation particularly on EDOs and concerns are mounting that the legislation could be rushed through without adequate consideration.



Peter Tatchell, Simon Calvert (Christian Institute), David Davis MP and Keith Porteous Wood



Children forced into faith schools

Towards the end of last year we called on the Education Secretary to intervene to prevent the closure of a non-religious academy on the Isle of Wight, which would leave pupils with no option other than to attend faith schools. She failed to do so and local children are now attending faith-based schools against their parents' wishes.

In December we met with the Department for Education to discuss our concerns about the proliferation of faith schools restricting parental choice. DfE officials were unable to reassure us that parents would be able to secure a state education for their children which does not have a religious ethos counter to their beliefs.

We also raised concerns with the DfE about the prospect of non-religiously designated schools (community schools) formally taking on a religious character or 'ethos' upon academisation, including when joining faith-based academy chains. We received reassurances that safeguards are in place to protect the character of non-faith schools that are part of faith-based academy trusts.

We're keen to hear of any experiences from teachers and parents with children at community schools joining faith-based academy chains or taking on a religious designation or ethos.

School admissions

Education Secretary Nicky Morgan has announced plans stopping what she called "vexatious" complaints against faith schools from secularist campaign groups.

The Government plan to prevent us from challenging the admissions processes of faith schools is likely to result in faith schools breaking the admissions code with impunity.

The Government is expected to launch a full public consultation on the proposed changes, so please look out for email updates from us, and be sure to let your MP what you think about the Government's undemocratic plans.

Collective worship and RE: Consensus builds behind reform

Late in 2015 we met former Education Secretary Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead to discuss our perspective on the role of religion in schools. They are working on proposals for legislative change in education, principally on the abolition of Collective Worship (CW) and reform of RE.

After many years making the case for secular reform, it is encouraging to see many others now recognising the need for change. With consensus seemingly building in our favour, the Government's entrenched position is looking increasingly untenable.

In November, senior academics joined the growing calls for a rethink about the imposition of worship on school pupils. The law, widely flouted, requires all schools to provide a daily act of Collective Worship. An Arts and Humanities Research Council report recommended that unless a rationale can be found "the current duties should be abolished".

The report warned of "significant concerns" about the imposition of CW in non-religious schools – arguing that it may violate the right to freedom of religion and belief. NSS campaigns manager Stephen Evans attended the report's launch at a conference in Leicester and told delegates it was also important to consider the rights of the many pupils in 'faith schools' who don't share the school's religious outlook.

Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN's Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion

or belief, told the conference that reform was "necessary" and insisted that mature children as well as parents must also have the right of withdrawal from school worship. The NSS secured this in 1996, but only for sixth form pupils, despite asking for it to include younger pupils too.

Meanwhile, an academic review into Religious Education has also called for a name change and fundamental reform of the subject, so that teaching reflects "the real religious landscape" of the UK – with content including a "broad range" of religious and non-religious views.

Academics described the current approach to Religious Education as a "mid-20th century settlement for an early 21st century reality" that fails to acknowledge the nature of religion and belief in the modern United Kingdom.

Despite a High Court ruling that Education Secretary Nicky Morgan made an 'error of law' on the new religious studies GCSE by failing to reflect the pluralistic nature of the UK in the curriculum, she issued new guidance in January insisting that schools were under no obligation to cover the teaching of non-religious world views.

In the meantime we've written to the Education Select Committee urging it to ensure that the RE taught in faith schools is properly inspected by Ofsted, rather than 'religious authorities' as is currently the case.

NSS welcomes proposals to regulate supplementary schools

Supplementary schooling is an unregulated area in which children, particularly from minority backgrounds, are vulnerable to indoctrination and extremism. In some cases religious supplementary schools are a child's only schooling – resulting in them being denied a secular education.

The NSS responded positively to Government plans to safeguard children and young people who attend “out-of-school education settings”, including madrassas and yeshivas, with a system of registration and inspection – something we first called for in 2009.

The lack of regulation makes pupils more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. In our response to the Department for Education's call for evidence we also highlighted reports of over 400 allegations of physical abuse in British madrassas between 2008 and 2011, revealed by freedom of information requests.

