

15 February 2013

Make 2013 the year you joined the NSS. It's certainly going to be a year when we need your support more than ever. [Join us](#) if you aren't yet a member.

Quotes of the Week

"Unfortunately, gay and liberal Catholics who keep expressing their seemingly endless supply of 'hope' for the new leader of their church, are likely to be disappointed. They are not going to get a progressive pope, and likely won't even get a moderate one. They could even do worse than the current guy, by having a charismatic Pope selected, who can put a happy veneer over harsh, anachronistic policies."

(Wayne Besen, *Truth Wins Out*)

"Criticism of religion is not only the starting point of all criticism. It is the prerequisite of any kind of criticism. In a society where religion cannot be criticized, everything becomes religion from the length of your beard to what hand to use when wiping your backside. Where there is no criticism of religion, life and society in their entirety become religious and the littlest squeak against the existing order is an act of blasphemy."

(Lars Hedegaard, head of the Danish Free Press Association, who survived an assassination attempt after criticising Islam)

'The impression one gets from many religious leaders and spokespeople is that most religious people are opposed to the liberalising trend in society. That is just not true and statistics like this give the lie to that view.'

(Linda Woodhead, *Guardian*)

"The Roman Catholic church can be considered a massive transnational business that is partly legitimate and partly an organized crime syndicate."

(Mano Singham, *Machines Like Us*)

Essays of the Week

[The Pope can quit, but it won't eradicate his complicity in his Church's crimes](#)

(Geoffrey Robertson, *Independent*)

[How much longer can the Vatican avoid priest sex abuse charges?](#)

(Vatileaks)

In this week's Newsline

[Joseph Ratzinger's failed papacy may have fatally undermined the Vatican](#)

[New survey reveals that most religious people are not anti abortion \(not even Catholics\)](#)

[Local authority abandons plans prioritise faith school pupils in community school admissions](#)

[Villagers angered by plans to open new Sikh faith school](#)

[Section 5 reform completes its parliamentary progress](#)

[Religious Education – special pleading increases in volume](#)

[Fundamentalist Catholic group moves into education](#)

[Media regulator finds Islamic TV channels guilty of preaching hate](#)

[Win £250 – just write an uplifting *Secular Thought* for the Day](#)

[Have you got your ticket for Secularist of the Year? Book now and avoid disappointment](#)

[Romanian secularists want an end to state sponsorship of churches](#)

[NSS speaks out](#)

Joseph Ratzinger's failed papacy may have fatally undermined the Vatican

By Terry Sanderson

And so we are to see an end to the rule of Joseph Ratzinger at the Vatican. At such times it is usual to break out into a chorus of "Ding, Dong the Witch is Dead" from the Wizard of Oz, but we fear that Ratzinger's successor will be as bad, if not worse, than the man himself.

Ratzinger has ruled for decades at the Vatican, even before he became Pope. He was chief inquisitor under the rule of John Paul II, and as the old Pope's health failed, Ratzinger ramped up the reactionary agenda. (Not that John Paul II was any slouch at authoritarianism and bigotry).

Under Ratzinger the Vatican has become despised and resented throughout the world. He has played a major role in reducing the Catholic Church's popularity and its authority.

Catholics have deserted the Church at an increasing rate, repelled by the inhumanity of Ratzinger's unbending adherence to what are perceived as cruel doctrines.

When he came to Britain in 2010, we were told that the visit had been a huge triumph. In fact, it was an abject failure as the official statistics showed and the Catholic Church's own [research](#) confirmed. The visit did succeed, though, in generating the [largest protest march ever seen against a papal visit](#).

Of course, the endless child abuse scandals that have been exposed have been a major factor in Ratzinger's failure as pope. As one revelation followed another, it was clear that for centuries the Church has been covering up the crimes of its clergy. It has put the safety of children well behind the interests of those of the Church.

Every single accusation of child abuse landed on Ratzinger's desk when he was in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In most cases they were kept secret. Only when the civil authorities became involved did the Vatican come clean about its activities – and even then it had to be forced.

For all its claims that it has now cleaned up its act, new cover-ups seem to be discovered almost every week. And we should not forget the horrible attempts to avoid paying compensation to people whose lives they have ruined and who the Church sometimes dismissed as liars and money-grubbers.

