

**THE
BLOOM
REVIEW**

Does government 'do God?'

An independent review into how
government engages with faith

Colin Bloom

Independent Faith Engagement Adviser

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Foreword

Independent Faith Engagement Adviser

Nearly 20 years ago, a former Prime Minister's spin doctor famously replied to a Vanity Fair journalist: "I'm sorry, we don't do God."¹ That phrase has been taken out of context and misused ever since, but for many people of faith it has become a cultural reference point, confirming their suspicions that government neither understands faith and crucially, nor does it particularly want to.

There are three types of believers. The first are 'true believers' who, regardless of their faith, are sincere, devout and peaceful. Government can and should work with true believers. The second are 'non-believers' who, like true believers, are generally sincere, peaceful and decent. True believers and non-believers are part of the solution to improving society. The third are 'make-believers'. Make-believers are generally the cause of most of the problems that government encounters in the faith space. Make-believers are often motivated by ego, money, prestige or power and abuse their position to promote themselves or their causes, clothing them with religion to give them divine legitimacy. Make-believers are a problem, both for government and for the communities they claim to represent.

While this report touches on make-believers, the most important points focus on true believers, for this is a review into how government engages with faith, people of faith and places of worship. The review is much needed, and its timing – after what we hope is the end of the pandemic – could not be better. This is the first time that faith has been reviewed in this way, and the first time in living memory that an administration has bravely asked: 'Are we properly engaging with people of faith?'

In October 2019, the government announced the appointment of an Independent Faith Engagement Adviser to provide recommendations to the Secretary of State for Communities on how government should engage with faith groups in England. The original aims of this review were to identify:

- what the government can do to recognise and support the contribution of faith organisations within communities
- how best to break down barriers and promote acceptance between faith groups, including those of no faith or belief, and creating opportunities for co-operation
- the steps the government can take to promote shared values and tackle cultures and practices that are harmful
- how the government can promote, in parallel to freedom of religion, the values of freedom of speech, democracy, the rule of law and equality
- how the Civil Service can improve its faith literacy and the steps the government can take to ensure it fully carries out its role in relation to faith and belief under the Public Sector Equality Duty

Without the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson who had the insight to ask for the review, the previous Secretary of State for Communities Robert Jenrick who generously enabled it, and the previous Faith Minister Stephen Greenhalgh who vigorously championed it, this independent review would not have happened. A further set of ministers, including the current Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Michael Gove and

¹ Oxford Reference (2017) 'Alastair Campbell 1957 – British journalist'. Available at: www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00002529.

many other secretaries of state, ministers and officials, have supported it along the way, as have special advisers, opposition politicians and other sectoral experts. All are united in a desire to positively reset relations between government and people of faith. It seems that in an elegant act of cosmic symmetry, the planets have aligned to create the perfect opportunity for the government to address some of the challenges it faces when engaging with religion, belief and faith. There are some difficult messages in this report, but the government deserves credit for enabling it to go wherever the evidence was taking it.

With the devastating impact of COVID-19, this review was conducted at a time when the government and places of worship were thrown together in a way we have never previously experienced. Engagement and communication between ministers and faith leaders became more important and needed to occur much more frequently. Many people needed their faith and their faith communities more than ever but were unable to come together in person. Faith leaders and ministers deserve credit for the way they worked together to find solutions, often in the most challenging and darkest of circumstances. But the responsibility must remain on government to maintain an open door and continue to listen and meaningfully engage with faith communities.

Even though this review is robustly independent, from its outset it had a ‘no surprises’ policy and committed to transparency and fairness with all stakeholders, including relevant government departments. In some cases, as a result of this transparent approach, some government departments have already made improvements in the way they engage with faith and have shown a greater willingness to engage with faith communities.

This report makes 22 recommendations that, if accepted, will make relations between the state and faith groups stronger, more efficient and more effective. Hopefully these recommendations will illuminate the importance of faith in the eyes of government and will help address some of the challenges that exist within faith communities. Sadly, these challenges are too often overlooked, ignored or put in what the former Labour Home Secretary Charles Clarke called ‘the too difficult box’.²

This review could never have covered every single aspect of how government engages with faith, people of faith and places of worship. Despite the heightened profile of faith-based partiality, and allegations of religious prejudice within political parties and elsewhere, the report’s remit does not extend to the ongoing challenges of religiously motivated hatred, including antisemitism or anti-Muslim hatred. These issues are being examined elsewhere, along with a review into so-called far-right and far-left political extremism.³ Similarly, the barbaric issue of female genital mutilation, which sometimes has loose religious associations, is being addressed separately in a review into violence against women and girls.⁴ It is encouraging that despite the pressures brought about by COVID-19 and the upheaval caused by the political tensions in 2022, this administration

² Charles Clarke (2014) ‘The Too Difficult Box: The Big Issues Politicians Can’t Crack’. Available at: www.bitebackpublishing.com/books/the-too-difficult-box

³ Home Office (23 November 2020) ‘Lord Walney announced as independent adviser on political violence and disruption’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/lord-walney-announced-as-independent-adviser-on-political-violence-and-disruption

⁴ Home Office (9 October 2020) ‘FGM campaigner Nimco Ali appointed as Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Adviser’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/fgm-campaigner-nimco-ali-appointed-as-tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-adviser

remains committed to reviewing all of these important areas, even though delays due to the pandemic have been inescapable. There are other large areas of faith engagement that, unfortunately, remain unexamined here or elsewhere. It should be an ambition of current and future administrations to commission further reviews to address aspects that have been omitted here. For example, with more time and resources, it would have been helpful to look in greater depth at the role that women and young people play in faith and faith settings.

Demonstrating the very strong public interest in faith in society, this review's call for evidence (launched in November 2020) received more than 21,000 responses. Special thanks must be given to the thousands of faith leaders, civil and civic society champions, and members of the public who contributed. In many cases they requested to remain anonymous, and their wishes have been respected. With nearly one million pieces of data, analysis would have been insurmountable were it not for the expert support kindly provided by the Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Birmingham. Everyone who has been involved has been listened to and given the opportunity to share their opinions and ideas. Nevertheless, this is an independent review and the findings and recommendations presented below are entirely those of the author.

Finally, this report would not have been possible without the support of the small but dedicated group of civil servants and advisers who acted as the author's secretariat. During the ongoing pressures of COVID-19 and the redeploying of human resources to meet unprecedented pressures, this magnificent group of individuals went, in the words of Jesus, the extra mile.

Colin Bloom

Independent Faith Engagement Adviser



Executive summary

Introduction

Whether people like it or not, faith plays a profound role in the life of the United Kingdom (UK). Life in our country would be markedly different without the historical legacy and the overwhelming contribution made by faith, people of faith and places of worship. For many people, religion, faith and belief inform what they do and how they interact with their communities, inspiring them to engage in both the civil and civic activities which build social capital and strengthen the ties that bind our country together. The UK is a successful multi-faith country, and it has some of the strongest protections in the world to allow people to freely practise their religion, faith or belief. However, as the UK continues to become more diverse, so too does the landscape of faith and belief. Therefore, it is important that our collective understanding of the role of faith in society stays both current and alive to its evolutionary changes, to ensure the UK remains a place that respects, embraces and understands people of all faiths, beliefs and none.

This is particularly important in the context of the government's ambition to 'level up' our communities. For many people in the UK, their place of worship is their 'marketplace' – the place they go to for pastoral support, for spiritual nourishment and for practical guidance. If we are to truly improve equality of opportunity across our communities, we must find the spaces where those messages will be heard. For many, this is through their faith leaders and their places of worship. Ensuring our understanding of the role of faith in society remains current and improving the government's overall faith literacy are crucial steps to successfully delivering the levelling up agenda.

"Imagine if churches and other places of worship removed their time, money, creativity and energy from public life. What would happen to food banks, and youth clubs and [parent] and toddler groups? What would happen to the army of volunteer chaplains in prisons, universities and hospitals? What would happen to the systems and networks of Parish Priests faithfully doing their visits to the vulnerable and housebound? How much would it cost government to replace everything that people of faith do for free?"

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Are we properly engaging with people of faith? This is the brave question government has asked this review to investigate. The first of its kind, it draws on over 21,000 responses to the call for evidence, along with hundreds of hours of follow-up discussions with people of faith, faith-based organisations and Civil Service officials. Given the breadth and complexity of the subject matter, the review could never claim to be comprehensive – but it is an honest appraisal of some of the fundamental areas where faith and government meet.

This review recognises and affirms the incredible contribution that faith, people of faith and places of worship make to society. It identified strong examples of working relationships between some parts of government and faith communities. Yet there is clearly an overall need for more consistency in the quality and readiness of government engagement. The review's recommendations hope to galvanise government to better support and work with the overwhelmingly positive aspects of faith, while not shying away from tackling harmful practices such as forced and coercive marriage, faith-based extremism, financial exploitation, and potentially unsafe educational environments. All these things are incompatible with and unworthy of the great liberal democracy we want to be.

Chapter 1: Religion, belief and faith in the UK / Chapter 2: Faith literacy in government

In the 2021 Census for England and Wales, over half of respondents declared a religion, representing a significant proportion of the population of England and Wales.⁵ In the past 50 years, religious demographics have changed considerably, partly as a result of inward migration of people of minority faiths.⁶ Faiths provide structure, codes of conduct and context for building cohesive communities. Regardless of which faith people identify with, studies suggest that faith can have incredibly positive impacts on personal wellbeing, success and feelings of belonging.⁷ Faith often informs people's priorities and helps cultivate pro-social sentiments such as kindness, generosity and compassion.⁸ Faith-based organisations contribute immensely to the effectiveness and success of government when it attempts to tackle some of the most pressing social challenges, whether poverty, loneliness, mental health or support through the COVID-19 pandemic. Faith-based organisations make up around 27% of charities in England and Wales, and the sector is growing.⁹ In short, faith is a force for good which government cannot afford to ignore.

However, this review's call for evidence found that 53% of respondents believe freedom of religion or belief is under threat in the UK. This view is particularly strong among Christians (68%). The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief has formed a major part of government's commitment to address the persecution of Christians and minority religious groups around the world.¹⁰ The review recommends expanding the role of the Special Envoy to include domestic affairs.

Chapters 1 and 2 outline examples of excellent partnership working between government and faith organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on this, government should support greater and better collaboration, as set out in the 2020 Kruger review 'Levelling up our communities'.¹¹ By 2023, every local council should be signed up to a Faith Partnership Charter with local places of worship.

⁵ Office for National Statistics (29 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

⁶ Theos (2020) 'Religious London: Faith in a global city'. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Religious-London-FINAL-forweb.pdf

⁷ European Commission and Cordis (30 April 2017) 'The challenges of diversity for current societies: Its impact on social capital and well-being through the lens of identity'. Available at: cordis.europa.eu/article/id/209849-the-positive-power-of-multiculturalism. Forbes (22 December 2013) 'Religion is good for all of us, even those who don't follow one'. Available at: www.forbes.com/sites/jeffreydorfman/2013/12/22/religion-is-good-for-all-of-us-even-those-who-dont-follow-one/?sh=2f88ce7464d7. Harold G. Koenig (2012) 'Religion, spirituality, and health: The research and clinical implications', ISRN Psychiatry. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3671693/

⁸ Call for evidence respondents, Bloom review

⁹ New Philanthropy Capital (2016) 'What a difference a faith makes'. Available at: www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/what-a-difference-a-faith-makes/

¹⁰ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (20 December 2020) 'Prime Minister Boris Johnson appoints new Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-boris-johnson-appoints-new-envoy-for-freedom-of-religion-or-belief.

¹¹ Danny Kruger MP (2020) 'Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant'. Available at: www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities-Danny%20Kruger.pdf

Good collaboration is rooted in good communication. This review found that the terms ‘faith’, ‘belief’, ‘religion’, and other basic tenets and principles of the range of faiths and beliefs in the UK are often poorly understood in government and public services, including the Civil Service, the police, the National Health Service (NHS) and in education. This review recommends the adoption of a consistent set of definitions, alongside generalised faith literacy training for all on the public payroll. This would improve both internal and external communication, policymaking rooted in respect for all protected characteristics and human rights, and service delivery free of conscious or unconscious prejudice. The important work of improving meaningful engagement should be supported by a new Independent Faith Champion.

Chapter 3: Faith in education

Schools play an important role in shaping every generation, and particularly in promoting an understanding and appreciation of faith which stretches across generations into many sectors of society. Through promoting constructive dialogue and positive interaction between people with different beliefs, faith literacy in educational contexts is an essential part of equipping young people to thrive in British society. Despite religious diversity in England increasing over recent decades, the place of faith in the education system faces some significant challenges, including the provision of quality religious education (RE) and the level of understanding and sensitivity towards students’ faith-specific needs.¹²

Beyond full-time education, faith and religious instruction is often taught through faith-specific settings such as yeshivas, madrassahs or Sunday schools. Currently, these ‘out-of-school settings’ are not required to be registered, which increases the risk of poor safeguarding and health and safety breaches.¹³ This reviewer believes that a ‘one size fits all’ approach would be problematic, but where an out-of-school setting operates just below the legal threshold of an independent school, it should be appropriately registered and regulated. It is a cause of deep regret that very often government primarily looks at these establishments through the lens of counter-terrorism without also looking at them from a safeguarding perspective. For the mental and physical safety of our children, it is important that government formalises its approach to these institutions.

At higher education level, introducing faith-sensitive student finance options would improve fair access across faith groups. Government should follow through on Sharia-compliant student finance.

¹² Religious Education Council of England and Wales, National Association of Teachers of Religious Education, and RE Services Today (2017) ‘State of the nation: A report on religious education provision within secondary schools in England’. Available at: www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/SOTN%20RE%202017%20Report%20web%20v4.pdf. Ofsted (2013) ‘Religious education: Realising the potential’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413157/Religious_education_-_realising_the_potential.pdf. Religious Education Council of England and Wales (accessed 29 November 2022, original research conducted 2017) ‘State of the nation report: 800,000 secondary pupils lose out on religious literacy’. Available at www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/secondary-pupils-lose-out-on-religious-literacy/

¹³ The BBC (27 February 2018) ‘Is there a problem with unregistered schools?’. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43170447

Chapter 4: Faith in prison and on probation

Approximately 68% of prisoners claim to have a religion, which is considerably larger than the general population.¹⁴ Reflecting wider society, the prison population is increasingly faith-diverse.¹⁵ Generally, someone who finds themselves in the prison system can expect their faith to be recognised and respected.¹⁶ Where faith is clearly important to prisoners, prison chaplaincy plays a key role in fostering healthy religious practice and values, but the service is too often inconsistent. There are many faith-based organisations who are well-equipped to support prisoners and probationers. This review argues for enhanced due diligence of chaplains and volunteers, and consistent partnership with faith-based civil society for the welfare of prisoners and success of rehabilitation, particularly where extremist ideologies are at play.

In what is by definition a captive audience, extremist ideologies can spread, be reinforced, and in some cases be coercively imposed, illegally curtailing prisoners' rights to freedom of belief, undermining the rehabilitation journey and increasing security risks. Government should carry out an urgent review of coercive conversions and radicalisation. Moreover, the prison and probation system should prioritise equipping staff with religious understanding and tools that will help them identify radicalised religious ideologies and support prisoners in their rehabilitation. Government should further embrace the use of faith-based deradicalisation and rehabilitation programmes, and expand existing ones focusing on what works, both before and after prison.

Chapter 5: Faith in the UK Armed Forces

The UK Armed Forces is not only one of the biggest employers in the UK, but it is also a symbol that proclaims and protects British values at home and abroad. Through its recruitment strategies, it has the potential to play an important role in advancing community integration and cohesion across diverse communities. To illustrate the scale of the challenge, Muslims account for just 0.4% of UK Regular Forces, though they make up 6.5% of the UK population (according to the 2021 Census).

This review found evidence that UK Armed Forces members from minority religious groups have an enormous sense of belonging, together with pride in their families and faith communities. Addressing the barriers which prevent British citizens of minority faiths from joining freely should be tackled urgently to build the diverse and dynamic fighting force that truly mirrors the society it protects. The UK Armed Forces should continually review their recruitment and retention policies until this is achieved.

¹⁴ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) 'HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual report 2019-20'. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisonswp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/HMI-Prisons_Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20-WEB.pdf. Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021.

¹⁵ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) 'HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual report 2019-20'. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisonswp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/HMI-Prisons_Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20-WEB.pdf

¹⁶ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) 'HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual report 2019-20'. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisonswp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/HMI-Prisons_Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20-WEB.pdf

Chapter 6: Faith-based extremism

This review recognises that the freedom to campaign for particular beliefs is a fundamental human right and an essential part of a liberal democracy. However, it is unacceptable and undemocratic for activists to coerce, threaten or intimidate people who disagree with their beliefs or tactics. Identifying when an ideology breaches democratic bounds is a complex issue. While the majority of people of faith are, as defined earlier, ‘true believers’ – decent, honourable and generous people – government must address the small but dangerous minority of ‘make-believers’ who intentionally harm, or intend to harm, the individual and collective freedoms this country holds dear. The four fundamental British values as taught in our schools are democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs.¹⁷ These values are what makes this country such an attractive place to live. Government should be bold and courageous in not just upholding these values, but rigorously protecting them too.

For a generation, policy makers and the media have almost singularly focused on the threat of Islamist extremism, and proportionally it remains the largest threat.¹⁸ Of course, the overwhelming majority of British Muslims do not condone the values and behaviour of Islamist extremists. Government should redouble its efforts to ensure mainstream and peaceful Muslims do not feel unfairly associated with Islamist extremists. The important distinction between Islam and Islamism must form part of the faith literacy training for all staff on the public payroll as recommended in chapter 2.

Recent years have seen a welcome crackdown on white supremacists and neo-Nazis, and a robust response to an ugly rise of antisemitism. However, in the opinion of this reviewer, this laser focus has allowed other types of faith-based or ‘faith-adjacent’ extremisms, such as Sikh extremism, Hindu nationalism and black nationalism, to grow under the noses of the authorities. This chapter describes some of the subversive or sectarian behaviours and activities of the various faith-based or ‘faith-adjacent’ extremisms operating in the UK today, including online tactics. It recommends renewed efforts to investigate these behaviours and activities, as well as greater government vigilance and the need for decisive and courageous action where these groups are politically subversive or where they use tactics to silence or threaten their opponents.

Chapter 7: Faith-based exploitation

Faith-based charities and places of worship need to raise money to cover their expenses. However, there is a clear difference between legitimate and voluntary fundraising, and when deception, coercion and exploitation of trust are used to extract money from people, particularly when the victims can’t afford it. Though rare, such practices are well known and have devastating impacts on victims and their broader communities. In extreme cases, such as high-control groups (‘cults’), it is not only money but a person’s freedom over their life that can be compromised. All who may be involved with ensuring the legal compliance of places of worship and the safety of people of faith (such as the police, the Charity Commission, policy makers and MPs) need a sufficient level of faith literacy,

¹⁷ Department for Education (27 November 2014) ‘Guidance on promoting British values in schools published’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published

¹⁸ MI5 (14 October 2020) ‘Director General Ken McCallum makes first public address’. Available at: www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-makes-first-public-address

including intrafaith issues, to spot the signs of wrong-doing and handle these difficult situations sensitively.

Chapter 8: Religious marriage

Marriage is widely recognised as a key life event and plays an essential part in both family life and public ceremonial practice. Not all wedding ceremonies result in a legal marriage, which can be problematic if the spouses are unaware of their lack of rights in cases of divorce or death of a partner. If anyone is coerced, deceived or manipulated into marriage or marriage conditions they do not consent to, it is both a denial of their freedom and a violation of their human rights. It is unacceptable that this continues to happen, to the suspected tune of 5,000 to 8,000 incidences a year in England.¹⁹ Since religious background is sadly often a key feature, government should systematise the comprehensive collection of data across local and national government and prioritise better faith literacy among officials and front-line services so that prevention and victim support efforts become more effective. Moreover, officiants responsible for conducting marriages, legally-binding or not, must be held accountable for ensuring that prospective spouses have given informed consent to their chosen form of marriage.

