

Bulletin



National
Secular
Society

challenging religious privilege

Issue 87

Spring 2024

Faith schools failing disadvantaged families

The truth about faith-based selection

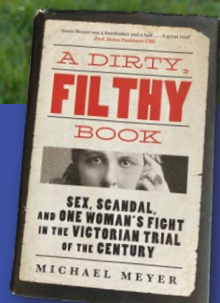


ALSO IN THIS EDITION:

The Islamist threat to schools

Bishop's voting privileges challenged on Isle of Man

New book on Annie Besant published – exclusive offer for NSS supporters





It was true a century ago and it's true today: secularism protects our most fundamental freedoms

Almost 150 years ago, two leading figures of the National Secular Society stood trial, charged with sordid crimes under the Obscene Publications Act for publishing and selling a birth control pamphlet.

In the dock alongside NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh was Annie Besant, a formidable 19th century secularist, social reformer and women's rights advocate. I'm delighted to see her finally getting the recognition she deserves, with the publication of a 'Dirty, Filthy Book' documenting Besant's extraordinary life and pivotal role in championing the crucial cause of birth control.

Today, the NSS continues that long tradition of promoting personal autonomy, and protecting freedom of thought, choice, and expression, in the face of religious attempts to suppress them.

There are myriad ways in which religion limits individual freedoms. Our role at the NSS is to ensure that religion doesn't exert control by unduly influencing public policy. The recent finding that the public overwhelmingly support

legalising assisted dying shows theological objections don't deter the population from backing reform – nor should they deter parliamentarians from legislating to allow it.

One area of policy where organised religion still wields significant influence is in education, through its role in running thousands of publicly funded faith schools. In this edition we highlight new research revealing that such

schools are among the most socially selective in England. This comes off the back of earlier research showing faith schools also admit fewer pupils with special educational

needs and disabilities. The perception that faith schools perform better can usually be attributed to their selective admissions policies, which inherently favour certain demographics rather than any superior 'faith ethos'.

There's no moral, educational or social justification for allowing faith-based admissions to continue. It's time to show this form of discrimination the door.

Our role at the NSS is to ensure that religion doesn't exert control by unduly influencing public policy.

Hindu group threatens secularists with police over "offensive" talk

We're concerned that some religious organisations weaponise the concept of 'hate speech' to silence criticism of their beliefs and practices. A recent incident at a secularist group illustrates our concerns all too well.

In December, Leicester Secular Society (LSS) held a talk, entitled "Hinduism: Wretched Immoral Compass", by a former Hindu. The talk included discussions of Hinduism's 'caste system', which is at the root of many human rights abuses in India and elsewhere.

But before the talk took place, LSS received an email from the Hindu Council UK (HCUK) which said the title "seems designed to appeal and incite hatred towards Hindus".

HCUK has consistently opposed introducing a ban on caste discrimination in the UK.

The letter went on: "We intend to bring this matter to the attention of the local Hindu community, and local authorities, including the police.

"The use of offensive language targeting a religious community can have significant repercussions, and we hope you take our concerns seriously".

LSS chair Ned Newitt replied that LSS is "committed to the free discussion of religion" and "deeply opposed to discrimination".

He added: "Free expression is a fundamental principle of a free, democratic, secular society, and we must not go back, through the



Leicester Secular Society is thought to be the world's oldest secularist group and is affiliated with the NSS.

backdoor, to the type of society where religion is exempt from criticism, ridicule and satire".

The talk went ahead without incident. LSS has received no further contact from HCUK or the police. We congratulate LSS for refusing to be cowed and standing by their principles.

Secular education, Islamism, and the case of Michaela Community School

We've long advocated for a secular education system as the best way to deal with religious tensions in our increasingly diverse schools. A recent high-profile incident underlines the need for this approach.

In January, news broke that Michaela Community School in north London was subjected to death threats over a row about Islamic prayer rituals last year.

According to reports, a group of around 30 pupils began intimidating other children into fasting for Ramadan, wearing hijab, and quitting 'un-Islamic' school clubs.

