



Annual Report
2015

challenging
religious
privilege

ABOUT THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Founded in 1866, we work towards a society in which all citizens, regardless of religious belief, or lack of religious belief, can live together fairly and cohesively. We campaign for a secular democracy with a separation of religion and state, where everyone's Human Rights are respected equally.

This report covers the period October 2014 – October 2015

THE SECULAR CHARTER

Our campaigning and policy objectives are guided by our Secular Charter.

The National Secular Society campaigns for a secular state, where:

- There is no established state religion.
- Everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief.
- The judicial process is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes.
- Freedom of expression is not restricted by religious considerations.
- Religion plays no role in state-funded education, whether through religious affiliation of schools, curriculum setting, organised worship, religious instruction, pupil selection or employment practices.
- The state does not express religious beliefs or preferences and does not intervene in the setting of religious doctrine.
- The state does not engage in, fund or promote religious activities or practices.
- There is freedom of belief, non-belief and to renounce or change religion.
- Public and publicly-funded service provision does not discriminate on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief.
- Individuals and groups are neither accorded privilege nor disadvantaged because of their religion, belief or non-belief.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Secularism's role has never been so important

This has been another significant year for the NSS, with the prospect of an even more special one to come as our 150th anniversary approaches. You can read in this report about the campaigning that has been going on in that period. Our staff have been diligent in challenging injustices caused by religious privilege. I'm proud of how well they have assisted the increasing number of people who call us and write to us for advice and help.

But, of course, we are not a public advisory service or helpline like the Citizen's Advice Bureau or the Samaritans. We don't have the benefits or the restrictions that come with public money. But many who feel they have been treated unfairly because of their religion or lack of it still come to us for assistance – whether it is about problems excusing their child from collective worship at school or discrimination in job provision we do our best to help – despite our limited resources.

This is an aspect of our work that doesn't get a lot of public exposure but it does take up a fair amount of time.

Our new staff members, Ben and Alastair, have settled in well and have risen to the unique challenges of their jobs. With their input, our website continues to grow in popularity and we have a significant social media presence.

Of course, in a global context, the issue of secularism has never been so important. As extremist religion and sectarian conflict spread, our efforts to oppose it are constantly undermined by apologists who should know better. Until recently those who misguidedly imagine that they are somehow protecting ordinary, peace-loving Muslims by demanding that Islamism remains beyond examination have been able to silence critics with claims of "racism" and "Islamophobia". Extremists have been able to take control of state schools, jihadists have been able to freely come and go to conflict hotspots and indoctrination centres going under the name of madrassas have been allowed to operate with no oversight.

Our universities seem particularly prone to this. Several more cases emerged this year of critics of Islamism being denied



“As religious conflict spirals out of control across the world, the time is coming for democratic secularism to be recognised as the only way that these diverse societies can peacefully live together.”

a platform on grounds that they were “Islamophobic” or even “racist”. The people who impose these bans don't seem to have grasped yet that they are supporting misogynistic, homophobic, totalitarian forces that need to be challenged.

But there are signs that, at last, the Government is getting the message: our *laissez faire* attitude to “conservative” religion has to change. The Prime Minister seems to have belatedly realised that people who talk in extreme ways may not be terrorists themselves, but those who listen to them might be on a journey to becoming so.

You might have thought that the ‘Trojan Horse’ affair would have shaken the Government's faith in faith schools, but once more Mr Cameron gives them a free pass. He insists that we must be a cohesive society, but fails to challenge one of the major stumbling blocks to the integration of children from minority communities.

The NSS's opposition to religious schools is as firm as ever. We don't just want publicly funded schools reformed, we want them dismantling, and the rest regulated more carefully. The abolition may have to be done in stages, but it must be completed for all our sakes. We can start by scrapping the scandalously unfair entry requirements and the unforgivable employment discrimination. Whether the faith school madness continues or not, these particularly blatant affronts to human rights must be done away with.

As religious conflict spirals out of control across the world, the time is coming for democratic secularism to be recognised as the only way that these diverse societies can peacefully live together. Many Muslims see the value of keeping the state and religion separate. And hopefully the millions fleeing sectarian wars will come to understand that they must learn to tolerate and accept other religious points of view. They must not bring their wars with them.

Our job at the NSS is to promote as best we can the idea that democracy and secularism are not religion's enemy, but could be everyone's very best friend.

US Secretary of State, John Kerry, said that his wish is for Syria one day to be secular. He knows as well as we do that the only way for religions and beliefs to live together, without any one of them having the opportunity to have power over the others, is to embrace secularism.

The extremists must be isolated and eventually overcome. Secularism has a powerful role to play in the rebuilding of the Islamic world.

Terry Sanderson

“Our job at the NSS is to promote as best we can the idea that democracy and secularism are not religion's enemy, but could be everyone's very best friend.”

FREE SPEECH, BLASPHEMY AND COUNTERING EXTREMISM

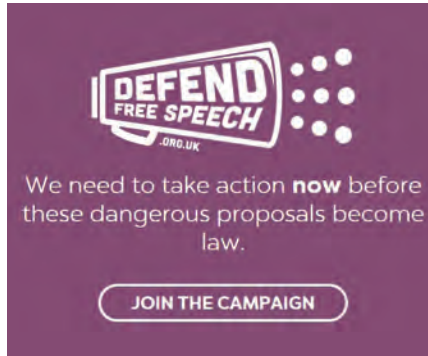
Social cohesion and free expression to counter extremism

Challenging religious extremism should not mean undermining the freedoms or democratic values essential to a free, secular society.

A stronger civil society, and a school system which educates young people on their shared rights and civic responsibilities in integrated, secular schools, is a precondition for building a more cohesive society. Segregating children by family religion in the school system is a terrible way to start children off in a society already contending with deep religious divisions and rising tensions.

This year we've been involved in two events organised by the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) which have looked at challenging religious extremism and bigotry, including anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic hatred. At the June meeting (a high-level roundtable discussion) we were the only UK organisation participating.

We urged the FRA to stress the importance of human rights and civil society-based approaches which protect freedom of speech. We have also spoken out against the commonly used term 'Islamophobia' to describe what should properly be called 'anti-Muslim bigotry' – thus avoiding the conflation between criticising religion and violence.



Our joint campaign to challenge anti-free speech proposals

Our contributions were personally welcomed by the European Commission's First Vice-President, Frans Timmermans, and have led to our executive director being invited to a third event as a keynote speaker on education. We will report on this in the next Annual Report.

We also met with the Minister responsible at the Department for Communities and Local Government to discuss more sophisticated tracking of hate crime statistics and trends, to better understand and reduce religiously motivated hate crime and identify its origin. The Government has since announced this will form part of its new counter extremism strategy.

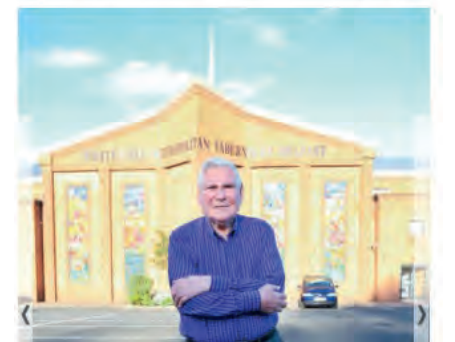
We've welcomed the aspects of the strategy which focus on empowering civil society groups to challenge extremism. However we

challenged Prime Minister David Cameron for the uncritical attitude to faith schools in his July speech on radicalisation, and the aspects of his strategy which could threaten free expression.

The state already uses its expansive powers to restrict the activities of extremist preachers. The proposed 'Extremism Disruption Orders' (EDOs) are unnecessary and draconian. We are teaming up with the Christian Institute on a new campaign – Defend Free Speech – to oppose vague and ill-defined EDOs. Previous joint campaigns with them have been successful.