Despite many waves of societal, political and journalistic interest, there has been insufficient action to date on forced marriage. This reviewer believes that such crimes would be more effectively tackled if a single government department took sole responsibility of an adequately resourced Forced Marriage Unit. This would ensure that the policy and operational arms can quickly adapt to perpetrators' evolving tactics and provide a stronger political voice for addressing this issue.

Conclusion

This far-ranging report reviews key areas of government's engagement with faith communities. There are numerous areas where engagement helps bring about common goals of a free, respectful and caring society, and a few where insufficient or inadequate engagement undermines these aims. On the strength of this report, the reviewer hopes government and others will continue to celebrate the benefits of faith in all its diversity for this country and its people. He hopes government finds the recommendations helpful so it can maximise the overwhelming good, but also tackle the small but serious areas where harm is caused.

Notes

Scope

It is important to note that this review was commissioned by the UK government. It therefore makes recommendations regarding the UK government's engagement with faith, people of faith and places of worship in England and, where it is exercising reserved functions, across other parts of the UK. Matters related to faith policy are largely devolved, but the evidence gathered often covered all four corners of the UK and was not

¹⁹ National Centre for Social Research and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) 'Forced marriage prevalence and service response'. Available at: https://oro.open.ac.uk/44739/1/_userdata_documents4_pk4594_Desktop_My%20Documents_forced-marriage-prevalence-service%5B1%5D.pdf

necessarily geographically specific, so, where appropriate, the review comments on faith in the UK more broadly. It is the expressed hope of the reviewer that a number of the recommendations may prove helpful to policy makers across the whole of the UK.

Methodology

From the outset of this review, a high premium was placed on ensuring that the evidence collected adequately captured the opinions and lived experiences of as many people as possible, including the people and organisations that represent the vast diversity of faiths and beliefs in the UK. The initial evidence-gathering process involved numerous meetings and interviews, engaging charities, organisations, sectoral experts and key individuals of all faiths, beliefs and none to discuss and share any data on specific areas of interest. This also included assessing research and academic papers, other independent government reviews, All-Party Parliamentary Group reports, and news articles.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary pause, to allow the Independent Faith Engagement Adviser to advise and support the government in its engagement with places of worship and faith-based organisations. This provided unique insight into how government and other public services responded to the pandemic's incredible challenges and offered another rich pool of evidence.

In a third phase, a public call for evidence was launched on 13 November 2020, closing on 11 December 2020.²⁰ It received over 21,000 responses to a series of questions around how those of all faiths, beliefs or none perceive government's engagement with faith. It covered a large proportion of the final topics outlined in this review, although not all, as this final stage of stakeholder engagement was designed to provide further evidence where gaps had been identified. The response to the call for evidence was far higher than anticipated – bringing up over one million pieces of data – emphasising the strength of public feeling associated with matters of faith.

Ministers and officials from across government were consulted to inform recommendations. It is important to note that the overall response and engagement from all government departments has been overwhelmingly positive. Many are seeking joint-working initiatives and formulating new policy following the assessments put forward by the review, in some cases before this report was published.

It was vital that a review commenting on the need for greater faith literacy engaged with analysts, academics and professionals who were confident in interfaith and intrafaith issues, as well as the common faith-based arguments, religious nuances and prejudices in the responses. The University of Birmingham, through the Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion, has provided thorough analysis of the call for evidence, ensuring that every response was carefully read and every respondent listened to, while also providing clear statistical data. These analysis reports are the intellectual property of the University of Birmingham.

²⁰ Independent faith engagement review: call for evidence (closed consultation 13 November 2020 to 11 December 2020). Background available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-faith-engagement-review-call-for-evidence

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that despite the wealth and richness of the data gathered throughout this review, the qualitative and anecdotal nature of the evidence often represents opinion rather than fact, given the personal and sensitive nature of many of the conversations. The evidence is therefore not infallible, and the review should be read with this in mind. Given the evidence gathering and stakeholder conversations primarily took place in 2020 and 2021, developments in policies, statistics, domestic or international affairs may not be entirely up to date at the time of publication.



Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (chapter 1)

Government should expand the role of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief to include the promotion and protection of religious freedom in the UK. Government should be equally vigilant regarding the protections and freedoms of religion, belief and faith at home as it is overseas.

Recommendation 2 (chapter 1)

Government should take learnings from the Faith New Deal pilot fund, launched in September 2021 following the recommendations set out in the 2020 Kruger review 'Levelling up our communities', and consider ways of proactively partnering with places of worship in a Faith Partnership Charter to support their broader local community. By December 2023, every local council should be signed up to a Faith Partnership Charter with their places of worship.

Recommendation 3 (chapter 1)

Government should adopt the working definitions for 'religion', 'belief' and 'faith' as defined below. These should become the collective and common understandings across government and its agencies, and should be published on the [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) website and the intranet for each central government department within six months of this report being published.

'Religion' is a particular, shared system of belief, generally in one or more supreme being(s) or entities or in a sense of the infinite, which seeks to influence the follower's actions and practices. Someone can be born into a religious tradition, they can follow a religion, they can belong to a religion and they can even be religious in their lifestyle choices. Religions often have designated places of worship such as churches, temples, gurdwaras, mosques and synagogues or other sacred spaces, and will frequently have a formal structure and national and international hierarchy. Most of the world's major religions have some kind of statement of belief, commitment or creed, and scriptures or other sacred texts.

'Belief' is an idea or concept that one accepts as true or real. A genuinely or sincerely held belief is more than just an opinion and can often have a profound impact on someone's lifestyle. A belief should have at least a minimal level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance, and be worthy of respect in a democratic society. A belief should be compatible with human dignity and not seek to undermine the fundamental rights of others. Belief is not necessarily rooted in the supernatural. A belief can be a worldview like atheism, humanism, veganism or environmentalism, but a belief can also be held within a faith or a religion.

‘Faith’ is sometimes used as a synonym and equivalent for ‘religion’ or ‘religious’ in the context of, for example, a faith-based organisation, faith leader, global faith or faith community. However, more directly, faith should be interpreted as a profound trust in something based on spiritual conviction and divine principles, which can be perceived by others to be beyond the normal limits of perception or of logical proof. Someone can have a faith without having a religious lifestyle, they may believe in a God or gods, a ‘higher power’ or ‘life after death’, and they may be a ‘spiritual’ person. The important aspect is that they believe with conviction in something which goes beyond empirical experience.

Recommendation 4 (chapter 2)

Government should take steps to ensure that everyone on the public payroll, including civil servants in Whitehall and local councils, NHS and public health staff, teachers in schools, colleges and universities, and police, prison and probation officers, are provided with consistent, quality faith literacy training, overseen by the Independent Faith Champion’s Office as outlined in recommendation 6. This should include: training on the freedom of religion or belief enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998 and Equalities Act 2010, greater understanding of faith-specific practices including the public expression of religious belief, awareness of intrafaith matters and sensitive issues such as forced marriages, and financial and other forms of faith-based exploitation. The training should be developed by trusted partners and sectoral experts to ensure appropriate parameters are in place.

Recommendation 5 (chapter 2)

Government should learn from the effective faith engagement programmes initiated during the pandemic and hold regular roundtables with senior, serious and national faith leaders. These should be governed by a sophisticated mechanism of discernment, with all groups having the right to speak and be heard at appropriate levels, to ensure fairness in output with a consistent outcome.

Recommendation 6 (chapter 2)

Government should appoint an Independent Faith Champion. The Independent Faith Champion should have a well-resourced team of civil servants and sectoral experts to act as advisers and support government departments on both interfaith and intrafaith matters. This office could be rebuilt from the current faith team in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities or be a new function in the Cabinet Office. In any event, the Independent Faith Champion and their team should have a broad, government-wide remit to ensure that government is successfully engaging with faith, people of faith and places of worship. They should be the main support for the Faith Minister and the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Recommendation 7 (chapter 3)

Government should look again at why religious education (RE) in schools has become the ‘Cinderella subject’ and should consider methods for improving the teaching of faith literacy and RE, with a view to cultivating a more inclusive society where people of all backgrounds are able to engage in debate about the different faiths and beliefs that shape society. Possible solutions could include the introduction of minimum standards regarding timetabling and resourcing to bring RE alongside other humanities subjects which would then be centrally inspected by Ofsted, the introduction of religious studies GCSE into the English Baccalaureate, or even outreach programmes to university graduates of theology and religious studies to ensure higher levels of faith literacy among RE teachers.

Recommendation 8 (chapter 3)

Government should ensure that ‘out-of-school settings’ which include faith-based settings operating below the current minimum threshold for registration as independent schools, and those that provide supplementary religious instruction, are properly registered and regulated (creating a new registration scheme and/or mandatory safeguarding reporting regime governed by a centralised oversight body as necessary). They should also ensure appropriate resources are allocated to meet children’s welfare and safeguarding requirements.

Recommendation 9 (chapter 3)

Government should accelerate proposals to introduce Sharia-compliant student loans on equalities grounds. Faith-sensitive student finance should be made available from the beginning of academic year 2024-25.

Recommendation 10 (chapter 4)

Government should begin an improvement review of chaplaincy services in prisons and pastoral support for people on remand and on probation. The review should focus on consistency across services, as well as exploring options for modern and effective support, including greater partnership with faith-based organisations who are well equipped to support the prison chaplaincy service.

Recommendation 11 (chapter 4)

Government should carry out an urgent review of the issue of prisoners allegedly being coercively converted and radicalised in prison, including by their peers, as well as the issue of faith-based gangs. The review should identify any gaps in services that allow these issues to flourish, including the robust vetting of chaplains, mandatory faith literacy and theological training for HM Prison and Probation Service staff, and nuanced data collection on in-prison conversion.

Recommendation 12 (chapter 4)

Government should explicitly integrate the use of religious or theological reflection as an important part of the rehabilitation of some offenders. This is particularly needed in the Healthy Identity Intervention, where suitable religious and faith-focused tools should be used alongside psychological and social ones to help deradicalise prisoners who have been converted to flawed and extremist religious ideologies. At the very least, government should evaluate the sequencing of the Healthy Identity Intervention and the Theological and Ideological Intervention to establish how they can complement each other in the rehabilitation process.

Recommendation 13 (chapter 5)

Government and the UK Armed Forces should review recruitment campaigns, future recruitment contracts and HR policies to ensure that more minority faith groups, particularly British-born Muslims, are recruited and retained. By December 2024, the UK Armed Forces should have developed and implemented a strategy that will see the numbers of British-born service personnel from minority religions increase every year until the UK Armed Forces more accurately reflects religious diversity in the UK. Progress should be monitored annually.

Recommendation 14 (chapter 6)

Government should redouble its efforts to reinforce the distinctions between extremist Islamism and Islam and between Islamist extremists and Muslims. The vast majority of British Muslims do not condone the behaviour or values of Islamist criminals who perpetrate acts of violence, terror and extremism. Government should continue to seek ways of ensuring that British Muslims do not feel unfairly associated with violent Islamism or Islamists who operate with violent or subversive tactics, and ensure that these distinctions are heavily supported in the faith literacy training mentioned in recommendation 4.

Recommendation 15 (chapter 6)

Government should continue to crack down on white supremacist and neo-Nazi terrorists and extremists who are using religion or religious imagery to promote their hateful ideology. In addition, government should keep a watching brief on religiously motivated black nationalist groups. Government should also be much more alive to the very small but growing phenomenon of extreme Hindu nationalism and Buddhist nationalism.

Recommendation 16 (chapter 6)

Government should clearly define and investigate extremist activity and identify where this exists within the Sikh community, taking steps to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of subversive and sectarian Sikh extremist activity. Government should ensure that unacceptable and extremist behaviours are not inadvertently legitimised by government or parliamentary engagement. The reconsideration of previous decisions regarding the activity and legality of certain groups should be included. This will require improving faith literacy across government and the parliamentary estate, particularly on intrafaith issues, so government can be more discerning regarding engagement and representation within British Sikh communities.

Recommendation 17 (chapter 6)

This reviewer welcomes much in the Online Safety Bill. Government should use the provisions within the bill to exert much greater pressure on YouTube and other social media platforms to remove content uploaded by extremist groups (often intrafaith) which glorifies terrorist activity and is therefore illegal. Similarly, content, including in other languages, which may not be illegal but which incites anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Hindu hatred, hatred towards Sikhs, or any other kind of violent prejudice, racism or misogyny should be treated as harmful. It should be removed on the basis that it incites violence or religious-based sectarianism and is therefore potentially psychologically damaging for children and adults, as well as compromising the safety and security of faith communities in the UK. This requires improved faith literacy across government, including on historical context and events so government can better understand the root causes of tension and hate.

Recommendation 18 (chapter 7)

Government and its agencies, the Charity Commission, the Crown Prosecution Service and the police should increase their awareness of faith-based financial exploitation so that perpetrators face appropriate sanctions and victims are supported. Government should consider increasing resource allocations to the Charity Commission's investigations team, so they are better able to pursue cases of financial exploitation. In addition, government should produce a toolkit for MPs, local councillors and local government officers to spot signs of faith-based financial coercion and exploitation, with clear instructions on reporting to relevant authorities including the police and Charity Commission.

Recommendation 19 (chapter 7)

Government should fund a programme that supports vulnerable people to leave high-demand groups, high-control movements (often referred to as cults) or religious groups. In addition, this work should help people who face isolation as so-called 'apostates' and those facing threats of homelessness, shunning and honour-based abuse. Government should consider partnering with experts on this topic, such as the pioneering academics Dr Linda Dubrow-Marshall and Professor Rod Dubrow-Marshall at the University of Salford, and Humanists UK who currently work to support so-called 'apostates'.

Recommendation 20 (chapter 8)

Government should amend the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to make it a criminal offence for faith leaders conducting religious and civil weddings to do so without ensuring both participants have willingly entered into the marriage. Given the additional pressure this will place on faith leaders, government should consider providing training on spotting the signs of forced and coercive marriages to support them. This should include guidance for navigating difficult situations where marriage applications need to be refused.

Recommendation 21 (chapter 8)

Government should redouble its efforts to tackle forced and coercive marriage by publicly adopting the term 'forced and coercive marriage' to address the full range of coercive behaviour and pressure in some religious-only or arranged marriages. The Forced Marriage Unit should be led at the political level by one secretary of state to ensure ownership of this important issue, and it should be adequately resourced within one department to house both the operational delivery and policy work. This would ensure that the policy team can adapt to perpetrators' evolving tactics while the operation team continues to support victims, as well as prioritising effective join-up across government, particularly with the Department for Education.

Recommendation 22 (chapter 8)

A review should be set up to fully investigate where existing legislation and policy are failing to prevent the crime of forced and coercive marriage, what further resources are needed, and what more can be done to meet the needs of victims and prevent others falling prey to these crimes. Government should record more quantitative and qualitative data on forced and coercive marriage, including working more closely with social services and local councils. The Forced Marriage Unit specifically should record further data – especially the religious or ethnic backgrounds of both victims and perpetrators – to identify trends and effectively target campaign materials.



Chapter 1

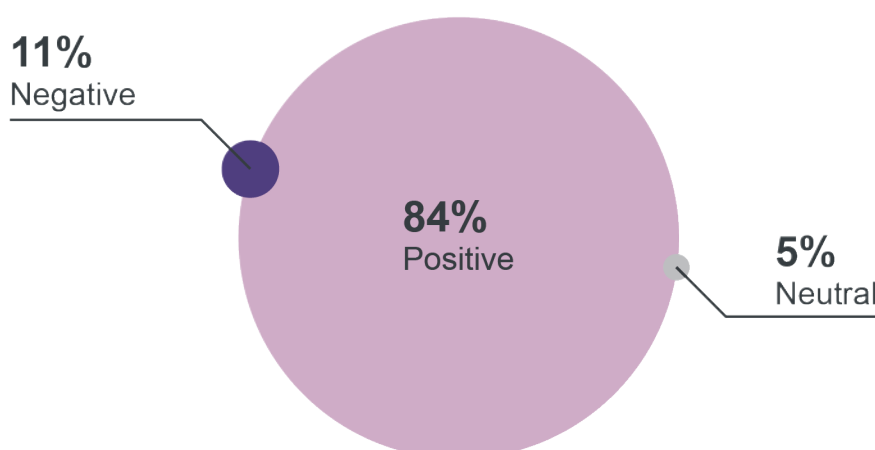
Religion, belief and faith in the UK

1.1 Introduction

The four fundamental British values of freedom (individual liberty), democracy, justice (rule of law), and tolerance (mutual respect) have been foundational to the thinking and development of this report. These values benefit everyone, whether they have a faith or not. If they are embraced by everyone, then every community flourishes. Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights state that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (including the freedom to change their religion or belief), and that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.²¹ Freedom of religion and belief is essential for a healthy society, and the UK is a global leader in protecting freedom of religion and belief, both at home and abroad. As a result of these democratic freedoms, the UK is incredibly pluralistic and home to some of the most culturally and religiously diverse populations in the world.

A person's religion, belief or faith is often central to how they live their life – at the core of who they are and guiding many of the big decisions they make. Any careless treatment or poor use of language by politicians or government officials – however inadvertent – can be upsetting and feel disrespectful. It is therefore paramount that government gives due consideration to religion, belief and faith to uphold and foster the democratic rights of UK citizens, as well as designing and implementing policies that are fair to all and are appropriate across the diverse spectrum of people in the UK. In doing so, government must be continually vigilant and precise in its understanding and use of these terms.

Figure 1: In your opinion, are faith and religion overall positive things for society?



Source: Bloom review call for evidence, 2020

For hundreds of years, faith has fulfilled important roles in society, providing structures, codes of conduct and context for building cohesive communities. At the outset of this review we asked: how positive is faith and religion for society? From over 21,000 responses, the majority of people affirmed that faith and religion are beneficial for society.

²¹ The United Nations (1948) 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights'. Available at: www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

Over half of respondents gave faith and religion a 10 out of 10 rating for contribution to society, and over 84% scored the social contribution as positive.

The emphatic response of ‘yes’ to this question has not only highlighted the areas where faith and religion meet crucial needs, but in the opinion of the reviewer it also underscores the need for government to facilitate greater faith-based service provision. This is especially required where faith communities surpass the ability of government to understand and address the local challenges and potential of the population.

In the UK, freedom of association and freedom of religion or belief are protected characteristics. These freedoms allow people of diverse faiths, religions and beliefs to organise themselves autonomously without interference from government authorities. Indeed, common law going back to Magna Carta, and the struggle for religious freedoms in the British civil wars of the mid-17th century, have contributed to preserving freedom of religion throughout the centuries. The UK has become a significant leader in global religious freedom, which has allowed people of all faiths, beliefs and none to thrive in the context of liberal democracy.²² As a result, there is a rich display of religious expression through many different places of worship, denominations and organisations represented in British society.