Under Ratzinger, too, the Catholic Church has become crazily politicised. He has instructed his bishops to go out into the world and aggressively push legislators to obey Vatican edicts.

In this, too, he has failed dismally.

When you recall the apocalyptic language that the Catholic Church has been using to oppose gay marriage, and its predictions of the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it, (including several increasingly [hyperbolic interventions](#) by Ratzinger himself) you would have thought that Catholic politicians would have felt it beholden upon them to vote against.

But not so. An interesting by-product of the controversial Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill was the number of supposedly Catholic MPs who voted in favour of it.

There are 82 known Catholic MPs. Of them, 57% voted for the Bill with 34% against and 9% registering no vote.

But this illustrates that Catholic politicians in this country do not, in general, take their whip from the Vatican. ([Some do of course](#), and are quite open about it). Even so, politicians still labour under the impression that there is a "Catholic vote" that can be corralled. There is no such constituency.

But this is the latest of many recent indications that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has become increasingly isolated under Ratzinger's arrogant rule. Its many political confrontations with governments around the world who are trying to modernise their societies usually result in defeat for the Church.

Let's have a look at a few:

During the American presidential election, the Church decided that it was totally opposed to President Obama's plan to introduce a health insurance mandate. The reason? It would include funding for contraception.

In an effort to placate the bishops, Obama has since offered two radical modifications that would relieve the Church of having to provide contraception to its employees. But, as is its way, the Church will accept nothing less than total surrender.

There is a strong suspicion that this confrontation was manufactured as a means of defeating Obama at the election. It was presented as "an attack on religious freedom", but it was perceived as a peevish assault on the rights of women.

As we know, the Church's attempt to derail Obama's campaign failed. Indeed, it could be argued that the Church's hysterical behaviour and childish demands for complete obedience went a long way to ensuring that Obama got his second term.

The Catholics in the pews suddenly started thinking for themselves and the bishops were unable to order them into voting the way the Church told them to. Instead of rushing to the polling booths to defeat Obama, Catholics voted for him in record numbers.

In Spain – once regarded as the most Catholic country in the world – the previous secularist Government legalised same-sex marriage. The Church set its face against such a reform and agitated violently against it. The reform passed. The new Government, which is supposedly sympathetic to the Vatican promised to repeal the law. It has failed to do so, thwarted by the constitutional court. Abortion reforms were enacted, Church privileges were reduced, and changes made to the stranglehold the Church had on education.

In Portugal, similarly, same-sex marriage is now legal. This despite the Catholic Church's best efforts to defeat it.

In the Philippines, the Church declared that a Bill in parliament to make contraceptives legal and freely available must not pass. It passed.

In Ireland, once unquestioningly under the thumb of the Catholic Church, the child abuse revelations have been so extreme that it caused the Prime Minister to denounce the Church in parliament and has since closed the Irish Embassy at the Vatican. The Church is also trying to defeat a small change to the stringent abortion law that would allow women who have been raped to have an abortion. It is unlikely that the Church will prevail.

In South American countries, which the Pope could once guarantee to rule with a rod of iron there have also been rebellions. In Brazil gay marriage was approved (although the Church succeeded in defeating attempts to reform the harsh abortion laws). In Mexico City same-sex unions are now legal.

This political agitating, and these attempts to interfere in democratic parliaments is increasingly resented. [Poll after poll shows](#) that the Catholic population do not agree with or accept the Vatican's doctrines on abortion, contraception, homosexuality or assisted suicide.

This is reflected in the dwindling number of Catholics who continue attend Mass – or have anything else to do with the Church.

Joseph Ratzinger will now disappear from the scene. Many will sigh with relief at his departure. But we shouldn't celebrate too soon. He has put in place a college of Cardinals that are as reactionary as he is – or even more so.

Whoever they elect as the next Pope, there is unlikely to be much improvement.

See also: [Lowlights from a failed papacy](#)

[Resignation connected to sex abuse crisis, says documentary maker](#)

New survey reveals that most religious people are not anti abortion (not even Catholics)

A new YouGov survey commissioned for the Westminster Faith Debates finds that 43% of people who identify with a religion are in favour of keeping or raising the current 24 week limit (compared with 46% of the general population), 30% would like to see it lowered (compared with 28%), and 9% support a ban (compared with 7%). The remainder of people say they 'don't know'.