This year we've continued to maintain our reputation of defending free expression – even when we vehemently disagree with the speaker. We've taken action to defend two Christian preachers James McConnell and Michael Overd – both of whom faced legal action for their sermons.

When former Prime Minister Tony Blair proposed to the European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation "lowering the barriers to what constitutes incitement to violence", and criminalising holocaust denial, we spoke out strongly in the media and at a Tony Blair Faith Foundation event.



“If someone said, “I don't trust atheists”, there is not a chance in Pastor McConnell's hell they would be prosecuted for it. Nor should they be.”

BENJAMIN JONES,
communications officer



First Vice President Frans Timmermans meets Keith

European Commission

Blasphemy and free expression

Clearly the defining event of 2015 for freedom of speech was the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. The attempt to enforce blasphemy laws through violence is just one strand of attempts to restrict criticism and satire of religion all over the world.

The aftermath prompted global debate over the protection of free expression. Led by NSS honorary associate and former contributor Caroline Fourest, *Charlie Hebdo* published a 'survivors' edition' with an editorial in support of free speech and secularism – for which they were awarded the 2015 Secularist of the Year prize.

Immediately after the attack we called on the BBC to abolish their restrictions on depicting Mohammed and welcomed their decision to do so. In contrast Sky News cut off a live interview with Caroline Fourest as she displayed the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*.

Our successful Reform Clause 5 (which outlawed insulting words or behaviour) campaign led to us being invited to speak at two seminars to senior Metropolitan police officers on freedom of speech.

We've regularly reported on attempts to outlaw 'blasphemy' around the world. These included the UAE making it illegal to 'offend God', a Saudi official claiming free expression was an abuse of "religious and ideological rights" and even attempts in Quebec to introduce legislation to target "people who would write against ... the Islamic religion". We've spoken out against Saudi Arabia's barbaric treatment of secularist writer Raif Badawi and called for the UK Government to do the same.

This year we've followed the story of the on-going targeting, murder and intimidation of secularist Bangladeshi bloggers. We supported a protest at the Bangladesh High Commission in London and provided a platform for British Bangladeshi secularists to speak out; one anonymous blogger told our readers that the terrorists could "never kill ideas".



Through our informal relationships with international human rights/secular groups as well as formal partnerships with international groups we affiliate to, we've done our part to raise awareness, support international human rights efforts and pressure the UK Government to play a positive role in protecting freedom of religion and belief and expression.

In June we welcomed the International Humanist and Ethical Union (to whom we are affiliated) highlighting the global persecution of non-religious and religious minorities through their annual Freedom of Thought Report and we've used every opportunity to urge the UK and EU governments to take this threat seriously.

We attended a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion and Belief to discuss a report by Human Rights Without Frontiers International detailing country by country a list of prisoners who have been incarcerated for manifesting their beliefs or breaking 'blasphemy' laws. In a Parliamentary debate NSS honorary associates including MPs Kerry McCarthy and Jim Fitzpatrick spoke in support of secularism in Bangladesh.

“ I and many others will remain anonymous, except for the few extraordinarily brave ones, but you should know that you can never kill ideas or change what's in people's minds.”

ANONYMOUS BRITISH BANGLADESHI SECULARIST, NSS website



Supporting free speech protest at the Bangladesh High Commission

We've continued to play a leading role on the advisory board of the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics. At their February meeting our executive director warned of *de facto* blasphemy laws increasingly being used to censor criticism of religion.

“ We will hope that as of this January 7, 2015, strongly defending secularism will be second nature for everyone. That we will finally stop posturing for electoral reasons or through cowardice, legitimizing or even tolerating community separatism and cultural relativism, which lead to but one thing: Religious totalitarianism.”

CHARLIE HEBDO editorial, in its first edition following the attack



//FREE SPEECH, BLASPHEMY AND COUNTERING EXTREMISM

Standing up for free speech on campus

This year we've criticised student unions and universities abusing the language of 'health and safety' and 'safe spaces' to stifle discussion of religion.

We played a key role in drawing public attention to the ban on secular activist and NSS honorary associate Maryam Namazie put in place by Warwick Student Union on the spurious grounds that her critique of Islamism might 'incite hatred'. We were quoted in the *Independent* calling for the decision to be reversed – which it was after widespread criticism in the national media, and on social media led by NSS honorary associate Richard Dawkins.

Worryingly, while the ban was reversed, the Student Union's policy on external speakers – which stipulates that speakers must "avoid insulting other faiths" – remains. The NSS has played a key role in exposing such regressive attitudes, and publicised another case from Bath University where a student comedy society was forced to axe light-hearted material about Jesus and Mohammed after the chaplaincy complained. The NSS was subsequently invited to give a talk to the Bath Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Society on campus censorship and blasphemy, and at the University of Exeter Debating Society we won a debate on the right to satirise religious figures.

Sadly, cases of censorship are very common, as organisers of a conference at Queen's University Belfast found when trying to organise an event, featuring Maryam Namazie, on the fallout from the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in April.

The website of the Manchester Free Speech and Secular Society was hacked and deleted shortly after receiving an ominous message from an IP address in Saudi Arabia



Campaigns manager Stephen Evans visits Godalming College's student secular society

which said "Please stop mocking Muslims otherwise you will feel remorse." We offered the group our support and fortunately they were able to restore the lost content of their website very quickly.

Meanwhile, as secularists and others face censorship, hard-line Islamists have still been speaking regularly on many university campuses, largely unimpeded. The NSS attended an event with Student Rights, a group that works to counter extremism in universities, where the prevalence of Islamist speakers (in London universities in particular) was revealed. We also hosted a blog by the student founder of the Exeter University Quilliam Society, on why it was so important for students to lead the way on countering extremism.

In our bid to protect secularist and non-religious groups on campus, the NSS also criticised the director of the LSE who claimed – incredibly – that university atheists were being "militant." We challenged his mischaracterisation of events that took place at the LSE freshers' fair in 2013, and his strange focus on non-religious groups.

While this catalogue of encroachments may be troubling there's cause for hope. The significant backlash against student unions that do try their hand at censorship should make other institutions think twice before unduly restricting free speech.

We are reinvigorating our relationships with student groups, in part by providing support to students who do face campus censorship over religion.



Free speech wins in campus debate



Picture from UCL Atheist Society's freshers' fair event

EDUCATION AND FAITH SCHOOLS

Challenging religious extremism in schools

In addition to promoting a positive vision for secular and inclusive education, the NSS scrutinises faith schools and exposes some of the problems stemming from the undue influence of religion in education.

This year we've highlighted a number of cases of extremism with the Department for Education (DfE) and other bodies involved in the regulation of schools.

- In May we called on the DfE to investigate two independent Orthodox Jewish schools after we discovered school leaders had imposed a 'driving ban' on mothers dropping off and picking up their children, based on a rabbinical ruling. The Belz sect members run two large schools in north London for 444 boys and 135 girls. Both schools are rated 'good' by Ofsted. Jewish leaders joined us in condemning the schools, calling the ban "at odds with Jewish values". The DfE swiftly launched an investigation and declared the ban "completely unacceptable in modern Britain". The driving ban was swiftly dropped, but this incident gives an insight into the kind of groups that are involved in running schools.



- In August we contacted Ofsted and the DfE about an independent Muslim school in Dewsbury when we learnt it had banned students from socialising with "outsiders" and instructed pupils not to watch TV, read newspapers or listen to the radio. The Islamic Institute for Education had been rated "good" by Ofsted. We took our concerns to Ofsted and the DfE is now investigating the school.
- We also raised concerns with the DfE and the Office of the Schools Adjudicator about a state-funded Jewish school's intrusion into pupils' individual liberty after we discovered its admissions policy stipulated that television and the internet is "absolutely forbidden" in pupils' homes. Parents were also required to sign a statement that they will adhere to "the strictest laws" and "moral values" of Charedi beliefs. This was the same

school that we had exposed censoring exam questions on human reproduction and evolution in 2013.