In the UK today, many are at ease with the plurality of religions, beliefs and faiths. This means that faith and faith communities have been free to take up important roles in society, both in shaping our social fabric and meeting individual needs in ways that the state cannot. Some public services – including many schools, the hospice movement, midwifery and nursing, orphanages or children’s homes, and charitable organisations – were begun or accelerated by faith-based movements. Throughout the last century, government has inherited many of these and taken on responsibility for their maintenance and provision. The nationalisation or direct funding and regulation of these sectors has led to significant improvements, such as mandatory government-funded education and the NHS. While this development has revealed the upper limits of what the state can do, faith, places of worship and faith-based charities can often go the extra mile in tackling some of the most pressing challenges in society. There are thousands of examples, but perhaps one that exemplifies this point is the Mildmay Mission Hospital in London. Set up as a Christian response to the cholera outbreak in the 1860s, it has become one of the world’s leading centres in care for people living with HIV and AIDS and continues to be an organisation that derives inspiration from its faith-based values.²³

The UK has also pioneered efforts to protect religious freedom across the world, such as the creation of a Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. In May 2021, under its G7 presidency, the UK secured the inclusion of freedom of religion or belief issues in the communique from the G7 foreign and development ministers’ meeting for the very first

²² For example, it hosted the third international Freedom of Religion and Belief Forum in 2021. See Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (23 November 2021) ‘UK to host international conference to promote freedom of religion or belief next summer in London’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-host-international-conference-to-promote-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-next-summer-in-london

²³ Mildmay (accessed 1 December 2022) ‘About us’. Available at www.mildmay.org/about. Mildmay (accessed 1 December 2022) ‘What we do’. Available at: www.mildmay.org/what-we-do

time.²⁴ This has allowed the UK government to become a voice for the voiceless, especially those who are persecuted for their faith and belief. While these actions reflect how important religious freedom is for the UK, some respondents to the call for evidence and follow-up discussions revealed concerns of a perceived rise in threats to religious freedom in our own country. Some members of both Christian and minority religions felt they were at risk of being marginalised, de-platformed, or even losing their jobs for practising their faiths or beliefs.

This chapter presents the role and place of faith in society, and reviews current relationships with government in England and the potential benefits of improved engagement.

1.2 Faith and belief in society

Through centuries of struggle and great debates, the UK has become a leader in religious freedom, with every religion, belief system and faith able to coexist within one sovereign state. While not perfect, when it comes to religious freedom we fare significantly better than many other nations where religious persecution is still prevalent.²⁵ Today, British culture shines with unique religious expressions which were once only found overseas.

The idea that faith is dying is a myth. It is also unhelpful for the positive development of modern society because it can create a disconnect between people of faith and people who know very little about it. This chasm can cause countless problems in the delivery of public services, in how organisations are run, and especially in how government operates. The full range of faiths provides resources and contexts which contribute immensely to the effectiveness and success of government's attempts to tackle some of the most pressing social challenges, whether poverty, loneliness, mental health, or the scale of public health and volunteering support required during the COVID-19 pandemic. This review calls on government to actively encourage greater understanding and consideration of the beliefs and practices that define the complete expression of religion and faith, and for greater appreciation and support for what people of faith, faith-based organisations and places of worship contribute to society.

1.2.1 An evolving and dynamic force

The UK is made up of people from all faiths, beliefs and none. In the recently released 2021 Census for England and Wales, over half identified with a religion.²⁶ Although numbers have declined since the 2011 Census, the largest religion was still Christianity with 27.5 million

²⁴ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (23 November 2021) 'UK to host international conference to promote freedom of religion or belief next summer in London'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-host-international-conference-to-promote-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-next-summer-in-london

²⁵ Global survey participants ranked the UK third out of 85 countries with the most religious freedom. See U.S. News (accessed 1 December 2022) 'These countries have the most religious freedom'. Available at: www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings/religious-freedom

²⁶ Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

people (46.2% of the population). Muslims were the next largest religious group with 3.9 million people (6.5% of the population). Of the other main religious groups: 1 million people identified as Hindu (1.7% of the population), 524,000 people identified as Sikh (0.9%), 271,000 people as Jewish (0.5%) and 273,000 people as Buddhist (0.5%). 348,000 people (0.6%) identified with religions which did not fall into any of the main religious categories. These included Pagan, Alevi, Jain and Zoroastrian, among others. 22.2 million people in England and Wales said they had no religion, which is just over a third of the population – an increase of 12 percentage points (8.1 million people) since the 2011 Census. Many of the changes in data from the 2011 Census reflect changing patterns of ageing, fertility, mortality and migration. The results may also demonstrate changes in the way people responded to the Census question, potentially reflecting a shift from identifying as Christian in the church-going sense, to identifying as agnostic or atheist, while still retaining some Christian norms and traditions.²⁷

While the increased proportion of people self-identifying as ‘no religion’ in the 2021 Census was expected, the pandemic also seems to have triggered a growing popular interest in faith and religion. There was a dramatic increase in sales of religious texts and app downloads, with one specialist online store recording a 55% increase in sales of Christian Bibles and record numbers of Quran sales and app downloads in March 2020.^{28, 29} In-person faith-based interest also appears to have risen. A survey by Evangelical Alliance UK of 900 churches across England found that 59% saw a notable increase in interest, and 70% reported that more people who would not normally attend church attended during the lockdown.³⁰ How these trends evolve as we emerge from the pandemic remains to be seen, particularly in light of the 2021 Census results, but they are an indication that faith interest in the UK is not just alive, but in some areas thriving.

As a result of inward migration of people of minority religions and faith groups, cities, which were previously seen as less religious than the countryside, are flipping the trend. In their 2020 report ‘Faith in a global city’, the think tank Theos highlighted that London is significantly more religious than the rest of the country, with 62% identifying as religious compared to 53% outside of London.³¹ While minority faith groups are small compared to the entire population, numbers are often concentrated in specific regions and cities, reflecting migration patterns.³² For example, 97% of the Hindu population live in urban areas such as Leicester and London and the South East, where they represent 15.9% and

²⁷ Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) ‘Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021’. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

²⁸ Penguin (14 May 2020) ‘Why lockdown has inspired a surge in Bible sales’. Available at: www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/may/lockdown-reading-bible.html.

²⁹ Religion Media Centre (28 April 2020) ‘Bible and Koran sales up: Spirituality grows during the Covid crisis’. Available at: religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/bible-and-koran-sales-up-spirituality-grows-during-the-covid-crisis/

³⁰ Evangelical Alliance UK (2020) ‘Changing church: Responding to the coronavirus crisis’. Available at: www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/changing-church.

³¹ Theos (2020) ‘Religious London: Faith in a global city’. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Religious-London-FINAL-forweb.pdf

³² Theos (2020) ‘Religious London: Faith in a global city’. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Religious-London-FINAL-forweb.pdf

5% of the population respectively.³³ This pattern also plays out at sub-city level. For example, the borough of Harrow in London is 27.6% Hindu.³⁴ Future trends suggest that while minority faith communities will continue to grow mostly in cities, changing work opportunities, remote working and other factors such as particular waves of refugee resettlements will expand the reach of different religions and faith groups into more rural areas, altering the religious landscape in England and the impact of faith on society.³⁵

The vast range of faith-based charities, which provide key services in education, health and care, are another indicator of the significant reach and impact of faith in society. The faith-based charity sector has a longstanding heritage in British history, often anticipating and complementing the development of government-run public services. Faith-based charities have an established place in communities across the country, making up around 27% of charities in England and Wales in 2016.³⁶ The faith-based charity sector is changing and growing, from 32,735 (one in five) in 2014 to 49,881 (over one in four) in 2016.³⁷ Though we lack more recent data, a higher proportion of faith-based charities were registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales between 2006 and 2016, suggesting a dynamic landscape of new entrants and raising over £16 billion in 2016.³⁸

Faith in England and Wales is alive and well, and the abundance of detailed and passionate responses to this review across many faith and belief communities highlights the importance of the topic to many in contemporary British society. Faith is a diverse and evolving force which government cannot afford to ignore.

1.2.2 Religious freedom in the UK

The UK government has become a global leader in upholding and defending freedom of religion and belief through promoting religious tolerance abroad.³⁹ Since 2018, the Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, in association with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, has formed a major part of government's initiative and commitment to address the international persecution of Christians and religious minority groups. In July 2022, the UK hosted the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, bringing together international governments, parliamentarians, faith and

³³ Religion Media Centre (27 March 2018) 'Hinduism in the UK'. Available at: religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/hinduism-in-the-uk/

³⁴ Office for National Statistics and London Datastore (2018) 'Population by religion, borough'. Available at: data.london.gov.uk/dataset/percentage-population-religion-borough?resource=abfb6175-f489-4c6e-add2-f4d323183224.

³⁵ The Economist (19 May 2018) 'Britain's rural Muslims are a minority within a minority'. Available at: www.economist.com/britain/2018/05/17/britains-rural-muslims-are-a-minority-within-a-minority.

³⁶ New Philanthropy Capital (2016) 'What a difference a faith makes'. Available at: www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/what-a-difference-a-faith-makes/

³⁷ New Philanthropy Capital (2014) 'Questions of faith'. Available at: www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/questions-of-faith/

³⁸ New Philanthropy Capital (2016) 'Faith matters: Understanding faith-based charities'. Available at: www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/faith-matters/.

³⁹ House of Commons Library (15 October 2020) 'Research briefing: Progress on the Bishop of Truro's independent review on persecution of Christians and freedom of religion or belief'. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2020-0110/.

belief representatives, and civil society.⁴⁰ It urged increased global action on freedom of religion or belief for all and was the first in-person international ministerial conference on this issue since 2019. The event built on the previous ministerial-level conferences held by the United States in 2018 and 2019, and in virtual format by Poland in 2020. In 2021, during the UK's presidency of the G7, the UK secured inclusion of freedom of religion and belief concerns in a G7 communique for the first time.

Around the world, many people of faith, and those with specific beliefs, are at risk of losing their lives, livelihood, family and social reputation because their beliefs do not meet popular approval or the will of the established regime.⁴¹ There are many praiseworthy cases where government and MPs have raised a voice for the voiceless, advocating for asylum, aid and political interventions on their behalf. For example, government has taken significant steps in response to the 2019 report by the Bishop of Truro on Christian persecution, which set out recommendations for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to better tackle religious persecution and discrimination.⁴² While not all recommendations have been fully implemented, the government has voted in an important new global human rights sanctions regime against organisations or individuals complicit in human rights abuses, which came into force in 2020.^{43, 44} The legislation does not specifically target violation of freedom of religion or belief, but it does target “violations of the right to life, torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, slavery, forced or compulsory labour”.⁴⁵ This is likely to encompass the worst violations of religious freedom.

The UK has a long-standing history of religious plurality, and protecting these freedoms is at the heart of what the UK stands for. However, the call for evidence for this review found that 53% of respondents believe that freedom of religion or belief is under threat. This was notably higher among Christians (68%), with many citing high-profile cases of job losses because of ‘bringing their faith to work’ or being penalised for bringing their faith into the public square. Many Christian respondents said they no longer feel able to be who they are in public or at work, after experiencing the dismissal of traditional religious beliefs and practices. This review unearthed many concerns from diverse faith communities that government is overlooking the complexity of the issue, fuelling a trend in society, the

⁴⁰ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (accessed 1 December 2022) ‘International ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief: London 2022’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/international-ministerial-conference-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-london-2022

⁴¹ Pew Research Centre (15 July 2019) ‘A closer look at how religious restrictions have risen around the world’. Available at: www.pewforum.org/2019/07/15/a-closer-look-at-how-religious-restrictions-have-risen-around-the-world/

⁴² Bishop of Truro (2019) ‘Independent review of FCDO support for persecuted Christians’. Available at: christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/storage/2019/07/final-report-and-recommendations.pdf

⁴³ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (4 July 2022) ‘Assessment of the implementation of recommendations of Bishop of Truro’s independent review of FCDO support for persecuted Christians’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/bishop-of-truros-independent-review-of-fcdo-support-for-persecuted-christians-assessment-of-recommendations-implementation/assessment-of-the-implementation-of-recommendations-of-bishop-of-truros-independent-review-of-fcdo-support-for-persecuted-christians#conclusions-and-lessons-learnt

⁴⁴ House of Commons Library (15 July 2022) ‘Research briefing: UK sanctions for human rights abuses and corruption’. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2022-0148/

⁴⁵ The Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/680/made.

media and government to privatise religion and belief. For example, there was a consistent emphasis among Christian respondents of the danger of no-platforming, and the lack of a decisive response from politicians and government to address this issue. The concern was that the views and beliefs of many Christians are being marginalised and rejected from discussions without exploring why people hold particular beliefs about life, relationships and meaning.

Despite official figures showing a drop in religiously motivated hate crime between 2019 and 2021, some respondents to the review mentioned a perceived rise in hostility before the pandemic.⁴⁶ Acknowledging tensions and any perceived sense of threat between and within some faith and belief groups, ideological movements, and faith communities is key to ensuring people of faith feel adequately supported by public institutions, whatever their background. Government must develop a greater sensitivity to the nuances of religious freedom in the UK, particularly if there are rises or perceived rises in marginalisation, discrimination and prejudice towards people of faith. While religious tensions in society can affect freedom of religion, they also impact on people's freedom to explore, understand and debate diverse views and opinions which are rooted in different worldviews.

In light of the admirable and effective efforts of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief regarding international matters, government should have a similar passion for preserving religious freedom in both public and private institutions in the UK.

1.2.3 Is faith good for people?

Regardless of which faith people identify with, studies suggest that faith can have incredibly positive impacts on personal wellbeing.

- Religious freedom is a vital component of a healthy society. A 2022 report by the United States Institute of Peace notes the link between freedom of religion or belief and democracy, political stability and even economic development in localised cases.⁴⁷
- At a national level, ethnic and religious diversity are associated with better health and wellbeing.⁴⁸ Numerous studies have pointed to the wider health, economic, social and educational benefits that faith communities bring to society.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Home Office (12 October 2021) 'Home Office statistics: Hate crime, England and Wales, 2020 to 2021'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021

⁴⁷ United States Institute of Peace (21 June 2022) 'Global trends and challenges to protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief'. Available at: www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/global-trends-and-challenges-protecting-and-promoting-freedom-religion-or

⁴⁸ European Commission and Cordis (30 April 2017) 'The challenges of diversity for current societies: Its impact on social capital and well-being through the lens of identity'. Available at: cordis.europa.eu/article/id/209849-the-positive-power-of-multiculturalism.

⁴⁹ Joanna Maselko, Cayce Hughes and Rose Cheney (2011) 'Religious social capital: Its measurement and utility in the study of the social determinants of health', *Social Science & Medicine*, 73(5), 759-767. Available at: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21802182/. Forbes (22 December 2013) 'Religion is good for all of us, even those who don't follow one'. Available at: www.forbes.com/sites/jeffreydorfman/2013/12/22/religion-is-good-for-all-of-us-even-those-who-dont-follow-one/?sh=2f88ce7464d7

- Religious participation by children in schools has even been shown to increase life chances, with a higher probability of pupils pursuing further and higher education.⁵⁰
- A 2006 report for government found that the positive contributions of faith and religion are frequently associated with the purposefulness it provides, resulting in higher levels of life satisfaction among people of faith.⁵¹ This was the case across the vast majority of religions represented in the UK.
- A 2002 Cabinet Office research paper on life satisfaction notes that the higher levels of satisfaction among people of faith was closely correlated with the “strength of one’s relationship with the divine”, as well as prayer and devotional aspects of faith.⁵²
- A systematic review found a significant correlation between religious affiliation and lower rates of suicide attempts and suicide, though this seems to vary according to specific affiliation and definite causality remains to be established.⁵³
- A comprehensive overview of research into religion, spirituality and health between 1872 and 2010 covered hundreds of studies on a huge variety of subjects, revealing a notably positive correlation between a person’s mental and physical health, life expectancy and their involvement in faith and religion.⁵⁴ It also highlighted that faith and religion help people develop healthy habits (both mental and physical) and better understand their role in the universe, therefore gaining more hope, meaning and purpose in life.

One common theme emphasised by respondents to this review’s call for evidence was the unique ‘convening power’ of faith and places of worship. In many ways, faith and religion act as a powerful ‘social glue’, bringing together people from all backgrounds, creating strong bonds and generating close-knit support and accountability. People felt this enabled them and others to overcome some of the toughest challenges, including anxiety, depression and loneliness. This matches evidence from a range of studies finding that people regularly involved in activities related to faith and religion, in places of worship or the broader community, are likely to be happier, more satisfied with life and less likely to suffer from depressive symptoms.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Christopher G. Ellison, Robert A. Hummer and contributors (2010) ‘Religion, Families, and Health: Population-Based Research in the United States’. Available at: www.amazon.com/Religion-Families-Health-Population-Based-Research/dp/0813547199/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1387644228&sr=8-1&keywords=Religion%2C+Families%2C+and+Health%3A+Population-Based+Research+in+the+United+States

⁵¹ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2006) ‘Review of evidence on the influences on personal wellbeing and its application to policy making’. Available at: sciencesearch.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=14000.

⁵² Cabinet Office Strategy Unit (2002) ‘Life satisfaction: The state of knowledge and implications for government’. Available at: tidsverkstaden.se/filarkiv/file/Life%20satisfaction.pdf

⁵³ Ryan E. Lawrence, Maria A. Oquendo and Barbara Stanley (2016) ‘Religion and suicide risk: A systematic review, Archives of Suicide Research, 20(1), 1-21. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7310534/

⁵⁴ Harold G. Koenig (2012) ‘Religion, spirituality, and health: The research and clinical implications’, ISRN Psychiatry. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3671693/

⁵⁵ Harold G. Koenig (2012) ‘Religion, spirituality, and health: The research and clinical implications’, ISRN Psychiatry. Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3671693/

“Faith is oxygen to many of us.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

The benefits that faith and religion bring to society cannot be reduced to social benefits alone: for people of faith, it is about much more than this. Many people find that faith fulfils a role in their lives that society and government are unable to. It has become increasingly clear that faith and religion can be key in determining the overall health and wellbeing of individual lives, which in turn benefits society enormously.

1.2.4 Is faith good for society?

A broad cross-section of respondents to this review’s call for evidence supported the view that faith and religion make a significant, beneficial contribution to society. As might be expected, responses varied between those of no faith and among different faith and belief groups. A majority of atheist and humanist respondents gave low ratings, while almost all religiously affiliated respondents rated faith and religion as a positive force in society. However, there were differences of sentiment between groups: only 47% of Hindus, 49% of Sikhs, 60% of Christians and 76% of Muslims opted for the maximum positive score. Those giving the highest ratings usually commented on the convening power of religion – the ways in which it provides community and networks of support.

Many highlighted the practical contributions religion makes to society. Respondents’ rationale broadly corresponded, with sentiments such as: “having a faith and religion keeps you positive and living in hope”, “faith and religion provide purpose, order, a sense of community and belonging”, and “many faith groups [...] are always looking for ways to help the community”.

The positive role that religion or faith plays in providing coherent belief and values systems was frequently noted, not only because it helps inform people’s priorities but also because it enables them to better navigate and understand the world around them, and in some cases seek to improve it. In many ways, the structure and the code of conduct that faiths and beliefs provide can be cornerstones and building blocks for more integrated, stable and cohesive communities. This was particularly noted by Muslim and Christian respondents who emphasised the value of moral accountability that comes from faith, which helps cultivate some of the best virtues that are common to a healthy society, including kindness, generosity and compassion.

“Being able to follow a faith legally and openly allows people to feel safe within society. Faiths often provide codes of acceptable conduct which align with society as a whole.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

A 2020 Theos report found that the convening power of faith is strongly related to the vision faith communities have for “change and transformation”.⁵⁶ This often acts as a

⁵⁶ Theos (2020) ‘The church and social cohesion: Connecting communities and serving people’. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2020/11/26/the-church-and-social-cohesion-connecting-communities-and-serving-people

powerful unifying force which invigorates society and pushes individuals towards a more cohesive community, characterised by hope, constructive endeavours and a positive vision for the future. The ground-level community impact of this vision is an incredibly positive feature of faith in society. It is particularly evident in how people of faith and places of worship proactively build authentic communities which are able to meet many practical, moral and spiritual needs. The convening spaces, values and vision that people of faith provide in community endeavours are a significant societal asset which should not be ignored.