Even though the Roman Catholic Church teaches that abortion is always wrong and should be illegal, only 14% of Catholics in this country are in favour of a ban.

A significant number of people believe that human life begins at conception, but this does not necessarily mean they are opposed to abortion.

44% of people believe that human life begins at conception, 30% at some time during pregnancy, 17% when the baby is born, and 8% don't know.

Surprisingly, even amongst those who believe that human life begins at conception, most believe that abortion should be legal. Over three quarters believe that abortion is acceptable in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and a half believe that abortion should be allowed at least up to 20 weeks. Amongst the religious people surveyed, Catholics, Muslims and Baptists are the most hostile to abortion, but only about half would like to see the law changed.

14% of Catholics surveyed support a ban and 33% would like to see the 24 week limit lowered.

30% of Muslims surveyed support a ban and 16% would like to see the 24 week limit lowered.

Those who rely on external religious sources for guidance, and whose religion offers an anti-abortion message, are the most likely to be hostile to abortion.

The survey finds that factors like gender, age and voting preference do not make much difference to attitudes to abortion. The people most likely to be hostile to abortion are those:

- who believe in God with most certainty
- rely most strongly on scripture or religious teachings for guidance
- whose religion has a strong anti-abortion message

Only 8% of the population fits this profile, and of this 8% one third support a ban on abortion. The survey finds that most people in Great Britain — including religious people — rely most on their own judgment or feelings or the advice of family and friends for guidance.

Amongst the population as a whole, anti-abortion sentiment is declining and support for current abortion law is growing. Comparisons with earlier YouGov polls reveal that the percentage of the population who would like to see a ban on abortion has fallen from 12% in 2005 to 7% today. Of those who expressed a view, support for keeping (or even relaxing) the current 24 week limit has risen by about one-third to a clear majority (57%) today.

Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University told the *Guardian*: "The impression one gets from many religious leaders and spokespeople is that most religious people are opposed to the liberalising trend in society. That is just not true and statistics like this give the lie to that view."

Local authority abandons plans prioritise faith school pupils in community school admissions

Surrey County Council has written to the National Secular Society to confirm it will not accept a proposal to amend the admissions criteria for Reigate Priory School which would have indirectly given preferential admission arrangements to pupils whose parents regularly attend Church of England services.

The proposal would have created a 'feeder' link between a religiously selective Voluntary Aided Church of England infant school and an oversubscribed community school, indirectly applying faith based admissions criteria.

The National Secular Society wrote to Surrey County Council to inform it that the proposal was likely to lead to unlawful discrimination on grounds of religion and belief.

The Council has now acknowledged that it failed to take into account the particular issues of the link between a faith and a non-faith school, and has said "any future assessment will certainly do so."

The Council said its decision on the proposal will be deferred until next year to allow alternative solutions to be reviewed before moving forward.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "We very much welcome this decision. Unfortunately, the fact that this proposal got so far demonstrates that the detrimental impact that 'faith' schools have on the non-religious, and those of other faiths within the community, is still not being properly considered by decision makers.

The National Secular Society is also backing a local campaign to oppose [similar proposals](#) by the non-religiously designated Tudor Grange Academy in Solihull which is consulting on giving priority in admissions to pupils from two religiously selective 'faith' schools. Local parents have launched a [Facebook campaign group](#) and a [petition](#) to block the proposal, which has already attracted over 800 signatures.

Villagers angered by plans to open new Sikh faith school

Local residents have reacted angrily to plans to open a new Sikh faith academy school in a Buckinghamshire village.

Concerns centre on proposals from Slough Sikh Education Trust [SSET] to open a new 840-pupil Secondary Academy in the village of Stoke Poges.

The proposed Khalsa Secondary Academy's [admissions policy](#) (pdf) states that up to 50% of the places will be allocated on the basis of Sikh faith and all remaining places will be allocated to children of other faiths or no faith. However, local residents have argued that the school's recruitment drive has focused exclusively on Sikh communities in neighbouring Slough, Southall

and Harrow and is therefore expected to open with at least 90% of pupils from a Sikh background in the first year's intake.

Local residents are concerned that the village does not have the adequate infrastructure to deal with additional traffic that will occur when pupils are bussed in from surrounding areas.

Local parents have also raised concerns that as the school will become the catchment school for the South Bucks area, families who choose not to send their children to the 'faith' school will lose their paid-for home to school transport.

