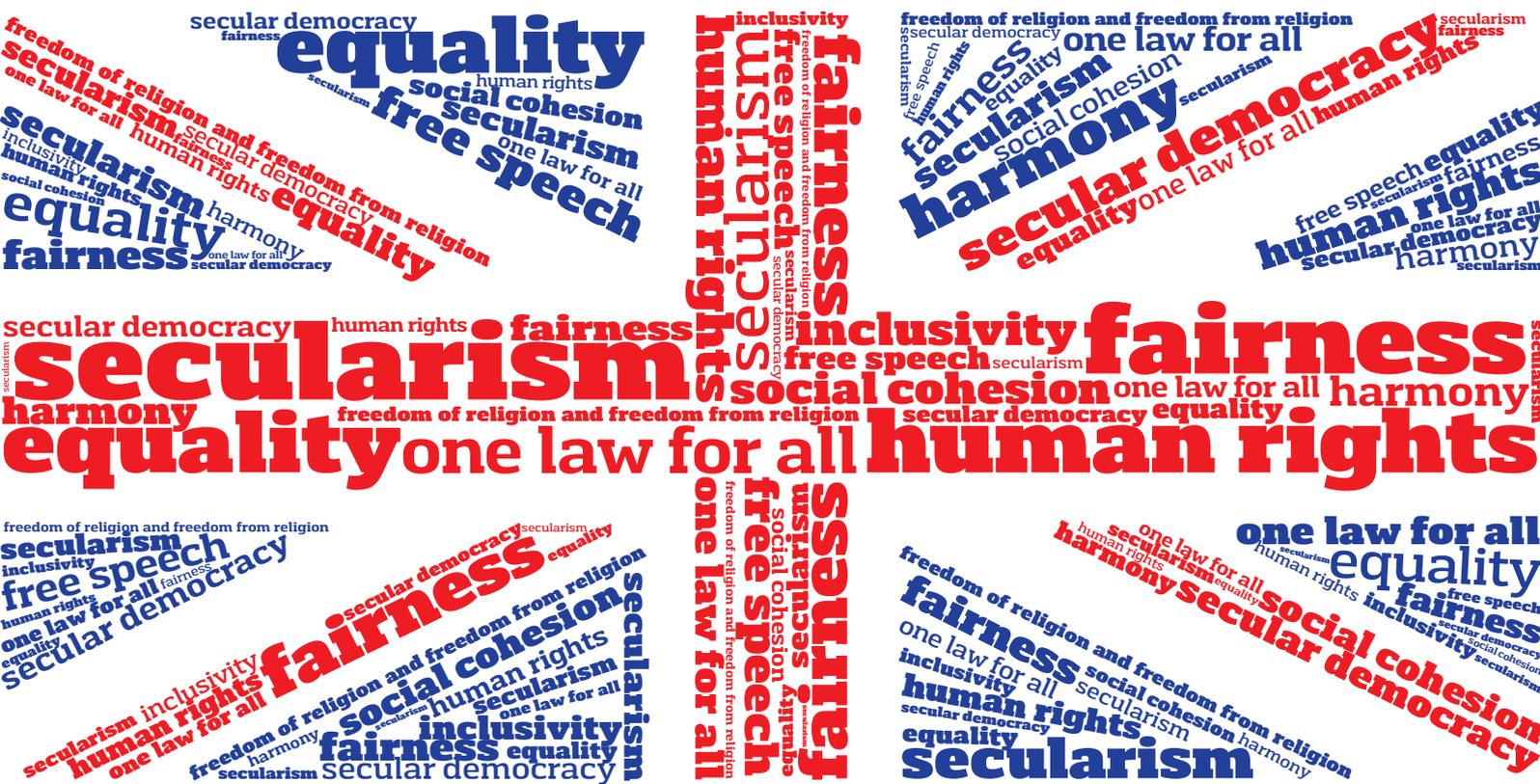


Bulletin

national
secular
society

Issue 63 Summer 2016

150 years of challenging religious privilege



Living better together

Later this year the NSS will mark 150 years of challenging religious privilege with a special conference around the theme of 'living better together'.