- Our efforts to prevent a Christian group that associates child disobedience with witchcraft from opening a school have been successful. In August the DfE confirmed to us that the organisation behind the proposed school in Kent had withdrawn its application to register as an independent school. We had previously drawn the DfE's attention to the Church's teachings and to video footage of its leader, the preacher David Oyedepo, slapping a young girl after accusing her of being a witch.

We broadly welcomed the Government's announcement that schools must from November 2014 promote 'fundamental British values' – defined by the DfE as: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith.

This at least sets out certain standards for schools and provides a mechanism for secularists to challenge schools that undermine children's rights, including their right to a broad and balanced education. However, until we move away from the concept of faith schools entirely, this tension is sure to continue.

Protecting parents' rights

Throughout the year our team has assisted many parents often angry and exasperated by schools imposing religious beliefs and practices on children against their wishes.

In some areas, the proliferation of faith schools and the shortage of school places is making it difficult – even impossible – for parents to secure a secular state education.

We assisted parents with successful appeals and complained to local authorities after over two-thirds of places offered to parents at a Sikh ethos free school in Leeds went to pupils whose parents did not choose the school. Similarly in



Students protest plans to close Weston Primary

South Buckinghamshire 24 parents were allocated places at another Sikh free school without their requesting or wanting it. We complained to the local authorities and assisted parents with successful appeals to ensure no child was forced to attend a religious school against their parents' wishes. Our support ensured none did.

We supported parents on the Isle of Wight when the proposed closure of a non-religiously designated Academy school would leave many with no alternative but to send their children to one of three faith schools in West Wight. We've called on the Secretary of State for Education setting out the legal, human rights and equity arguments for maintaining a diversity of provision and calling on her to reverse a decision to close the school – at least until alternative secular provision can be arranged.

In many areas, Church of England schools are the only practical option for parents, and in such cases children of all backgrounds attend them, when not restricted by discriminatory admissions. Such schools' promotion of Christianity proves especially problematic. This year we assisted a number of non-religious and Muslim parents who were obstructed by church schools from withdrawing their children from RE and worship. In all cases the parents were happy for their children to receive a broad and balanced education about religions and beliefs but objected to efforts to inculcate their children into the Christian faith through biased presentation of RE or acts of worship.

“The best way of building mutual understanding, trust and the common values that we're going to need in multifaith Britain, is to ensure that our publicly funded schools are secular spaces where children and young people of all backgrounds are encouraged to learn and live together side-by-side.”

STEPHEN EVANS, campaigns manager

//EDUCATION AND FAITH SCHOOLS

With our help, all parents were able to assert their legal rights to withdraw, with the schools backing down when challenged. But for many parents withdrawal isn't a satisfactory or practical solution, especially where "cross-curricula" teaching insinuates religion into every subject.

In December we briefed peers ahead of a House of Lords debate on "religion in public life" in which a number of our honorary associate peers raised concerns over religious influence in schools. Baroness Falkner told peers that, whilst parents' religious and philosophical convictions should be respected in state schools, the demand for religious education that was wholly on parents' terms was an "unreasonable and potentially divisive demand which must be resisted". The Baroness said that "rather than facilitating the segregation of pupils along religious lines, we should be doing everything we can to ensure that children of all faiths and none are educated together in a respectful and inclusive environment."

Academisation: the threat to secular education

The Government has made clear its intention to turn every school in England into an academy. This increases the risk of religious organisations gaining greater control over publicly funded education and increasing the proportion of faith-based schools.

In July we submitted written evidence to the Education and Adoption Bill's Public Bill Committee to highlight our concerns that, without adequate safeguards, the proposals to require 'coasting' maintained schools to become academies could lead to an increase in the proportion of formally religious designated academies and 'faith ethos' ones too.

Schools eligible for intervention which join faith academy chains could be at risk of acquiring a religious designation or a softer 'faith ethos' upon conversion, or subsequently, with no opportunity for parents and other stakeholders within the wider community to be consulted. The Bill is currently progressing through Parliament and we are seeking amendments to protect the secular nature of community schools.

Collective worship: the beginning of the end?

Our long-running campaign to end collective worship in schools received a boost this year when a Westminster Faith Debates report called for the current requirement in statute for an act of collective worship to be abolished.

The report from the former Education Secretary Charles Clark and Linda Woodhead, professor of politics, philosophy and religion at Lancaster University, on the future of religion and RE in schools, said the requirement on all schools to provide worship reflected an era of religious practice and belief which is now long gone.

In the run up to this year's general election almost 12,000 people signed our petition calling on all parties to commit to removing the legal obligation (in England) on schools to hold worship. Both the Liberal Democrats and the Greens made that pledge but other parties were less clear.



However, the current Education Secretary Nicky Morgan has indicated her support for the continuation of compulsory school worship – but it's hard to see this position being sustainable in the long-term.

The volume of calls and enquiries received by the NSS indicate that collective worship is causing unnecessary conflict and resentment amongst parents and pupils and difficulties for schools. In June over 300 students at a Scottish high school signed a petition against compulsory Christian assemblies and in Strabane a Sixth Form student started a campaign against collective worship in Northern Ireland schools.

An academic evaluation of the law and policy surrounding collective worship in the UK is due to be published by Bangor University in late 2015 and may prove useful as we continue to work with others to nurture the growing consensus to end compulsory worship in schools.

Rethinking religious education

We've continued to be a leading voice calling for reform of religious education. In a series of consultation responses we've called for the transformation of RE into a new National Curriculum subject for all pupils which covers a broad spectrum of human ideas and thought, including religious and non-religious worldviews.

In January Keith Porteous Wood and campaigns manager Stephen Evans had a productive meeting with Welsh Education Minister Huw Lewis to discuss our concerns about the existing relationship between religion and education. Mr Lewis has since announced proposals to reform RE and rename the subject "religion, philosophy and ethics". This will hopefully form a blueprint for a similar overhaul of the subject across the UK. We look forward to the opportunity to comment on the reforms in more detail in an upcoming consultation.

In addition to calling for the abolition of collective worship, a set of Westminster Faith Debates policy proposals co-authored by Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead also proposed significant reforms to RE including a proposed change to 'religious and moral education'.

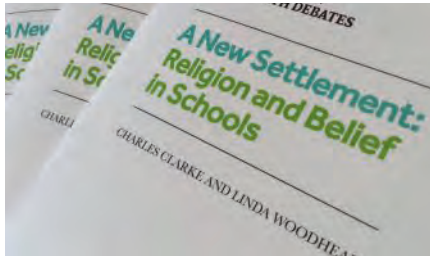


Huw Lewis announces his plans for curriculum reform to the Welsh Assembly

“Rather than facilitating the segregation of pupils along religious lines, we should be doing everything we can to ensure that children of all faiths and none are educated together in a respectful and inclusive environment.”

NSS honorary associate BARONESS FALKNER opposing faith schools in Parliament

// EDUCATION AND FAITH SCHOOLS



At a RE consultation event we attended in Birmingham in February, pupils, many attending faith schools in England, made it clear that they thought the subject should be broadened and focus less on one particular faith.

This year we have also called for Ofsted to inspect RE in all schools. At present RE in faith schools isn't inspected by the schools regulator but by religious groups sensitive to the school's faith. Particularly given the freedoms that faith-based schools and academies are granted to teach their own syllabus, our submission to the Education Select Committee emphasised that the subject be inspected by Ofsted to ensure that all faith schools are providing a broad and balanced education and adequately promoting fundamental values.