Nick Kandola, chair of SSET, says his organisation looked at a number of potential sites within Slough, but none were considered viable by council planners or Trust members.

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "One of the problems with faith schools is that rather than attending their local school, schoolchildren are increasingly being segregated by the religious beliefs of their parents and then bussed around to the nearest 'faith' school that matches that belief.

"With regard to this specific proposal, we are particularly concerned that parents not wanting to educate their children at a school with a distinctive Sikh ethos could be financially penalised by the local authority by denying them assistance with home to school transport costs. This is yet another example of how the faith school system can disadvantage the non-religious and those of other faiths."

More than 400 Stoke Poges residents attended a recent meeting in the village hall pledging to fight the plans. A [Facebook group](#) set up to coordinate opposition to the new school now has over 950 members.

A [public consultation](#) concerning the proposal closes on Friday 15 February 2013.

Section 5 reform completes its parliamentary progress

MPs confirmed on Tuesday that a controversial public order law that criminalises "insulting" words or behaviour will be reformed to permit greater freedom of speech.

The move follows the Government giving way on the issue last month, after a bruising vote in the House of Lords.

The bid to change the law was spearheaded by Reform Section 5 – a campaign supported by the National Secular Society and Christian Institute, together with the Peter Tatchell Foundation and others.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, who has been prominent in the campaign, said that "free speech is a little freer because of this change. Our alliance with the Christian Institute could hardly have been more fruitful."

In December last year, the House of Lords amended legislation to removing the word "insulting" from Section 5 of the Public Order Act. Despite both Government and the Labour front bench opposing, the vote was 150 in favour to 54 against – the lowest pro-Government vote of the Parliament.

Realising that MPs were also likely to follow suit when the legislation returned to the House of Commons, the Home Secretary conceded defeat and agreed to accept the Lords' amendment.

The amendment cannot now be overturned, and so will become law later this year.

Comedian Rowan (Mr Bean) Atkinson added his support to the campaign last year, warning that merely stating a different point of view could lead to an arrest unless the law was changed.

The Reform Section 5 Campaign was borne out of the unlikely partnership of the Christian Institute and the National Secular Society. The Christian Institute was alarmed at the way Section 5 had been used against street preachers, while the NSS saw it as part of our ongoing commitment to free expression for everyone.

See also: [The Danish free speech advocate who the Islamists tried to kill](#)

Religious Education – special pleading increases in volume

The Catholic Education Service (CES) for England and Wales has reiterated concerns that Religious Education will remain relegated among academic subjects, after plans to introduce the English Baccalaureate were scrapped.

Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, had planned to introduce an English Baccalaureate Certificate (EBC) for five core subjects, excluding Religious Education, but it was announced last week that plans for the EBC would not proceed after all.

A statement from the CES said that under new proposals RE would still not be given sufficient importance. It said that the Catholic Education Service was “disappointed that Religious Education remains effectively relegated to outside the ‘core’ under these proposals when it is at the very heart of the curriculum in every one of our more than 2,000 schools in England.”

It continued: “GCSE RE is a valuable and worthwhile subject, but it could be better, and we hope to be able to work with Ofqual and Examination Boards to ensure that it becomes so.”

The statement added: “We welcome the announcement today by the Secretary of State for Education concerning the reform of qualifications at 16. It is clear that the government’s own consultation regarding examination reform showed broad consensus, accepting the need for reform yet rejecting the initial proposals for that reform. That the Secretary of State proposes to reform exams ‘with the help of school and university leaders’ is particularly welcome. Working closely with education professionals will help ensure that any reform will enjoy the widest possible support and confidence.”

Fundamentalist Catholic group moves into education

The secretive and ultra conservative Catholic organisation Opus Dei is thought to be behind the opening of a new private school in Croydon.

The Cedars School is the first senior school in the country to be based on the ethos of Opus Dei. The group says it is not funding the school, which has been founded by a group of parents, many of whom are members. The headteacher, Robert Teague, is a member of Opus Dei as is the school's chaplain.

The £3,900-a-term school will be based on the educational theories of the founder of Opus Dei [Josemaría Escrivá](#).

Mr Teague told the *Croydon Advertiser*: "The school is not run by Opus Dei but Josemaría Escrivá's ideas on family, formation and freedom are a key influence on the founders," he said. "These ideas do not impact the curriculum but do alter the 'tone' of the school... we're not a school offering its own offbeat curriculum."

