

Quotes of the week

"Can we just stop using the word 'tolerate'? I do not tolerate anyone based on the colour of their skin or who they go to bed with – I accept them as equal. So let's not consider 'tolerance' as a 'British value', let's consider social equality among all as THE British value."

(Jamie Lewis, *Independent*)

"No religion should ever be free from criticism. The fact that there are religious proponents out there who desire to punish those who question their faith makes them even more deserving of our scrutiny."

(Neal Simons, *Examiner*)

Essays of the week

[Why we want to keep church and state as far away from each other as possible](#)

(Paul Krassner, *Alternet*)

[Religion has no place in the constitution](#)

(Raphael Vassallo, *Malta Today*)

[Should atheists fight for religion in politics?](#)

(Shanny Luft, *Salon*)

Secular doctors call on the GMC to revise personal belief and medical practice guidance

Secular doctors have called on the GMC to urgently revise [guidance on personal belief and medical practice](#) (pdf), effective from 22 April 2013, that allows religious doctors "to opt out of providing a particular procedure because of (the doctor's) beliefs and values..."

Dr Lempert, a GP and chair of the [Secular Medical Forum](#) (SMF), warned that the new guidance gives a green light to religious doctors to obstruct patient care. He said: "The new guidance gives unrestrained freedom to religious doctors to refuse to provide the most appropriate treatment options".

"The guidance also contradicts existing BMA policy that the right of doctors to refuse to treat patients for reasons of conscientious objection should be restricted "to those protected in law and to withdrawing life-sustaining treatment..."

"Patients should be able to rely on their doctor's professional expertise not being compromised by his/her religious beliefs. It is not in patients' best interests to allow wholesale religious exemptions to the provision of standard medical care"

"The new guidance fails to limit conscientious objection to the areas, such as [abortion](#) (pdf), that are narrowly defined by legislation, making way for a potentially open-ended refusal to provide medical care on religious grounds. As a result, patients will be left vulnerable to the personal whims of their doctor."

The Secular Medical Forum criticised the new guidance which also recommends that doctors "must do (their) best to make sure that patients are aware of (their) objection in advance." The SMF is

concerned that this places an unreasonable onus of responsibility on patients to investigate in advance their doctor's personal views.

Dr Lempert commented: "The GMC should remind doctors of the professional responsibilities which accompany the privilege of their chosen profession. Patients cannot always choose to see a doctor of their choice; so the guidelines should make clear that patients' best interests and reasonable treatment options should never be restricted because of conflict with the doctor's own personal beliefs, except where prescribed by law."

Concerns remain over non-religious Academy's revised admissions policy

A non-religiously designated academy in Solihull that planned to give priority in admissions to pupils from two religiously selective 'faith' schools has revised its decision.

Tudor Grange Academy had planned to give priority to children at Tudor Grange Primary Academy St James and St Alphege CofE Junior School. Both schools have criteria favouring in their admission arrangements pupils whose parents attend Church of England services.

The school say "a large number" of local residents came out against the proposals during a recent consultation.

Under new admissions arrangements published as part of its [Summary Report on Admissions Determination](#), pupils of St Alphege will no longer be prioritised. Pupils attending Tudor Grange Primary Academy St James will still be prioritised, but the school has now launched its own consultation on proposals which include the removal of its faith criteria for admissions.

The National Secular Society wrote to Tudor Grange Academy in February informing it that after taking legal advice, it believed the proposals were likely to result in local children being disadvantaged on grounds of religion and belief - and that as such, the proposals were likely to be both a breach of the admissions code and unlawful.

As the executive principal of Tudor Grange Academy is also a trustee of the Diocese of Birmingham Educational Trust, some local parents also expressed concern that the academy may seek to take on a religious designation in the future.

Responding directly to parent's fears that Tudor Grange would become a faith school, the school said in the Report; "It is very difficult to counter this fear. All we can do is demonstrate that this fear is not justified in our final decision about proposed admission arrangements. We have no plans to make Tudor Grange Academy Solihull a faith school." However, the school also went on to say: "We are affiliated to the Diocese of Birmingham and have very similar values."