Under the Government's plans, any out-of-school education settings providing “intensive tuition” where children attend over six hours per week will need to register. Inspections will only be carried out where a specific risk has been identified. The new rules will also prohibit corporal punishment in supplementary schools and require them to carry out background checks on staff.

The proposals have been met with fierce resistance from religious groups who claim the measures amount to an “attack on religious freedom”. The Chairman of Birmingham Central Mosque said plans to inspect madrassas were ‘racist’. Conservative MP David Burrowes said he would not let inspectors into his “youth camp”.

Our response reiterated our commitment to religious freedom and stressed the need to balance parental rights and religious freedom against children and young people's independent rights and wider societal interests.

A related issue is that of unregistered (and therefore illegal) religious schools. For many years the NSS has been raising concerns about children from Jewish backgrounds who are ‘missing’ from mainstream education and instead attending unregistered yeshivas where secular education



is neglected and the curriculum is entirely religious.

Meanwhile, our scrutiny of both registered and unregistered (illegal) religious schools continues. In recent months we have raised concerns with Ofsted and the DfE about an Islamic school which banned “socialising with outsiders” and a Jewish school which banned mothers from driving. Both schools have since faced investigations.

In January, an unregistered Orthodox Jewish school that has been operating illegally for 40 years was ordered to close after inspectors found their curriculum contained no written or spoken lessons in English. The school does not teach any secular subjects and failed to meet the “minimum” standards required by the Government. The school, which has 200 students, was found to “severely restrict the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils” in ways that prevented them from “developing a wider, deeper understanding of different faiths, communities, cultures and lifestyles, including those of England.”

Ofsted is now preparing prosecution cases against the founders of unregistered religious schools after warning the Government of a “serious and growing threat” to children's safety.

Report calls for more multi-faithism

December saw the release of a report from the self-appointed “Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life” calling for a ‘new settlement’ in relation to religion or belief in the UK.

The Commission was convened by the Woolf Institute which studies relations between Jews,

Christians and Muslims. The report's publication presented a major opportunity for the NSS to advance the case for secularism and how it could be implemented in a unique British context, where the growing majority are not religious, but where traditional privileges remain and minority faiths are growing rapidly.

We were widely quoted in the press in response to this attempt to entrench some religious privileges and expand others by – for instance – giving other faiths representation in the House of Lords.

The report did recognise that Britain is no longer a Christian

country, and some of the more reasonable recommendations reflected what is fast becoming inevitable. But many recommendations were partisan, reflecting the influence and priorities of the vested religious interests behind the report.

The Commission's recommendations, if implemented, would further disadvantage the non-religious. Their championing of a ‘multi-faith’ approach to religion and the state is at odds with secularism, and in the coming months the NSS will release its own report on religion and belief in public life.



Clerical child abuse: Major establishment cover-up over Anglican sexual abuse

For many years the NSS has been exposing how religious power and privilege has been used to cover up clerical child abuse. Another example of this appears to have emerged in the case of the former Anglican Bishop of Gloucester, Peter Ball.

In 1993 Peter Ball received a police caution for just one offence, despite “sufficient admissible, substantial and reliable evidence” of numerous crimes. Ball then resigned as bishop.

In October 2015 Ball was jailed for 32 months for a series of sexual offences dating back to this period, committed against almost 20 young males who had sworn an oath of obedience to the religious order Ball co-founded.

After decades pleading his innocence, Ball made a last-minute plea change which resulted in him being convicted without any trial. Ball continues to deny more serious allegations, involving young teenage boys, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These allegations were inexplicably allowed to ‘lay on the court file’, legalese for being disregarded for ever.

In 1993, the then-Archbishop of Canterbury, George (now Lord) Carey pressured both police and the Crown Prosecution Service while they were considering whether to charge Ball. Days later the CPS dropped charges, a decision it has now admitted was “wrong”. *The Times* is convinced that “Carey knew of the sex abuse when he defended Ball”.

The police appeared to take into account the adverse effects that pressing charges might have on the Church and even, astonishingly, contemplated establishing whether ecclesiastical law had been broken.