We welcomed the closing down of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate, an organisation set up to inspect the religious content of Christian and Muslim independent schools. We'd called for the organisation to be stripped of this role for years and were joined by Ministers and Sir Michael Wilshaw, the chief inspector of schools, after we formally logged our concerns with Ofsted about apparent links between BSI inspectors and religious fundamentalists.

NSS welcomes Government crackdown on religious supplementary schools

We've expressed disquiet about the prevalence of children being taken out of mainstream education to attend a growing number of unregistered religious schools that lack proper regulation or oversight – something we were pleased to see David Cameron subsequently address in his speech to the Conservative Party conference.

We welcomed the announcement that madrassas and other supplementary religious schools are to be regulated – something the NSS has been asking the Government to do for many years.

Prime Minister David Cameron expressed concern that some supplementary schools are helping to “incubate divisions” within society and has announced that if a supplementary school is teaching children for more than eight hours a week then it will be required to register with the Department for Education.

Around 250,000 students attend religious supplementary schools in England alone, and there are thought to be up to 2,000 madrassas.

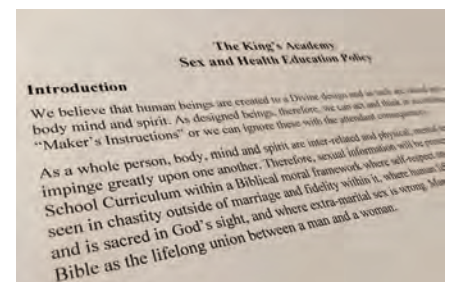
“Like the NSS, I believe that external groups (including religious) can make a legitimate contribution visiting schools. But just as if a political group were visiting I'd expect there to be appropriate boundaries on their behaviour and proselytization.”

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE, NSS website

PSHE and sex education

We've reported cases of several faith schools teaching “abstinence” and “purity” in sex education. The Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth published guidelines instructing their schools to stress the value of “purity” and the “virtue of chastity” in Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) and it says that schools should emphasise “sexuality as a gift from God”.

The Diocesan guidance says that schools should teach a programme of sex education that distinguishes the “sinner from the sin” and that those who fail to meet “Christian ideals” should be shown “mercy.”



The Diocese is not alone: the King's Academy in Middlesbrough teaches sex education in line with the “Maker's Instructions” and its policy statement on sex education begins by stating that they “believe that human beings are created to a Divine design”. These views should not be promoted as objective facts in the classroom.

We welcomed Caroline Lucas MP's bill to make sex education and PSHE compulsory in all schools, including free schools and academies. The Green MP's bill aims to reduce the sexual abuse of children by making sure they have knowledge and education about the meaning of consent. She points out that poor SRE in some schools left students unaware of their rights.

COUNCIL PRAYERS

Our long-running campaign to keep councils secular and prevent religious councillors from imposing prayers on all during meetings suffered a setback this year, but we have seen many local victories.

In 2012 the High Court ruled in the NSS's favour that councils had no power to hold prayers during meetings. This year, however the Government backed a Bill reversing this by permitting a wide range of local authorities to hold prayers during their meetings. It was notionally a Private Member's Bill but the Department of Communities and Local Government under then Secretary of State Eric Pickles played a leading role in drafting it.

The legislation was passed in an almost empty House of Commons in January, but during the debate Conservative MP James Arbuthnot made extensive use of an NSS briefing to voice his opposition, arguing that the Bill was "out of touch with the majority of the people we represent, because only a tiny proportion of our constituents go to church". He announced that he was an atheist, and said that there was tremendous pressure on politicians – particularly in the Conservative Party – to keep quiet about not being religious.

We helped our honorary associates speak out against the Bill during its passage through the House of Lords, including Liberal Democrat peer Lord Avebury, who warned it would result in some councils imposing "something which is bound to divide members from one another according to their religion" and crossbencher the Earl of Clancarty who cautioned that the passing of the Bill would be a "recipe for divisiveness".

Though councils may now hold prayers during meetings, a great many are choosing not to. In September Wymondham council voted against the practice in a crushing 10–2 vote, in a debate which saw members stand up for secularism. Whitchurch council made a similar decision in May.

A Westminster councillor was branded an "absolute disgrace" – simply for saying it was "inappropriate" to begin a meeting with religious observances. In April a Northern Ireland council was left in bitter division over holding prayers, hardly conducive to reducing sectarian tension.

We continue to receive regular contact from councillors opposed to prayers who are working to keep their local authorities secular and welcoming to all.

“It is no triumph for democracy if local authorities and other bodies covered by this Bill are given power to impose something which is bound to divide members from one another according to their religion or belief.”

NSS honorary associate LORD AVEBURY,
opposing the Local Government
(Religious etc. Observances)
Bill in the House of Lords



“Secularist peers did well to ensure the provisions in this Bill were scrutinised and debated – but even after the Bill becomes law, it will remain our secular civic duty to resist the imposition of worship where it doesn't belong. In the public sphere, in local government, in civic life, adherence to particular religions or beliefs is not and cannot be the price of admission.”

ALASTAIR LICHTEN, campaigns officer

EQUALITY & HUMAN RIGHTS

Championing equality

We've continued to work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on religion and belief issues, particularly when attending "Friends of the Chair" roundtable meetings.

Despite the UK having some of the most comprehensive equality laws in the world, the Commission is currently investigating the adequacy of the laws protecting religion or belief. A public consultation carried out by the Commission this year found "widespread public confusion

and misunderstanding" about the laws protecting freedom of religion or belief. We believe this is largely a result of the false grievance narrative perpetuated by Christian lobby groups, often through high profile yet hopeless legal cases.

Some religious figures, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey, are pressing for a new 'duty of reasonable accommodation' for religion or belief, similar to the 'duty of reasonable adjustment' which requires employers to make workplace adjustments to mitigate disadvantages faced by disabled people.

The law already provides for 'reasonable accommodation' – but we fear any new duty would privilege religion or belief by placing it at the top of a hierarchy over other protected characteristics.

We have strongly urged the EHRC to resist changes to current laws which adequately protect everyone's right to be treated with fairness, dignity and respect.

In June our campaigns manager Stephen Evans stressed the importance of equality in public service delivery at a briefing event for local authority managers and public service providers. With public services increasingly being subcontracted out to faith based organisations, Stephen stressed that where religious organisations are contracted to deliver public services they should do so without discriminating against their employees, withholding services from users on grounds of religion or sexual orientation and without proselytizing.

In July the House of Lords debated caste discrimination. NSS honorary associate Baroness Flather, was adamant that the majority of Hindu and Sikh organisations should not be able to veto protection of the minority, and that the strength of the fight against the legislation belied the claims of opponents of legislation that there is no discrimination. The Baroness was supported by fellow honorary associate Lords Avebury, Cashman and Desai.

Defending LGBT rights in Northern Ireland

In December we warned about a new Bill being tabled in the Northern Ireland Assembly by DUP backbencher Paul Givan that would undermine equality legislation. The 'Conscience Bill' could allow religious business owners to decline to serve customers, if the service would "promote or facilitate" a same-sex union.



Along with LGBT rights groups we helped promote opposition to the Bill and used a consultation in February to strongly criticise its ill-thought-out provisions. We'd received legal advice from an eminent academic lawyer that the proposed legislation is so widely drafted that it could be used to justify discrimination in any service and lead to widespread discrimination.

The strength of opposition and use of a Petition of Concern (a parliamentary mechanism requiring controversial motions to gain cross-community support) lodged by all the other major Stormont parties blocked the Bill.

The Bill's supporters sought to advance the myth that Christians are discriminated against by equality legislation (particularly that protecting LGBT people) and that they need extra legal protection. This is becoming a common strategy by religious groups seeking to write religious privilege into law.