Stephen Evans, campaigns manager at the National Secular Society, said: "It appears the school has taken seriously our concerns over the legality of giving preferential treatment to certain children on the basis of their parents' religion or belief. However, even if the faith-based admissions criteria are removed from St James, this will not filter through to pupils leaving St James and starting secondary school until 2021. This means that the Tudor Grange Academy admissions policy will still unfairly prioritise pupils on religious grounds for some time to come. We therefore doubt that the new policy is compliant with the School Admissions Code or the relevant law relating to admissions."

The National Secular Society said it will now consider making a formal complaint to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator.

New poll finds many Christians ignoring Church leaders on same-sex marriage

A YouGov poll commissioned for this week's Westminster Faith Debate on same-sex marriage shows that most people in this country — including those who declare themselves to be religious — favour the legalisation of marriage for same-sex couples.

The survey found that the section of religious people most opposed to same-sex marriage is made up of those who both believe in God with certainty and make decisions primarily on the basis of explicit religious sources – God, scriptures, teachings and religious leaders.

This so called 'moral minority' of strict believers amounts to almost 9% of the population, and is spread across religious traditions, with a greater concentration among Baptists and Muslims.

While the poll exposes the majority of religious leaders to be entirely at odds with British citizens, it also reveals the lack of extent to which people turn to religious leaders for "moral guidance".

When asked: "Which, if any of the following, do you rely on MOST for guidance as you make your life decisions?" only 0.5% of the 4,447 people questioned plumped for "religious leaders" or "religious groups".

41% said they relied on their "own reason"; 22% said their "own intuition"; 13% said family; 6% said God; 3% said friends; 2% said "religious teachings; 1% went for "deceased loved ones". But only 0.5% would ask "religious leaders" for advice and the same low number would ask a "religious group".

The survey also asked: "Do you believe in God or 'a higher power'?" 26% thought there was "definitely" a God; 23% thought there was "probably" a God; 16% thought there "probably was NOT" a God; 19% thought there was "definitely NOT" a God and 17% didn't know.

[The survey's full findings can be found here.](#)

Scots are abandoning their religion

Scotland, once one of the more pious parts of the British Isles, is [rapidly becoming secularised](#) (pdf) according to a poll commissioned for the *Sunday Times* and Real Radio Scotland.

Over the past decade the number of Scots saying they belong to a Christian faith has fallen from almost two-thirds (65%), as recorded in the 2001 census, to 55% today.

Over the same period, the number of those who follow no religion has risen from 28% to 39%.

While 70% of men aged 55 and over, and 78% of women in the same group, call themselves Christian in the poll, only 34% of men aged 18–34 and 33% of women of this age do so. This is the first time we have seen that women have been shown to be less religious than men, and may be the first signs of the emergence of an important trend.

These trends are expected to be echoed in the results of the 2011 census to be published later this year.

The drop in support for the Church of Scotland, once regarded as the national church, is particularly acute. While 42% said they belonged to the kirk in the 2001 census, only 32% do so in the latest survey of 1,002 Scottish adults.

Whereas those describing themselves as Roman Catholic in 2001 stood at 16%, the poll found 13% doing so now, a smaller proportionate drop than the Church of Scotland.

The poll found that only 8% of the Scottish population attend church once a week, compared with a finding of 14% by the Scottish social attitudes survey in 1999.

Less than a third (30%) have been to church within the past year except for special ceremonies such as weddings and christenings, while just over a third (34%) say it has been more than a year since they attended and a further 31% "never or practically never" go.

The poll shows that there would be widespread support for the new pope to make some radical changes to the Catholic Church.

A total of 54% say Pope Francis should allow priests to marry, while 41% say he should be more accepting of homosexuality. In addition, 61% say the Catholic church should be more tolerant of condom use, while 40% believe it should be more accepting of abortion and 63% want it to be tougher with abusers.

Even among Christians, there is a lack of faith in the Bible. Of those who belong to the Church of Scotland, only 37% say they believe Jesus was God's son and came back to life after being crucified, while 23% consider the account false and 35% say they don't know. The Easter story is more widely believed among Catholics (67%) and other Christians (61%).