Britain today is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world and has more non-believers

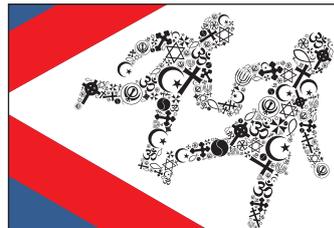
than ever before. Secularism has a key role to play in ensuring that people of all religions and none can live together better. Inside, we set out our vision for a secular British state and explains why it's time for everyone, including people of faith, to stand up for secularism.

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Page 4: Academisation threat to secular education



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Later this year we'll be marking the 150th anniversary of the NSS with what's shaping up to be a very special conference. The theme – 'living better together' – reflects the role secularism can play in a society in which all of us, whether religious or not, can live together fairly and cohesively.

A secular state guarantees religious freedom for all. It protects believers from religious persecution and non-believers from religious compulsion. When a clash of rights occurs, secularism performs a balancing act – one we need to get right if Britain is to stay free of the sort of sectarian conflict that has torn other societies apart.

Universal support for fundamental freedoms and values cannot be taken for granted. This year a Channel 4 documentary about British Muslims, based on new research about their attitudes, painted a bleak picture for social cohesion in Britain.

The research highlighted some troubling views among British Muslims, revealing that significant numbers of, especially young, Muslims living in Britain do not share the values of their fellow citizens including liberal Muslims, with many wishing to lead separate lives under sharia law.

Trevor Phillips, the former head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, who fronted the programme, said the UK needed to plan for the social consequences of 'super-diversity' and change.

Secularism, as the enemy of separatism, is an indispensable component of that plan.

Most people in Britain have a generally secular outlook but secularism as a concept is not widely embraced. This is in part down to those that support and wish to extend religious privilege and subsidy never missing an opportunity to misrepresent secularism as 'anti-religious'.

That's why it's so important for us, the National Secular Society, to articulate a principled and very

“Secular democracy offers citizens the best opportunity to live in peace with other citizens whose worldviews are different from their own.”

British form of secularism – assertive, yet tolerant – a codification of 'live and let live' – but within limits.

Secularism really shouldn't be a hard sell. Its equitableness should appeal to the British sense of fair play. But it is up against a powerful religious lobby defending a long heritage of deeply-entrenched religious privilege. Christianity's role in British life, from its entanglement in law-making and education to its dominant role in our national institutions and ceremonies, opens the door for similar privileges to be accorded to other religions and beliefs. This path of multifaithism must be resisted if Britain is to avoid the religious conflict and sectarian grievances that so easily flare-up in

countries where religion overpowers society.

Faith schools are the epitome of Britain's misguided approach to pluralism. Organising young people's education around religious identities is short-sighted, divisive and dangerous. In schools, as with all areas of public life, we should be promoting freedom, fairness, equality and a commitment to Human Rights rather than religious observance.

Secularism poses no threat to religious practice. It does seek to diminish religion's privileged public

role. An end to publicly-funded faith schools is an example of this. Secularists should support an open society in which people are free to express their beliefs, but at the same time we need to insist on clear limits to what society tolerates in the name of religion. Multifaithism may be more popular amongst interfaith circles, but its practical effect is likely to have a corrosive effect on our cherished liberal values, restrict the freedom of women and children in minority communities, harm LGBT rights, further erode secular spaces and impede social cohesion.

Secular democracy offers citizens the best opportunity to live in peace with other citizens whose worldviews are different from their own. Secularism, properly understood, is a vital ingredient for living better together.



Free Speech coalition secures government consultation on counter-extremism plans

A joint campaign from the National Secular Society and Christian Institute, together with Big Brother Watch, the Peter Tatchell Foundation, English PEN, Article 19, the Manifesto Club and Index on Censorship, has secured a Government promise in the Queen's Speech to consult on new counter-extremism plans.

The Defend Free Speech campaign had warned that proposed 'extremism disruption orders' would capture

a huge range of speech, given that the Government has only offered a vague definition of 'extremism'.

The prosecution thresholds for EDOs are worryingly low yet the consequences of granting such an order, even if not broken, are likely to be very serious – potentially rendering the recipient unemployable. Few faced with such a threat are likely to have the resources to mount any defence, as proceedings will be at the High Court.

Unregistered faith schools under the spotlight

We previously reported that Ofsted had warned the Government that unregistered religious schools were a “serious and growing threat” to children’s safety.

Since our last *Bulletin*, Ofsted has found over 50 suspected illegal faith schools, including a disproportionate number of Islamic schools, prompting renewed fears about thousands of children being taught in unregistered schools with no regulatory oversight.