The group also started holding prayer rituals in the playground and pressuring pupils to pray. The school said it decided to restrict these prayer gatherings after they "resulted in a division in the playground between the Muslim and the non-Muslim children which had never happened before".

A pupil was then suspended for "extreme rudeness" towards a teacher who objected to her bringing a prayer mat to the playground.

"We believe it is wrong to separate children according to religion or race"

– Katharine Birbalsingh, headteacher of Michaela Community School.



Jonathan A Jones, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Teachers were subsequently subjected to "appalling" abuse and threats, including bomb scares.

The suspended pupil and her mother are taking legal action against the school, saying the restriction on prayer rituals is discriminatory and breaches their religious freedom.

The school's headteacher stated Michaela is "a happy and respectful

secular school" which wants its "multi-cultural and multi-faith community to flourish".

This incident comes at a time of growing concern about 'anti-blasphemy' extremism in the UK. A report published in March by the Commission for Countering Extremism says responses to perceived acts of 'blasphemy' are "more organised than ever".

Michaela is one of a growing number of schools which have faced Islamist threats in recent years. Another report by Sara Khan, Independent Adviser for Social Cohesion and Resilience, has recommended the government create a unit tasked with responding to "flashpoint incidents" such as blasphemy protests at schools.

The school's pursuit of an inclusive and secular school ethos is laudable. The courts will determine the legality of the school's policy, but the rising tide of intimidation and threats involving schools should be universally condemned.

Schools subjected to threats from Islamist fundamentalists following accusations of 'blasphemy' or 'Islamophobia'

■ St Stephen's Primary School in London was bombarded with threats after it objected to pupils as young as eight being sent to school wearing hijab or told to fast for Ramadan.

2018

■ Teachers at several schools in Birmingham were abused and threatened for teaching about LGBT equality.

2019

■ A teacher at Batley Grammar School in West Yorkshire was forced into hiding after showing a picture of Muhammad during a religious education lesson.

2021

■ A pupil at Kettlethorpe High School in Wakefield received death threats after bringing a Quran into school where it was allegedly scuffed.

2023

■ Plashet School in London terminated a school equalities club following threatening complaints, spurred on by an Islamic group.

2023

■ Barclay Primary School in London was subjected to arson and bomb threats over 'Islamophobia' accusations, prompted by the decision to ban children from wearing political symbols including the Palestine flag.

2024

Council and school cut ties with evangelical group

We're regularly contacted by parents concerned about external religious groups coming to their children's school and attempting to convert them to Christianity. Fortunately, a recent case we worked on had a positive outcome.

In October, a mother whose children attend a school in Eccles asked us for advice about a group called the Message Trust, which came to the school each year to preach under the guise of providing Personal, Social and Health Education.

One of her children told her that in a recent session "they mentioned Jesus throughout" and presented Jesus "as

the solution to problems such as bullying". The speakers also apparently 'bribed' pupils with prizes to attend a Christian youth club.

Following our advice, the parent raised her concerns again with the school, which then confirmed it would not host this group again. We also got in touch with Salford City Council, which had promoted the Message Trust to 16 local schools. It has since said it is "not currently engaged" with the Message Trust.

We hope other councils and schools will follow this example and ensure any external speakers they invite do not use schools as mission fields.

Campaigning against unregistered schools

We've welcomed the Labour Party's announcement in January that, if elected, it will create a register of children not in school. We've long called for the creation of such a register to protect children from unregistered, illegal faith 'schools'. Some children who are supposedly home educated are in fact enrolled in unregistered schools.

Unregistered faith schools actively conceal themselves from authorities to evade inspection. This allows them to teach a very narrow, religion-based curriculum, including extremist, regressive and discriminatory dogma, without oversight.

Meanwhile, we've warned the Department for Education that its proposed new guidance for

local authorities on elective home education is too permissive of unregistered schools, as it suggests that in some cases sending a child to these settings could be considered "suitable".

The government must make it clear: it is never acceptable to deprive a child of adequate education and safeguarding.

A secular approach to school holidays

We've welcomed the Welsh government's proposal to decouple the school spring break from the Easter public holiday.