Recent YouGov research showed that adults in the UK who practise a faith with any amount of regularity (from major holiday observers to regular worshippers) are more likely to be charitable when compared to their non-practising or non-religious counterparts.⁵⁷

“While many faith groups are very active in the community, that is merely an overflow from the core of their identity, not their actual identity.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

There is almost no area of human activity and endeavour which people of faith, places of worship or faith-based charities are not involved in. In every village, town or city across the UK, places of worship and linked properties (such as church halls) are open to community projects. These are key places where ‘community’ is done in our country. A 2020 report by the National Churches Trust estimated that churches alone generate a total social value of between £12.4 billion and £62.8 billion a year, depending on metrics used.⁵⁸ Places of worship fund, host, support and directly deliver a broad range of social good activities, including those in the following diagram.

⁵⁷ YouGov (5 May 2021) ‘Religious people give more often – but they also prioritise different causes’. Available at: yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2021/05/05/religious-people-give-more-often-different-causes

⁵⁸ National Churches Trust (2020) The house of good: The economic and social value of church buildings to the UK’. Available at: www.nationalchurchestrust.org/sites/default/files/NCT%20full%20Exec%20Summary%20and%20Technical%20Report-%20SINGLE-PAGES.pdf



In its dealings with people of faith, government must understand and recognise this positive societal impact as the practical out-working of deeper motivations that are rooted in the conviction, purpose and value system that often comes with faith and religion. As recommended in Danny Kruger MP's 2020 review 'Levelling up our communities', public policy across sectors could encourage and further integrate the existing contributions of faith and religion into developmental strategies for the good of communities.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Danny Kruger MP (2020) 'Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant'. Available at: www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities-Danny%20Kruger.pdf

1.2.5 Faith groups in the pandemic

“One of the great things about our country is that we have so many faith-based and Christian organisations that do so much incredible work in our communities. [The social action of churches, mosques and synagogues is] not a sign of a weak country or an inadequate set of institutions, but a sign of our strength.”

Former Prime Minister, David Cameron⁶⁰

This reviewer believes that the UK is stronger, more resilient and more cohesive as a result of its diverse and rich multi-faith society. The overwhelming response of faith groups across the UK in supporting communities during the COVID-19 pandemic is testament to this resilience and cohesion. It also tangibly demonstrates the significant social capital that faith groups have built up within society over years, decades and sometimes centuries.

“We have seen during the pandemic that faith groups have been among the first to step forward and support their neighbourhoods and communities through the emergency. Not only that, they have also provided support, comfort and solace during a time of great difficulty, sadness and stress.”

Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham⁶¹

The University of Birmingham's analysis of the call for evidence data assessed perceptions surrounding the contribution of faith groups to social wellbeing before and during the pandemic. Many respondents said they were aware of the social contribution of faith groups before the pandemic, but that activities and services run by faith groups, such as foodbanks and the delivery of clothing and medicines, seemed to take place with a deeper commitment and perhaps to a greater extent than before the pandemic. The flexibility of service provision was also noted alongside the convening power of faith communities – a number of respondents made positive comments on the effectiveness of faith organisations, while a few talked about how rapid the response to the crisis was.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, faith groups rallied to support not just the clinically vulnerable and those shielding, but also entire neighbourhoods and communities. They delivered vital supplies, established support networks, and provided social lifelines to the elderly and isolated. In a 2020 UK council survey commissioned by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, Goldsmiths University found that: “Local authorities say they have discovered a new appreciation of the agility, flexibility and professionalism of faith groups and faith-based organisations in their responses to the pandemic.”⁶² Over the summer of 2020, 59% of local authorities had been working with church-based foodbanks, 24% with mosque-based foodbanks, 11% with foodbanks based

⁶⁰ Church Times (1 April 2016) ‘PM defends Britain's multifaith society’. Available at: www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/1-april/news/uk/pm-praises-britains-multifaith-society.

⁶¹ Greater Manchester Combined Authority (16 March 2021) ‘New panel will provide strong voice for faith communities’. Available at: www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/new-panel-will-provide-strong-voice-for-faith-communities/

⁶² All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society (2021) ‘Keeping the faith: Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic’. Available at: www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf

in Sikh gurdwaras and 10% with foodbanks based in Hindu temples. 67% of local authorities reported that there had been an increase in partnership working with faith groups, particularly around food poverty and mental health and wellbeing. 91% of local authorities described these partnerships as positive or very positive, and 76% expected the new partnerships to continue after the pandemic.

“The COVID crisis has merely heightened what [our faith-based group was] already doing.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

“Faith-based organisations do an immense amount. They claim they did it before, they are keeping on doing it and see it as an important aspect of their faith identity.”

Andrew Davies, Edward Cadbury Centre

Many faith groups also played a more formal role in defeating the virus at a grassroots level, supporting local councils in disseminating vital public health messages. With Cabinet Office backing, departments across government reached out to faith leaders and community groups to foster working partnerships, sharing campaign assets, toolkits and other relevant public health materials. In some cases, this material was then used organically by communities to complement messaging published through government channels.⁶³ Faith leaders also played a pivotal role in encouraging compliance, bringing together medical professionals to answer questions on the vaccine and promoting adherence to restrictions during religious festivals and celebrations.

Faith communities also supported NHS initiatives beyond messaging. For example:

- the Guru Nanak gurdwara in Wolverhampton hosted a COVID-19 testing pilot in November 2020, which helped NHS England identify undiagnosed cases and protect those most at risk from the virus⁶⁴
- in January 2021, members of the Hindu community in Slough transformed their temple into a test centre for the mass rapid testing campaign led by One Slough and Slough Borough Council⁶⁵
- in the same month, imams in mosques across the UK delivered sermons at Friday prayers to address concerns surrounding COVID-19 vaccinations and reassure worshippers about vaccine safety⁶⁶

⁶³ I am Birmingham (22 May 2020) ‘British Muslim celebrities share positive message for Eid during lockdown’. Available at: www.iambirmingham.co.uk/2020/05/22/british-muslim-celebrities-share-positive-message-eid-lockdown/

⁶⁴ Express and Star (21 November 2020) ‘Rapid testing back on track in Wolverhampton as ‘steady flow’ swabbed at site’. Available at: www.expressandstar.com/news/health/coronavirus-covid19/2020/11/21/rapid-testing-back-on-track-in-wolverhampton-as-steady-flow-swabbed-at-site/

⁶⁵ Slough Express (22 January 2021) ‘Slough Hindu Temple transformed into mass rapid coronavirus testing centre’. Available at: www.sloughexpress.co.uk/news/slough/165276/slough-hindu-temple-transformed-into-mass-rapid-coronavirus-testing-centre.html

⁶⁶ The Guardian (14 January 2021) ‘Imams across UK to reassure worshippers about Covid vaccines’. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/14/imams-mosques-uk-reassure-muslim-worshippers-covid-vaccines

- churches, mosques, gurdwaras and temples opened their doors to help in the national vaccine roll-out by turning into community vaccination centres and encouraging their communities to receive the vaccine in a comfortable and familiar environment – including Salisbury Cathedral, Lichfield Cathedral, the United Synagogue at St John’s Wood, Manchester’s Central Mosque and the Vaisakhi vaccine clinic in Luton⁶⁷

It is important to recognise that in addition to their contribution to the national battle against COVID-19, faith groups have continued to provide the essential day-to-day religious services that their congregations and the wider community rely on. Working in close collaboration with the government’s Places of Worship Taskforce, churches, synagogues, mosques and gurdwaras were able to keep congregants safe while practising their faith. Following advice from Public Health England and working with government on guidance design, faith leaders found innovative ways to allow funerals, weddings and other significant life moments to continue taking place in safe ways. They embraced digital technology to ensure that prayer, sermons and services remained COVID-19 secure. For example, the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir’s weekly religious assemblies for children, teenagers and adults were webcast live every weekend, while the arti ceremony (the ritual waving of lighted wicks before the deities) was available to view each evening through a live web stream.⁶⁸ The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community UK held events for the ‘Big Virtual Iftar’, bringing thousands of British Muslims together virtually to break the fast of Ramadan.⁶⁹ The Church of England rapidly moved many services online from the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, subsequently reporting over 3.7 million live views of virtual services and 40 million views of content on their social media channels.⁷⁰

At times informal and improvised, this reviewer regards the breadth, depths and effectiveness of faith groups’ efforts as instrumental in protecting – if not strengthening – the social bonds of society during an extraordinarily difficult time.

1.2.6 Partnership with government

From the outset of the pandemic, the government (with support from the Independent Faith Engagement Adviser) used existing engagement networks and established new ones (mostly through virtual roundtables) to ensure that faith communities were fully supported. The government’s investment of time and resources into engagement efforts with faith groups to bolster vaccine take-up in all parts of society has proven particularly effective.

In May 2020, the government established a dedicated Places of Worship Taskforce comprising representatives of all major faith groups to produce guidance and support

⁶⁷ Discover Cathedrals Discover Pilgrimage (16 January 2021) ‘Another vaccination centre in Salisbury’. Available at: www.englishcathedrals.co.uk/latest-news/another-vaccination-centre-salisbury/

⁶⁸ The Tablet (6 April 2020) ‘How technology and faith are helping Hindus in Britain through Covid-19’. Available at: www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1397/how-technology-and-faith-are-helping-hindus-in-britain-through-covid-19

⁶⁹ MyLondon (18 May 2020) ‘Our hearts are open - How Feltham’s Ahmadiyya Muslim community has risen to the challenge of lockdown’. Available at: www.mylondon.news/news/west-london-news/our-hearts-open-how-felthams-18269038

⁷⁰ Church of England (16 March 2021) ‘Millions join worship online as churches bring services into the home in pandemic year’. Available at: www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-releases/millions-join-worship-online-churches-bring-services-home-pandemic

places of worship across England to reopen safely. The taskforce met regularly throughout the pandemic to discuss workable solutions to problems encountered by places of worship during lockdowns in October and December 2020. This work was complemented by frequent faith roundtables chaired by the then Faith Minister, Lord Greenhalgh, to discuss specific challenges faced by faith communities, including encouraging vaccine take-up (see section 2.3.2).⁷¹ The value government placed on these relationships and networks was demonstrated by increasing ministerial and senior civil servant engagement. The then Home Secretary, Communities Secretary, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Minister for Vaccine Deployment and UK Health Security Agency Chief Executive Dr Jenny Harries all participated in meetings with the Places of Worship Taskforce.

This reviewer recognises the invaluable contribution faith communities make to our society and believes that government, working in partnership with these communities, can achieve more than it ever could alone. There is now an opportunity to capitalise on the partnerships and networks which have been forged during the pandemic. In the scientific community, there is growing optimism that the intensive research infrastructure resulting from the urgency of vaccine development can be used to cure other diseases.⁷² Similarly, government should use the relationships it has either formed or strengthened in response to COVID-19 to collaborate with faith groups in tackling other societal problems and building more social capital in our communities.

There is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build on the momentum gained during the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen collaboration between faith leaders and the state. It is the unequivocal position of this reviewer that the government should seize this opportunity with both hands.

1.2.7 A Faith Partnership Charter

There is a valuable opportunity for government and local councils to forge productive, co-operative and symbiotic partnerships with places of worship. It is impossible to know exactly how many places of worship there are across the UK, or even England alone. There are over 11,000 places of worship in the UK which are registered under the Inter-Departmental Business Register, though there are likely many more.⁷³ A large number have incredible reach, social connectivity, and engagement with local and national needs. Many are dynamic hubs of human flourishing, and as stated earlier in this report, are overwhelmingly ‘schools of virtue’. The sheer number of activities outlined in the call for evidence responses (see section 1.2.4) suggests that people of faith working in local communities frequently fill the gap of compassion, providing a positive vision which enriches society and adds depth, meaning, hope and vitality. During the pandemic, many local councils and public health bodies found partnerships with places of worship

⁷¹ There were two Christian roundtables, as well as roundtables for the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh faiths. FaithAction led on engagement with smaller faiths (such as Jains and Buddhists).

⁷² Nature (18 December 2020) ‘The lightning-fast quest for COVID vaccines – and what it means for other diseases’. Available at: www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03626-1

⁷³ 11,625 were registered in 2018, though registration is optional. See Office for National Statistics (27 November 2019) ‘Places of worship and provision of data’. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/placesofworshipandprovisionofdata

invaluable, and many places of worship eagerly embraced the opportunities to keep their congregants and the wider community safe.

A Faith Partnership Charter could be developed which brings individual places of worship into initiatives like local strategic partnerships and provides a route for local public services to better serve their communities. These endeavours aren't without risks, and government has a key role in supporting quality, safe and fair community-led services. But where this is done well, places of worship can be an invaluable partner for both local and national government.

This is notable in the activity of organisations such as the Salvation Army, which has provided key services for 150 years and become a giant in public procurement. At the time of writing, the Salvation Army has provided specialist support to more than 15,230 victims of modern slavery since 2011, and was granted a five-year modern slavery victim care contract by the government in 2020.^{74, 75} At the time, the Home Office noted that the Salvation Army would provide a service that “better meets the needs of each victim, including those with specialist and complex needs”, fulfilling part of the national referral mechanism through safeguarding, protecting and supporting victims to help them rebuild their lives.⁷⁶ The development of this government partnership shows how drawing on faith-based organisations can be an important step in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable.

“Faith communities have a greater asset than their wealth when it comes to providing support and succour to people in need. Their values, their concern for the spiritual wellbeing of individuals and society, provide a motivation and commitment that often exceeds that of paid professionals. They have deep roots in local communities and are there for the long-term.”

Danny Kruger MP⁷⁷

While there is significant value in developing partnerships between government and faith-based organisations on a national and international level, a Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities report identifies several challenges to the public sector engaging with faith-based organisations (albeit in the international development sector). Facilitating a stronger relationship involves identifying common values and encouraging more dialogue and understanding through increasing the level of faith literacy among public officials, as well as a greater understanding of public sector objectives and

⁷⁴ The Salvation Army (2020) ‘Modern slavery annual report’. Available at: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/modern-slavery/modern-slavery-latest-reports

⁷⁵ Home Office (29 June 2020) ‘New contract to deliver improved support for modern slavery victims’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/new-contract-to-deliver-improved-support-for-modern-slavery-victims

⁷⁶ Home Office (29 June 2020) ‘New contract to deliver improved support for modern slavery victims’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/new-contract-to-deliver-improved-support-for-modern-slavery-victims

⁷⁷ Danny Kruger MP (2020) ‘Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant’. Available at: www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities-Danny%20Kruger.pdf

processes by faith-based organisations.⁷⁸ Another challenge lies in their structure, with many operating at a local level, and on a small scale. This can mean they are difficult for government to identify and develop fruitful partnerships with. However, for many faith-based organisations, their close connection with local communities is one of their greatest assets and can be the deciding factor between success or failure of programmes, such as vaccine take-up.⁷⁹ A 2017 Faith in Action report notes that while there are promising examples of partnership between public services and faith groups, these are often unrecognised and the true potential for productive partnerships remains untapped.⁸⁰

And yet there have been numerous examples of faith-based organisations partnering with local councils and the NHS, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸¹ This reviewer strongly believes that one of the functions of government should be to facilitate and encourage the voluntary generosity and compassion of faith-based groups, charities, foundations and organisations, which meet people's needs in a way that government institutions do not or cannot.

In his report, 'Levelling up our communities', Danny Kruger MP highlights that there is "something missing in the mixture" in the last 40 years of trying to drive economic and social progress: the role of local people, acting together spontaneously or through enduring institutions.⁸² This reviewer agrees with the recommendations made in Kruger's report. In particular, it makes a compelling case for government to offer "a new deal with faith communities" – and that it should "invite the country's faith leaders to make a grand offer of help on behalf of their communities, in exchange for a reciprocal commitment from the state".⁸³ In doing so, the government would be helping to build a stronger, safer, more resilient society after COVID-19.

Following the publication of the Kruger report, work has already begun that will provide a more comprehensive framework for local partnership with faith-based organisations. In September 2021, government announced the launch of the Faith New Deal pilot fund, a competitive grants programme to explore what faith organisations in England working in partnership with public bodies can do to help communities tackle local issues. The fund

⁷⁸ Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (2016) 'Building more effective partnerships between public sector and faith groups'. Available at: jliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NEWBuilding-more-effective-partnerships-between-public-sector-and-faith-groups-1.pdf

⁷⁹ Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (2016) 'Building more effective partnerships between public sector and faith groups'. Available at: jliflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NEWBuilding-more-effective-partnerships-between-public-sector-and-faith-groups-1.pdf

⁸⁰ FaithAction (2017) 'Working with faith groups to promote health and wellbeing'. Available at: www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/working-faith-groups-prom-6ff.pdf

⁸¹ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society (2021) 'Keeping the faith: Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic'. Available at: www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf

⁸² Danny Kruger MP (2020) 'Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant'. Available at: www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities-Danny%20Kruger.pdf

⁸³ Danny Kruger MP (2020) 'Levelling up our communities: Proposals for a new social covenant'. Available at: www.dannykruger.org.uk/files/2020-09/Levelling%20Up%20Our%20Communities-Danny%20Kruger.pdf

has since backed 16 organisations to work in partnership with public service providers, such as local councils or public health bodies, using their collective skills and resources to deliver projects that benefit communities as they recover from the impact of COVID-19. The fund will also inform development of a Faith Compact which will set out key principles to aid engagement between faith groups, national government and local government.⁸⁴ The Faith Compact is intended to build on the Faith Covenant drafted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society and learn from areas where it has already been adopted since 2014.⁸⁵

As part of the Faith Compact work, this reviewer recommends developing a Faith Partnership Charter to catalyse commitments to best practice and public good and cultivate the service capacity of places of worship to further entrench their activities as valuable community assets. As part of this charter, government should consider expanding local strategic partnerships to include the wide range of faith groups and communities operating in various capacities to fulfil objectives which are mutually recognised, in the interest of good governance and the outworking of the principles that often spring from faith. Alongside strategic, service-based contracts that enable faith groups to take a leading role in addressing societal needs, the Faith Partnership Charter should involve a broad scope of engagement between government, local councils and local faith groups to maintain a consistent and reliable dialogue with community partners and stakeholders.

1.3 New working definitions – define your terms!

“‘If you wish to converse with me,’ said Voltaire, ‘define your terms.’ How many a debate would have been deflated into a paragraph if the disputants had dared to define their terms! This is the alpha and omega of logic, the heart and soul of it, that every important term in serious discourse shall be subjected to the strictest scrutiny and definition. It is difficult, and ruthlessly tests the mind; but once done it is half of any task.”

Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (1926)

1.3.1 Language matters

For many generations, the social tapestry of the British Isles has been enriched and strengthened by different religions, ethnicities and cultural identities. Today, the UK is a political union of four nations which together are more pluralistic, varied and internationally connected than almost any other sovereign nation on earth. Over 300 languages are spoken across London, arguably the world’s most diverse major city.⁸⁶ A globally significant financial, economic and trading power, the UK is also a major international

⁸⁴ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (29 July 2022) ‘16 faith groups to share £1.3 million ‘New Deal’ fund to help support communities’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/16-faith-groups-to-share-13-million-new-deal-fund-to-help-support-communities

⁸⁵ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society (accessed 1 December 2022) ‘The faith covenant’. Available at: www.faithandsociety.org/covenant/

⁸⁶ Museum of London (26 October 2018) ‘Languages of London, past & present’. Available at: www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/languages-london

centre of art and culture which often celebrates the diverse religious affiliations of its population. It has become common in recent years to speak of building a new 'Global Britain'. Clearly, the UK's religious communities today are already truly global – drawing on the heritage and vivacity of faith traditions from every populated continent in the world.