The NSS first raised these concerns with the Government many years ago – and as far back as 2008 a *Jewish*

Chronicle report warned of children disappearing from the education system and being “systematically undereducated in secular studies” in unregulated schools.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, the head of Ofsted, told Education Secretary Nicky Morgan that he was “extremely concerned about the number of children and young people attending these schools who may be at significant risk of harm and indoctrination.”

Years of inaction, largely motivated by ‘cultural sensitivity’, has allowed a

generation of children to languish in these ‘schools’. Many of those pupils will have been denied a secular education, indoctrinated or exposed to extremist and separatist ideas. Some are not taught English and have never heard of science.

As with so many issues, the NSS was many years ‘ahead of the curve’ on this and we’ll continue to campaign to ensure that ‘religious toleration’ does not result in children being placed at risk or denied their right to a broad and balanced education.

Religious literacy: moral panics, Trojan horses and genuine education

In response to a parliamentary inquiry into ‘religious literacy’, we reiterated our support for improved education about religion and belief but warned that concerns over poor ‘religious literacy’ were being used by some as a Trojan horse to increase religious influence in schools.

The inquiry was launched by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Religious Education which has recently removed the study of non-religious worldviews from its remit – narrowing its interpretation of what religious education (RE) means. This has resulted in widespread and justified criticism.

Its founding chair, the former Lib Dem MP Stephen Lloyd, has warned that the APPG has been taken over by religious “fundamentalists” and is in danger of turning into a “religious sect”.

Fiona Bruce MP, the group’s current chair, and

Education secretary Nicky Morgan are both members of the ‘Christians in Parliament’ group.

The APPG’s first inquiry under its new leadership reflects the inordinate concern over ‘religious illiteracy’ that is being shown by faith groups.

We warned against MPs using the APPG on RE to further their own narrow ideological interests and turning the clock backwards – impeding much-needed efforts to reform RE.

Our response argued that an understanding of different religions and beliefs is useful knowledge for life in 21st century Britain, but that moral panic over ‘religious illiteracy’ was overblown. Genuine religion and belief literacy would be better promoted by ending the segregation of children by religion in faith schools, and promoting more inclusive schooling where children of different faith and belief backgrounds can be educated together.



Religiously segregated school transport

In May we urged a local authority to review its school transport policy after a pupil was told he couldn’t use the council-run school bus because it is provided only for church-going pupils.

Telford & Wrekin Council’s school transport policy entitles parents who choose a faith school which is not their nearest or designated school to transport assistance, provided they can offer evidence of their religious belief. Non-churchgoing families

are denied assistance – and their children not even allowed on the same bus as fellow pupils. Earlier this year the NSS made a submission to Flintshire Council in Wales after it announced it was to review a similar policy which gave Catholic pupils free travel but made non-Catholics pay. We await the outcome.

It’s scandalous and unfair that local authorities are incentivising religious segregation of local pupils by subsidising transport to faith

schools in this way. We’re now again urging the Government to review the religious exemption in the Equality Act that allows this unjustifiable religious discrimination and segregation.

Parents opting to send their children to faith schools rather than their local school should assume responsibility for the provision of transport and associated costs rather than expecting the state to pick up the bill.

Academisation threat to secular education

We have continued to warn that Government plans (since softened) to force all schools in England to become academies could see a major increase in religious influence in education, with the Church of England possibly gaining control of non-faith-based schools.

In April, our evidence to the Education Committee inquiry into Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) pointed out serious failings in the protections for secular education and oversight of faith schools. While Department for Education officials have personally assured us that community schools absorbed into Church-led MATs will have their ethos protected, we remain convinced that such protections are wholly inadequate.

School-level governing bodies will ultimately be subservient to MATs, which will remain accountable for the schools and will ultimately take all decisions on how academies are run.

A MAT's control of its schools' curriculum means that diversity and neutrality of religion and belief education could be undermined, even when its funding agreement would prevent RE being taught in an openly confessional manner. Similar concerns apply to sex and relationship education, collective worship and extra-curricular activities.