Currently, Wales's spring school holiday is based on the date of Easter, which significantly varies each year.

The Welsh government decided to consult on the issue because evidence suggests the distribution and placement of breaks can have an impact on learner progression and attainment. This is of particular concern when Easter falls later in spring, resulting in less time in school immediately before exams.

We said structuring the school term around Christian observances is inappropriate in a diverse society like Wales. Only 44% of the Welsh population is Christian, while 47% have no religion.

We added that the Welsh government should consider fixing the Easter public holidays. The Easter Act 1928 was intended to fix the date of the public holiday, but Christian groups have been unable to reach consensus on a fixed date.

Religious resistance to fixing a date is not a legitimate basis for ignoring the needs of schools and families who are disadvantaged by the fluctuating holidays.



The Local Government Association and the Family and Childcare Trust have both expressed support for a fixed Easter school holiday to allow parents to arrange childcare more easily.

shutterstock

Schools in Northern Ireland still religiously segregated, new research confirms

In January we contributed to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry on integrated education, calling for a secular school system which treats all families equally.

The inquiry examined the cost and implications of Northern Ireland's segregated school system. It also looked at the expansion of integrated schools, which proactively teach pupils from Protestant, Catholic and other religious and nonreligious backgrounds together in an effort to end the serious problem of sectarianism in NI.

Research published in January by Queen's University Belfast revealed there has been little change in school composition since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Just over 89% of children from Protestant families attend controlled or voluntary schools (de-facto Protestant in ethos), while 87% of pupils from Catholic backgrounds attend Catholic schools.

Confirmed: Faith schools are the most socially selective

Faith schools often boast about their high academic achievement. We've argued this has little to do with their religious ethos, and far more to do with the fact most kinds of faith schools can select pupils based on their family's religious observance.

New research confirms what's long been known: faith schools indeed take fewer pupils from disadvantaged families.

A report published by social mobility charity Sutton Trust in January concludes faith schools "are consistently more socially selective than non-religious schools".

Incredibly, it found 19 of the top 20 most socially selective schools are faith schools.

The research looked at the difference between the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at a school, and those in the school's catchment area; this is known as the 'FSM gap'. FSM eligibility is often used as a measure of pupil disadvantage.

The wider the FSM gap, the less representative the school's intake is in terms of socio-economic disadvantage. Sutton Trust found that this gap is "significantly larger" at faith schools.

The rate of FSM pupils at faith schools is 20.6%, compared with 22.4% in nonreligious schools. Non-Christian faith schools are considerably more socially selective, with an FSM rate of only 15.6%.

Although they represent only 19% of all comprehensives, faith schools constitute 29% of the top 500 schools on



photo: Shutterstock

Faith groups have consistently lobbied against attempts to end religious discrimination in faith school admissions. The Catholic Church even campaigns against the 50% cap on faith-based admissions at new academies.

Progress 8 scores, and 34% on Attainment 8 scores. Progress 8 indicates how much pupils improve compared with expectations, while Attainment 8 reflects the school's average academic performance.

The combination of over-representation in the top 500 schools and large FSM gap suggests faith schools "are more likely to be socially selective than non-religious schools", the report said.

The findings reflect those published by the Education Policy Institute in February. It found schools linked to dioceses are less likely to reflect their local areas in terms of the number of pupils they admit from low income backgrounds.

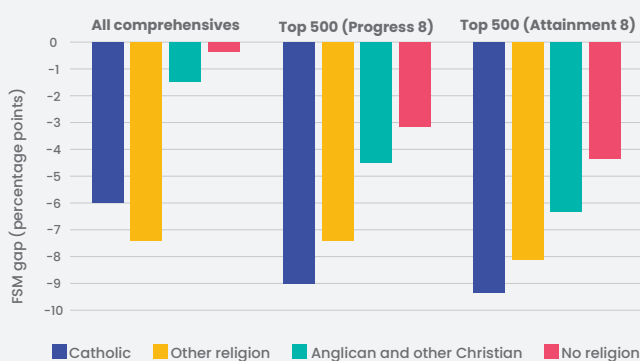
Research from the London School of Economics last year found faith schools admit fewer pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.

