

# Secularism

Keith Porteous Wood argues that secularism benefits society as a whole and all its members, including those with religious beliefs.

## The NSS and its origins

We will soon be celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the National Secular Society in 1866, a time of idealism and political ferment which also saw the birth of the Fabians and the co-operative movement. I notice a visit to Leicester Secular Society's Hall is included in the conference timetable. Their secular society's formation predates the national one by over ten years. Leicester's Hall is the last remaining specifically secular society hall, but in the latter half of the 19th century there were scores if not hundreds of them. Why? Because the established church, in particular, would stop at nothing to prevent secularists from holding meetings, and this included pressurising those with venues not to hire them out to secularists. The NSS was formed as a federation of these local societies by Charles Bradlaugh, who later became a prominent liberal MP. My favourite picture of him is in a rowing boat just a few yards offshore talking to large crowd on a beach. He had to do this because the local constabulary, shown rather unflatteringly in the picture, were seeking to prevent him speaking: their authority did not extend beyond the shoreline.

The history of the Anglican Church in the UK and the Catholic Church before it, if told frankly, is one of oppression that would nowadays beggar belief. The churches have depended on the short memory of the population at large and have been ruthless in taking advantage of this to rewrite history to their own advantage. You would never guess from the way they tell it today that they fought every reform tooth and nail at the time. The most recent example is the clerical arch-opponents of same sex marriage now claiming they were in favour of civil partnerships, which Hansard helpfully disproves. This observation concerns power and corruption, it is a criticism of the theological claims of religions, about which I will not comment. And while these historic atrocities have largely been laid to rest, there is regrettably plenty of misuse of clerical power that still needs to be challenged, including from within the organisations themselves.

Charles Bradlaugh's formal education was limited, but he taught himself to become a lawyer, and became so brilliant he was feared by the top lawyers in the country. He went on to be an astonishingly influential MP, referred to with reverence even today in the Palace of Westminster, and we hope soon to have a bust of him there. But, back then, those opposed to Bradlaugh on ideological grounds, particularly his atheism, went to extraordinary lengths to prevent him becoming an MP. Duly elected, he was prevented from taking his seat because they maintained his atheism precluded him from swearing the necessary biblical oath. This prompted a by-election in his constituency of Northampton. Bradlaugh was repeatedly re-elected, only to be repeatedly refused his seat when he arrived at Westminster. It was only after the threats of massive fines, a beating and even imprisonment within the clock tower of the Palace of Westminster, that Bradlaugh took his seat – on the fifth attempt. Little wonder then that he was responsible for the Oaths Act 1888, permitting the oath of allegiance to be solemnly affirmed, rather than sworn to God.

Bradlaugh's vice president was Annie Besant – the estranged wife of a brutal clergyman – and they campaigned tirelessly together, including on wider social issues. Perhaps the most notorious was the publication of a penny leaflet on contraception. The authorities had no problem with this information being included in hardback books for middle-class readers, but making it available to the working class, surely those in most need, they thought absolutely unacceptable.

## Secularism

I hope I can persuade you that secularism is in everyone's best interests, except perhaps that of theocratic bodies who are bringing undue influence on the state. Our campaigns are largely challenging religious privilege. It is a long time since the NSS has engaged in soapbox debates on the merits or not of religion, but the NSS is still tarred with the charge of being anti-religious by our antagonists, often religious leaders. They do so particularly if they haven't got any better counter-arguments.

They also frequently, and I suspect knowingly, conflate and confuse secularism with the secularisation of society, by which I mean the population drifting away from religion and religious influence. Only this week the incoming minister of St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, signalled his intention to confront ‘what is widely perceived in the Kirk as raucous secularism within wider society’. It seems now to be regarded as a grammatical error to mention secularism without a pejorative adjective. This minister joins a growing band blaming secularism. Some blame it for the decline in church attendance. In fact it is secularisation, which as I said is very different. Sometimes they even blame the NSS by name. Do these clergy think we stand at church doors preventing people going in?

Others are riled that often we criticise religious leaders unflinchingly: How dare we, not being men – and it is usually is men – of God? We tend to be on what is regarded as the progressive side of arguments over homosexuality and abortion, voluntary euthanasia etc. And generally it is religious leaders that are the most prominent on the other side of the argument. It is fascinating, though, how often liberal members of

religions, and sometimes even the majority, are more on our side than that of the leaders of their denominations. These members, and I expect they include some of you, are in a sense disenfranchised or unrepresented. That mismatch is clearly the case on gay rights. In a poll last week, 87% of even *Church Times* subscribers opposed disciplinary measures against a priest who had just married his same sex partner.

That brings me to a point that I brought up with José Manuel Barroso, the recently-replaced president of the European Commission: that the EU should be looking much more to polls to establish what the population think, rather than to what religious leaders tell them. It is superficially amusing that the very topics

on which religious leaders lobby hardest are generally the very ones in which they are at the greatest variance from their congregations. But in fact it is chilling in its implication – certainly if the politicians pay undue heed to the religious leaders’ representations. And again it is anti-secular, hence my suggestion to the President about polls.