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "These figures indicate a growing national trend towards secularisation. And even then the results of the Scottish poll are likely to be underestimates of the extent of it. When the Scottish census figures are released later this year, we expect to see similar levels of decline in religious identity."

Mr Sanderson referred to the well-established phenomenon of people overstating their religious beliefs and loyalties; a recent poll in England showed implied attendance double the actual figures taken from church statistics. He also pointed to the response to another poll conducted on behalf of the Chef and Brewer pub chain about how people spent their Sundays. Fifteen per cent claimed that they 'usually went to a place of worship'. Terry Sanderson said: "Even the churches wouldn't try to claim that. Their own head counts show less than half of that number actually show up at church on a normal Sunday."

He continues to be puzzled by the way people still often felt the need to exaggerate their religious adherence when questioned by pollsters. "So why do people feel the need to say they go to church when they don't? It seems to be another indication of the religious indoctrination we have all undergone, which leaves many of us still feeling guilty about admitting we couldn't really care less about the church and are bored by it."

NSS condemns Government's callous disregard for UK victims of caste discrimination

The National Secular Society has criticised the Government's "callous" disregard for victims of caste discrimination in the UK after MPs rejected a Lords amendment to make discrimination on grounds of caste unlawful.

The House of Lords voted last month by a majority of 103, despite Government opposition, to make caste a protected characteristic (as an aspect of race) under equality law via a new clause in the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill.

Today's vote in the Commons was lost by 243 votes to 307, with the Government speaking against the amendment. It will return to the Lords on Monday 22 April.

Equalities minister Jo Swinson told MPs that she thought legislation could increase stigma rather than ease the problem. She said: "This is an issue that is contained in the Hindu and Sikh communities. That's why we are working with those communities to address these problems."

However, Conservative MP Richard Fuller said: "This is a straightforward issue, caste discrimination in the work place is wrong and the people who suffer from it deserve legal protection. That's it. Beginning and end.

"Meena Varma of the Dalit Solidarity Network said: "I am very disappointed. But we'll keep going until we get this legislation."

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, which has campaigned for several years for caste discrimination to be made unlawful, commented: "I hope that peers will seize the opportunity next week to vote once more in favour of making caste discrimination unlawful, reversing the Government's cynical and callous rejection of it today. In opposing statutory protection now, the Government has kicked the issue into the long grass, shamelessly abandoning its international Human Rights obligations, instead apparently paying greater heed to those, however influential, who have a vested interest in perpetuating this debasing discrimination."

The National Secular Society has obtained a legal opinion, supported by leading equality lawyers, showing that the UK's failure to outlaw caste discrimination is a violation of Article 2(1) and 6 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The UN has formally recommended amending the Equality Act 2010 to make caste discrimination unlawful "in accordance with [the UK's] international human rights obligations".

Mr Porteous Wood said: "The Government's alternative of 'informal conciliation' is toothless and entirely inadequate, given the power wielded by those of high caste – often the [employers of those subjected to caste discrimination](#), and the widespread and endemic nature of caste discrimination."

Prior to today's vote, The Christian Institute and the National Secular Society sent a [joint letter to conservative and LibDem MPs](#) urging them to support the Lords amendment.

It's not fair! Why has Ireland got Ruairi Quinn, while we're stuck with Michael Gove?

By Terry Sanderson

If only the UK had an education minister like Ireland's Ruairi Quinn.

Mr Quinn is, bit by bit, challenging the stranglehold that the Catholic Church has over education in the Republic.

He does it in a proper, diplomatic way, of course, but he has already [begun a long-term process](#) of taking some of the country's schools out of Catholic control and handing them over to more ecumenical interests.

Now Mr Quinn has set the cat among the pigeons by questioning the amount of time that is spent teaching religion in Irish primary schools.

According to the Irish Department of Education's rules, 30 minutes a day – two and a half hours a week – is devoted to religion, compared with 60 minutes for science and physical education (PE). But a recent Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) survey found over 70% of teachers were spending more than the required time on religion. The extra time usually goes on preparing children for First Communion and Confirmation.