And in March, the Office for the Schools Adjudicator's annual report found some local authorities say faith schools' ability to prioritise families of their faith is making it harder to find suitable schools for looked after children, who are particularly vulnerable.

Faith schools are splitting our communities apart – and excluding families who need the greatest support. It's time to show faith-based selection the door.

Please call on your MP to support a secular, inclusive education system for all, with no religious discrimination: www.secularism.org.uk/admissions

FSM gaps by religious character



Source: Sutton Trust

Welsh government consults on school admissions

In February we responded to the Welsh government's consultation on changes to school admissions. The proposed changes would require local authorities to coordinate admissions between schools, with

pupils receiving only one offer of a school place.

We said the government should clarify that parents' selection of nonreligious schools will be protected under the new arrangements.

We added that the ability of faith schools to set faith-based criteria in their oversubscription policies is a significant cause of the complexities and inefficiencies which the proposed changes are intended to eliminate.

Charity's sexist "submit and love" sermon exposed

We've exposed a Christian charity whose pastor said a wife "that submits to her husband's leadership and respects him is easier to love".

Rosyth Baptist Church, which re-registered as a charity in January, recently published a sermon by pastor Chris Demetriou on its YouTube channel entitled "Submit and love". The sermon said a wife "should submit to her husband's leadership" because "that's the Lord's pattern for us".

We reported the church to the Office of the Scottish Charity

Regulator (OSCR), telling them this misogynistic and discriminatory sermon fails to fulfil the requirements that charities provide a public benefit and cause no harm.

This is the second time in recent years we've reported a Scottish charity over misogyny. A similar sermon was delivered by Moray Coast Baptist Church in 2022 which said housework is the "primary function" of women. But OSCR said it would not act because the charity exists for "the advancement of religion", and the sexist views it espoused are religious.

We then wrote to First Minister Humza Yousaf, who in February launched an initiative to "promote positive masculinity". We called on him to review "the advancement of religion"

charitable purpose, because its contribution to spreading misogyny undermines this initiative.

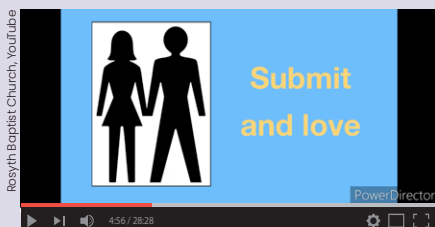
If the Scottish government is serious about tackling misogyny, it must stop enabling religious organisations which promote sexism. This means ending their tax breaks and removing their charitable status.

Church pastor blasted for sermons 'telling women to submit to their man'

Ultra-conservative Scottish reverend is blasted for 'misogynistic' Handmaid's Tale-style sermon calling for all women to 'submit to their husbands because it's God's will'

Christian pastor blasted for 'anti-women' sermons compared to 'The Handmaid's Tale'

Our story was featured widely in the national press, including the *Daily Mirror*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Record*.



Rosyth Baptist Church's "Submit and love" sermon ended with a prayer that "we will let our husbands lead".

BBC normalising hijab for young girls

We're alarmed that the BBC is normalising children wearing the hijab through its educational Bitesize platform, where the page on "respect" for Islam features a photograph of very young girl wearing a hijab.

When we raised our concerns with the BBC in January, it told us the image will "remain unchanged". It said senior members of their education team had asserted that Muslim girls and women wear the hijab as "a sign of modesty before God". It added that, "especially in the West", women and girls "choose to wear the hijab for a variety of reasons".

Misogyny is inherent in religious modesty codes. Young girls wearing hijab is more a reflection of rising fundamentalism than freedom of choice.



The resource which features this picture is targeted at children aged between five and seven years.

"The BBC's use of the term 'choice' when it comes to child veiling is a questionable one. How does a 5- or 6-year-old make an informed decision that effectively segregates her based on her sex?"