We try to act as a counterbalance to the opinions of bishops and imams when they seek to frame the debate on important social issues that affect us all. The number of people actively involved in religion has reduced so dramatically, and polls repeatedly show that the church is out of step with the people. The largely

hyper-conservative minority faith leaders are even more out of step. There is no reason why these clergy, who are so prominent in our media and law making, should be given a privileged status to call the shots. A key example is the religious obstruction of contraception, hugely more important now as over-population threatens the planet. The main culprits are evangelicals in America and the Catholic Church, often in co-operation with Muslim countries.



Leicester Secular Hall, of the Leicester Secular Society, the first secular society in the world, founded in 1851 and still active. The busts in niches on its façade are of Socrates, Jesus, Voltaire, Tom Paine and Robert Owen.

As you will know, the Vatican (in its guise as The Holy See, one of the worst

examples of the antithesis of secularism) exploits its Observer status at the UN to devastating effect. The overpopulation it promotes creates poverty. The suppression of contraception also leads to an increase in women’s mortality, and the needless spread of disease, including AIDS. Yet, in Europe the majority of Catholics do not obey their Church’s doctrine on contraception. We work at the UN on a number of fronts, including working there with clerical abuse victim groups to put pressure on the Vatican to bring abuse perpetrators to justice and to properly compensate victims. Our work has been sufficiently successful to be well known to the Church and I suspect our work has crossed the current and previous Popes’ radar.

So many of the social reforms from which we benefit today, and which we often take for granted, were the result of the selfless work of dedicated secular and human rights campaigners. I say that because secularism is a human rights issue, rather than a non-religious perspective. We forget at our peril the strength and the ruthlessness of the opposition that was waged against those who were trying to bring about reform. It remains work in progress. If anything, there is a resurgence of that opposition. There is no legal definition of secularism, and arguably it has changed emphasis a little since the 19th century, but I doubt if you will disagree with the NSS's Secular Charter, codified in our Articles of Association:  
[www.secularism.org.uk/secularcharter.html](http://www.secularism.org.uk/secularcharter.html)

## Secularism in France and USA

You will know that the two countries most recognised for their secular constitutions are France and the United States. France's *laïcité* is very different from America's secularism, mandated by its First Amendment that prohibits the establishment of any religion. In France, the state seeks to be blind to religion, permitting no religious expression in its parliament, schools or institutions. The American secular model offers protection to all religions without permitting any of them as a state religion – to protect religious freedom and diversity.

The origins of the two forms of secularism could hardly be more different. French secularism was a revolt against a greedy and corrupt church and its attendant monarchy. Many of the early US settlers had of course forsaken their homes in Europe because of religious intolerance and persecution. They had taken the treacherous journey to America to follow their religion in a way they were unable to do in their country of origin. Not all will have been happy about what they found. A visit I made to the marvellously-preserved Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, showed the lengths to which the Anglican Church had gone to impose its privilege in America in the 18th century; it was recreating all the Anglican privileges there that other denominations had fled Europe to escape. Fortunately, that all changed in 1791 with the First Amendment.

Today, however, secularism is under siege in both the US and France. The First Amendment is under constant attack from the Religious Right, which seeks to establish Christianity as the primary religion of the state. In France, the constitution is under pressure too, mainly from Islamists who constantly try to undermine the ban on religious symbols in public institutions, not everywhere – as I suspect deliberately misreported. This is part of the state being blind to religion and everyone being treated the same. I have some

sympathy with the theory, but it doesn't work in practice.

## Concordats

Secularism was the only way to protect everyone from the dominance of one religious denomination. In other parts of the world that domination is often Catholic, and Catholicism remains today much more pro-scriptive and prescriptive anywhere it still can, than Anglicans have been for the last century. I will come to Islam later. It is not generally known that the Holy See, the Vatican's *nom de plume* in diplomatic circles, has the best established diplomatic corps of any country in the world – although some lawyers dispute that the Vatican fulfils the necessary convention criteria for a state. In many countries, the papal nuncios are frequently the longest serving diplomats, and therefore the most senior.

Few are aware of concordats. These are profoundly unsecular agreements between the Holy See and numerous states, generally Catholic ones, around the world (not the UK), under which the Church is accorded significant privileges in that country. They have the status of international treaties, and are frequently concluded behind closed doors, even in democratic countries. Most concordats require, for example, the imposition and funding, by the country of course, of Catholic education and financial contributions to the Church, directly and/or through tax exemptions. Concordats sometimes also require the imposition of Catholic doctrine. This could relate to abortion – regardless of the adverse and human rights implications on those, whether Catholic or not, wishing and/or needing to avail themselves of abortion services. You will remember the poor woman in Ireland who died in hospital for want of an abortion, something else I have raised with President Barroso.