Mr Quinn last week faced an unreceptive – bordering on hostile - annual conference of the Catholic Primary School Managers Association. He asked them: "Can we really afford to continue providing a mere 60 minutes, per week on scientific instruction or, for that matter, 60 minutes per week of PE?" He suggested that preparation for the sacraments could take place in the parish, outside school hours.

Needless to say, his speech did not go down very well with the Catholic education hierarchy, who take for granted that the nation's schools at their disposal as a means of propagating their religion.

CPSMA vice chairperson Fr Denis McNelis, said they were happy to talk about the timing and method of the teaching of religion, but "I think there would be widespread disapproval on the part of parents and most teachers if we were to go down the road of removing entirely sacramental preparation from the school".

Of course, the Catholic Church has always put huge emphasis on its influence in education.

It realised centuries ago that you need to get at children before they are at an age when they might be able to resist religious indoctrination. They need to be told that they are Catholics at a very early stage in their lives and the message must be reinforced relentlessly.

School — particularly primary school — is the perfect place for this brainwashing to be accomplished. For the rest of their lives they will regard themselves as "Catholic", even if they never set foot inside a church again..

Every concordat that the Vatican manages to wangle with a state will always give them privileged access to education.

The Church will say: "If we didn't provide it, there would be no education." This may be true in some parts of the developing world, but the quid pro quo is that the Church then uses its schools for relentless indoctrination and evangelisation.

Ruairi Quinn hopes to challenge this, although the Catholic Church in Ireland still controls almost all the schools in the country (despite these being publicly-funded schools) and will not give them up without resistance. The minister told reporters after the conference that while he had no current plans for changes to existing arrangements, he insisted the question he was posing was not "rhetorical". He added science was important and "it all starts in primary."

Irish primary pupils spend 40% of their time on science – half the international average – and 10% on religion, more than double the global norm.

The recommended minimum one hour a week for PE is the lowest of 30 EU countries.

Mr Quinn is an astute politician. He won't have a face-to-face confrontation with the Church but they must now be aware that he's got them in his sights.

I repeat, somewhat ruefully, where is the UK's Ruairi Quinn?

Romania considers introducing church tax

Media, politicians and, of course, the Orthodox Church, have been frantically debating proposed changes to the public funding of religious institutions in Romania, in recent weeks.

New legislation, inspired by the German "church tax" model, would allow all citizens to direct a part of their income tax to the churches or other organisations of their choosing. This would replace the current system in which religious groups are funded at the discretion of parliament, with most funding going to the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The reform, proposed by Remus Cernea MP (Green Party), would save 70 million Euro per year. Moreover it would allow citizens who do not support the church or who are non-religious to redirect their taxes to secular or humanist non-governmental organisations.

Cezar Maroti, president of the Romanian Humanis Association (RHA) said: "We feel that the majority of Romanian citizens would approve the proposed reform. But there have been some very negative, very undemocratic replies from many politicians."

He cites Radu Mazare, the mayor of Constanta (the city where Remus Cernea was recently elected deputy in the Romanian Parliament) who threatened Cernea that he "will break his legs" unless a public apology is offered to the Orthodox Church. Also, George Becali, former MEP, known for his strong support to Christian Orthodox issues, called Cernea "a satanist", "imbecile", "devil", "animal" and said that he should be "exiled to prison" or to the "mad house" over the proposed legislation.

The Romanian Orthodox Church itself said the optional church tax model was "unrealistic and inadequate". Similar systems have been introduced in several European countries included Norway and Germany.

Remus Cernea clearly believes that his proposal has been misunderstood. "I actually support a funding model of different religious groups. Romania doesn't really have a law on religious funding at the moment. Funding is granted arbitrarily, at the discretion of politicians. I propose a system of financing religious groups that gives the choice to individual citizens, and will even help religion or belief groups benefit from predictable, stable and quite substantial funding. This system will strengthen their autonomy."