We expect the increasing numbers of schools launching consultations on academy conversion to result in many more parents, staff and governors contacting us with

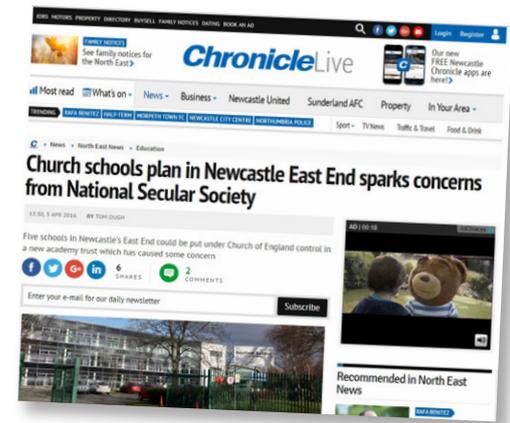
concerns of 'religious takeovers'.

One such case is in Newcastle where the Church of England is proposing to form a new MAT involving one CofE and four non-religious schools. Under the plans, the Diocese would advance the interests of the Church by appointing three out of five board members. The local MP, parents and city council have all joined the NSS in criticising the plans. The Regional Schools Commissioner for the North of England has assured us that the points we raised with her will be considered before any decision is reached.

In the long-term, there is nothing to prevent non-religious schools that become part of faith-based MATs from eventually taking on a religious designation, provided they gain the approval of the Secretary of State. The NSS has already uncovered examples of this.

Meanwhile, we have opposed the Government giving Anglican and Roman Catholic churches privileged safeguards from academisation. They grant special protection from forced academisation and protect the promotion of a rigorous religious ethos.

We are regularly contacted by parents, teachers and governors concerned about efforts by religious groups to assert a much more aggressive religious ethos in faith schools. One parent governor recently told us he felt very "uncomfortable" about an "aggressive new push to convert children" at his local CofE school.



The continuing reduction of Local Authority oversight with increasing academisation is likely to remove barriers to religiously affiliated MATs imposing a greater religiosity over academies, regardless of the wishes of local parents. Parents' representation on MATs is also under threat.

We are also concerned that religious MATs may construct job roles in an attempt to permit lawful discrimination against non-religious staff and exclude them from senior leadership positions. This is particularly concerning as many of the responsibilities for functions previously carried out by local authorities (where applying religious criteria in staff selection would not be lawful) will be progressively transferred to the senior leadership teams of MATs.

We'll continue to lobby the Government to protect all these aspects of secular education. If you become aware of any threats to secular provision in your area, do let us know.

Government Minister praises student secular society

Godalming College's Secular Society has earned the respect of their local MP after he met with the Society's leaders, Burhan Waheed and George Chandler, to discuss the group's success.

Jeremy Hunt MP said he was "impressed and inspired" by the students' initiative and later wrote to Home Secretary Theresa May to highlight the group's ability to attract

a diverse range of students to discuss a range of controversial, diverse and thought-provoking topics.

This Society, which is welcoming of all students irrespective of religion or belief, holds lively and contentious but always good-humoured meetings.

If you're interested in setting up a student secular society or would like resources on secularism for your group please do get in touch.



Jeremy Hunt MP with Godalming College Secular Society students George Chanry and Burhan Waheed and teacher Patricia Wallis

Educate Together awarded ‘Irwin Secularist of the Year’ 2016 prize

We were delighted to award our Secularist of the Year prize for 2016 to Educate Together. Their inclusive schools practise the ideals we would like to see replicated across our entire education system, and their formula of open admissions, with inclusive policies for all, have met with great success and much admiration.

The award was presented at our annual lunch awards event in London, and the education charity was given a £5,000 prize, once more kindly donated by Dr Michael Irwin. It was presented by our honorary associate, the broadcaster and writer Julia Hartley-Brewer. The CEO of Educate Together, Paul Rowe, was delighted by the Society’s recognition of their work. He told the audience that “ethical education” and “the provision of schools in which children

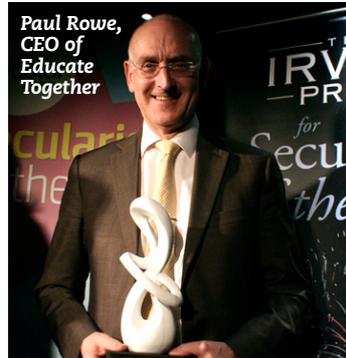
of all backgrounds can learn together in equality and respect” are the “foundations and building blocks for the inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies that are urgently needed in all parts of the world.”