– **Maryam Namazie**, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain

Keeping abortion buffer zones safe from religious loopholes

In January we responded to the Home Office's consultation on safe access zones around abortion clinics.

We told the government that the law shouldn't be watered down to appease religious interest groups.

The law makes it an offence for a person who is within a safe access zone to cause "harassment, alarm or distress" to any person seeking to access, provide or facilitate the services at an abortion clinic.

Book on NSS trailblazer Annie Besant published

One of the NSS's most important and influential leading figures was Annie Besant – feminist, activist, and vice president of the NSS in its earliest years.

Together with NSS founder Charles Bradlaugh, Besant republished the pioneering birth control pamphlet 'The Fruits of Philosophy', in defiance of obscenity laws. Besant and Bradlaugh were prosecuted and, at their trial, Besant became the first woman to publicly endorse birth control.

We've therefore welcomed the publication of a new book all about Besant, by critically-acclaimed author

and journalist Michael Meyer. *A Dirty, Filthy Book – Sex, Scandal, and One Woman's Fight in the Victorian Trial of the Century* focuses on the 'Fruits of Philosophy' trial, and highlights why Besant's life and work were so extraordinary in the context of highly conservative, and highly Christian, Victorian England.

To celebrate *A Dirty, Filthy Book's* publication, we held an online talk with Michael Meyer in April to explore why he was inspired to write about Besant, and to discuss her importance within the history of secularism in the UK.

'Annie Besant was a freethinker and a half . . . A great read'
Prof. Helen Pankhurst CBE

A DIRTY, FILTHY BOOK



**SEX, SCANDAL,
AND ONE WOMAN'S FIGHT
IN THE VICTORIAN TRIAL
OF THE CENTURY**

MICHAEL MEYER

SPECIAL OFFER FOR NSS MEMBERS!

Waterstones are offering a discount of £5 off the recommended retail price for *A Dirty, Filthy Book*, exclusive to our members and supporters.

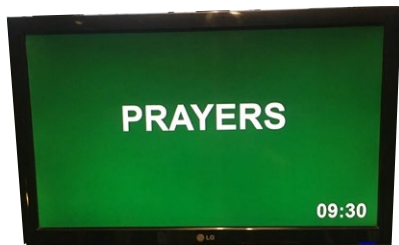
To claim your discount, use the code "FILTHY" at the checkout when you buy a copy of *A Dirty, Filthy Book* from Waterstones.com. This code is valid for online purchases only at Waterstones.com, and it will expire on 31st May.

Calls to end parliamentary prayers

In February, we called on the Speaker of the House of Commons Lindsay Hoyle to review the practice of holding prayers in the Commons chamber.

We told Hoyle parliamentary prayers fail to uphold the values of British society: equality, fairness, and respect for individual human rights and freedoms. We urged him to use his position to end this Church of England privilege in parliament.

A crossbench peer also called for an end to parliamentary prayers during a House of Lords debate on religious education in January. Norman Warner said that both Church and state “seem unwilling to recognise” the reality that Britain is increasingly irreligious, and less than 1% of 18-24 year olds are Anglicans. He criticised the imposition of prayers on both parliament and schools, and challenged the 26 seats in the Lords reserved for CofE bishops. He also questioned state funded faith schools.



Sittings in both the House of Commons and the Lords begin with Anglican prayers. Parliamentary prayers act as a seat reservation system during busy times; even MPs who are slated to speak have no option but to attend prayers to reserve a seat.

“We could and should abolish compulsory acts of Christian worship in schools, and we should move to teach an independently devised and more broadly based national education curriculum, as others have suggested, on faith and non-faith beliefs. This House might like to set an example by changing some of its own religious practices.”

– Lord Warner



UK Parliament

**Join our campaign to end parliamentary prayers:
www.secularism.org.uk/end-government-prayers**

Challenging the Isle of Man's bishop

Like Westminster, the Isle of Man also gives privileges to religious leaders in its parliament, Tynwald. It reserves a seat in the upper house, the Legislative Council, for the Church of England bishop of Sodor and Man. But we've seized an opportunity to get this seat removed.