Language constantly adapts and evolves to reflect our lives and the society we live in. Government must be alive to these changes, updating and modernising its use of language to reflect cultural changes. But the onus is also on government to explain its vision and strategy so that society adopts this language. While government frequently uses the terms 'religion', 'belief' and 'faith', it is the opinion of this reviewer that it neither fully understands how these terms should be used, nor how they are received or perceived publicly. Each term has a precise and different meaning which can imply different things to different people. The use of precise language when discussing contested ideas and values is particularly important and will help government communicate clearly and respectfully with varied audiences, making any stakeholder engagement significantly more effective. Furthermore, correct use of language avoids creating a stigma for a specific group which can be used to reinforce negative stereotypes. Agreeing a clear and consistent set of working definitions is therefore crucial to improving internal communication between central government departments and to enhance policy making. This reviewer hopes the devolved administrations of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales will also consider adopting these definitions to allow for a consistent approach.

1.3.2 About definitions

Sometimes society, and government by extension, uses the terms 'religion', 'belief' and 'faith' interchangeably, which runs the risk of creating confusion. While there are similarities and aspects that overlap, there are important distinctions that need to be properly understood. These distinctions are particularly relevant to the function and activity of government, but they are also important for social integration, in businesses, communities and everyday conversations. Therefore, in a review focused on how government engages with various communities, it is necessary to provide better working definitions for 'religion', 'belief' and 'faith' so the chapters of this review can be read and understood clearly. A commonly accepted understanding of 'religion', 'belief' and 'faith' is needed for government to have a consistent approach when engaging with faith communities and other communities defined by their worldview.

For the purposes of this review:

Interfaith is the practice of building relationships, respect and understanding between different faith communities.

Intrafaith is the practice of building relationships, respect and understanding within a single faith community that may be divided by denomination, practice or sect.

While in recent years progress has been made in interfaith relationships, the reviewer found a significant deficit in the government's overall understanding of intrafaith matters (issues occurring within, rather than between, different faith communities). Stakeholders repeatedly pointed out that people in senior positions in public life seemed to have a limited understanding of the rich diversity within faith communities, whether religious denominations, geographic location or ethnicity. By adopting stakeholder-supported

definitions, government and its agencies will provide greater clarity on precisely what they are supporting and who they are engaging with.

1.3.3 Topology of definitions

It is important to remember that for the most part, religion, faith and belief (whether the latter is secular or not), coexist very well. Indeed, for most people there is very little drama in having a deep faith with strong and particular religious convictions while living and working alongside people of another faith or no faith at all. Moreover, it is perfectly reasonable for a scientist to have a strong faith, and it is equally reasonable for a person of deep religious conviction to believe in science.

As detailed in recommendation 3, this review recommends that government adopts a consistent set of definitions for each of the terms, to help clarify the sometimes-subtle differences. According to these terms, having a belief is not synonymous with having a religion or a faith. While to have a faith someone must have a belief, to have a belief does not require someone to have a faith.

The official understanding of what is and is not a religion has subtly changed in recent years, particularly with a 2013 Supreme Court ruling describing religion as a spiritual or non-secular belief system.⁸⁷ But as the responses to the call for evidence suggest, the working definitions set out in this recommendation should be sufficient for the vast majority of contemporary UK government usage. There should be a better understanding of the definitions and acceptance of both religious and non-religious worldviews and philosophies. In equality and human rights law, the phrase ‘religion or belief’ is used, with ‘belief’ often denoting the non-religious and secular, such as humanism, atheism and veganism.

The proposed working definitions are in line with the conclusions set out by both the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Charity Commission. While the Equality and Human Rights Commission guidance offers little assistance on working definitions for common usage by government (due to the use of legal definitions), their conclusions are consistent with the definitions set out in the recommendation.⁸⁸ The Charity Commission’s guidance for religious charities, ‘The advancement of religion for the public benefit’, also goes some way to define religion and religious practice.⁸⁹ The working definitions proposed are also consistent with this.

⁸⁷ See paragraph 57 in Supreme Court (11 December 2013) ‘Judgement: R (on the application of Hodkin and another) v Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages’. Available at: www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2013-0030.html

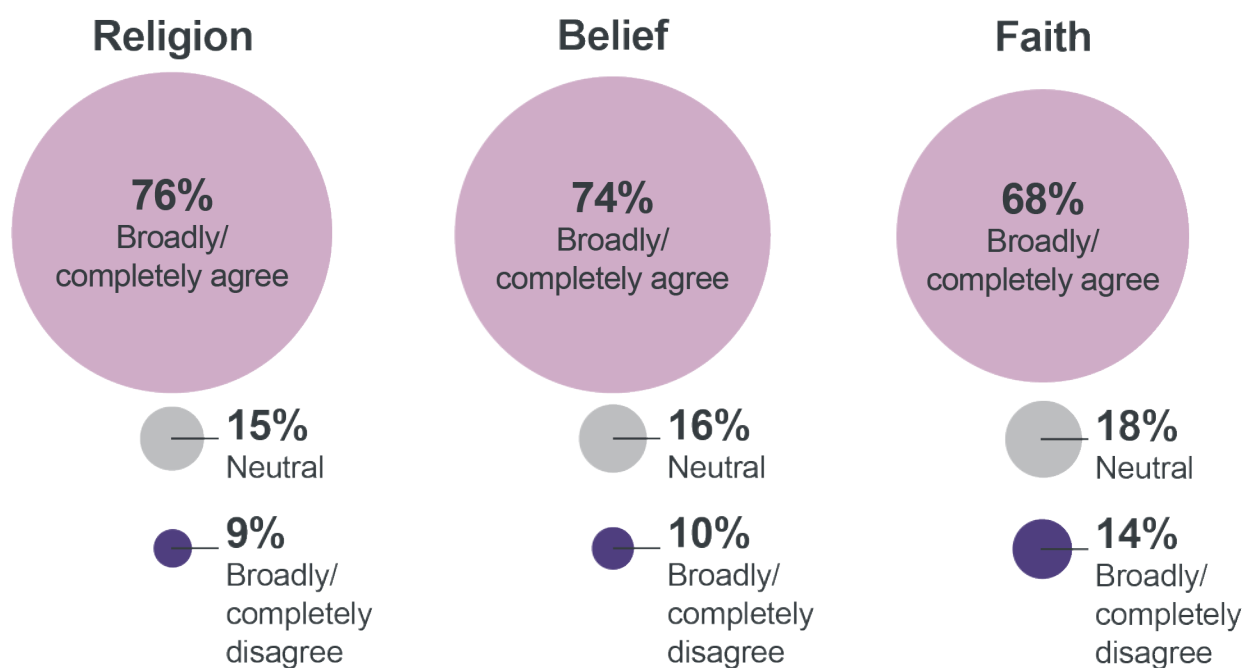
⁸⁸ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) ‘Religion or belief: A guide to the law’. Available at: www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/religion-or-belief-guide-to-the-law.pdf

⁸⁹ Charity Commission (2008, amended 2011) ‘The advancement of religion for the public benefit’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/358531/advancement-of-religion-for-the-public-benefit.pdf. This should be read in conjunction with section 5 of Charity Commission (2013) ‘Guidance: Charitable purposes’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/charitable-purposes/charitable-purposes#the-advancement-of-religion

1.3.4 Key review findings

This review's call for evidence received more than 21,000 responses from a wide range of individuals from all faiths, beliefs and none.⁹⁰ It included a section on proposed definitions for the terms 'religion', 'faith' and 'belief'. The original draft definitions were drafted after consultations with faith experts and theologians from across different faiths, and academics including Professor Andrew Davies at the Edward Cadbury Centre. These were included in the call for evidence. Just under three quarters of total respondents to the call for evidence either completely or broadly agreed with the proposed definition of 'religion' (76%), 'belief' (74%) and 'faith' (68%). The response was overwhelmingly positive about the proposed definitions, with a widespread agreement on both the need for clear definitions and the proposed definitions themselves.

Figure 2: Public assessment of the Bloom review's proposed working definitions for religion, faith and belief



Source: Bloom review call for evidence, 2020

Small amendments were made following feedback from the call for evidence and follow-up discussions with key stakeholders, scholars and theologians representing the major faith and belief groups in England, and with government departments including the Government Equalities Office.

⁹⁰ Independent faith engagement review: call for evidence (closed consultation 13 November 2020 to 11 December 2020). Background available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-faith-engagement-review-call-for-evidence

Religion

Of those who expressed an opinion, 89% were in broad or complete agreement with the proposed working definition for religion. However, data analysis by the University of Birmingham found that a minority felt the original definition was more appropriate to Abrahamic faiths, and that it did not fully accommodate religions such as Buddhism (which does not hold to a concept of a supreme being) or Paganism (which tends not to have hierarchical leadership or sacred buildings). Similarly, a small minority of Hindu respondents felt excluded from the proposed definition. Challenges also arose around the concept of organised hierarchy. Some religions have a pantheon or hierarchy of gods or deities, rather than a singular supreme being. Based on this feedback, the original definition was modified to ensure inclusivity.

Belief

Over 88% of respondents who expressed an opinion agreed with the proposed working definition for belief. Some respondents self-identifying as atheist and/or humanist challenged certain aspects of the wording, citing philosophical disagreements on what constitutes a belief and concerns over beliefs which conflict with human rights. But fewer than one in five atheist and/or humanist respondents disagreed broadly or completely with the proposed definition. Minor amendments were made to the proposed working definition following feedback from key stakeholders, scholars, theologians and people representing the major faith and belief groups in England.

Faith

Just over 83% of those who expressed an opinion either strongly or broadly agreed with the proposed working definition for faith. However, feedback from the call for evidence and advice from key stakeholders stated that the original definition did not adequately reflect the common use of 'faith' as essentially a synonym of religion in the context of 'faith community', 'faith-based organisation' and 'faith leaders'. The revised definition attempts to alleviate these concerns.

The final definitions can be found in recommendation 3 below.

1.4 Recommendation 1 to 3

Recommendation 1

Government should expand the role of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief to include the promotion and protection of religious freedom in the UK. Government should be equally vigilant regarding the protections and freedoms of religion, belief and faith at home as it is overseas.

Recommendation 2

Government should take learnings from the Faith New Deal pilot fund, launched in September 2021 following the recommendations set out in the 2020 Kruger review ‘Levelling up our communities’, and consider ways of proactively partnering with places of worship in a Faith Partnership Charter to support their broader local community. By December 2023, every local council should be signed up to a Faith Partnership Charter with their places of worship.

Recommendation 3

Government should adopt the working definitions for ‘religion’, ‘belief’ and ‘faith’ as defined below. These should become the collective and common understandings across government and its agencies, and should be published on the GOV.UK website and the intranet for each central government department within six months of this report being published.

‘Religion’ is a particular, shared system of belief, generally in one or more supreme being(s) or entities or in a sense of the infinite, which seeks to influence the follower’s actions and practices. Someone can be born into a religious tradition, they can follow a religion, they can belong to a religion and they can even be religious in their lifestyle choices. Religions often have designated places of worship such as churches, temples, gurdwaras, mosques and synagogues or other sacred spaces, and will frequently have a formal structure and national and international hierarchy. Most of the world’s major religions have some kind of statement of belief, commitment or creed, and scriptures or other sacred texts.

‘Belief’ is an idea or concept that one accepts as true or real. A genuinely or sincerely held belief is more than just an opinion and can often have a profound impact on someone’s lifestyle. A belief should have at least a minimal level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance, and be worthy of respect in a democratic society. A belief should be compatible with human dignity and not seek to undermine the fundamental rights of others. Belief is not necessarily rooted in the supernatural. A belief can be a worldview like atheism, humanism, veganism or environmentalism, but a belief can also be held within a faith or a religion.

‘Faith’ is sometimes used as a synonym and equivalent for ‘religion’ or ‘religious’ in the context of, for example, a faith-based organisation, faith leader, global faith or faith community. However, more directly, faith should be interpreted as a profound trust in something based on spiritual conviction and divine principles, which can be perceived by others to be beyond the normal limits of perception or of logical proof. Someone can have a faith without having a religious lifestyle, they may believe in a God or gods, a ‘higher power’ or ‘life after death’, and they may be a ‘spiritual’ person. The important aspect is that they believe with conviction in something which goes beyond empirical experience.



Chapter 2

Faith literacy in government

2.1 Introduction

For many people, faith is the most important part of their identity, and at least as important as their gender or race.

Faith literacy matters

Faith literacy is the ability to know, understand and respect the basic principles of the world's major religions and faiths. It is also understanding and respecting the religious traditions and beliefs that inform someone's outlook, motivations and purpose, and acknowledging the profound impact they can have on individuals, communities, society and government. Being faith literate is having the self-awareness to address one's own prejudices in relation to religion and faith or lack of it.

Faith and faith communities are evolving and diversifying. Being aware of what people believe and why they believe it, respecting differences and celebrating diversity are essential for an integrated, healthy and happy modern society. Not only because it is right and fair, but also because religion or belief is a protected characteristic by law, in article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 and chapter 1, section 10 of the Equality Act 2010. It stands alongside other protected characteristics such as age, race, disability or sexual orientation.⁹¹ Any prejudice towards faith, people of faith and places of worship is just as unacceptable as any other form of prejudice based on protected characteristics, such as racism, sexism or homophobia. Faith literacy is therefore essential for everyone and especially those in public service. As religious identity becomes more diverse, but fewer people recognise the role of religion in their own lives (see Census statistics in section 1.2.1), it becomes even more important to ensure that our public services are able to understand faith and people of faith.

This chapter looks into existing and potential structures for improving faith literacy in public services and presents key findings from the review's call for evidence.

“At a time when political discourses have become more toxic through narratives of hate, nationalism, extremism, racial and religious bigotry which lead to violent and catastrophic ends, the role and importance of faith and faith groups in deconstructing and dispelling these toxic narratives is critical. Faith literacy initiatives need to take place and be introduced at our schools, universities, and public and private sector organisations.”

Professor Andrew Davies, Edward Cadbury Centre

⁹¹ Human Rights Act 1998. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1/part/I/chapter/8. Equality Act 2010. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

2.2 The state of faith literacy – why is it important?

Evidence gathered during this review shows that many respondents think faith engagement among some government institutions and public agencies (including the Civil Service, the police, NHS and other emergency services) needs improvement (see section 2.3). A knowledge of key concepts and factual information about what people believe and how they express it is an important part of faith literacy. Yet, to be faith literate transcends simple factual knowledge. It means recognising and respecting the core place, purpose and value that faith has in the lives of many people, and in many parts of society.

Inadequate communication and poor understanding between government and people of faith can severely limit government's ability to achieve policy that is sufficiently informed of the nuances of faith communities to be effective in practice. Specific needs unique to faith communities may also be overlooked. One example was the amendment to the 2019 Offensive Weapons Bill to include religious exemptions for Sikh ceremonial swords (kirpans).⁹² The original draft legislation, aimed at tackling knife crime, did not consider the impact on Sikh communities regarding the possession and presentation of kirpans and would have prohibited this important tradition in the Sikh faith.⁹³

The lack of faith literacy may relate to the enduring lack of diversity among senior civil servants.⁹⁴ However, given the wide range of faiths and beliefs represented in the UK, becoming faith literate should be an essential requirement for any public body wishing to build an inclusive society which thrives on the vision and dynamism of diverse communities.

"I have seen some meaningful engagement where significant issues have arisen and government has worked collaboratively with faith communities/organisations on the issue (e.g. FCDO [the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office] on the issue of religious persecution/freedom of religion and belief or Home Office on the issue of modern slavery). However, I have put low scores for both as I think in general, there is an issue of low faith literacy in government and I don't really see/hear about government seeking to understand people of faith or engaging with people of faith (it seems to be select individuals who don't necessarily represent the wider faith community) on policy issues.

⁹² Home Office (6 April 2022, updated 27 July 2022) 'Statutory guidance: The Offensive Weapons Act 2019'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-draft-statutory-guidance-on-the-offensive-weapons-act-2019/final-draft-statutory-guidance-offensive-weapons-act-2019-accessible-version

⁹³ Home Office (6 April 2022, updated 27 July 2022) 'Statutory guidance: The Offensive Weapons Act 2019'. Available at: www.parliament.co.uk/lord/lord-singh-of-wimbledon/bill/2017-19/offensiveweapons

⁹⁴ The Civil Service 2017 diversity and inclusion strategy acknowledges a lack of diversity at senior level. See Civil Service (2017) 'A brilliant Civil Service: Becoming the UK's most inclusive employer – The Civil Service diversity and inclusion strategy' Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1057951/civil-service-diversity-inclusion-strategy-2017-withdrawn.pdf

Faith groups are highly impacted by different policies, but it seems rare that they are considered in the bigger picture or consulted on issues not directly relating to faith. Likewise, there seems to be low engagement between local governments and faith communities and organisations. I think there is lots more room and opportunity for engagement and inclusivity.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

At the time of writing, the elimination of racial discrimination and addressing issues of hate crime have rightly become governmental and societal priorities.⁹⁵ This review calls on government to acknowledge how faith shapes people, and society’s response to them, in a similar way to how race can define certain aspects of people’s experience in the world. While someone’s beliefs may affect how they look, speak and live, the personal significance of these beliefs is not always immediately apparent to other people or to government. As a result, it is necessary to ask what people of faith believe, why they believe, how it shapes their outlook and the deepest part of their identity, and how this may interact with other characteristics such as race, gender, age or disability to inform the way they participate and are included in wider society. Valuing and acknowledging how faith can shape someone’s vision of life, society and community will enable government to engage constructively and to benefit from the diverse perspectives that people of faith have to offer.

Faith communities can be a hugely beneficial ally in promoting the overall wellbeing of society (see section 1.2). However, the value, rationale and motivation behind the social engagement that faith communities carry out is often perceived among people of faith to be both misunderstood and underestimated by government. This misunderstanding can sometimes play out publicly where government engages with faith communities as though community support was their identity, rather than an “overflow from the core of their identity” – obscuring how faith and belief can motivate “ethical, social and political action”.⁹⁶

“Levels of religious literacy in government and the Civil Service are low and faith is too often seen as a problem rather than appreciated as a vital partner in addressing common good. Also, because people of faith tend to get on with life irrespective of government, time is not taken to understand or work with them, and there seems to be a fear of being seen to support faith organisations.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

If government fails to acknowledge the importance of faith literacy and doesn’t invest sufficiently in faith literacy training across public bodies, there is not only a risk of causing offence or designing policies which exacerbate perceptions of not understanding faith

⁹⁵ Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Local Government and Communities, and Ministry of Justice (published 26 July 2016, updated 9 November 2020) ‘Hate crime action plan 2016 to 2020’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/hate-crime-action-plan-2016

⁹⁶ Respondents to the Bloom review call for evidence. See Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (13 November 2020, updated 22 February 2021) ‘Closed consultation: Independent faith engagement review: call for evidence’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-faith-engagement-review-call-for-evidence

communities, but ultimately government will be missing out on opportunities for partnership with faith communities. This applies both in terms of delivering key public services and in terms of engaging key figures within society who can help government land important policies across a range of areas, including public health, counter-terrorism, youth crime and integration. Beyond current government and public agencies, government should be ambitious for a renaissance of public faith literacy, to inform and inspire the attitudes of future generations before they take up key roles in society. This means investing in faith literacy in education so children can learn to discuss and understand the place, purpose and value that religions, faith and belief have in shaping individual identities and maintaining an inclusive and diverse society.