I commend an excellent website detailing the breath-taking extent of concordats – [www.concordatwatch.eu](http://www.concordatwatch.eu) – from which I am briefly about to quote. Treaties can only be varied with the consent of both parties, so having secured a favourable concordat, the Vatican rarely agrees to any concessions. Democracy just sometimes prevails, however, and leads to concordats being at least partially disregarded. It was not until 2011 that Malta finally amended its concordat when – as a result of a referendum – divorce was legalised. It remains however, thanks to its concordat, the only member of the European Union not to allow abortion under any circumstances. This is surely an abuse of human rights. It is becoming increasingly obvious from my work at the European Union and observation of proceedings at the Council of Europe that socially conservative

pressure, often indirectly connected with the Church, is on the rise and becoming much more interventionist and well-organised. The battleground is mainly on women's reproductive rights. This new illiberalism has arrived too late to reverse gay rights advances in most countries. However, the extent of the opposition to same-sex marriage in France last year was a further reminder of the power of the religious Right, which becomes ever stronger towards the East of Europe.

## Secularism in Britain

Religious groups should have the same rights as everyone else to express their views in a democratic society. The line is crossed where that influence is undue, i.e. influence denied to others. It is generally difficult, if not impossible, to prove undue influence. However, the access of the bishops in the House of Lords to ministers, which I regularly see, certainly qualifies. A huge paradox in the UK is the growing secular deficit. On the one hand, religious adherence, particularly of Christianity, has been on the wane for a century. The number of religiously indifferent and openly non-religious is growing exponentially. On the other, the exercise of religious power in our institutions appears if anything to be growing. Could one cause be the recent series of self-declared religious Prime Ministers, starting with Margaret Thatcher? And maybe too much accommodation has been given, in the name of multiculturalism, to the demands of minority faith leaders. The new Education Secretary looks to be avowedly anti-secular and likely to be even more resistant to NSS proposals than Michael Gove, and that is saying something. I suspect that the only reason that England and Wales are the only countries in the world to retain a mandatory daily act of mainly Christian worship in every school is because the House of Lords is the only legislature in the world to give the bishops an automatic right to sit – 26 of them. Again, the very antithesis of secularism. The current battle is the largely religious-led opposition to a series of assisted dying bills popular with the majority of the country. Only gay rights appears to have largely resisted this religious opposition to progress.

There was a disturbing Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme about extremism in Muslim, Jewish and Christian schools. Ted Cantle, author of the report in 2001 on race disturbances in the North West, and an NSS Honorary Associate, talked about the 'balkanisation' of education, particularly in faith schools. As we have seen in Birmingham, the problem has even overwhelmed community schools. The implications for long-term community cohesion could not be more serious. Aren't religious schools a missed opportunity for cohesion? Why should we pay for religious indoctrination of any kind? In one of these Muslim

schools, even clapping was prohibited. Some Jewish schools in north east London were entirely unregulated, even though the Government knows about them. And in still other Christian ones, creationism is taught and evolution derided in science lessons. And let's not get on to sex education, denied to the children most in need of it.

And there does seem to be a concerted attempt to have Sharia insinuated into our laws here, something that is very much against women's interests, and we work strongly to oppose this.

## Human Rights

I said at a formal conference convened by the Council of Europe that the greatest threat to human rights was organised religion. This resulted in my being censured by the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, ambassadors and state representatives queued up afterwards to congratulate me, lamenting that they couldn't possibly say anything of the sort in their professional capacity. But if it's true, why not? Such human rights abuses only survive because of such misplaced deference.

When it comes to human rights, we are exceptionally fortunate in the United Kingdom, and indeed most of Europe and the developed world. However, laws protecting equality and the rights of minorities are under constant attack by conservative religious groups. We are proud of our intervention at the European Court of human rights, which was influential in ensuring that evangelical employees are unable to discriminate at work against gay service users, and that a nurse cannot insist on wearing jewellery, even if it is a crucifix, that could cause injury.

The picture is much bleaker elsewhere, especially those countries with a dominant religion, particularly where this is Islam, but it could also even be Buddhism. The majority of countries where apostasy or homosexuality are criminal offences are Muslim states, and an even higher proportion are Muslim states where homosexuality is a capital offence. These laws are an affront to human rights and to secularism, and were secularism to prevail they would be repealed. So that is why I would like you to support secularism.

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Keith Porteous Wood is Executive Director of the National Secular Society. This is an edited version of the talk he gave to the SOF Annual Conference in Leicester. He writes:

**I hope you will want to support us by joining the NSS. You can find out how, and more about what we do by looking at our website [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk), with our regular reports under 'resources'. We have a comprehensive weekly e-Newsletter called *Newsline*. Alternatively you can telephone 020 7404 3126 for an information pack.**