The Cedars has been founded by the [PACT Educational Trust](#), which describes itself as providing "independent education with a Catholic ethos". It already runs Oakwood, a primary school in Purley which also has an Opus Dei priest.

Opus Dei claims about 85,000 followers worldwide, with a growing number in the UK. Its critics accuse it of gross misogyny, elitism, cult-like practices (including deceptive recruitment techniques) and supporting right-wing political regimes such as Franco and Pinochet.

The organisation has also been accused of controlling members and recruiting only influential people who can press forward its agenda. The former Labour politician Ruth Kelly was "outed" as a member when she was part of Tony Blair's government. The former Minister stepped down from the government following criticism for putting her religion before loyalty to party policy.

PACT had initially intended to open The Cedars as a free rather than independent school, but was put off by the "very restrictive" admissions policy that would have stopped them reserving all their places for Catholics.

"It's not so much a faith thing as trying to find families who want the same thing as we do," Mr Teague told the *Advertiser*. "Parents will be subject to a selection interview to ensure they understand the hands-on role they would be taking in their son's education."

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "So long as they are financing this themselves, there is little that can be done. But it is interesting that they had considered applying for free school status. I wonder how long it will be before an application finds its way on to Mr Gove's desk?"

Media regulator finds Islamic TV channels guilty of preaching hate

Islamic TV channels operating on the Sky platform and broadcasting in Britain have been found to be breaching the Ofcom broadcasting code by giving fundamentalist clerics free reign to preach hate.

The media regulator Ofcom has upheld several complaints about the channels after a supposed Islamic scholar told viewers that it is their 'duty' to 'kill those who insult Prophet Mohammed'. In another a woman presenter said homosexuals should be beaten and tortured for the 'evil, shameful act.'

On its programme *Dare to Ask*, [Peace TV](#) allowed notorious hater Dr Zakir Naik to say: "One group of scholars, they say that if a Muslim, if he becomes a non-Muslim [inaudible] he should be put to death. There is another group of scholars who say that if a Muslim becomes a non-Muslim and propagates his new faith against Islam then he should be put to death. I tend to agree more with the second group of scholars, who say that a Muslim, if he becomes a non-Muslim and propagates his new faith against Islam, that is the time this penalty is applied."

Ofcom ruled: "It is potentially offensive for any service to broadcast comments suggesting that it is acceptable to apply a 'penalty' and kill any individual for renouncing their faith. Broadcasters must ensure that material which may cause offence is justified by the context."

Dr Naik, who was banned from entering Britain in 2010 after the Home Secretary ruled his presence was "not conducive to the public good", is the co-owner of Peace TV, a channel which is funded by a charity called the Islamic Research Foundation International.

In March last year he said in a programme he was presenting that it was appropriate to crucify, dismember or exile those who "wage war against Allah" under sharia law. He also said it was correct to kill former Muslims who "propagate his new faith against Islam".

Ofcom ruled Dr Naik's show breached part of the code which states that offensive comments should be "justified by the context".

In May last year, Muhammad Farooq Nizami was given a platform by Noor TV, (which Ofcom had already fined £75,000 in 2011 for soliciting £1,000 donations in exchange for prayers).

Farooq Nizami said: "There is absolutely no doubt about it that the punishment for the person who shows disrespect for the Prophet is death. No one disagrees about this. Whoever shows disrespect for Prophet Muhammad will be given death penalty. In the whole world, there should be slaves of Mustafa [Muhammad] everywhere, and disrespectful people should be eliminated. One has to choose one's own method. Our way is the peaceful way but when someone crosses the limits, faith-base emotions are instigated."

Ofcom said: "The breaches in this case ... are regarded by Ofcom as serious breaches of the code. Ofcom is very concerned that Al Ehya [Noor TV's parent company] still does not appear to recognise the very serious issues raised by the broadcast of Mr Nizami's comments."

On the DM Digital channel, Abdul Qadir Jilani, an imam at a mosque in Walthamstow, said: "The matter of insulting the prophet does not fall in the category of terrorism. Those who cannot kill such men have no faith. It is your duty, the duty of those who recite the holy verse, to kill those who insult Prophet Mohammed.