In December, a bill which would remove the bishop's vote passed its second reading, triggering a consultation on the issue.

We therefore wrote to all 24 Members of the House of Keys (MHKs), Tynwald's directly elected lower branch, calling on them to pass the bill and to abolish the bishop's seat entirely.

We highlighted how the bishop had used his *ex officio* position to subvert the democratic will of the Manx people. In 2018, the bishop voted against a bill which sought to extend access to abortion.

The reforms to abortion law enjoyed overwhelming support during public consultation and were passed by a margin of 22 to 2 in the House of Keys.

Additionally, we called for an end to parliamentary prayers, which one MHK described as “exclusionary and divisive”.

Ending the bishop's voting rights in Tynwald would hopefully pave the way for stripping the 26 bishops of their privileges in Westminster.



Photo: Pixabay

Keeping remembrance secular

The *Daily Telegraph* reported in February that Secretary of State for Defence Grant Shapps is “furious” about army guidance which recommends that acts of remembrance be “inclusive” and “seek to avoid being conducted as a wholly religious event”.

We reminded Shapps of the importance of remembrance commemorations which are equally welcoming and relevant to all.

Keeping our national ceremonies secular is the best way to show respect for the diversity of religion and belief amongst those who gave their lives in war.



Taxpayers asked to give £50m a year to fix churches

How would you feel about going to see a healthcare professional in a church?

Under recommendations in a January report from the National Churches Trust (NCT), you might have to.

The NCT has identified many churches at risk of closure due to lack of funds for repair and maintenance (and lack of attendance). To rectify this, it recommends that the government moves public services, including the NHS, into places of worship, in addition to “helping to upgrade” these facilities where needed. This would appear to be an attempt to shift the burden of maintaining churches on to the

The Church of England holds billions of pounds in assets, but spends a large percentage on activities which do not preserve buildings – particularly evangelism.



Biblebox/CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons

public rather than the denominations which own and primarily use the church.

The NCT also suggests ringfencing public funding of at least £50

million a year to help “keep the UK’s churches open”.

In response, we wrote to Secretary of State Lucy Frazer urging the government not to spend public money on churches when there are other solutions considerably less burdensome to taxpayers. We also warned the NCT’s recommendations would undermine the secular nature of the NHS and other public services.

Many churches have historical, architectural and cultural value. But there is no business case for public spending on them when the CofE, and other wealthy denominations, are unwilling to take on the bulk of the financial burden for the buildings they own.

Report: CofE safeguarding “below standards” of secular institutions

A report published in February once more reveals that the Church of England’s agenda has been prioritised again and again over abuse victims and survivors, and those vulnerable to abuse.

The report concluded CofE safeguarding “falls below the standards expected and set in secular organisations” and “cannot be sufficiently improved whilst it remains within Church oversight”.

“It has been clear for several years that the Church of England cannot be trusted to do its own safeguarding effectively.”

– **Richard Scorer**, NSS vice president and lawyer specialising in representing victims and survivors of sexual abuse.

The report was commissioned by the CofE to propose recommendations for making its safeguarding fully independent of the Church.

A survey conducted for the report found 70% of victims and survivors felt ‘unsatisfied’ or ‘very unsatisfied’ with the outcome of the safeguarding process.

The report also found examples of safeguarding being ‘weaponised’ as a pretext for removing people “on the basis of moral judgements or simply because they were seen as a nuisance”. The report said it was “notable” that several examples “related to women and gay clergy”.

The government recently announced it would proceed with introducing mandatory reporting laws, in which anyone in a “regulated activity” relating to children in England would be legally required to report if they suspect a child is being sexually abused. The NSS and other campaigners have lobbied for religious institutions to be subject to mandatory reporting laws, without any faith-based exemptions.

This report demonstrates all too clearly why.



Left to right: Rachael Reign of Surviving Universal UK, Yehudis Fletcher of Nahamu, and NSS vice president and lawyer Richard Scorer lent their experiences and expertise to the panel discussion.