Tackling caste discrimination

A report commissioned by the Government before the 2010 Election found that there was discrimination on grounds of caste in the UK. Since then we have been fighting to have such discrimination made unlawful. We played a role in the House of Lords, when Parliament instructed the Government to introduce legislation.

Despite assuring the UN that anti-discrimination law was being introduced as it had recommended, the Government continues to argue against it and seemingly intends to delay it indefinitely.

During the general election the National Council of Hindu Temples – a registered charity – was rebuked by the Charity Commission for appearing to endorse the Conservative Party, over their opposition to outlawing caste discrimination.

The Government now claims that a recent employment tribunal decision, *Tirkey v Chandok*, (that only says that caste "might be capable of" protection under the Equality Act), obviates the need for legislation. Even the vague intention of introducing legislation has now been dropped.

Only with unambiguous legislation will legal claims be straightforward and inexpensive – especially important to those labelled "low caste" who are likely to be impecunious. Having to rely on quirky case law is the opposite. That, however, is exactly what the Government told Lord Avebury and the NSS it was proposing, in response to a joint letter to the Prime Minister.

Religious 'marriages' and women's rights

Religious 'marriages' and women's rights

We're continuing to consult with Muslim women's groups and other human rights campaigners over what can be done to protect women left vulnerable by 'religious-only' marriages that have no legal standing.

In December, we welcomed a report by AURAT, a charity which supports victims of honour-based violence, which showed many Muslim women are unsure of their legal rights and assumed that 'marriage' ceremonies were legally valid simply because they had taken place in the UK. Educating young people about their legal rights is crucial, so that in later life they are not victims of religious 'marriages' in which they have no legal protection.

“The government has been directed to introduce anti-discrimination legislation by Parliament (twice) and the UN. For it to defy both can only be explained by conflict with a strong vested interest.”

KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD, executive director on the Government's refusal to outlaw caste-discrimination

//EQUALITY & HUMAN RIGHTS

One law for all, religious law and Sharia

November 2014 saw a major campaign success after the Law Society withdrew its practice note on sharia compliant wills, issuing an apology after widespread criticism for gender discrimination and other concerns.

The note had advised solicitors that “illegitimate and adopted children are not sharia heirs” and that “male heirs in most cases receive double the amount inherited by a female heir.” The guidance also stated that “non-Muslims may not inherit at all” and that “a divorced spouse is no longer a sharia heir.”

The NSS had worked with a wide range of campaign groups to have the guidance withdrawn, and the Law Society thanked us for raising concerns and said they hoped the NSS would “continue to engage with the Society and its work in the future”. NSS executive director Keith Porteous Wood met with the Law Society again in February and thanked them for withdrawing the guidance.

We also welcomed the Government’s pledge to review sharia ‘courts’ in the UK, having raised this with parliamentarians.

One recurrent issue related to religion and law is the wearing of the face veil. We believe face veils should not be permitted in courts or in settings where communication

is paramount. A poll by the Bar Council this year found support for our position with 91% of barristers saying they would insist witnesses remove a face veil while giving evidence in court.



CHILDREN’S RIGHTS

Clerical child abuse: RC Church at the UN

The Society has been instrumental over a number of years in having the United Nations hold the Roman Catholic Church to account over clerical child abuse.

A detailed statement we prepared was referred to and summarised in a verbal intervention at the Human Rights Council’s plenary session in Geneva in September. These were made through our affiliates, the International Humanist and Ethical Union and European Humanist Federation – to both we express our thanks. The intervention was made by NSS member and volunteer Josephine Macintosh, currently undertaking postgraduate studies in Law.



Josephine Macintosh

The Pope’s commission to examine child abuse is a cynical attempt to deflect attention from the Committee’s damning conclusions. The Tribunal to examine bishops’ conduct over abuse provides an illegitimate alternative to the secular justice to which many of these bishops should be subjected.

Manfredi La Manna, an NSS member and lecturer at St Andrews University, called for shamed Scottish Cardinal Keith O’Brien to be stripped by the University of his honorary degree over his sexual abuse. It refused and outrageously criticised Mr La Manna for having made his call public.

Clerical child abuse: UK

Establishment cover-ups were also evident on a spectacular scale over the former Anglican Bishop of Gloucester, jailed in 2015 for a string of sexual offences over 20 years. When initially exposed in the 1990s he was forced to resign and accept a trivial caution, leniency having been urged by many prominent members of the establishment (said to include a member of the Royal family). The Church, police and CPS, which has admitted this was mishandled, have been involved in an unpardonable perversion of the course of justice.

The NSS is making a detailed submission relating to this case to Justice Lowell Goddard who heads the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

Briefing UN committee on state of children’s rights

The NSS made a submission to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child urging the Committee to recommend to the UK Government that:

- Children and young people’s access to local schools is never determined by their religious beliefs or activities, or those of their parents.
- All new publicly funded schools are secular in character and truly inclusive and equally welcoming to children of all religion and belief backgrounds.
- Legislation is changed to remove any requirement on children to “take part” in worship and make attendance at collective worship voluntary in all schools.
- Legislation is passed requiring all state-funded schools, including faith based schools, to provide age-appropriate and objective sex education.

HEALTHCARE

Rethinking hospital chaplaincy

We've continued to campaign for a root and branch reform of chaplaincy in the NHS and cautiously welcomed new guidance from NHS England which discusses the pastoral needs of non-religious patients, having previously responded to a consultation on the draft guidance.

We raised concerns that a multi-faith approach to chaplaincy will never provide total coverage to all patients' religious beliefs, and would be prohibitively expensive. Indeed research revealed that NHS Trusts have spent over £23 million on religious chaplaincy in the last financial year, equivalent to employing 1,000 new nurses. We questioned whether this was money well-spent.

No taxpayer-funded post in the NHS should be reserved for people of a particular religious faith.



Safeguarding abortion access and reproductive healthcare rights

In December we welcomed a Supreme Court ruling which clarified the limits of conscientious objection in abortion treatment. The Greater Glasgow Health Board had (as we urged) appealed against an earlier decision in favour of two nurses who had claimed the right not to “delegate, supervise and support” staff who were involved in abortions.



In June the NSS and the Secular Medical Forum warned that the Conscientious Objection (Medical Activities) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords, would greatly expand the number of staff able to opt-out of peripheral involvement in procedures such as the termination of a pregnancy, significantly compromising the provision of patient care and upsetting the delicate balance between legitimate conscientious objection and the need for safe, comprehensive healthcare. We are continuing to monitor the private member's Bill to see if it makes progress.

In July we were co-signatories to an open letter urging the Government to protect abortion service providers and patients' right to access healthcare without harassment, after a clinic was reportedly forced to close following intimidation by religious groups. The letter argued "It is not acceptable for any part of our National Health Service to be held hostage by a small number of protesters who are preventing women accessing, or getting information about, services."

Religion in hospitals

We remain vigilant about the imposition of religion in hospitals and by healthcare providers. We have reported cases this year where a psychiatrist admitted distributing “highly inappropriate” unsolicited religious material and one instance where a GP performed an exorcism on a mentally ill patient and told her to stop taking her anti-depressants for “religious reasons”.

There have been numerous cases of evangelising by healthcare workers in recent years, and the NSS is active in revealing crucial details omitted by the media, as we did in the case of Victoria Wasteny, an occupational therapist who claimed religious discrimination after she was dismissed for seriously inappropriate proselytisation at work.

The NSS has also offered support to NHS workers affected by evangelising in hospitals, and we work closely with the Secular Medical Forum to offer advice and we are very grateful indeed for their advice to us and for advice received from secular lawyers.

“We fear that this Bill, if it gets through the significant parliamentary hurdles in its way, would upset that balance drastically, and allow for an inappropriately wide exemption – covering people who are at the very periphery of these services. This would clearly have a damaging effect on patients' access to healthcare.”