On 25 May, the Romanian Humanist Association conference, held in conjunction with the European Humanist Federation and International Humanist and Ethical Union, will take place in Bucharest.

"We advocate secularism," said Maroti. "This is simply the idea that the church and state should be separate. This is also in the best interest of the churches and all the believers. The church should be independent and should not be controlled by politicians. Receiving money from the politicians is making the church vulnerable to political influence, which is not good for anyone. Also, the current system is unfair, unjust and it discriminates against the growing number of Romanians who are non-religious or humanist in their outlook. It's going to be a lively debate!"

Campaign in Egypt urges citizens to remove religion from ID Cards

In an attempt to disentangle religion and citizenship, activists in Egypt are encouraging citizens to remove their religious affiliation from their national identity cards.

The "None of Your Business" campaign is being driven by a [Facebook group](#) and a [YouTube video](#) and follows in the wake of recent violence against Coptic Christians in the country.

Organisers say the removal of religion from official documents — the most important of which is the personal ID card — is a small but important step towards ending discrimination on the basis of religion. The group's Facebook page describes the initiative as "a campaign against interference in citizens' private lives by the state".

The campaign's video was produced by Aalam Wassef, an artist, musician and blogger who made subversive online videos during the Mubarak era under the pseudonym Ahmad Sherif.

Mr Wassef told the *New York Times* [Lede Blog](#): "Under Muslim Brotherhood rule, stating that your religion is your own business is a radical form of re-appropriation at a time when Islamists are posing as the sole gatekeepers of what it is to be a 'good Muslim', 'a good Christian' etc. Taking the liberty of masking your religion is, de facto, a way of challenging this imposture and discarding the threat of being called an infidel."

Many in the country recognise the importance of secularism in ensuring national unity between Coptic Christians and Muslims.

When taking office as Egypt's new president in June 2012, Mohammed Morsi pledged to follow a pluralist policy that respected the rights of women and non-Muslim minorities. However, Human Rights Watch has warned of growing religious intolerance and sectarian violence against Coptic Christians in Egypt in recent years and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood has alarmed many of the country's Coptic Christians who make up 10% of Egypt's 82 million population.

There has been a proliferation of prosecutions for blasphemy in Egypt in the nearly two years since Hosni Mubarak was overthrown. Critics say defamation and blasphemy laws are being used by the Government to stifle dissent and limit the freedoms of religion and expression. Many of those targeted have been Copts. Last year a court sentenced Alber Saber, an atheist blogger from a Coptic Christian family, to [three years in prison for blasphemy](#) and contempt of religion.

Austrian referendum seeks to end church privileges

A referendum is being held in Austria aimed at ending the 1933 concordat that regulates church-state relations.

The Tablet reports that the three main demands of the "Referendum Against Church Privileges" are "abolition of church privileges, clear separation of Church and State and terminating the gigantic state subsidies to the Church".

The initiators explain: "Everyone has the right to believe in whatever they want, but religion and personal belief should be a private matter and not supported by the state".

As the referendum is principally directed against the Catholic Church, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the Archbishop of Vienna has been quick to point out that all 14 recognised Churches and religious communities in Austria have equal legal status.

"One could prefer a model of society in which religion was completely private", he told a press conference this week, but that would not work "as the right to religious freedom, which is a fundamental human right, gives religions the right to articulate themselves in public".

Catholic organisations are gearing up for a strong resistance to the referendum, which is due to be held from 15 to 22 April.

Saudi religious police aren't funny

By Terry Sanderson

If you are going to have a special police division to enforce morality in a country that is already very religiously conservative, then they are bound to make frequent idiots of themselves.

In Saudi Arabia, where religious mania seems to be a requirement of citizenship, the religious police have just forcibly evicted three men from an annual cultural festival and sent them back to Abu Dhabi from whence they came.

The men had been deemed "too handsome" and that women would find them irresistible, according to the Arabic language newspaper *Elaph*.

"A festival official said the three Emiratis were taken out on the grounds they are too handsome and that the Commission [for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vices] members feared female visitors could fall for them," *Elaph* reported.