NSS hosts event on safeguarding in religious settings

In March, we brought together abuse survivors and safeguarding experts for a panel discussion on how to tackle abuse in religious communities.

The event took place at the Manchester Art Gallery and examined issues such as unregistered schools, forced marriage, coercive control in religious communities, and the findings of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

It was a valuable opportunity to discuss the steps needed to protect people in religious communities from abuse and harm.

Success: “Covid-19 scam” Christian charity closed

We’ve welcomed news that a Christian charity whose leader sold ‘plague protection kits’ during the Covid-19 pandemic has been shut down by the regulator, after we raised concerns.

In January the Charity Commission announced it had ordered the Kingdom Church GB to close, following an investigation into the sales of fake Covid-19 remedies by the church’s pastor and trustee Climate Wiseman.

We raised concerns about the London-based Kingdom Church in 2020, when local media reported that Wiseman was selling £91 ‘plague protection kits’ made of oil and string through a website linked to the charity.

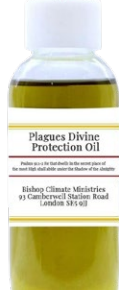
In 2022 Wiseman was found guilty of fraud for selling the kits, which were medically useless. He has also been disqualified from acting as a charity trustee or holding a senior position in a charity for 15 years.

The commission’s inquiry concluded the Kingdom Church’s trustees had exposed the charity’s reputation to “undue risk” by allowing the charity to be linked to Wiseman’s private business interests, including “the Covid-19 scam”.

It also found the trustees demonstrated “poor financial controls and management” and failed to keep accurate records.

The Kingdom Church was registered as a charity with the purpose of advancing the Christian faith.

This case should be a wakeup call. If ‘the advancement of religion’ is enabling organisations peddling fake cures to register as charities, it should be removed from the list of charitable purposes.



Kingdom Church’s website linked to an online shop, which claimed the “Divine Plague Protection Oil” would protect against “every coronavirus and any other deadly thing”.

Government rows back commitments on religious slaughter labelling

It is illegal to slaughter livestock without stunning them first, to avoid unnecessary suffering. However, this law exempts slaughter performed according to religious rites for kosher or halal meat.

Early last year the government committed to consulting on plans for clear, mandatory labels on meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning. This followed a call for evidence in 2021 which revealed nearly 97% of respondents supported such a requirement.

But in March the government caved in to religious pressure. It launched a further consultation on food labelling – but this time, the consultation document says the proposals “do not cover welfare” at slaughter.

We will nevertheless use the consultation to argue for labelling that offers consumers the choice to avoid meat from animals killed using an unnecessarily cruel slaughter method.



Edoardo Borrelli on Unsplash



In February our head of campaigns Megan Manson spoke at a protest at the Charity Commission against Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) and other harmful religious organisations registered as charities. In December we urged the Commission to hold UCKG to account after a BBC *Panorama* investigation suggested the charity is ‘exorcising’ children, conducting ‘gay conversion therapy’, and financially exploiting its members. The protest was organised by Surviving Universal UK.

Medical regulator investigating GP who led Hizb ut-Tahrir

The doctors' regulator is assessing a GP's fitness to practise after we raised concerns about his leadership of a recently proscribed Islamist group.

The General Medical Council (GMC) is investigating Dr Wahid Shaida, who has worked as a GP in Harrow. He also led Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain, which was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in January.

We told the GMC that Shaida had made extremist comments appearing to condone the October 7 Hamas attack against Israel, and sought to justify the attempted Islamist murder of Sir Salman Rushdie in 2022.

Ministers have said Hizb ut-Tahrir is antisemitic and encourages terrorism.

The GMC agreed with us that Shaida's statements and leadership of Hizb ut-Tahrir "does raise potential fitness to practise concerns" and "in the GMC's view, may affect the public's perception of the medical profession as a whole".



Dr Wahid Shaida has already been suspended by NHS England, but remains registered with the GMC - meaning he could still practice privately.

Interestmedia, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

New paper highlights barriers to reforming guidance on circumcision

"You have no idea how offended the chief rabbi would be."