The event was a welcome celebration of the success of secular education and our President, Terry Sanderson,



Secularist of the Year is kindly sponsored by NSS honorary associate Dr. Michael Irwin

thanked Educate Together for putting secularist principles into action: “Faith-based education and imposed worship are prevalent throughout our education system and result in religious discrimination against children, parents and teachers. Educate Together schools show that a different way is possible.”



Paul Rowe, CEO of Educate Together



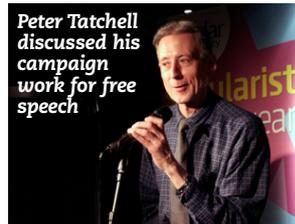
Peter Saunders, (pictured with Julia Hartley-Brewer) a prominent champion of the victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, was also recognised



Josephine Mackintosh of IHEU was thanked for making an intervention at the Human Rights Council on behalf of the NSS



Brighton Argus journalist Joel Adams was praised for his work in bringing to light an establishment cover-up of Anglican sex abuse



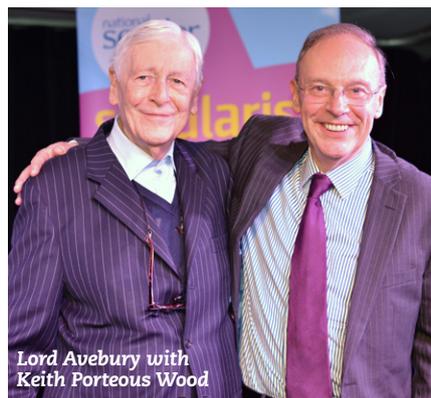
Peter Tatchell discussed his campaign work for free speech



NSS president Terry Sanderson

Eric Avebury: a life well spent

Lord Avebury, one of our most active honorary associates, died in February aged 87. His 52-year career in Parliament started with a spectacular by-election victory, winning Orpington for the Liberals. He came from a long line of distinguished parliamentarians but was modest about his own considerable achievements, and was known as a champion of the oppressed. Campaigns on which we worked particularly closely included the abolition of the blasphemy laws (for which he and Dr Evan Harris were awarded Secularists of the Year), mandating the Government to introduce legislation to outlaw caste discrimination, seeking to remove mandatory Collective Worship in schools and to abolish Chancel Repair Liability. It is unlikely that the Church will ever again seek to impose this.



Lord Avebury with Keith Porteous Wood

He never attended prayers in Parliament, suggesting they should take place elsewhere after which everyone could enter the chamber together. He spurned the Lords’ custom of giving way to bishops wishing to speak, apparently audibly groaning if anyone else did. We will miss him immensely and offer our condolences to his family.

NSS mourns the loss of Lord Peston

We are also sad to report the death of long-time honorary associate Lord Peston. He was regarded as one of the most distinguished economists of his generation, using economics as a tool to improve equality in society. After decades as a political adviser he became a peer in 1987. He was a passionate exponent of comprehensive schools and his views on education commanded cross-party respect. He was an enthusiastic honorary associate and a great help to the NSS in the House of Lords over religion in schools, about which he spoke without any deference and often acid wit. We offer our condolences to his family.

NSS gives evidence to child abuse inquiry and raises alarm over major flaws in Church's internal review

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) in England and Wales is to examine the Anglican and Catholic churches, among a number of other institutions. The NSS has made a submission to the Inquiry setting out aspects of abuse in clerical settings that make investigation more challenging.

Similar inquiries in Scotland and Northern Ireland will have a much narrower scope, for example concentrating solely on children in care, and we have drawn this crucial deficiency to the attention of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, ahead of its examination of the UK.

The Anglican Church has announced its own review into abuse committed by former bishop Peter Ball, recently jailed for

offences against eighteen young males over twenty years ago. This case shows every sign of being one of the biggest establishment cover-ups and one in which the Church played a pivotal role. Even now, the Church at a very high level has declined, despite representations from the NSS and a principal witness against Ball, to extend the terms of reference of its review to specifically include the bullying and silencing of victims and whistleblowers. We believe this bullying almost succeeded in preventing the trial or at least the guilty verdict.

Our research into the Ball case in particular has uncovered important unanswered questions which we will continue to raise as appropriate with the Chair of the Church's

review, and the IICSA.