No doubt the gentlemen in question were highly flattered to be chucked out of the country on such grounds and will find the reputation that follows them of no handicap whatsoever in their future romantic endeavours.

But stupid and authoritarian as the Saudi religious police may be, they aren't very funny if you get on the wrong side of them, as many women who have accidentally allowed a few strands of hair to fall from their veils know to their cost.

And nor were they particularly amusing when they refused to allow school girls to leave a burning building in case men should see them without face coverings. That incident resulted in [fourteen deaths and many horrific injuries](#).

The religious police are an indication of a country that has profound sexual hang-ups inspired by extremist religion.

On this occasion it was men who fell victim to the puritanical foolishness, but in the main it is women who must put up with the minute-to-minute control of their lives by this bullying and brutal brigade.

From the web

Ever wondered what the difference is between the Vatican City and the Holy See? Ever wondered how this tiny piece of land came to be recognised as a full-blown country at the United Nations? [This animated video](#) primer lasts seven minutes and will leave you an expert.

Appeal: Upgrading Leicester Secular Hall

Leicester Secular Society has launched an appeal to raise funds for the modernisation of Leicester Secular Hall. Besides Conway Hall in London, the Secular Hall is the only remaining dedicated secular building in the country.

The Secular Hall — a Grade II listed building — was built in 1881 and boasts a proud history of radicalism. It is still in use today, although it is urgently in need of repair and modernisation.

The total needed for the first phase of the repair is £65,000. The Leicester Secular Society can contribute £25,000, which leaves £40,000 still to find.

Harry Perry, president of the Leicester Secular Society, says: "As you would expect from such an unglamorous scheme, and for an organisation of our type, we are going to struggle to get support from statutory or grant-giving charities. So we are going to have to rely on donations from sympathetic individuals."

You can send a cheque made payable to Leicester Secular Society, to Harry Perry at Leicester Secular Society, The Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. You can donate by credit/debit card [here](#) – where you will also find out more information about the planned upgrade.

Donated funds will be held in trust until spent on the planned project (or other modernisation, repair, improvement and equipment).

NSS speaks out

Keith Porteous Wood was on Russian TV commenting on the decline in religious observance in the UK. Keith also wrote this article about protest and free speech for the [Politics.co.uk website](#).

Terry Sanderson was interviewed on BBC Surrey about religious conflict in the workplace.

Events

Debate: [The Catholic Church is beyond redemption and Pope Francis cannot save it.](#)

Organised by Intelligence Squared Wednesday 24 April 2013, 6.30pm for 7pm start. LBS, Sadler's Wells Theatre, Rosebery Avenue, London, EC1R 4TN. Tickets £10. Also being webcast.

Talk: Freedom of Expression, Roy Brown, International Humanist and Ethical Union. The right to freedom of expression has come under increasing pressure over recent years, not only in the developing world but here in the West.

Roy Brown was president of the [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#) (IHEU) from 2003 to 2006 and is main representative of IHEU at the United Nations, Geneva.

The meeting will start at 8:00 p.m. on Tuesday 7th May at The Showroom, Paternoster Row, Sheffield, S1 2BX. [See map](#). Organised by the [Sheffield Humanist Society](#).

Film: Kansas vs Darwin – British Library Conference Centre, Monday 20 May 2013, 6.30pm. £4
This darkly comic documentary explores the epic 2005 Kansas state school board hearings, in which a group of creationist politicians attempted to subvert the teaching of evolution in public schools. As the film shows, local scientists and educators sought to nullify the proceedings by staging a worldwide boycott, which subsequently backfired, resulting in an uncontested, all-out public attack on scientific orthodoxy.

Featuring exclusive footage of the hearings as well as often-surprising interviews with participants on both sides, *Kansas vs. Darwin* is by turns hilarious, touching and disturbing. Its subjects tell their story with no narration, revealing the seemingly unprincipled opportunism of the religious conservatives as well as the unwitting role played by scientists in undermining their own authority.

A discussion with American filmmaker Jeff Tamblyn, moderated by Dr Alexander Smith, Sociology, Warwick, follows the screening. Watch the film [trailer](#). [More information](#).