– The response of the GMC's head of policy when Dr Antony Lempert asked her about bringing GMC policy on circumcision in line with its other guidance.

A new paper from the chair of our Medical Expertise Network explores why professional medical bodies refuse to highlight the clear ethical and safeguarding concerns around non-therapeutic infant male circumcision in their guidance.

The paper, which was published in *Clinical Ethics* journal in December, challenges the General Medical Council's lack of position on permanent and painful genital

surgery on non-consenting boys for religious or cultural reasons. This approach is shared by the main doctors' professional body, the British Medical Association (BMA).

The paper's author Dr Antony Lempert argues that by refusing to challenge the practice of non-consensual, non-therapeutic male circumcision, the GMC and BMA are prioritising religious sentiment over children's welfare.

Hopes raised for reform on assisted dying

We've continued to support reforming the law on assisted dying across the UK, and to warn against undue weight given to theological objections in debates on assisted dying. Recently, there has been considerable progress:

■ In March, Liberal Democrat MSP Liam McArthur introduced a bill in the Scottish Parliament to legalise assisted dying in Scotland. It will potentially be voted on next year. A recent poll found 78% of Scots agree the law should be changed to allow people to choose the time of their death in certain circumstances. But the bill has faced religious opposition. In response to a 2021 consultation on the proposal, 21% of responses opposed it, with one of the most common reasons being "a fundamental belief, often founded in a particular religion, that human life is sacred and must not be purposefully ended under any circumstances".

■ Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Labour leader Keir Starmer have both pledged to allow time for the next parliament to consider reforming the law on assisted dying, should they win the general election. Starmer has additionally pledged to allow a free vote on assisted dying. A survey published in March found 75% of voters in England and Wales support making it lawful for terminally ill adults to access assisted dying in the UK.

■ Laws to allow assisted dying are also progressing in Jersey and the Isle of Man.

NSS addresses UN committee on religious threats to human rights

Our campaigns officer Dr Alejandro Sanchez travelled to Geneva in March to address the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

He told the committee that exceptional treatment of religion too often undermines the rights of UK citizens, and called for UK government action to ensure all human rights are equally protected.

Ahead of the meeting, the NSS submitted evidence for the first time on the UK's implementation of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is overseen by the committee. The ICCPR is an international human rights treaty ratified by the UK.

We raised issues including faith schools, school collective worship laws, circumcision and religious threats to free speech.



Alejandro Sanchez attended the 140th Session of the Human Rights Committee on behalf of the NSS as a representative of UK civil society.



Head of campaigns Megan Manson gave a talk about the work of leading NSS figure Annie Besant, and why secularism is crucial for women's rights, at Leicester Secular Society in March.

Free speech concerns over new 'extremism' definition

We wrote to the government ahead of its publication of its new definition of 'extremism', expressing concerns about the proposed wording.

The definition is intended to be used as a basis for deciding which groups the government funds or engages with.

We told the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities that challenging a country's institutions and values is often necessary to foster progress, ensure accountability, and promote inclusivity. We pointed out that the established Church of England and the monarchy are amongst the country's institutions, but it would be chillingly authoritarian to label secularists and republicans as 'extremists'.

The final definition, published in March, thankfully omits this wording, but free speech concerns remain. We were among many groups quoted in the national media expressing concerns.



Join us at London's Covent Garden this October for our Secularism 2024 conference: the biggest event for secularists this year.

Our expert speakers will shed light on the contemporary challenges faced by liberal societies, including rising religious fundamentalism and identity politics, and how secularism can provide a solution to these complex issues. Together, we will also explore the importance of challenging religious privilege and safeguarding the core principles that underpin liberal democracy.

Confirmed speakers so far include writer, broadcaster, and free speech advocate **Kenan Malik**; journalist and human rights activist **Joan Smith**; and Liberal Democrat life peer and disestablishmentarian **Lord Paul Scriven**.

BOOK NOW: Saturday 19th October 2024
Grand Connaught Rooms, Covent Garden, London
Just £20 for NSS members (£30 for non members).
Price includes a buffet lunch and drinks reception.

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