NSS campaigns manager STEPHEN EVANS raises objections to the Conscientious Objection (Medical Activities) Private Member's Bill sponsored by crossbench peer Baroness O'Loan

OTHER CAMPAIGN WORK

BBC and the media

The Society scored a success with the BBC in January, after the BBC Trust upheld a complaint over the way in which the BBC Asian Network framed a story concerning the allocation of places at a Sikh faith school as a 'race issue', rather than as an issue of religious freedom. The BBC Trust accepted that describing non-Sikh parents opposed to sending their children to a Sikh school as "white parents" was inappropriate and that it wrongly "implied that parents' objections to faith education were on the grounds of race."

In December 2014 we asked our supporters in December to challenge *Thought for the Day* in a consultation on the BBC's radio output. It was revealed in August that religious radio programmes are the "least popular" and "least well received" of all BBC speech radio output, but the Corporation refuses to change the nature of its output.

In September we urged our supporters to vote for making *Thought for the Day* a "philosophy slot" open to all, non-believers and religious contributors alike. Philosopher Nigel Warburton proposed the concept on Open Democracy's *Our Beeb* website, a platform for debating the future of public service broadcasting. With the support of our members, his idea became by far the most popular.

Our executive director Keith Porteous Wood wrote in August that the BBC was failing to respond to fair criticism of its religious output, particularly in light of its long-running failure to seriously review *Thought for the Day*.

“I knew of the NSS from its campaigns and its public statements and contributions long before I joined. For me, it remains the most important UK organisation seeking to promote democratic secular values throughout society.”

STEPHEN, new member from Kent

Chancel Repair Liability

NSS executive director Keith Porteous Wood, Lord Avebury and specialist lawyer Michael Hall met with the Secretary General of the Church of England's Archbishops' Council in October 2014 and made the case for abolition, and for mitigating the hardship Chancel Repair Liability (CRL) causes. The Society is also working with senior figures in the Law Society investigating all avenues of resolving this.

Our honorary associates made a strong case for ending CRL in a House of Lords debate held in January, and peers described the ancient duty as a "medieval anomaly".

Thousands of properties have had their value and saleability damaged by CRL in the past, but the Church is demanding compensation before abolition, despite not recovering any significant amount of money from CRL in the past century.

Lord Avebury, who initiated the debate and who has worked tirelessly on this issue, said the "only fair solution is abolition".

Religious exemptions and non-stun slaughter

The past year has seen significant developments concerning non-stun animal slaughter. Before the election a public petition calling for an end to religious exemptions to animal welfare laws, which we helped promote through *Newsline* and social media, attracted well over 100,000 signatures. Despite widespread public and expert support for changing the law, the Government said it respected "the rights of the Jewish and Muslim communities to eat meat prepared in accordance with their religious beliefs" and refused to take action.

In February 2015 MPs debated the issue and cited the "overwhelming" public support ending the religious exemption. In light of the Government's refusal to act, some MPs called for better labelling of food products to give consumers choice over whether they buy non-stun meat.

A poll by the RSPCA found that 80% of Britons want an end to non-stun slaughter and a survey by the European Commission found clear support for labelling of meat to specify whether it is from a pre-stunned animal.

In the meantime, given that there is little likelihood of Government action to remove the exemption for religious slaughter, the NSS has backed calls for clearer labelling.

Separation of church and state

A welcome development came during Tim Farron's campaign for the leadership of the Liberal Democrats, when he called for a secular state and for the disestablishment of the Church of England.

And a YouGov poll of Anglican clergy found that one-in-seven clerics would support full disestablishment of the Church and three-in-ten favoured some reforms, with the Church retaining only "some aspects" of its current formal ties to the state. 54% said the Church should retain its established status, leaving a significant minority in favour of modest changes.

As long as the UK retains an established Church, the NSS is keen to make sure that it does not interfere with secular matters and also to seek to limit it exercising its privilege, for example in the House of Lords.

In November 2014 the NSS called for an inclusive national day of remembrance, instead of a religious ceremony dominated by a single Christian denomination.

The area of the greatest privileged religious interference in public life is in education. A House of Lords debate in November 2014 saw this religious influence strongly criticised by honorary associates of the NSS.

While Christian peers including bishops argued religion and politics cannot be kept separate, the NSS responded that the Church was out of touch with public opinion and spoke from a privileged position, something that was inappropriate if they wished to speak out on politics. If the Church wants to play a role in politics, it should not do so from a place of special institutional power, but on a level playing field.

A particularly egregious example of religious privilege this year was a £400,000 handout from the DCLG, then Eric Pickles' department, to "strengthen" faith organisations in the UK.

The former Secretary of State had also served as Minister for Faith after the departure of Baroness Warsi from the Government, and the NSS is very pleased to report that the Minister for Faith title has since been effectively abolished.

//OTHER CAMPAIGN WORK

Easter trading

In April we wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to use powers contained in the Easter Act 1928 to fix the date of Easter and relax restrictions on Easter Sunday trading.

The date of Easter currently varies by over a month and the proposal to fix the date has been backed by the Local Government Association and the Family and Childcare Trust. Religious organisations, including the Second Vatican Council, have supported a fixed date in principle.

While the NSS supports the rights of anyone to celebrate Easter as they wish, the degree of restriction on Easter Sunday trading is unwarranted and inconvenient for many families and businesses. For example, garden centres and DIY stores being completely closed is a significant disadvantage to the populace on what is the longest Spring bank holiday.

In September, we submitted evidence to a consultation on devolving the regulation of Sunday trading to local authorities. Although traditionally motivated by religious privilege, there are legitimate arguments for and against restricting trading on Sunday, and the decisions of Government (whether local or central) should be religiously neutral.

Meeting with the French embassy to discuss secularism

We were pleased to be invited to meet a top French judge and the social affairs team at the French Embassy in London to discuss secularism. They wished to discover our perspective on the operation of, and challenges to, secularism in the UK and our impression of these in France. We envy secularism being institutionally embedded in France and the popular support for it, but also see that it is also coming under growing threat and that over some issues rigid adherence to the principle may even be counter-productive. They were very complimentary about our work.

A written constitution for Britain?

In December we hosted an event with NSS honorary associate Graham Allan MP, chair of the (since disbanded) Parliamentary Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee, and Bob Morris, from the UCL Constitution Unit, to discuss whether the UK needed a codified constitution – a “New Magna Carta”. The NSS takes no position on whether the UK should have a codified constitution and we used the Select Committee’s consultation to call for secular constitutional principles and raise concerns about the existing unwritten constitution.



Graham Allen MP (left) and Bob Morris at the “New Magna Carta” event

The consultation provided a good opportunity to advance the Secular Charter, and to consider how secular principles might be applied to foster a fairer, freer system of government, regardless of whether that is done within our existing constitutional system or through a written one.

SCOTLAND

In 2014 the agenda in Scotland was somewhat dominated by the independence referendum, and we were appalled to see an SNP Minister try to secure the Catholic vote with a last minute promise to give discriminatory state-funded Catholic schools ‘constitutional protection.’ This would have enshrined sectarian schooling in a modern independent Scotland – meanwhile football fans continue to be jailed for singing sectarian songs at football matches.

As ever, education was the primary battleground this year with our spokesperson for Scotland, Alistair McBay, assisting a number of parents challenging the imposition of religion on their children in Scotland’s schools. A successful petition to the Scottish Parliament by the Scottish Secular Society to ban the teaching of creationism in school science classes flushed out a cabal of creationists in Holyrood, with John Mason MSP lodging a Motion to the effect that creationism was a valid viewpoint and should be taught because no creationist position “can be proved or disproved by science”.