Letters to Newslines

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

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A CATHOLIC COUNTRY

At present, a formal inquiry is under way into the death in hospital a short time ago of a dentist. She had been refused the abortion that might have saved her. Why? Because the medics looking on informed her, 'Ireland is a Catholic country'. There's an obvious logical error there: a country can't be Catholic, Muslim, Evangelical or anything else. A percentage of its people may be one or the other – and in Ireland that continues to shrink. A country is just a bit of land where people live, believers or not; it can't have a faith. The same mistake's made when someone is described as 'Catholic' (etc) by birth'. No, that was a decision the parents made, like with most others, before the newborn was capable of making any decision on anything. What followed was the teaching, or indoctrination, of a particular religious belief structure, perhaps one that, like Catholicism, doesn't like having its 'truths' questioned. Probably the most tragic aspect of this event is that the dentist herself was known to be Hindu by faith, not Catholic. Yet sacrificed to Catholic ideology she had to be. The truly saddest thing is that she's certainly not alone. This mirrors the abortion debate in the US, where even now fundamentalists of whatever kind are determined to limit that right. And if women die as a result? Never mind, presumably the objectors' God will be kept content. In a way, human sacrifice is still being practised.

Michael Igoe

ETYMOLOGY OF CHURCH

Re Fiona Weir's letter on the origin of the word 'church', the Greek 'kuriakon' seems to have been first used around 300 (several centuries later than ancient Greek) and to have meant 'house of the lord', referring at the time to Mithras. It was several centuries before 'church' came into the English language, via German.

The ancient Greek word for 'church' was 'ecclesia' and referred to a place where people assembled.
Patricia Tricker (member Chattered Institute of Linguists)

RELIGIOUS LEADERS DO NOT SPEAK FOR US ALL

How many times have we heard Nick Griffin of the British National Party say that he talks on behalf of the British people? Likewise folks like David Cameron and Tony Blair have talked on behalf of the British nation when in reality all three only talk on behalf of a section of the population of the United Kingdom and in the BNP case a very small section of the citizens of our islands.

But our religious leaders are even worse and jump on the back of every human tragedy as they regularly pop up in the media as 'community leaders' and speak as if the church was the community. It's almost as if they treat human tragedy as a recruitment and advertising opportunity with the chance to promote their own self-aggrandisement.

The only time they should have the right to comment on such things is if the tragedy affects some church officer and that person is a regular attending their own church. It's about time that the church realises that it is not the community but in the 21st century only a small part of a wider community.

Brent Cheetham

POLITICS AND SECULARISM

It seems self-evident that in order for our society to evolve, in terms of the way that religious beliefs and non-beliefs are taken into account by policymakers, one or other of the main political parties will need to grasp the nettle and offer an equivalent platform for the secularist voice in Westminster as is afforded to the religious institutions (directly and indirectly). In fact, some form of 'positive discrimination' to help kick-start the public education on the secularist viewpoint might be considered in order.

Any one of the three main parties could make this a high-profile element of their political agenda. Think how progressive and forward thinking they would appear. Yet none of them have – why not? Is secularism too toxic a subject to stake a reputation on? There is so much low-hanging fruit, just waiting for a Campbell-type publicist to make capital of, surely it's only a matter of time? Still nothing happens. Maybe the education, as to the value of introducing a secularist viewpoint into mainstream politics, needs to start with the politicians rather than the public.

David Mills

RELIGIOUS POLITICIANS

I would be quite suspicious of Greg Mullholland's proposal regarding marriage (*Newsline*, last week).

His allegiance is very clear. From his comments, his stance and the way he refused to vote on gay marriage to his objections on school transport, Mr Mullholland is a religious apologist and for a particular religious sect.

The local council met, discussed, agreed and democratically voted for a plan to cease sectarian transport of one particular religious sect's children to other schools. Encouraged by a local religious leader Mr Mullholland raised his unfair and biased objections and at a time of austerity the council's plan to save local taxpayers millions and millions of pounds every few years have been put on hold. He should be exposed and, even though he is a Liberal Democrat and should therefore be more amenable to the aims of the NSS, hounded from office. The way he votes and raises issues makes it look as though he is working for the leader of a foreign state and not for his constituents. Is this not illegal? If not it should be.