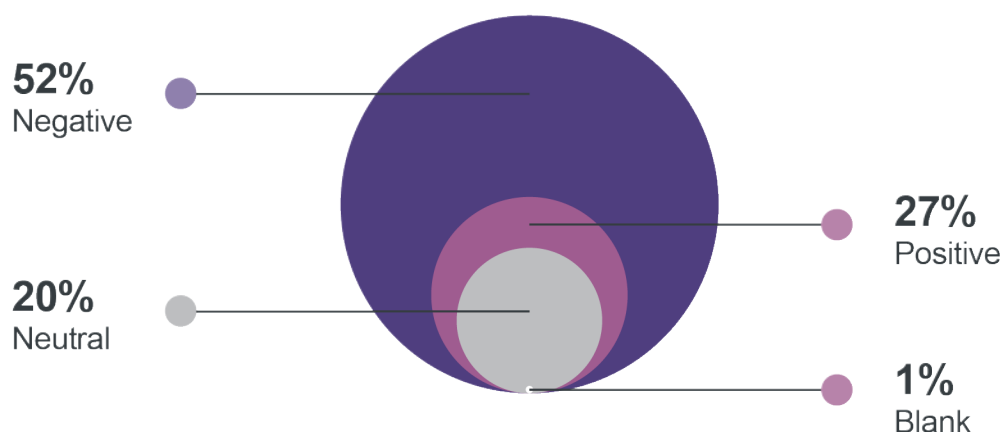
2.3 Key review findings

2.3.1 Call for evidence data

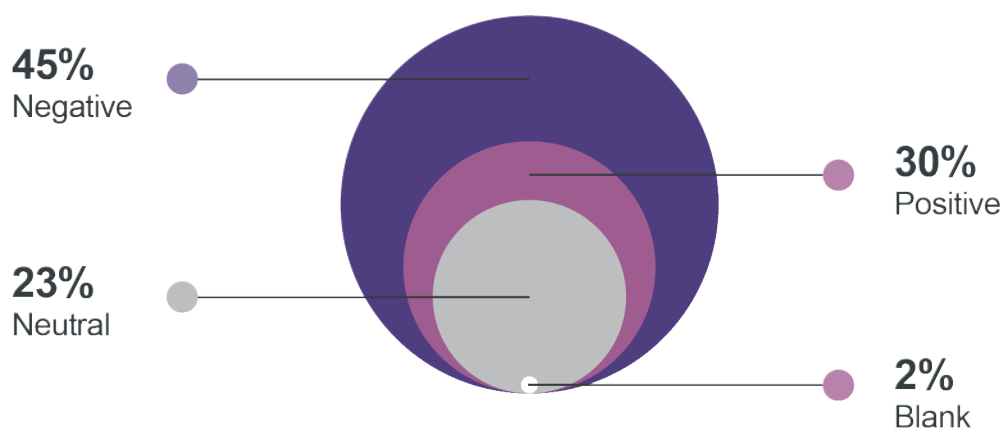
It is clear from the abundance of written responses that faith remains a core issue for many people within society. In the call for evidence, this review asked the public whether they felt government understood people of faith. Though the survey was self-selecting and so likely attracted people with a particular interest in faith and belief, around half of respondents answered negatively, and only 27% answered positively. A further question asked if government engages meaningfully with people of faith. Around 30% answered positively, while 45% answered negatively. In additional questions, respondents were asked if they felt confident that local and national government and public servants had a good understanding of different faiths, faith practices and issues, with 57.7% respondents saying 'no' and only 12% answering 'yes'. There was substantial nuance in the perspectives of different religions. Most notably, nearly four fifths of Pagans (79.8%), three quarters of Sikhs (74.3%) and over two thirds of Christians (68.2%) said they did not have confidence in government's understanding of different faiths, faith practices and issues. Whereas this reduced to 40.9% of Muslims, with 26.89% answering positively (the highest proportion of positive responses from the different faith groups).

Figure 3: Public perception of government's understanding and engagement with people of faith

Do you think government understands people of faith?



Do you feel government engages meaningfully with people of faith?



Source: Bloom review call for evidence, 2020

Though the call for evidence attracted people with a particular interest in religion, faith and belief, it is still notable that the majority of respondents perceived low levels of faith literacy in government. Half of respondents chose to provide additional qualitative feedback, which was around 90% negative. Respondents acknowledged that religious understanding across the community is generally very poor (except for one's own tradition), and government is certainly no better than the rest of society. Civil servants and public servants were noted as often having a very poor or superficial knowledge of the basic beliefs that differentiate religions, relying on generalised assumptions of supposedly 'orthodox' versions of faith.

“I would like to see government engage with faith leaders in local situations, in order that they can grasp the complexities of community involvement and integration of faith groups in society.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

2.3.2 The Civil Service

Lessons from lockdown

Throughout the pandemic, the government engaged regularly with members of various faith communities – revealing the value of doing so while also highlighting a need for greater sensitivity and discernment regarding suitable future partners.

This review recognises and applauds the enormous efforts of Robert Jenrick, the previous Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (now Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities), and his ministers, civil servants, and public officials who worked tirelessly to meet the needs of faith communities throughout the pandemic. Their commitment to engaging with faith groups on complex issues should be noted. In particular, it would be wrong not to specifically mention the former Faith Minister Stephen Greenhalgh, who led by example in his commitment to faith engagement. Throughout the course of this unprecedented national crisis, the government pioneered historic levels of engagement with faith leaders and faith communities. This led to the formation of roundtables, where ministers and civil servants were able to engage in productive dialogue regarding issues, challenges and questions that faith communities were facing.

The roundtables came about during a chaotic time of great uncertainty and confusion. However, as the restrictions and regulations have relaxed and the threat of the virus begins to wane, roundtables with faith communities have all but come to a complete standstill. Yet, in the aftermath of the wreckage and devastation brought to many lives, it is clear the impact of the crisis is not over. Domestic abuse, suicide, loneliness and mental illness have reached high levels, and the government cannot tackle these issues on its own.⁹⁷ Faith communities have been a vital ally in facing up to big societal challenges. For example, engagement with Muslim communities helped to create what one imam said was, “a new way of working”.⁹⁸ This enabled government, Public Health England and other agencies to build mutual trust and respect, and better understand the particular challenges faced by some Muslim communities during the pandemic and beyond.

Moreover, the high level of communication and co-operation with faith communities during the pandemic proved that the government could be wise and discerning in who it engaged with, without relying on a few organisations or individuals who claim to be spokespeople for their communities, but who in reality act more as self-appointed ‘gatekeepers’. This has previously been the case, with cross-government civil servants engaging with different groups, resulting in inconsistent messaging, and even individual politicians relying on their

⁹⁷ The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (21 July 2021) ‘Research briefing: Mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adults’. Available at: post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0648/

⁹⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s COVID-19 Muslim roundtable participant.

‘go-to’ community leaders, especially where their constituency has a large or influential place of worship. While there are prominent voices who claim to speak on behalf of their whole faith community, sadly, very often they do not. Public officials and elected politicians need to employ greater levels of professional scepticism before engaging with them. This lack of professional scepticism could be seen as laziness at best, and conscious ambivalence at worst.

“The government appears to give greater priority to historic organisations and ignores what is happening within local communities.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

To support democratic principles, government must carefully and consciously balance a weighted range of representative voices. This takes time, skill, knowledge and sensitivity. Yet over the last few years, the resources dedicated to the faith and belief team in what is now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities have significantly reduced. There is also a considerably high staff turnover rate, which means talent and attention are frequently redirected to other priorities and government is not able to lend the focus which faith requires. The dilution and redirection in the faith and belief team is also reflected in the position of recent faith ministers, whose portfolios have often included other things such as fire and floods, community safety, Hong Kong and Afghan national relocations, and building safety.

“[Government needs to engage with] more women, more diverse engagement, don't just tick boxes and feel OK that you have engaged the community. See beyond the labels and titles, are you really reaching people, are you really listening to a diverse range of views of people on the ground, really understanding lived experiences.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

The faith roundtables 2020-21

During the COVID-19 pandemic, proactive and quality government communication and strategic engagement with faith leaders and places of worship resulted in a mostly common acceptance of the restrictions and subsequent phased relaxations of gatherings at places of worship, funerals, weddings and other ceremonies. While these restrictions were very difficult for the majority of people of faith, they were followed and lives were undoubtedly saved as a result.

However, it was notable that the faith engagement strategy adopted during the pandemic was built from scratch. Although there was some community-level outreach taking place (such as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government engagement forums) and one-to-one meetings between senior faith leaders and government ministers, there was no pre-existing government mechanism for bringing together different faith leaders at scale and at speed (or at regular intervals) to discuss matters of importance within faith communities. This did not go unnoticed within faith communities. During the course of this review, senior faith leaders often noted that they only hear from government when government wants something from them, or that they only hear from politicians in the run-up to elections. Government must be more proactive and willing to listen to and engage with faith leaders. As the Independent Faith Engagement Adviser, this review's

author introduced the regular faith roundtables model during the pandemic. This was heartily welcomed by all participants, including government ministers. This reviewer believes the model was a positive development and should be continued.

For all parts of government and society in general, the spring and summer of 2020 was a highly stressful and dynamic time. This period at the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic will be written about and studied for decades, but for this report it might be helpful to set the scene. Large numbers of the public and public sector workers were sick, many had died, hospitals were full and there was genuine fear, and in some cases panic, that there could be hundreds of thousands of casualties. In an environment where everyone was trying to make the best decisions without knowing precisely what was happening, or what the future looked like, it was the closest thing the current generation of legislators and officials had to a world war.

The author of this report, with the encouragement of the then Faith Minister and the support of the faith and belief team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, hastily arranged a number of roundtable meetings for senior, national faith leaders. These meetings were very human, people were engaging poignantly in their contributions, and the then Faith Minister, who had recently lost his own mother to COVID-19, played a central part in making these meetings as genuine and heartfelt as possible.

A Christian roundtable was set up initially, with about 60 national church leaders and Christian charity leaders in attendance. There were Jewish, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim roundtables too. These meetings were held as and when necessary, but in the beginning they were sometimes weekly or fortnightly. The Faith Minister chaired these meetings throughout, with this report's author supporting and often co-chairing in the minister's absence. As the months moved on, departmental officials took on more of the administrative duties and in September 2020, all responsibility for the roundtables was handed over to officials.

In addition to the roundtables, a Places of Worship Taskforce was set up, which initially included the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, Cardinal Nichols, the Chief Rabbi and leading figures from the British Sikh, Hindu and Muslim communities. These meetings were chaired by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, but other senior government leaders often attended, including the then Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Since autumn 2020, the faith roundtables and the Places of Worship Taskforce significantly reduced in frequency, with only around six taking place in the whole of 2021, and even fewer in 2022. When challenged why, the response from officials was a mixture of 'we have nothing to tell them' and 'we don't have the resources'. The latter part is true: resources for faith engagement have hugely decreased rather than increased during COVID-19, with headcount reducing drastically over the course of this review period. The statement about 'we have nothing to tell them' precisely encapsulates all that is wrong with government's engagement with faith communities. Government sometimes needs to do more listening and less speaking. It needs to value the relational capital that is generated in these meetings, and it needs to be less transactional.

Departmental faith and belief champions

As part of the 2017 to 2020 diversity and inclusion strategy, central government departments appointed faith and belief champions at senior level.⁹⁹ These champions work in partnership with departments, business functions and staff networks to provide leadership on improving the experience of people of all faiths, beliefs and none at work, as well as promoting interfaith dialogue. There is a vague notion of a government-wide ‘super-champion’, someone who holds departmental champions to account and ensures that all departments are consistent in their approach to faith. However, possibly due to the immense pressures of COVID-19, the whole idea of faith and belief champions has become something of an afterthought. Therefore, it should be part of the recommended Independent Faith Champion’s remit (see section 2.4.1) to ensure that faith and belief champions across the Civil Service are fully equipped to meet the demands placed on them. The concept is a good one, but the execution has been underwhelming.

“I think those seeking election try to understand different cultures, but they only have a shallow understanding of different faiths.”

“Too many self-serving MPs and Councillors with no faith at all and a failure to want to understand faith except at election time.”

“There are many genuine elected members that demonstrate good understanding and empathy, however there are many who seem to hijack faith communities during election times. In my experience faith/ethnicity becomes a decisive factor when voting rather than merit and policies.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondents

2.3.3 The police

In British democracy, everyone has the right to hold beliefs and to express them through peaceful means of speech, writing, song or literature. It is not the responsibility of government or authorities to decide which religious, ideological or philosophical beliefs are correct, but it is government’s responsibility to protect the rights of all groups and individuals to hold and express their beliefs, so long as they do not incite violence or infringe on the rights and freedoms of others. Through conversations with representatives from the National Police Chiefs’ Council, it is clear that police are not always given the training and support they need to balance maintaining public order with preserving freedom of speech, religion and belief, particularly when engaging with matters of religion or faith.

While these freedoms are protected in law, there are significant concerns from some people of faith that the police do not always apply the law consistently and evenly, with some Christians in particular noting the arrests of street preachers on potentially spurious

⁹⁹ The Civil Service (2017) ‘A brilliant Civil Service: Becoming the UK’s most inclusive employer – The Civil Service diversity and inclusion strategy’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1057951/civil-service-diversity-inclusion-strategy-2017-withdrawn.pdf

grounds.¹⁰⁰ During this review's stakeholder engagement exercise, a perceived double standard was raised. For example, a street preacher in his seventies was arrested and detained overnight in Uxbridge for allegedly using homophobic language, while footage emerged appearing to show a man taking part in a protest and shouting "we'll find some Jews there", chaperoned by police officers.^{101, 102} Though the street preacher was ultimately cleared of all charges, and the outcome of the protest in the second example is not known, the point remains that apparent differences in treatment like this do nothing to ease some people's feelings of mistrust or resentment towards the police and by extension the government. The rising use of social media, memes and video sharing will only mean that unless individual instances are sensitively addressed, mistrust of public officials may get worse.

It is of course the case that where people use religion, belief or faith as a public platform for inciting violence, harassment, hostility or aggression towards specific groups or individuals, the police should ensure the law is upheld. However, it is the opinion of this reviewer that people peacefully fulfilling the principles of their faith in public without seeking to provoke violence or aggression towards others should be protected. Many respondents to the call for evidence noted the growing danger of de-platforming people of faith because of their views, even when they are using peaceful democratic means to express them.

Respondents noted the limitations of training the police to recognise extremism when they are not also equipped to recognise valid public expressions of religious beliefs. This was seen as damaging their reputation as protectors of justice. Sikh communities expressed the most negativity towards the faith literacy of the police, with just over 40% saying emergency services have an insufficient understanding of faith. This was partly due to police officers confusing Sikhs with Muslims, and occasions where police had raised concerns over the kirpan (a ceremonial sword Sikhs are obliged to carry as part of their religious observance), or where Sikhs were asked to remove their 'five Ks', five articles of faith they are commanded to wear at all times.

The amounts of taxpayer money and public resources that have been wasted on wrongful arrests, judicial proceedings, and compensation highlights the need for improved faith literacy among policing authorities.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ For example, see Premier Christianity (13 August 2021) 'Street preachers keep being arrested. More must be done to protect free speech'. Available at: www.premierchristianity.com/street-preachers-keep-being-arrested-more-must-be-done-to-protect-free-speech/5373.article

¹⁰¹ Premier Christian News (16 April 2022) 'Street preacher arrested for alleged hate speech cleared of all charges'. Available at: premierchristian.news/en/news/article/street-preacher-arrested-for-alleged-hate-speech-cleared-of-charges

¹⁰² @leekern13 (23 May 2021) 'LET THE WORLD SEE: I want the world to see British police officers do nothing as a racist mob tell them they are hunting Jews'. Available at: twitter.com/leekern13/status/1396584397025923073

¹⁰³ The Guardian (28 July 2019) 'Christian preacher accused of racism gets wrongful arrest payout'. Available at: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jul/28/christian-preacher-racism-wrongful-arrest-payout-bible. Premier Christian News (25 June 2021) 'Street preacher wins compensation for wrongful arrest'. Available at: premierchristian.news/en/news/article/street-preacher-wins-compensation-for-wrongful-arrest

2.3.4 The NHS

The call for evidence showed that beyond providing medical care, hospitals and medical practices are also key points of contact between people with different beliefs, across both staff and patients. The NHS should be commended as a highly diverse professional environment.¹⁰⁴ Yet in this review's call for evidence, some people of faith expressed strong feelings of marginalisation in medical settings. Respondents from smaller faith or belief groups (including the low-sample groups Paganism and Jain Dharma) were all more likely to be critical of treatment – perhaps unsurprisingly, given emergency services and medical staff are less likely to encounter people from those groups on a regular basis. More surprisingly, a large proportion of Sikhs (40.4%) expressed concerns, often connected to being wrongfully identified as Muslims. In 2020, the NHS sought to become a pioneer in social and racial integration, through encouraging staff to adopt a more sensitive approach which recognises the unique factors of heritage, race and background in shaping the lives of staff and patients. In the equality and diversity glossary of terms (which, for reasons this report does not know, has since been removed), the NHS lays out key terminology which staff should become familiar with to help welcome people, break down barriers and interact positively with people from all social groups.¹⁰⁵ Many of the terms are intended to tackle racial discrimination and enlighten people on the meaning of commonly used language. Despite the A-to-Z range of words, at the time of writing there was no explanation of faith, or any terms related to religion or belief. Although the Department of Health and Social Care published practical guidance on religion and belief for the NHS some time ago outlining the beliefs staff need to be aware of, this review found several areas where the NHS needs to improve the acceptance, understanding and integration of religion, faith and belief in the health system.¹⁰⁶

Concerning examples from the call for evidence include:

- patients pressured to pursue treatment which conflicts with the principles and ethics of their religious tradition (such as abortion, amniocentesis tests, and failure to understand the importance of a Sikh's turban in palliative situations and post-mortem)
- patients incorrectly assumed to have certain religious dietary requirements, such as Hindus being served Halal meals and others being denied religiously motivated requests for vegetarian medication
- failure of some hospitals to proactively promote chaplaincy services (with political correctness sometimes cited as the cause, as well as lack of representation) or patients being pointed to types of religious support alien to their beliefs
- some NHS staff feeling that they are unable to express a religious identity in the workplace, or being made to feel their faith is irrelevant

These examples highlight a pressing need to equip healthcare staff with the necessary knowledge to make proper distinctions, accurate suggestions and informed judgements on

¹⁰⁴ NHS (2021) 'NHS workforce more diverse than any point in its history, as health service commits to more action on representation'. Available at: www.england.nhs.uk/2021/07/nhs-workforce-more-diverse-than-any-point-in-its-history-as-health-service-commits-to-more-action-on-representation/

¹⁰⁵ NHS (2020) 'Protected: equality, diversity and inclusion'. Available at: web.archive.org/web/20210605160322/people.nhs.uk/equality-diversity-na/edi-glossary/glossary-a-z/

¹⁰⁶ Department of Health (2009) 'Religion and belief: A practical guide'. Available at: www.clatterbridgecc.nhs.uk/application/files/7214/3445/0178/ReligionorbeliefApracticalguidefortheNHS.pdf

the best way to engage with people from diverse religious backgrounds. False assumptions and miscommunication can become a major barrier to providing quality care fairly and effectively in a pluralistic society. The lack of understanding of how faith or religion can shape a person's outlook and may affect their health choices (for patients) and motivation at work (for staff) reflects a significant gap in the current approach to diversity in the NHS, which can have serious consequences.

“Another example of the health care professionals not understanding the Sikh community well is when they were asking Sikh men with beards to trim their beards at the start of the pandemic so that PPE would be able to fit them, and I was asked by some leading figures within the regulatory bodies as to why Sikh men couldn't simply just have a trim rather than having to spend money on specialist equipment for them.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

2.3.5 Faith literacy in education

For the government to comprehensively tackle faith literacy, ensuring that faith is recognised, protected and respected throughout society, there needs to be a generational shift in approach. This must begin in schools and feed into the culture and mindset that will inform future public servants. Faith literacy in government must come from multiple angles, both within government workplaces and within educational contexts.