We also raised awareness of a manipulative ‘education resource’ called ‘The God Question’ which was a clear attempt to get Intelligent Design into science classrooms. Meanwhile, there was no success for the Edinburgh Secular Society with its petition to end the anti-democratic practice of three religious voting nominees being appointed to Scottish local council education committees.

Most significant perhaps beyond the independence referendum was the passing of Scotland’s same sex-marriage law, and the corresponding failure of a prolonged, vitriolic and deeply homophobic campaign against it from the Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland and of course the Scottish Catholic Church.

“ I felt more than ever the necessity and importance of the vigilance that the NSS maintains in the face of those who would seek to gain and maintain special privileges for ‘faith’ ideologies and undermine our hard-won rights and freedoms. Hence my decision to sign up and make a small contribution to the continuance of assertive secularism.”

TERRY, new member from Norwich

SECLARIST OF THE YEAR

This year we awarded our annual Secularist of the Year prize to *Charlie Hebdo*, for the magazine's courageous response to the terror attack on their Paris office.

Just one week after the attack, the remaining staff of *Charlie Hebdo* published an edition of the magazine featuring an editorial making a passionate defence of secularism and the right to free expression.

The £5,000 prize money awarded to *Charlie Hebdo* was donated to the fund supporting the families of the murdered cartoonists.

Guardian cartoonist Martin Rowson accepted the award on behalf of *Charlie Hebdo*'s staff at an event in central London. It was widely agreed to have been one of the most moving ceremonies yet.

As for all previous Secularist of the Year events, the president masterminded this year's event, backed up by all the staff. Terry Sanderson told the audience that, "Since the events of 7 January in Paris, *Charlie Hebdo* has become more than a magazine – it has become an ideal, a symbol of democracy, a rallying cry to those who value freedom and openness in public debate".



Aliya Saleem (secular education campaigner), Gita Sahgal (the Centre for Secular Space) and Tehmina Kazi (British Muslims for Secular Democracy)



Martin Rowson's speech was well received



Keith with Nikita Malik, of the Quilliam Foundation



Lord Avebury with Safak Pavey (last year's winner and recently re-elected Turkish MP)



NSS President Terry Sanderson



Professors Atkins, Dawkins and Grayling



Turkish MP, human rights campaigner, Safak Pavey

“One of the things we laugh at, and we mock, with such beautiful precision as a species is those people who place themselves or their opinions in authority over us.”

MARTIN ROWSON

COMMUNICATIONS

Throughout the year we've continued to provide a secular voice in the media, challenging religious privilege and defending freedom and equality as a counterbalance to the powerful religious lobby. We've been widely quoted by news outlets, made numerous television appearances and have given radio interviews on a wide range of topics on stations up and down the country.

Our website secularism.org.uk received almost 1.1 million visitors this year and continues to keep our supporters informed with breaking news analysis and resources.

Around 250 news stories and nearly 100 opinion pieces were published in the last year.

Almost 160,000 people read our daily media round-up on the website, where we shared over 5,000 news stories of interest to secularists. Many more people discussed these articles via our Facebook page or Twitter account.

Newsline, our email newsletter, which keeps over 23,500 subscribers up to date on a weekly basis, saw over 5,000 people sign up in the last year.

On Facebook, our page grew from just over 11,000 likes to just over 13,200 over the last year. On the average day almost 700 people engage with the page, with more than 8,000 people seeing our content.

On Twitter, our follows grew from 17,900 to 23,800 and on the average day our tweets are seen 36,500 times.



Article by communications officer Benjamin Jones



Joey Barton



Executive director, Keith Porteous Wood



Campaigns manager, Stephen Evans



HUMAN RIGHTS & EQUALITY
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION
SECULAR EDUCATION
DEMOCRACY
SOCIAL COHESION
FREEDOM OF RELIGION
FREEDOM FROM RELIGION
SECULARISM PROTECTS

national secular society

New NSS leaflet

2014 AGM

“The National Secular Society upholds the universality of individual Human Rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.”

At our November 2014 Annual General Meeting members approved this new policy statement on Human Rights. The National Secular Society often works on a wide range of Human Rights issues, which are not directly secular, but which have secular implications.

LOOKING AHEAD – 150th ANNIVERSARY

The National Secular Society was founded in 1866 and 2016 marks our 150th anniversary. We're lining up a number of events to celebrate this special occasion, not least an anniversary conference on Saturday 3rd September 2016. Tickets will go on sale in January.

A new educational charity we are establishing to promote the public understanding of secularism will begin fundraising in the New Year for the commissioning of a bust of NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh – which is to be sited permanently in the Houses of Parliament.

Bradlaugh was elected Member of Parliament for Northampton in 1880 but was denied his seat in Parliament because he was not allowed as an atheist to take the religious Oath, precipitating four by-elections, each of which he won and the issue became a *cause celebre*. On one occasion he was literally thrown out of the Palace of Westminster, on another he was imprisoned in a cell in the famous Clock Tower under Big Ben, the last person to be held there.

In 1886 a new government finally allowed Bradlaugh to be sworn in, and he was instrumental in bringing about a change giving all MPs the right to affirm – a right they enjoy to this day.

Bradlaugh was a campaigner of courage and integrity and we hope you will give generously to ensure that the bust, a fitting tribute to the Society's founder, takes its place in the Palace of Westminster alongside other prominent parliamentarians.

NORMAN BONNEY 1944 – 2015



In February we were sad to report the death of Prof. Norman Bonney after a long illness, which caused him to resign last year from the NSS Council after four years' service.

He was Emeritus Professor at Edinburgh Napier University and the founder and leading voice of the Edinburgh Secular Society. He did more in recent years than anyone to raise the profile of secularism in Scotland.

This will be his enduring legacy, as will the fruits of his distinguished academic career. Shortly before he died he published *Monarchy, Religion and the State: Civil Religion in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the Commonwealth* and *The Cenotaph: A consensual and contested monument of remembrance*.

He will be greatly missed.

HONORARY ASSOCIATES

Graham Allen MP
 Prof Peter Atkins
 Lord Avebury
 Joey Barton*
 Baroness Blackstone
 Prof Colin Blakemore
 Edward Bond
 Julia Hartley-Brewer*
 Nick Brown MP
 Prof Ted Cattle CBE
 Lord Cashman of Limehouse
 Nick Cohen
 Prof Richard Dawkins
 Prof Lord Desai
 Angela Eagle MP
 Baroness Falkner of Margravine
 Jim Fitzpatrick MP
 Baroness Flather
 Caroline Fourest*
 Michael Frayn
 Lord Tristan Garel-Jones*
 Ricky Gervais
 Lord Goodhart
 Prof Anthony Grayling
 Nia Griffith MP
 Dr Evan Harris
 Lord Harrison of Chester
 Patrick Harvie, MSP
 Prof Ted Honderich
 Mary Honeyball MEP
 Kelvin Hopkins MP
 Dr Julian Huppert
 Sophie in 't Veld MEP

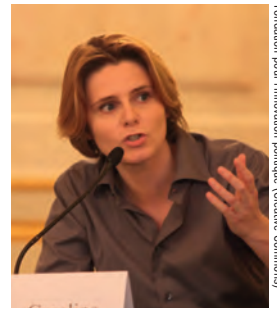
Virginia Ironside
 Dr Michael Irwin
 Asma Jahangir
 Prof Steve Jones
 Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead
 Prof Lawrence Krauss
 Stewart Lee
 Graham Linehan
 Baroness Massey of Darwen
 Kerry McCarthy MP
 Jonathan Meades
 Sir Jonathan Miller
 Baroness Murphy
 Maryam Namazie
 Taslima Nasrin
 Maajid Nawaz
 Lord O'Neill of Clackmannan
 Pragna Patel
 Lord Peston
 Philip Pullman
 Geoffrey Robertson QC
 Martin Rowson
 Gita Sahgal
 Joan Smith
 Dan Snow
 Dr David Starkey
 Peter Tatchell
 Lord Taverne QC
 Baroness Tonge
 Polly Toynbee
 Baroness Turner of Camden
 Lord Warner of Brockley
 Baroness Young of Hornsey



Joey Barton



Julia Hartley Brewer



Caroline Fourest

Fondation pour l'innovation politique (Creative Commons)



Lord Tristan Garel-Jones

*Honorary Associates we have been pleased to welcome over the last year
 On 12 March we were sad to note the death of honorary associate Sir Terry Pratchett.