"Under the guidance from Islamic texts it is evident that if a Muslim apostatises, then it is not right to wait for the authorised courts; anyone may kill him. An apostate deserves to be killed and any man may kill him."

Ofcom ruled: "The statements ... did amount to direct calls to action and were likely to incite or encourage crime or to lead to disorder."

Dr Liaqat Malik, 54, the chairman of DM Digital said Ofcom was biased against ethnic minorities. "There are cultural differences and I think Ofcom doesn't understand that," he said. "Some of the Ofcom committee members should be picked from the Muslim community."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "There is no real way to control these TV channels. Fines don't seem to deter them. They often don't keep recordings of their programmes – which Ofcom rules demand – and it is impossible to monitor them night and day. They also broadcast in a variety of languages, which makes monitoring them even more difficult. Who knows what is being said when no-one in authority is listening. When a TV channel permits its airwaves to be used to incite murder, Ofcom should remove its licence immediately."

[Read the Ofcom rulings in full](#) (PDF)

Win £250 – just write an uplifting *Secular Thought for the Day*

The ongoing irritation at the BBC's exclusion of secular voices from The *Thought for the Day* slot has spurred one of the NSS's previous presidents, David Tribe, to sponsor a prize of £250 for the best *secular Thought for the Day*.

To win the prize, we are looking for a short essay in a similar format to the BBC's religious slot.

Thought for the Day is supposed to be an 'uplifting' reflection on a topical issue from a religious point of view.

To be in with a chance, your secular Thought should be no more than 1,000 words and be positive in approach and ideally related to a topical matter. We are not looking for a humanist Thought or an

atheist Thought, but specifically for a secular Thought. We suggest you look at the NSS's [Secular Charter](#) for some ideas.

So, let's have some great (secular) Thoughts for the Day and good luck.

Send your Secular Thought for the Day to admin@secularism.org.uk or by post to NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Entries that require a great deal of correction or editing are unlikely to win the prize, so please let us have copy that is clean and finalised to your satisfaction.

Have you got your ticket for Secularist of the Year? Book now and avoid disappointment

This year's Secularist of the Year lunch is approaching (Saturday 23 March) and it promises to be a very special occasion. We hope that you'll join us for the NSS's premier social event that is always congenial and friendly – and held in one of the West End of London's most glamorous venues.

After a welcome cocktail, there will be a three course meal with tea or coffee to follow. Then there will be prize giving and other surprises.

This is your opportunity to meet secularists from around the country and mingle with some of our distinguished honorary associates.

All this for £45 – it's a steal. Get your ticket now [online](#) or send a cheque made out to "NSS" to National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

Romanian secularists want an end to state sponsorship of churches

Twenty-three civic organisations in Romania have asked parliament to end the public financing of religious denominations, saying the money would be better spent on health or education.

"Under the constitution, Romania is a secular state and has no state religion. So, there is no legal ground for churches in the country to continue receiving public money," Toma Patrascu, vice-president of the Secular Association, said.

There are 18 officially recognised religious denominations in Romania, with the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, respectively, the largest. The Romanian Orthodox Church claims that more than 85 per cent of Romania's population of 19.5 million are members. The recognised denominations receive around 540 million euro every year from the state. Most of the money is for clergy salaries, but it is also for building new churches.

"This public money would be better used on improving conditions in schools and hospitals," Patrascu added.

Many people oppose the initiative, however, which was made public at the same time that parliament started the debate over this year's budget. "There is nothing wrong with getting support from the state, as the churches have a traditional role in educating people and in helping the poor and people who are in need," a theologian, Radu Preda, said.

While politically neutral, the Orthodox Church has close relations with politicians, many of whom support Church initiatives in the hope of electoral advantage.

Recently, the Orthodox Church drew criticism for its plan to build a 107-metre-high cathedral, the tallest in south-east Europe, and seeking help from the cash-strapped state for the project. Bucharest City Hall last year announced plans to allocate around 2.5 million euro for the construction of the new cathedral. The cathedral is scheduled for completion this year and the Church plans to borrow half the money from banks and guarantee the loans against Church forests, buildings and other properties. Funds are also expected from donations and collection plates.

Similar donations have already been made or announced by other public institutions, including the government. By law, the state has to provide support for church construction and renovation of dilapidated buildings.