What people learn about faith at school plays a large part in shaping their outlook on living in a pluralistic society. The recognition and understanding of what faith is and how it shapes people's lives depends greatly on the ability of teachers to inspire constructive engagement with and between different faiths and beliefs. During engagement with various faith communities, this review heard concerns that some teachers can be dismissive or even hostile towards the expression of faith and beliefs.

The term 'faith-blind' has sometimes been used by teachers. This review suggests 'faith-sensitive' is a more appropriate term. It is both effective at promoting equality and reflects the core role of faith in the lives of some people, shaping actions, attitudes and worldviews. Being faith-sensitive means the full range of faiths and beliefs can be recognised, understood and treated respectfully (as well as recognising any harmful practices that may need to be addressed). The importance of this was highlighted in a 2010 Theos report, which noted the counter-productive consequence of promoting a purely secular worldview in education and treating religion as "irrelevant clutter", relegating it to "a problem" to be studied in RE. People feel less welcome to share their views, which ultimately "is not fruitful in building a successful plural society where difference is well-handled and the true role of belief in human knowledge is taken seriously".¹⁰⁷ The report notes that recognising the role of faith in students' lives encourages them "to explore how

¹⁰⁷ Theos (2010) 'Doing God in education'. Available at: repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/3a96bcd1682151b3e5c93fcc4d02ff6c410af7467cfcca4a08190a3248e62068/565310/Doing_God_in_Education_by_T_Cooling_Sept_10.pdf

their faith can support the common good and to listen to each other's beliefs in the cause of discovering truth and building a more harmonious society".¹⁰⁸

In 21st-century Britain, populated with religions, beliefs, cultures and people from around the world, it is more important than ever that the next generation is equipped to thrive in society. Therefore, it is vital that adequate resources and attention are dedicated to faith literacy in education. As noted in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education report, 'Improving religious literacy', religious literacy within schools "will enable communities and individuals to understand each other better, to communicate with one another on a more informed basis and promote community cohesion within a more inclusive and holistic society".¹⁰⁹ The report also states that schools are "one of, if not the most, important sites for improving religious literacy in society more widely".¹¹⁰ Faith in education is covered in more detail in chapter 3.

2.4 Practise what you preach

It is not the role of government to tell people what to believe or to offer any opinion on what is right or wrong when it comes to religious observance (excluding any harmful behaviour or activity that incites violence or threatens democratic order). However, it should be the government's responsibility to equip all civil and public servants with the basic factual knowledge to be able to recognise and understand the diverse religious life of the population.

Government should therefore consider designing a bespoke faith literacy course for civil servants. The current diversity and inclusion training offered through the Civil Service Learning platform is not sufficient. It provides basic training in the behaviours expected of civil servants working in a diverse workforce, but it does not provide any specific information regarding the expression of religious belief. It is the opinion of this reviewer that the training should be expanded to include a specific module on recognising and understanding religion, belief and faith for all civil servants, with further bespoke training for civil servants working on faith-related policy or external-facing stakeholder management and operational roles.

The basic-level training should include training on the freedom of religion and belief enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equalities Act 2010, greater understanding of faith-specific practices including the public expression of religious belief, awareness of intrafaith matters and sensitive issues such as forced marriages, and

¹⁰⁸ Theos (2010) 'Doing God in education'. Available at: repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/3a96bcd1682151b3e5c93fcc4d02ff6c410af7467cfcca4a08190a3248e62068/565310/Doing_God_in_Education_by_T_Cooling_Sept_10.pdf

¹⁰⁹ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (2020) 'Improving religious literacy'. Available at: www.fionabruce.org.uk/sites/www.fionabruce.org.uk/files/2018-02/All-Party%20Parliamentary%20Group%20on%20Religious%20Education%20-%20Improving%20Religious%20Literacy%20-%20A%20Contribution%20to%20the%20Debate.pdf

¹¹⁰ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (2020) 'Improving religious literacy'. Available at: www.fionabruce.org.uk/sites/www.fionabruce.org.uk/files/2018-02/All-Party%20Parliamentary%20Group%20on%20Religious%20Education%20-%20Improving%20Religious%20Literacy%20-%20A%20Contribution%20to%20the%20Debate.pdf

financial and other forms of faith-based exploitation. This training should be developed by trusted partners and sectoral experts to ensure appropriate parameters are in place. In addition, the Cabinet Office should provide standardised resources, such as a 'key dates' faith and belief calendar for distribution across government departments. These resources should be made easily accessible across departmental intranet sites.

The same approach should then be emulated across mandatory training courses for all those on the public payroll, including within the NHS, police and educational settings.

Faith literacy case study: resettling Afghan arrivals

The resettlement of Afghan arrivals in the UK has involved considering faith implications for policy making. The majority of arrivals from Afghanistan are Muslim.

This affects arrivals' needs and preferences for location of temporary and settled accommodation based on access to Halal butchers and mosques. Additionally, it affects food provision in temporary accommodation, particularly in relation to Ramadan.

Understanding different beliefs and practices – both for arrivals and existing communities – is also important to integration.

Ensuring this is considered in policy design and that central and local government are well equipped to understand the religious needs of arrivals has been important to providing effective support, meeting basic needs and encouraging integration.

2.4.1 Independent Faith Champion

The effective delivery of faith literacy training will require careful design of resources and training materials, as well as plans to embed the learnings in policy development and delivery. This should be overseen by an Independent Faith Champion.

Reporting to the Faith Minister or a secretary of state, there needs to be an independent appointee who is less constrained than civil servants, with more time to focus solely on faith than the Faith Minister, who often carries the role alongside a much larger and more diverse portfolio of responsibilities. The role is totally complementary to and should not compete with the role of the Faith Minister, who still has responsibility for the government's faith policy. Much of the Faith Minister's operational workload could be picked up by the postholder. The Independent Faith Champion should both oversee the improvement of faith literacy within government, and foster relationships between government and faith communities, acting as an interlocuter at both the political and spiritual level. The religious life of the UK is now so diverse that the convening role the Church of England may have traditionally occupied could be usefully bolstered by an independent appointee, but with greater ties to government.

The Independent Faith Champion needs to be an expert in faith engagement and have the relational qualities to be the day-to-day interlocuter between faith communities and the elected representatives of government. They would be tasked to build and maintain key relationships, acting as a critical friend to both. The Independent Faith Champion would be

an independent appointee, possibly with a similar (but bigger) remit to the Chaplain General of Prisons. In any event, the Independent Faith Champion's primary objectives would be to:

- lead a team who are sectoral experts in faith, interfaith and intrafaith matters (probably made up of civil servants and external contractors)
- advise senior members of government, including the Faith Minister and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, on faith matters and assist with all aspects of communications, engagement, roundtables, visits and speech writing
- provide a convening role between faith communities on matters relating to government and the implementation of public policy
- oversee the delivery of faith literacy training to public servants
- oversee the adoption of the recommendations in the Bloom review

This team should be the internal resource for the rest of government, the Faith Minister and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. The appointee should work closely with the communities team in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. They should also work closely with the Chaplain General of Prisons and the chaplaincy teams in the UK Armed Forces and NHS.

2.5 Recommendations 4 to 6

Recommendation 4

Government should take steps to ensure that everyone on the public payroll, including civil servants in Whitehall and local councils, NHS and public health staff, teachers in schools, colleges and universities, and police, prison and probation officers, are provided with consistent, quality faith literacy training, overseen by the Independent Faith Champion's Office as outlined in recommendation 6. This should include: training on the freedom of religion or belief enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998 and Equalities Act 2010, greater understanding of faith-specific practices including the public expression of religious belief, awareness of intrafaith matters and sensitive issues such as forced marriages, and financial and other forms of faith-based exploitation. The training should be developed by trusted partners and sectoral experts to ensure appropriate parameters are in place.

Recommendation 5

Government should learn from the effective faith engagement programmes initiated during the pandemic and hold regular roundtables with senior, serious and national faith leaders. These should be governed by a sophisticated mechanism of discernment, with all groups having the right to speak and be heard at appropriate levels, to ensure fairness in output with a consistent outcome.

Recommendation 6

Government should appoint an Independent Faith Champion. The Independent Faith Champion should have a well-resourced team of civil servants and sectoral experts to act as advisers and support government departments on both interfaith and intrafaith matters. This office could be rebuilt from the current faith team in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities or be a new function in the Cabinet Office. In any event, the Independent Faith Champion and their team should have a broad, government-wide remit to ensure that government is successfully engaging with faith, people of faith and places of worship. They should be the main support for the Faith Minister and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.



Chapter 3

Faith in education

3.1 Introduction

Throughout history, faith has played a crucial role in the British education system: from King Alfred in the Anglo-Saxon era who pioneered literacy and learning through a programme of translating classical works into Old English via his bishops during the late 800s, to religious institutions in the 1800s providing free or affordable education to the poor.^{111, 112}

Every child in the UK has a right to education. It is a violation of human rights to be denied access to education, and the state must respect the rights of parents and guardians to ensure that education conforms with their own religious and philosophical convictions, as stated in the Human Rights Act 1998.¹¹³ Under the Equality Act 2010, schools, colleges, universities and organisations must not discriminate against a pupil because of their religion or belief, and must support and accommodate the faith needs of their students.¹¹⁴ For example, this would include the provision of faith-appropriate school meals, and space and time to pray. Despite religious diversity in England increasing over recent decades, the place of faith in the education system faces some significant challenges, including in the provision of quality RE and the level of understanding and sensitivity towards students' faith-specific needs.

The United Nations further defines the aims of education as “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” and “the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples”.¹¹⁵ Ensuring children receive a suitably broad education is therefore paramount for enabling them to flourish in life, and should be considered alongside respecting the rights of parents and guardians regarding religious convictions.

Schools play an important role in shaping every generation, particularly in promoting an understanding and appreciation of faith which stretches across generations into many sectors of society and government. Through promoting constructive dialogue and positive interaction between people with different beliefs, faith literacy in educational contexts is an essential part of equipping young people to thrive in British society. Unlike religious instruction, which guides people in the beliefs, practices and traditions of a particular religion, RE in schools is about religious literacy, where students can understand and constructively engage with the full range of religions, beliefs and faiths. There are many programs and activities in schools which encourage diversity and pluralism, but faith literacy requires a particularly comprehensive approach which not only welcomes people

¹¹¹ The British Library (accessed 29 November 2022) ‘Learning and education in Anglo-Saxon England’. Available at: www.bl.uk/anglo-saxons/articles/learning-and-education-in-anglo-saxon-england

¹¹² UK Parliament (accessed 29 November 2022) ‘Elementary education in the 19th century’. Available at: www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/in19thcentury/

¹¹³ Human Rights Act 1998, protocol 1, article 2. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1

¹¹⁴ Equality Act 2010, part 6, chapter 1. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15

¹¹⁵ United Nations (2001) ‘Convention on the Rights of the Child: Annex IX, General comment No. 1, Article 29 (1): The aims of education’. Available at cypcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/General-Comment-1.pdf

of diverse faiths, but also seeks to understand the role of faith in their lives. By understanding faith, teachers and schools are better able to break down barriers that inhibit integration, enabling everyone to thrive.

Compulsory basic education in England comes in different shapes and forms: local council-maintained or community schools, academies (including faith-based academies), free schools (including faith schools), private or independent schools (including faith-based ones), home education and alternative provision.¹¹⁶ At the time of writing, there are over 24,000 education settings for young people in England, covering almost 9 million pupils.¹¹⁷ Most types of full-time educational provision must be legally registered and inspected (at the time of writing, home education and some types of alternative provision are notable exceptions). But they have different levels of autonomy regarding source of funding, governing body, admissions policy, student fees and adherence to the national curriculum. All state-funded schools in England must teach RE but the content is not centrally mandated as part of the national curriculum, so it varies.¹¹⁸

Beyond full time education, faith and religious instruction is often taught through faith-specific settings such as yeshivas, madrassahs or Sunday schools. Currently, these so-called 'out-of-school settings' are not required to be registered with any inspection or oversight body, such as Ofsted. This reviewer believes that a 'one size fits all approach' would be problematic, but where an out-of-school setting operates just below the legal threshold of an independent school, it should be appropriately registered and regulated. Government, Ofsted and local councils need to be more confident in their definitions. If something walks like a duck, looks like a duck and quacks like a duck – it's a duck. If something looks like a school, sounds like a school and behaves like a school – it's a school and should be regulated like one. Otherwise, the increased risk to children through potentially poor safeguarding practice, unchecked health and safety compliance, and narrow educational focus will continue. This reviewer notes that since first raising these issues with the Department for Education in 2020, the 2022 Schools Bill was introduced.¹¹⁹ Encouragingly, it included a new proposal to expand the definition of independent schools, meaning all educational settings where children receive most of their education would need to be registered, as well as a proposal to place a duty on local councils to create and maintain registers of children not in school, including those children who are home educated. As part of this proposal, home-educating parents would have had a duty to provide the necessary information for these registers, including whether their children are

¹¹⁶ For descriptions of the different types of education settings, see GOV.UK (accessed 29 November 2022) 'Types of school'. Available at: www.gov.uk/types-of-school/print

¹¹⁷ British Educational Suppliers Association (accessed 29 November 2022) 'Key UK education statistics'. Available at: www.besa.org.uk/key-uk-education-statistics/

¹¹⁸ GOV.UK (accessed 29 November 2022) 'The national curriculum'. Available at: www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/other-compulsory-subjects. In faith academies, foundation or voluntary faith schools, Ofsted inspectors must not comment on the content of religious worship or on denominational RE, although they may attend and comment on the contribution of those lessons to the school's wider aims, such as pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The teaching of RE in religious schools is instead inspected by someone chosen by the governors (which usually means the diocese or other religious group that runs the school). See House of Commons Library (2019) 'Research briefing: Faith schools in England: FAQs'. Available at: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06972/SN06972.pdf and Humanists UK (accessed 29 November 2022) 'State-funded faith schools'. Available at: humanists.uk/campaigns/schools-and-education/faith-schools/

¹¹⁹ The Schools Bill 2022. Available at: bills.parliament.uk/publications/46433/documents/1770

receiving some of their education in out-of-school settings. This would have gone some way to providing local councils with a clearer picture of what is happening. However, the bill has since been discontinued and, while the government has stated it remains committed to reintroducing the safeguarding proposals at the next legislative opportunity, no indication of timing has been given. More will also need to be done to understand the complexities of how out-of-school settings function, as not all will be covered by the expanded definitions and registration requirements. These issues are covered more in section 3.5.

This chapter first addresses widespread failings in RE as taught in full-time education settings. It then considers issues with supplementary educational faith-based settings. Finally, it considers alternative student finance as a way to improve fair access to higher education across faith groups.

3.2 Religious education

RE in full-time education is an important component of promoting understanding of faith and faith literacy. This subject is vastly different to religious instruction, which aims to teach the beliefs, practices and traditions of a particular religion. The most effective RE encourages an inquisitive environment where students can examine, explore, research and discuss different religions, beliefs and faiths that engage with the deepest questions in life.¹²⁰

Beyond exploring faith and religion itself, faith literacy must also be embedded in the delivery of educational provisions. This is already the case in the Department for Education's guidance for relationships, sex and health education, which emphasises the need to teach faith perspectives on these issues. In this context, faith literacy means having a good understanding of faith backgrounds, both to inform lesson planning and to ensure the content is appropriately handled in compliance with the Equality Act 2010, which states religion or belief as protected characteristics.¹²¹

"I believe the curriculum of most schools should be comprehensive enough, however, RE is one of the first lessons to be dropped in schools and in some places is barely on the timetable at all. Some faith-based schools don't cover enough RE for other religions."

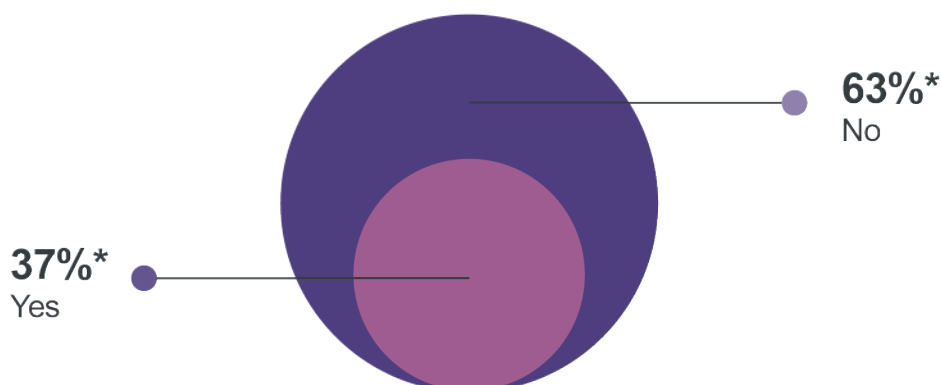
Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

This review's call for evidence asked respondents if they felt that RE is comprehensive enough within the English education curriculum to provide a good understanding of different faiths and beliefs. Although many didn't know, a considerable amount of those who did offer a view (around 63%) said no.

¹²⁰ Ofsted (2013) 'Religious education: Realising the potential'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/religious-education-realising-the-potential

¹²¹ Department for Education (2019) 'Relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships_Education_Relationships_and_Sex_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf

Figure 4: Do you believe that religious and belief education (often referred to as 'RE') is comprehensive enough within the English education curriculum to provide a good understanding of different faiths and beliefs?



* based on the number of respondents who offered a view (either yes or no)

Source: Bloom review call for evidence, 2020

A 2013 Ofsted report seemingly agrees. The report found that six in 10 schools failed to realise the subject's full potential, such as promoting the increasingly important qualities of respect and empathy in an ever more globalised and multicultural 21st century.¹²² Further analysis from the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education in 2017 found that 28% of surveyed state secondary schools gave no dedicated time to RE, resulting in at least 800,000 students being deprived of their "legal right to learn about major religions and beliefs" (though this didn't capture data where RE may have been taught as part of a broader or different-titled subject).¹²³ Another study from Liverpool Hope University in 2019 found that 701 schools across England had chosen to stop offering the optional religious studies GCSE between 2017 and 2018 – a drop of 13%.¹²⁴ According to the study, the drop was not reflected evenly across schools, with a higher drop rate of 18% in non-faith schools. Possible causes for the decline include: "difficulty or breadth of content of [the] new GCSE syllabus, [and] pressures on curriculum time caused by focus on other subjects". The Theos report 'The future of religious education' notes that "cuts to local council budgets and ongoing academisation are contributing to a situation where the quality and content of RE provision is inconsistent both between local education authorities

¹²² Refreshed data is expected in 2022. In the meantime see Ofsted (6 October 2013) 'More than half of schools failing pupils on religious education'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/more-than-half-of-schools-failing-pupils-on-religious-education. Ofsted (12 May 2021) 'Ofsted publishes research review on religious education'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-publishes-research-review-on-religious-education

¹²³ Religious Education Council of England and Wales, National Association of Teachers of Religious Education, and RE Services Today (2017) 'State of the nation: A report on religious education provision within secondary schools in England'. Available at: www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/SOTN%20RE%202017%20Report%20web%20v4.pdf

¹²⁴ Liverpool Hope University and Culham's St Gabriel's (2019) 'GCSE religious studies: At a crossroads: Mapping the impact of change in England 2017-18'. Available at: www.hope.ac.uk/media/news/GCSE%20Religious%20Studies%20Report.pdf

and between schools within the same authority”.¹²⁵ Department for Education officials have informed the reviewer that despite advocates for RE highlighting the reduction of allocated timetable space and lack of proper dedicated resourcing as significant factors in the overall decline of RE, more recent surveys suggest a slight improvement. In secondary schools the overall proportion of teaching hours devoted to RE is 3.3% (2021) compared to 3.2% in 2010. At primary level, small improvements may be partly due to Ofsted’s focus on the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum, including RE for all pupils in all school types.¹²⁶

“At present, the teaching of humanism is far too absent from RE. Moreover, this is unlikely to change given that the lack of humanist representatives on Local Authority Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs) is an exacerbating factor in many areas.