His unfair and biased objections to the local council have meant that all tax payers, religious or not, or of that particular religious sect or not, will continue to have their taxes squandered in support of one of the world's wealthiest religious sects.

This is yet another example of religious groups placing their religious moles in Parliament under the guise of being in support of a particular political party with true allegiance elsewhere. It might be difficult for the NSS to start a campaign to advise voters not to vote for religious candidates. But until such time as political parties realise that religious candidates will not be voted for little change will take place to remove religious privilege from British society. As there is not a fag paper of difference between the three main parties I have come to the conclusion that who you vote for changes nothing. Most politicians are religious. Most of the electorate are not. I will not vote for any religious candidate again. If enough voters follow my lead we may just yet get a secular society.

Bill Green

SECULAR SOCIETY

I congratulate Anne Marie Waters for her brilliant article on being grateful for living in a secular society. She is absolutely right to point out that if the country were to be governed by the bible it would be synonymous with that of Islamic theocracies.

That is why I believe it imperative that church and state should be separated.

1) Religious employers are exempt from the employment laws which other employers have to follow.

2) Faith schools are increasing at a very alarming rate and often the only choices parents have is to send their children to a faith school because they are the only schools within their area. In some cases that means there are strings attached and children must attend church and often parents must be seen to be regular church goers and against their will to get their children enrolled.

3) The right of the Conservative Party is nowadays over riddled with fundamentalist Christians connected to dodgy churches. They need to be kept in check. Just because David Cameron's introduced equal marriage laws is, not, however, time to sit back and relax.

Anne Marie Walters brilliantly highlighted the fact that couples who wish to go their separate ways and form new relationships are free to do so and no police officers would call upon them and enquire about their relationship because we live in a secular society.

If the things already mentioned are allowed to continue then this shall take us further down the road to biblical law. For LGTB members, divorcees, separated couples and those who question and criticise the scriptures, that unwanted knock upon the door from Mr Plod could well be tomorrow's reality.

Nick Rowland

The last *Newsline* was interesting and thought provoking (but then, I always enjoy reading it). It caused me to wonder how far our Secular Society discussions and opinions travel – that is, to people who might disagree with us. The item by Ahmad Mansoor on rivalry between Islamic strands of belief strikes me as clear evidence of their wrong-headedness, yet they don't see it as such. I think any person seeing the actual consequences arising from such opposing opinions should remember Jonathan Swift's description of a war. It was between people who liked their boiled egg opened at the blunt end and those who liked their egg opened at the sharp end. That humanity has not taken this on board disappoints me.

I know you accept as many opportunities as possible to talk to those who are interested in our views and those that challenge them. As a vehicle for expressing opinions and relating your efforts *Newsline* pleases me by reinforcing my mindset. I appreciate everything you do to achieve our aims but I ask myself, am I doing as much as I can to communicate with those of opposite views – to allow my views to be challenged?

Is it possible for the National Secular Society to write an article covering this aspect, something that sets out how we might begin a dialogue with people holding ideas diametrically opposed to our own?

Fred Grundy

VILLAGE CHURCHES

I was wondering whether the question of village churches had been addressed by the National Secular Society?

I am not and never will be a member of the village Anglican Church where I live. However the church has been classified as 'unsustainable' and could close within the next ten years. This must be a very common phenomenon which creates a significant problem for village communities.

The church is used for weddings and funerals and more people go to Christmas and memorial services than are members or attend on Sundays. I would be very sad indeed were the church in this or other villages to close their doors for good.

I appreciate that this is a 'sign of the times' but I do wonder whether there are ways in which places of worship could be used by secularists. I do not mean by arranging concerts and coffee mornings, but in some more meditative way by non-believers that would not offend the Diocese? Have you any thoughts or precedents?

Daniel Scharf

Ed writes: What do readers think of Daniel's idea?

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

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

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