Other establishment figures,

including a Law Lord, wrote letters to the police or CPS, as part of a seemingly orchestrated campaign. One, who is the Prime Minister’s godfather and a Privy Councillor, and later joined the Parliamentary ecclesiastical committee, described Ball as a “saint”. Others included a Home Office Minister, as well as three former heads and two chaplains of leading public schools.

The decision not to charge Ball caused great anguish to the victims. One of them, whose family the Church had reportedly “pleaded with ... not to go to the police”, attempted suicide several times because of Ball’s denials over the decades, and eventually killed himself. At least one other victim has contemplated suicide. A colleague of one of Ball’s victims said he tried to raise concerns with 13 different bishops, who appeared to take no action.

Our research into what appears to be a major establishment cover-up has been widely quoted and is now being included in evidence to Lord Justice Goddard’s Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse.



Keith Porteous Wood discusses the sentencing of Vickers House and the Church’s role in delaying access to justice

Religious evangelism and discrimination challenged in hospitals

An NHS Trust has put clear boundaries in place to prevent religious groups from disrupting patient care after the NSS and the Secular Medical Forum raised concerns about the activities of an evangelical church who were being given inappropriate access to hospital wards.

The NSS was contacted by a nurse concerned about a church group disturbing staff and patients, including sufferers of dementia, with invasive proselytization. Despite her initially raising concerns with the hospital chaplain, the group remained unchallenged by senior staff.

Following our intervention restrictions have been placed on the group to prohibit unwanted proselytising.

In November an NHS hospital chaplain who had accused the Church of England of discrimination lost his case at an employment tribunal. Canon Jeremy Pemberton’s offer of an NHS chaplaincy post was

cancelled after he married his same-sex partner, leading to the Church refusing to issue a licence. The possession of this licence was a condition of his employment at Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Trust.

We do not believe that it is appropriate for a publicly-funded hospital trust to impose a requirement that directly results in discrimination. These trusts also have public sector equality duties. Canon Pemberton’s case, however, was brought against the Church itself and not the Trust.

Following the ruling we argued that should a hospital trust wish to fund staff responsible for emotional welfare, such positions should be religiously neutral and not subject to discrimination. If the Church, or any other religious group, wishes to have representation in hospitals they should provide it at their own expense.

Other campaigning

- We continue to support councillors and members of the public who campaign locally against prayers during council meetings. An effort to introduce Christian prayers in meetings in Norfolk met with a crushing 10-2 defeat, and an East Herts councillor drew more critical attention to council prayers after he resigned his seat over the issue.
- Our executive director met with the Fawcett Society's director Sam Smethers in January 2016 to discuss common campaign themes and concerns and we are considering new ways to work together on issues of mutual interest. Both organisations were founded in 1866 and Annie Bessant – a key figure in the early NSS – was also a prominent figure in the Fawcett society.
- We criticised Keith Vaz MP when he said that he would have “no problem” with reintroducing blasphemy laws in the UK. In confusing comments Mr Vaz also said there should not be blasphemy laws in the UK but “if somebody brings it forward in parliament I’ll vote for it”.
- When the Islamic Society of Britain and the Grosvenor cinema in Glasgow cancelled their plans to screen a film about Mohammed due to a small petition-based protest, we wrote to them acknowledging their freedom to make such decisions while urging them not to do so on the basis of intimidation.
- As part of our work to build on our links with student societies, Benjamin Jones has spoken at the University of Exeter and the University of Bath. At Exeter he spoke to an audience of 250 students, and won the debate against the motion “this house would not satirise religious figures”.
- In November our staff did a number of radio interviews arguing for

inclusive public services following a report by a Christian think-tank that called for faith-based organisations to be able to ‘share the Good News of Jesus Christ’ when delivering public services.

- We challenged a Sixth Form College over its policy allowing additional annual leave entitlement for ‘religious reasons’ which we argued unlawfully discriminated against non-religious staff. The policy has been withdrawn following our intervention.
- Our submission to a Government consultation recognised legitimate secular arguments for restricting Sunday trading while arguing religious arguments shouldn’t be given special privilege.
- We responded to multiple enquiries in November/December from parents concerned about the disingenuous Operation Christmas Child in their school and finding effective ethical alternatives.
- Our executive director spoke at two events held by the Humanist and Secular LibDems at the Liberal Democrats’ conference.
- Keith spoke at a discussion on religious toleration in Parliament with Dominic Grieve, former Attorney General and the Speaker’s Chaplain on the panel.
- We promoted a campaign to make Radio 4’s *Thought for the Day* slot non-discriminatory by turning it into a “philosophy slot”.
- After a tribunal ruled in favour of a victim kept in “domestic servitude”, we wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to outlaw caste discrimination.
- We publicised a campaign to defend the Freedom of Information Act – pointing to the many times we’d used the act to uncover important information.