Can the Church really have believed Ball to be innocent of all accusations when it sought to influence the police and Crown Prosecution Service not to prosecute him in the 1990s? Numerous complaints were reportedly made to over a dozen bishops, including by Ball's staff, but there is no record of any response to them. The effect on the mental health of victims being branded as "mischief makers" or worse has been devastating and one committed suicide.

The NSS also proposed in its submission to the IICSA that they examine faith based out-of-school educational settings, to establish the extent to which relevant bodies have taken their duty of care seriously.

Highland games

Our Vice-President Alistair McBay reports on the chaotic enforcement of Religious Observance in Scottish schools

For more than a year we have been helping a member in Inverness with a very simple request to her child's school – to opt her daughter out of Religious Observance (RO) in accord with her legal right as a parent.

While this resulted in the NSS being asked by Highland Council to comment on their new guidelines for RO, it has proved a hugely frustrating year for the parent to get both school and Council to deal with her honestly on the issue.

The schools involved (the child has now been moved to another school at the parent's request) are non-denominational, although as our Scottish members will know, this in terms of the Scottish education system is often synonymous with 'Protestant'. All manner of evangelical, fundamentalist and traditional Christian groups treat the non-denominational school as the new church and a recruitment fair for souls for Jesus, all supported and even encouraged by the Scottish Government.

There have been several national reports condemning

the current situation on RO, and our discussions with Highland have revealed that far too much is left to the discretion of headteachers. For example, this results in parents not being allowed to attend RO assemblies at some schools, while others invite parents to attend. Some schools provide no details to parents of what goes on at 'religious' assemblies, while others provide a simple list of dates and topics at the start of every term so that parents can see what is going on. Such is the lottery parents can face in the Scottish education system.

In a survey we conducted of 100 Highland primary schools, handbooks revealed appalling inconsistencies, errors and omissions regarding parental rights of withdrawal, and frequent reference to 'Religious Instruction' and 'the Christian way of life' in the context of both RO and RME. Discussions with Highland Council are continuing.



**NSS Vice-President
Alistair McBay**

How universal is the Universal Declaration on Human Rights?

At the recent Foreign and Commonwealth Office's reception to launch its annual Human Rights and Democracy report, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood challenged the international Human Rights community to recognise the growing threat to Human Rights from religious countries or religious interests, and to find a strategy to combat it.

Those attending the reception included activists, diplomats, parliamentarians and civil servants. Addressing them and taking questions were the Minister for Human Rights, Baroness Anelay, top civil servants, and a panel of experts including several ambassadors.

Mr Wood pointed to the numerous attempts at formulating religion-based alternatives to the Universal Declaration, most notably the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation's Cairo Declaration that specifically makes Human Rights subservient to sharia. He asked if the panel accepted that the Declaration's universality was under increasing threat and what the strategic response to this should be.

A few years ago such concerns may have been dismissed. It was reassuring that there is a growing recognition of this problem and the FCO referred to an initiative that would assist with this. Another speaker suggested that nations opposed to this undermining of Human Rights should work together to combat it.

Keith later expressed his regret to Baroness Anelay, and Baroness Falkner (an honorary associate of the NSS), the LibDems' Foreign Affairs spokesperson, that the Government still hadn't enacted legislation to outlaw caste discrimination, reminding the Minister that the UN had formally noted this to be a treaty obligation.

He complimented the UK's ambassador to the UN in Geneva and permanent officials, with whom we have an excellent working relationship, on their superb work on Human Rights.

Parliamentarians told Human Rights are subservient to religion

A further example of religious undermining of Human Rights came with the recent publication of the book *Religious Approaches to Human Rights*, written by a former Church of England official. Its fundamental premise is that "God and/or an objective transcendent moral law [are preconditions for] human flourishing" – and therefore such flourishing is impossible in secular states that fail to privilege this belief.

The book was published by a charity that seeks to "equip public intellectuals, analysts and professionals to recognize and value the contributions of religion to public life". It was recently launched in Parliament to an admiring audience of parliamentarians and invited guests.

At the launch, our Executive Director challenged this religious colonisation of Human Rights and suggested that the religious and non-religious alike should work together to promote Human Rights as an expression of our common humanity.