The Orthodox Church, which has seen a revival since Communism fell in 1989, remains the most trusted public institutions in Romania, according to opinion polls. But it has often been marred by allegations of corruption and nepotism.

NSS speaks out

Terry Sanderson's blog on the resignation of the pope made waves round the world, being quoted in the [Guardian](#), [Metro](#), [USA Today](#), [Politicus USA](#), [Benzinga](#), [Examiner](#) and tacked on to the end of the [BBC's usual fawning](#), [Voice of Russia](#), [Independent](#) and [Irish Times](#).

Terry was also on BBC London 94.9 and LBC Radio and Keith Porteous Wood appeared on the [Russia Today](#) TV channel.

Events

Marlene Dietrich – an affectionate tribute – 16 February 2013. Please note that this NSS fundraiser is now **sold out**.

Film: Mea Maxima Culpa – Silence in the House of God. Alex Gibney's devastating film about the Catholic sex abuse scandals opens in Britain today. It pulls no punches and shows that the trail of guilt leads straight to the door of Joseph Ratzinger. It will have only a limited release, but cinemas showing it can be found [here](#).

TV Film: The Magdalene Sisters – another horrific examination of the Catholic Church's cruelty when it has power. The Irish state apologised last week for the ill-treatment visited upon the tens of thousands of innocent women who were incarcerated in these industrial compounds run by slave labour and overseen by nuns. BBC1, Thursday 21 February 2013 at 11.35pm.

Talk: Against Religiosity in Politics by Ross Longhurst. Organised by the [Nottingham Secular Society](#). Monday, 25th February, 7:30pm The Duke of Cambridge, 548, Woodborough Road, Nottingham, NG3 5FH. Members £1. Visitors: £3.

Play: The Fruits of Philosophy. The true story of the trial of Annie Besant (a vice-president of the National Secular Society) and Charles Bradlaugh (the founder and president of the NSS) who were accused in 1877 of publishing "obscene libel" – a pamphlet advocating family planning and describing contraception. The play will give a dramatised account of the trial, the scandal that surrounded it, the way it affected the lives and careers of the accused, and the impact on wider society. Friday 15th March 7:30, Brockway Room, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL. Voluntary donation of £5 appreciated.

Talk: Janet Heimlich – Breaking Their Will: Religious Child Maltreatment. Thurs 7 Mar 2013, 19.30 at Conway Hall. Award Winning American Journalist Janet Heimlich is an authority on the topic of child abuse and neglect enabled by religious belief. Ms Heimlich is the author of [Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment](#) (Prometheus Books), the first book to tackle this subject in a comprehensive way. Her appearance at Conway Hall is part of an [extended speaking tour](#) that will take place from March 5 to March 19. [More details](#).

Letters to Newslines

Please send your letters for publication to letters@secularism.org.uk. We want to publish as many letters as possible, so please keep them brief – **no more than 250 words**. We reserve the right to edit. Opinions expressed in letters are not necessarily those of the NSS. You can also join in live debates on our [Facebook page](#).

QUESTIONABLE MEDICAL PRACTICE

I have just been reading Professor P Z Myers' blog, Pharyngula, and one article referred to the [Christian Medical Fellowship](#) or, as he references it 'The witch doctors fellowship', a site for Christian medical staff in the UK.

I found the following on the Doctors page which, in view of all that has been happening with regard to 'sharing faith in the workplace' in recent times is questionable to say the least:

Training:

CMF believes strongly in helping to build up your skills and experience. Whether you're getting ready for mission abroad, learning about whole person care, sharing your faith in the workplace, or wanting to add substance to your discussions on ethics and apologetics, we have training programmes for you.

Our conferences offer seminars, keynote addresses and a chance to network with experts in their fields – allowing you to grow as a doctor, in knowledge and ambition.

Ian Walker

Newslines provide links to external websites for information and in the interests of free exchange. We do not accept any responsibility for the content of those sites, nor does a link indicate approval or imply endorsement of those sites.

Please feel free to use the material in this *Newslines* with appropriate acknowledgement of source. Neither *Newslines* nor the NSS is responsible for the content of websites to which it provides links. Nor does the NSS or *Newslines* necessarily endorse quotes and comments by contributors, they are brought to you in the interests of the free exchange of information and open debate.

This email has been sent to you by
National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL, United Kingdom.
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7404 3126
www.secularism.org.uk