Sharia courts under scrutiny

The Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill completed its passage through the House of Lords. It would outlaw discrimination in sharia ‘courts’ and other religious tribunals. The NSS supported Baroness Cox in her efforts to steer the legislation through the House of Lords, and she thanked us for this during the debate. We have found a Conservative MP to sponsor the Bill for its passage in the Commons, but this will only occur if the Government allocates time for the Bill to be debated.

The Government has said that the Bill is not the right way to challenge sharia ‘courts’ and is instead planning a review into religious tribunals. We look forward to submitting evidence to this review in the near future. The Bill was unpopular when first tabled around four years ago but the climate is now much more critical of such ‘courts’ – with the Prime Minister and Home Secretary recently expressing their concerns.

Counter Extremism strategy

We continue to be involved in debates, at a national and international level, where we argue that secular human rights-based approaches to challenging extremism should strengthen civil society responses, and that authoritarian approaches could be counterproductive and undermine free speech.

In October the Government released its counter-extremism strategy. There were some welcome announcements, however we continue to raise concerns over a lack of human rights protections, and plans for the funding of ‘moderate’ religious groups. In the past such funding has led to more reactionary organisations gaining legitimacy and influence. Another concern is Extremism Disruption Orders (page 3).



Marriage equality in the military

Regulations allowing same-sex marriages in the 190 military chapels in England and Wales came into force 18 months ago – but none of the denominations using the chapels currently allow same-sex marriages.

Defence Minister Penny Mordaunt has now written to military chaplains to ask how “Parliament’s sanction” will be “fully implemented”. She took this action in a response to a written

question asked by Madeleine Moon MP (Bridgend, Labour), a member of the Commons Defence Committee. It followed NSS discussions with her staff, and we are most grateful to her.

The National Secular Society has also called for it to be made clear to all service personnel that if they want a same-sex marriage in a military chapel they can have one.

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Barry Thorpe for research and Parliamentary monitoring.

NSS welcomes two new honorary associates



Julia Hartley-Brewer

We were very pleased to welcome the writer and broadcaster Julia Hartley-Brewer as an honorary associate. A former political editor and LBC Radio presenter, she is a regular commentator on Sky News and TV shows such as *Question Time*. Julia is a vocal advocate for secularism and we’re looking forward to her presenting this year’s Secularist of the Year prize.



Baroness Greengross

We’re also pleased to welcome Sally Greengross, Baroness Greengross, OBE – an independent crossbench member of the House of Lords. She is also a former Commissioner of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and former Director General of Age Concern. She spoke out in favour of the Assisted Dying Bill and has been a keen NSS supporter in the Lords for many years.

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

secularist of the year 2016

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The £5,000 Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year award is presented annually in recognition of an individual or an organisation considered to have made an outstanding contribution to secularism and human rights.

This year’s prize will be presented on Saturday 19 March at a lunch in central London, where the award will be presented by writer and broadcaster Julia Hartley-Brewer.

Tickets includes lunch and a welcome drink on arrival.

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Saturday 3 September 2016

We’re excited to announce tickets are now on sale for our major conference to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the founding of the NSS.

We have a great line up of speakers including **Jacques Berlinerblau** author of the internationally acclaimed *How to be Secular*. Along with other human rights and education experts Berlinerblau will take a critical look at secularism’s successes and areas for development.

So come to meet and be inspired by other secular activists and play your part in setting a positive vision for the role of secularism in advancing human rights and creating a more tolerant society.

Tickets include lunch and refreshments.

You can find out more and buy your tickets at secularism.org.uk/secularism2016

Tickets for all our events can also be purchased by sending a cheque to the office.

Early bird ticket prices

£60 Non-member	£80 Gala dinner
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