Secular medics welcome religious circumcision ruling

We joined the Secular Medical Forum in welcoming a recent court ruling on male circumcision. In a case where the separated parents disagreed over whether to have their children circumcised, Mrs Justice Roberts said that the young children should have a right to choose for themselves, when old enough.

While the ruling only sets a limited precedent in quite specific circumstances, secular doctors said it was a welcome step "towards safeguarding children from forced genital cutting".

James Chegwidden, who acted as junior counsel for the mother in the case, said that the ruling was "an encouraging step towards the legal protection every child deserves".

At the same time as the ruling was published, a medical tribunal was considering the case of a doctor who repeatedly botched a religious circumcision on a young infant. Dr Antony Lempert of the Secular Medical Forum said corrective surgery for failed circumcisions occurred with "nauseating regularity".

Support us while you shop

If you are buying anything through Amazon, you could help the Society at no cost by reaching their website by clicking on the link at the bottom of our home page. Thank you.

Thanks to:

Claudine Baxter for her help with membership administration.
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Francesca Sturiale for graphic design.
Barry Thorpe for parliamentary research.
Michael van Zyl for graphic design.

Other campaigning

■ Following a series of brutal murders in Bangladesh, we wrote to the Foreign Office and to the Bangladesh High Commission urging the Bangladeshi government to take serious action against Islamists targeting secular and Human Rights activists.

■ We supported Scott Moore, a student in Northern Ireland, campaigning against compulsory collective worship in schools. He has already met with local councillors and his 'Let Schools Choose' campaign is planning to approach other councils to build grass-roots support for students' religious freedom.

■ We've supported the student-led #Right2Debate campaign against campus censorship and criticised the misuse of 'no-platform' policies to censor secularists and critics of organised religion.

■ The date of Easter causes inconvenience for schools and holidays because its date varies by over a month. We called on the Business Secretary to agree a fixed date for Easter, as provided for under the Easter Act 1928,

in consultation with churches. We suggested that this should just be with western churches, rather than waiting for an unlikely religious consensus with the 'Eastern' churches – whose date for Easter has been different for over a thousand years.

■ The NSS continues to advise councillors and members of the public in challenging the imposition of religious worship in local government. We defended the newly elected Mayor of Totnes when she was criticised for not attending a religious service and welcomed news that Bridgnorth Council is to stop having prayers during its meetings.

■ We submitted follow up evidence to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, after the Committee decided to take up many of the issues we had raised in our initial evidence for their examination of the United Kingdom.

■ The NSS campaigns team are continually responding to members of the public in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales seeking help and advice. Concerns about

inappropriate proselytization and other issues related to religion in schools are among the most common enquiries.

■ Keith Porteous Wood gave a presentation on Human Rights and freedom of expression at the National Police conference on the policing of protest in Derby.

■ We contributed to the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics' February conference on the impact of religion on women's rights, and remain active on their advisory board.

national secular society **Bulletin**

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SECULARISM 2016

Living better together conference

This September we are privileged to be hosting a number of excellent guest speakers at our 150th anniversary conference. 'Secularism 2016: living better together' will have discussions exploring secular education, Islam and the modern secular state, and Human Rights.

We will be joined for the day by our keynote speaker **Jacques Berlinerblau**. He is the author of the internationally acclaimed *How to Be Secular*, a call to return to America's long tradition of secularism and a passionate celebration of secularism's role in promoting good social cohesion and protecting both freedom of and from religion.

Our panellists will include **Maajid Nawaz** of the Quilliam Foundation, **Tehmina Kazi** of British Muslims for Secular Democracy, **Paul Rowe** of Educate Together, writer **Douglas Murray**, Turkish MP **Safak Pavey**

and historian **Deborah Lavin**. We warmly invite our members and supporters to attend this special conference, which marks 150 years since the founding of the National Secular Society.

Our members enjoy a discounted ticket price of £50, and after the conference discussions are over we will be hosting a gala dinner.

Buy before the end of June to take advantage of our early bird offer!

CONFERENCE TICKET PRICES:
Non-member: £60 Member: £40
Student: £10 Gala dinner: £80
(Early bird members' price for conference and gala dinner: £120)

Date: Saturday 3 Sep 2016

Time: 09:30 to 17:30

Location: Central London



Jacques Berlinerblau



Tehmina Kazi



Safak Pavey



Douglas Murray



Maajid Nawaz



Aliyah Saleem



Paul Rowe



Deborah Lavin