YOUR COUNCIL as of 1 October 2015

President

Terry Sanderson

Vice Presidents

Alistair McBay
Gerard Phillips

Treasurer

Clare Wadd

Council

Judy Audaer (co-opted)
Ray Newton
Sadikur Rahman
Afonso Reis e Sousa
Peter Revell
Dorothy Smith (co-opted)
Robert Stovold
Adrian Tippetts
Peter Vlachos

Clare Coghill resigned during the year.

Executive director

Keith Porteous Wood FCCA

Campaigns manager

Stephen Evans



Terry Sanderson



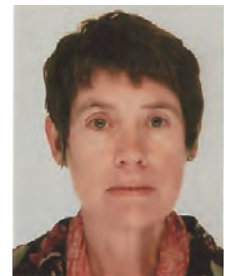
Alistair McBay



Gerard Phillips



Clare Wadd



Judy Audaer



Ray Newton



Sadikur Rahman



Afonso Reis e Sousa



Peter Revell



Dorothy Smith



Robert Stovold



Adrian Tippetts



Peter Vlachos

AFFILIATED GROUPS

National Groups

Humanist and Secularist Liberal Democrats
Secular Medical Forum
UK Society of Celebrants

Local groups

Bedfordshire Humanists
Belfast Humanist Group
Birmingham Humanists
Brighton Secular Humanists
Bristol Secular Society
Cambridge Humanist Group
Chester Humanists
Chiltern Humanists
Cornwall Humanists
Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists
Devon Humanists
Dorset Humanists
East Kent Humanists
Edinburgh Secular Society
Essex Humanists
Farnham Humanists
Gloucestershire Humanists
Greater Manchester Humanists
Hampstead Humanist Society
Havering & District Humanist Society
Humanist Society of West Yorkshire
Isle of Man Freethinkers
Isle of Wight Secular and Humanist Society
Lancashire Secular Humanists
Leicester Secular Society
Liverpool Humanist Group
Milton Keynes Humanists
Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group
North East Humanists
North Kent Humanists
North London Humanist Group
Nottingham Secular Society
Oxford Humanists
Plymouth Humanists
Sheffield Humanist Society
South East London Humanist Group
South Hampshire Humanists
South Somerset Humanists
Stoke Humanist Group
Suffolk Humanists and Secularists
Sutton Humanist Group
West Glamorgan Humanist Group
West London Humanists and Secularists

Student groups

AHS Society – University of Leicester
Birmingham Atheist, Secular & Humanist Society
Bradford Atheist & Humanist Society
Cambridge University Atheist and Agnostic Society
Durham University Humanist and Secularist Society
Kings College AHS Society
Kings College London Secular Society
Leeds Atheist Society
LSE SU ASH Society
NU-Think (Newcastle University Skeptics Society)
Oxford Atheists, Secularists & Humanists
Queen Mary Atheism Secularism and Humanism Society
Reading Atheist, Humanist and Secularist Society
St. Andrews University Atheist Society
UCL Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society
University of Bristol Atheist Agnostic Secular Society
University of Lincoln Secular Society
University of Nottingham Secular Society

THANKS

As an organisation solely focused on campaigning, the NSS is not eligible for charitable status – and we neither seek nor receive funding from publicly-funded bodies. We are therefore reliant on members' subscriptions, donations and legacies to fund our campaigning work. We are immensely grateful for this support. You are the NSS.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who has donated money in the last year or remembered us in their wills. If you would like to take out a direct debit, please contact the office. If you would like to leave a legacy to the NSS to help secure secularism for future generations, the executive director will be pleased to assist: he can be contacted through the office.

We also thank the many people who generously donate their time, expertise and advice to the NSS.

We are particularly grateful to those who have provided legal advice and support over the last year; particular thanks go to James Chegwiddden, Gráinne Mellon, David Wolfe QC and Michael Hall, a solicitor who has greatly assisted our work on Chancel Repair Liability.

Thanks also to Dr Antony Lempert, Chair of the Secular Medical Forum, who has provided valuable assistance to the NSS throughout the year.

Throughout the year Barry Thorpe has given his time to assist with research and his work is very much appreciated. We are also grateful to Bob Baxter, Stephen Knight, Paul Lopez, Tony Loraine, Alison Meek, Paul Orton, Matt Smith, Alice Suttle, and Patricia Tricker for volunteering their time to help the NSS with events and campaign work over the last year.

A massive thank you goes to Claudine Baxter, who regularly assists us with membership administration in the office. Thanks also to Sven Klinge for photographing our events.

Special thanks also to *Guardian* cartoonist Martin Rowson for his magnificent speech in accepting our Secularist of the Year award on behalf of *Charlie Hebdo*.

We also thank the many members and supporters for sharing their experiences and assisting our research and campaigning work. Particular thanks to David Boothroyd who assisted us in opposing the Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Bill.

Thanks also to all those who ran stalls at freshers' fairs and local events and got involved with campaigning locally.

NOT A MEMBER?

The most tangible way of supporting our work is by becoming a member and contributing funds to enable us to work; the more funds we have, the more we can do. If you believe, as we do, that a secular Britain is the best way to achieve true equality for all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs, then please join us and become part of what is possibly the most important causes of the 21st century. Together we can create a fairer and more equal society.

You can join us online at secularism.org.uk/join or by contacting the office at enquiries@secularism.org.uk or by calling **020 7404 3126**.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS SAY:

I have long been convinced that the only way to fight religious extremism of all origins, and to protect the basic liberties of all citizens, is to work towards a properly secular and democratic society, in which freedom of religious practice and expression (within the law) is safeguarded, but where the state takes no sides in religion save to ensure that it has no special privileges and cannot be forced on anyone.

— Stephen, Kent

The NSS is important because there are too few organisations in this country that can act as a voice for secularists and make a difference, especially when disproportionately influential groups with the support of their friends in high places continue to try to impose their brand of religious dogma on people like me.

— Diane, Chester

I decided to join the National Secular Society as I feel it's necessary to promote the equal status of religions on a platform that does not privilege one over the other. I find it unfortunate that the influence of religion in education is so often to promote the importance of faith over the choice to follow such beliefs. In a society where diversity and religious freedom is flourishing, the time for a monotheistic state is passing, and I believe the promotion of secularism is the only way.

— Edward, Wiltshire

I find the privilege provided to religion within our society to be intolerable. It is tiresome to repeatedly hear and see the straw man view of secularism being cynically attacked by those who wish only to preserve the status quo, and who see anything but religious privilege as them being persecuted. I found the NSS to be one of the major organisations effectively working to address these inequalities, and that is why I support the NSS.

— Dalis, Bucks

I decided to join the NSS, whose campaigning against religious privilege wherever it reared its malignant head I had long admired. The NSS goes about its business with intelligence, reason, sincerity and courtesy in marked contrast to most of the organisations whose views and actions it challenges and I am proud to be a member.

— Geoffrey, Gloucestershire

I originally joined the NSS because in my area a significant number of our secondary schools only admit children whose families attend church – although these schools are largely state funded and are seen as a key part of the local provision. I feel extremely strongly that faith is a personal matter and do not want children segregated according to their parents' beliefs (or their parents' willingness to lie about their beliefs)

— Sarah, Kent

FREEDOM OF & FROM RELIGION