The Welsh Government has said that in its view, the Human Rights Act means that humanism needs to be treated equally in RE to the major religions, and humanists need to be admitted to SACREs.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Yet there is still more to do to improve provision. While the scope of the locally agreed syllabus is reviewed at least every five years by an agreed syllabus conference and approved by local councils, the quality of content across different regions can vary. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the removal of the short course religious studies GCSE from school performance measures led to a decline in take-up, which was not compensated for by a subsequent increase in take-up of the full course religious studies GCSE. Furthermore, when the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) was introduced, the religious studies GCSE was omitted from it.¹²⁷ This sustained de-prioritisation of RE means that students are less likely to pursue further religious education at A level or in higher education.¹²⁸ It also deprives students of vital knowledge which enables them to understand the different religions, faiths and beliefs that shape the contemporary world they live in.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Theos (2017) ‘The future of religious education in England and Wales’. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Reportfiles/The-Future-of-Religious-Education---Debating-Reform.pdf

¹²⁶ Ofsted (2021) ‘Research review series: religious education’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education#re-at-different-stages-of-education. National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (accessed 29 November 2022, original research conducted 2020) ‘Over 95% of primary teachers report time spent on teaching RE has increased or stayed the same’. Available at: www.natre.org.uk/news/latest-news/over-95-of-primary-teachers-report-time-spent-on-teaching-re-has-increased-or-stayed-the-same/

¹²⁷ Religious Education Council of England and Wales (accessed 29 November 2022, original research conducted 2012) ‘Religious education in schools is being killed off’. Available at: www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/religious-education-schools-killed-off/

¹²⁸ Religious Education Council of England and Wales (accessed 29 November 2022, original research conducted 2018-2019) ‘Schools’ failure to meet legal requirements on religious education continues to impact A-level entries’. Available at: www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/a-level-results-day-2019/

¹²⁹ Religious Education Council of England and Wales (accessed 29 November 2022, original research conducted 2017) ‘State of the nation report: 800,000 secondary pupils lose out on religious literacy’. Available at www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/secondary-pupils-lose-out-on-religious-literacy/

“Curriculum time in secular schools is very limited. Exclusion of RE from the EBacc implies that it is a less important subject than the other GCSE subjects. Shortage of RE teachers, yet no ITE [initial teacher education] bursaries.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Both the purpose and the content of this subject offer immense benefits to building a better, more inclusive Britain. If government is committed to cultivating a society that is culturally ‘levelled-up’, where people of all backgrounds are able to meaningfully engage and debate about the different beliefs that shape their lives and outlook, it should look again at why RE in schools has become the ‘Cinderella subject’. This reviewer understands the benefits of not mandating a national curriculum for RE as it allows local councils to tailor provision for their communities, but this can’t come at the cost of poor provision at best, or no provision at worst. Possible solutions for giving RE similar levels of resourcing and timetable space to other humanities subjects include the introduction of minimum standards regarding timetabling and resourcing, which would then be centrally inspected by Ofsted. Other solutions could be the introduction of religious studies GCSE into the EBacc, or even outreach programmes to university graduates of theology and religious studies to ensure higher levels of faith literacy among RE teachers (see section 3.3 below). RE should be elevated to a higher level of importance in the education system so it receives the attention it deserves.

3.3 Faith literacy among educators

A report published in 2017 by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education notes that many academics, teachers and faith leaders are increasingly concerned that “too many people lack the relevant skills to understand and discuss issues about religion precisely at the time when they are most needed”.¹³⁰ According to a Theos report that same year, the lack of time and resources allocated to training teachers means that the broad range of complex issues within RE has also led to RE being seen as overburdensome, confusing and difficult to teach in both primary and secondary schools.¹³¹ As a result, the report commented that RE is often relegated to the bottom of the list, and children are not given the quality of education they deserve.

“The Hinduism syllabus in many schools is woefully inadequate. AQA recently had to apologise and withdraw a textbook that contained discriminatory content against Hindus.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

¹³⁰ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (2016) ‘Improving religious literacy: A contribution to the debate. Available at: www.fionabruce.org.uk/sites/www.fionabruce.org.uk/files/2018-02/All-Party%20Parliamentary%20Group%20on%20Religious%20Education%20-%20Improving%20Religious%20Literacy%20-%20A%20Contribution%20to%20the%20Debate.pdf

¹³¹ Theos (2017) ‘The future of religious education in England and Wales’. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Reportfiles/The-Future-of-Religious-Education---Debating-Reform.pdf

In 2018, the Commission on Religious Education identified a lack of adequate teacher training in RE across primary and secondary schools.¹³² According to their report, the number of non-specialists teaching RE in secondary schools was almost three times higher than for history. Moreover, the majority of newly qualified primary school teachers (60%) reportedly received less than three hours of RE training, and 53.6% of secondary school RE teachers had no relevant post-A level qualification in the subject. Ofsted inspectors separately agree that many teachers find themselves lacking the confidence, knowledge and training to effectively deliver RE, especially the controversial topics, which in the opinion of this reviewer are the lifeblood of the subject.¹³³ In 2018, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales warned that unless something was done to address the shortage of subject-specific RE teachers, schools would not be able to adequately equip students to filter out unhelpful stereotypes which contribute to religious discrimination in schools and society.¹³⁴

The challenges of providing good-quality RE were further noted in the 2013 Ofsted research report on RE provision in primary and secondary schools.¹³⁵ The report found that most schools had low standards, weak teaching, problems with developing curriculum, and teachers were often confused about the purpose of the subject. One of their recommendations was to “ensure that learning in RE has a stronger focus on deepening pupils’ understanding of the nature, diversity and impact of religion and belief in the contemporary world”.¹³⁶ Despite Ofsted’s strong recommendations to improve teacher training and the structure of the curriculum, a 2017 Theos report found very little progress had been made in the quality and consistency of RE provision.¹³⁷

Based on stakeholder conversations and the call for evidence, this reviewer believes that for some teachers to adopt a more faith-literate approach in schools, there should be a change in language and perspective. For example, occasionally the term ‘faith-blind’ is used. This reviewer finds the term ‘faith-blind’ inadequate and unhelpful. While this may promote equality between faiths, it falls short of developing a school environment that recognises the richness, value and significance of faith in the lives of students and their families. As noted in section 2.3.5 of chapter 2, teachers should adopt a ‘faith-sensitive’ approach instead to help create a welcoming school environment where the different beliefs and traditions among people of faith are understood, respected and celebrated.

¹³² Commission on Religious Education (2018) ‘Religion and worldviews: The national way forward’. Available at: www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf

¹³³ Ofsted (2013) ‘Religious education: Realising the potential’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413157/Religious_education_-_realising_the_potential.pdf

¹³⁴ Religious Education Council (accessed 30 November 2022, original article estimated 2018) ‘Chronic shortage of RE teachers in schools’. Available at: www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/news/chronic-shortage-re-teachers-schools/

¹³⁵ Ofsted (2013) ‘Religious education: Realising the potential’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413157/Religious_education_-_realising_the_potential.pdf

¹³⁶ Ofsted (2013) ‘Religious education: Realising the potential’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413157/Religious_education_-_realising_the_potential.pdf

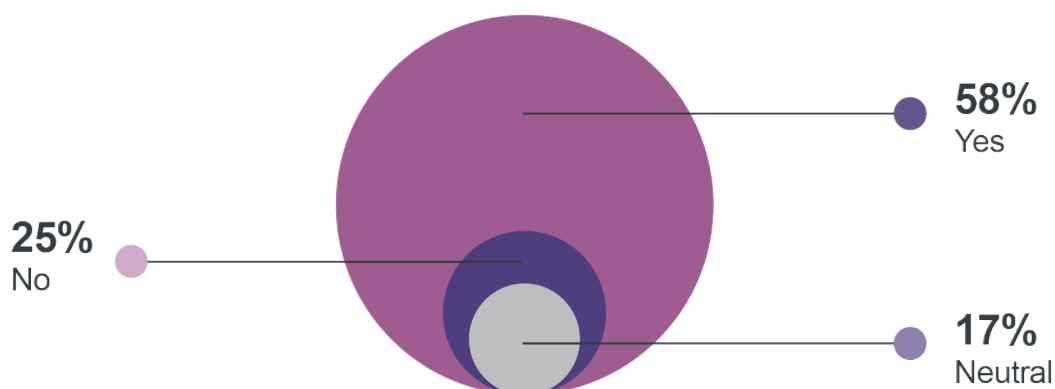
¹³⁷ Theos (2017) ‘The future of religious education in England and Wales: Debating reform’. Available at: www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/Reportfiles/The-Future-of-Religious-Education---Debating-Reform.pdf

Nevertheless, where faith practices are harmful, such as the disempowerment of women and girls, this will need to be treated sensitively. Teachers and educators need to be appropriately trained to understand the various expressions of religious belief and why certain practices are important and others harmful. It is therefore important that government prioritises the proper delivery of RE, which can only be achieved through improving faith literacy among educators themselves, as set out in recommendation 4 of this report.

3.4 Faith schools

Faith schools and academies are educational establishments with a designated religious character, such as Church of England schools. Most are accessible to students of all faiths and none (though they do have freedom to admit pupils on the basis of faith if oversubscribed). The depth of faith affiliation and influence on teaching can differ.¹³⁸ The quality of RE in faith schools can be inspected by someone chosen by the governors rather than Ofsted.¹³⁹ High-performing faith schools, where available, can be parents' first choice for their children (regardless of personal faith), often due to ethos, social demographic and attainment records.¹⁴⁰ While 58% of respondents to this review's call for evidence believe faith-based schools are a positive thing for society, a considerable proportion disagreed (25%).

Figure 5: More than a third of all state-funded schools and academies and faith-based. Do you think that faith-based schools are good for society?



Source: Bloom review call for evidence, 2020

¹³⁸ National Secular Society (8 July 2015) 'When is a faith school not a faith school?'. Available at: www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2015/07/when-is-a-faith-school-not-a-faith-school

¹³⁹ GOV.UK (accessed 30 November 2022) 'The national curriculum'. Available at: www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/other-compulsory-subjects

¹⁴⁰ Tim Butler and Chris Hamnett (2012) 'Praying for success? Faith schools and school choice in East London', *Geoforum*, 43 (6), 1,242-1,253. Available at: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S001671851200070X

This demonstrates that public opinion remains divided even among people who are more likely to have a religious affiliation than the general population. The argument against faith schools tends to focus on inclusivity, class and social cohesion.¹⁴¹ While this reviewer does not disagree that these issues may exist in any type of school with specific admissions criteria, it is evident that faith schools are generally more committed to providing RE (see section 3.2), fostering an environment where students are encouraged to discuss issues of religion, ethics and morality. Providing space for this discourse, even within the tenets of a particular faith, aligns with the pluralistic, inclusive and inquisitive classroom environment that we should be encouraging, as guided by British values.¹⁴² The 2014 guidance on promoting British values in schools notes that pupils are expected to gain both an understanding that the freedom to hold other faiths and beliefs is protected in law, and an acceptance that people with different faiths or beliefs to oneself (or having none) should be accepted and tolerated, and should not be the cause of prejudicial or discriminatory behaviour.

The 2015 Department for Education publication 'Education excellence everywhere' recognises the valuable contribution of faith schools through their conversion to academies. This has helped improve the range of choices available, allowing parents to choose schools that reflect their beliefs.¹⁴³ The report commits to "build sponsor capacity, speed up the process of conversion to academy status, and work with the Church of England, Catholic Church and other faith groups to support Church and faith schools to become academies". This commitment was reaffirmed in 2019 when the then Education Secretary encouraged more faith schools to convert to academies, stating that: "The diversity of schools in this country is one of our education system's most valuable assets, and faith schools play a pivotal role in that. They have led the way in embracing our reforms, with innovative free schools and high-performing academies, taking advantage of the freedom and autonomy those choices provide."¹⁴⁴

3.5 Faith-based out-of-school settings

This review's stakeholder engagement highlighted the prevalence of concerns relating to the safeguarding of children and the quality of teaching in supplementary faith-based

¹⁴¹ New Internationalist (1 November 2011) 'Are religious schools bad for society?'. Available at: newint.org/sections/argument/2011/11/01/religious-schooling-debate-on-faith-schools

¹⁴² Department for Education (27 November 2014) 'Guidance on promoting British values in schools published'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published

¹⁴³ Department for Education (2016) 'Education excellence everywhere'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/educational-excellence-everywhere

¹⁴⁴ Department for Education (30 January 2019) 'Education Secretary urges more faith schools to consider academy conversion'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-urges-more-faith-schools-to-consider-academy-conversion

educational establishments, also referred to as ‘out-of-school settings’.¹⁴⁵ Concerns were particularly high in those that operate just below the legal threshold of a ‘school’, or in disregard of it. Many respondents called for greater monitoring and inspection to prevent “hate speech”, “indoctrination” and “inappropriate discipline”, and practices which increase insularity and broader cultural disengagement.

Faith-based out-of-school-settings, estimated at between 1,500 and 2,500 in England in the mid-2000s, can include a wide range of supplementary religious education.¹⁴⁶ They include Jewish yeshivas, Islamic madrassahs, Hindu settings, Sikh settings and Christian Sunday schools.

There is currently no regulatory regime for out-of-school settings, and they are therefore not legally required to be registered or subject to inspection by any oversight body. As a result, there is a significant risk that safeguarding issues could occur under the radar and without detection. While there is non-statutory guidance in place to protect children attending these settings, a 2018 Department for Education report noted some public concern that children attending them may be more vulnerable to the risk of extremism and exposure to other forms of harmful practice or safeguarding risks.¹⁴⁷

Some settings are already covered by charity law (if registered or established as charities) and have to comply with minimum safeguarding standards. Any setting that employs individuals to educate or care for children unsupervised on a regular basis is likely to be within scope of a ‘regulated activity’ requiring DBS checks.¹⁴⁸ However, this review’s stakeholder engagement exercise heard serious concerns regarding the training of teachers and leaders in some of these educational settings, with some lacking legitimate credentials, training or screening, including DBS checks. A lack of official background checks and proper management can put children at significant risk of psychological, physical and sexual abuse, as well as indoctrination into extremist ideologies and the promotion of violence. Separately, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse was set up in 2015 because of serious concerns that some organisations (including religious settings) had failed and were continuing to fail to protect children from sexual abuse.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Out-of-school settings are organisations or individuals that provide tuition, training, instruction or activities to children in England without their parents’ or carers’ supervision. They are not: schools, colleges, education settings providing alternative provision 16-to-19 academies, or providers caring for children who are registered with Ofsted or a childminder agency. See Department for Education (2020) ‘Out-of-school settings (OOSS) voluntary safeguarding code of practice: Government consultation response’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/out-of-school-settings-voluntary-safeguarding-code-of-practice/outcome/out-of-school-settings-ooss-voluntary-safeguarding-code-of-practice-government-consultation-response

¹⁴⁶ Institute for Public Policy Research (2015) ‘Saturdays for success: How supplementary education can support pupils from all backgrounds to flourish’. Available at: www.ippr.org/files/publications/pdf/saturdays-for-success_Sep2015.pdf

¹⁴⁷ Department for Education (2018) ‘Out-of-school education settings: Report on the call for evidence conducted November 2015 to January 2016’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698250/Out-of-school_education_settings-Report_on_the_call_for_evidence.pdf

¹⁴⁸ Department for Education (2012) ‘Factual note by HM Government: Regulated activity in relation to children: scope’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/550197/Regulated_activity_in_relation_to_children.pdf

¹⁴⁹ The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse website (accessed 30 November 2022). Available at www.iicsa.org.uk/

The final report was published on 20 October 2022 and over the course of 15 investigations, the inquiry has made a number of recommendations to improve preventative measures in religious settings.¹⁵⁰

In light of this, this reviewer urges government to formalise its approach to faith-based out-of-school settings. There is a big difference between a group meeting for a short period of time after a religious service, and a group which meets five or six days a week after the school day and continues into the late evening, or a group which operates during the school day but just below the legal threshold for full-time education, preventing the possibility of providing full-time education elsewhere (for example, in a registered school). It is the opinion of the reviewer that the combination of narrowly defined terms and the fear of upsetting some faith groups means the potential for unintended consequences is high, and appropriate measures are not always taken to ensure children's safeguarding and wellbeing.

It would be wrong not to acknowledge the notable progress in this area. Following consultation, the Department for Education published a voluntary safeguarding code of practice for out-of-school settings in October 2020.¹⁵¹ The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's 2019 'Integrated communities strategy green paper' also sought to address the issue, with the government's response noting: "[We are] working with sixteen local councils to understand how safeguarding in out-of-school settings can be enhanced through greater multi-agency working, with a view to identifying and sharing best practice across the country and to identify any gaps in existing powers."¹⁵²

Many home-educated children attend out-of-school settings (such as tuition centres) to supplement their education. According to recent BBC research, during the first eight months of the academic year 2020-21, there was a 75% rise in the number of children registered for home education.¹⁵³ As home education becomes more common, it is increasingly important for government to have a comprehensive understanding of where children are being educated, whether this education is suitable, and whether proper safeguarding measures are in place. In 2019, the Department for Education consulted on establishing a local council registration system for children who do not attend state-funded or registered independent schools. This was taken forward into the Schools Bill, introduced in May 2022, but subsequently discontinued in December 2022.¹⁵⁴ The bill also proposed a new duty on out-of-school education providers to give information on request to local councils for their registers in cases where they are, or where the local council reasonably

¹⁵⁰ The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (2021) 'Child protection in religious organisations and settings: Investigation report'. Available at: www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/investigation/cp-religious-organisations-settings

¹⁵¹ Department for Education (2020) 'Keeping children safe in out-of-school settings: Code of practice'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-out-of-school-settings-code-of-practice

¹⁵² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) 'Integrated communities strategy green paper: Summary of consultation responses and government response'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/777160/Integrated_Communities_Strategy_Government_Response.pdf

¹⁵³ The BBC (27 July 2021) 'MPs call for national register of home-educated children'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-57974170

¹⁵⁴ Schools Bill, part 3, section 33 (last updated 7 September 2022). Available at: bills.parliament.uk/bills/3156

believes them to be, delivering education to a child eligible for registration above a prescribed threshold. With the discontinuation of the bill, the reviewer hopes that these positive policy proposals are not abandoned or confined to the ‘too difficult box’, and that the government reintroduces them as it has committed to at the next legislative opportunity.

In addressing the issue of out-of-school settings, it is not the intention of this reviewer to criticise the motives of parents or the people teaching, as the vast majority do so for the best of reasons. Consultation with the Charity Commission for England and Wales as part of this review noted the many examples of faith-based charities providing supplementary school activities, with the vast majority providing a valuable service to local communities.

Far less prevalent than out-of-school settings are illegally unregistered faith-based schools. Operating an unregistered setting which meets the legal definition of an independent school is a criminal offence, and those found guilty can face both custodial sentences and heavy fines.¹⁵⁵ However, in practice there has apparently only been one custodial sentence to date and fines are typically under £1,000. The existence of these illegally unregistered schools is less common than faith-based out-of-school settings which do not need to register and are not illegal. However, given the narrowness of what legally qualifies as a school, it is the opinion of this reviewer that many potentially harmful proto-schools operate in plain sight. In such settings, children can be deprived of a full and comprehensive education, leaving them entirely unprepared to live and work in society with little ability to read, write or even speak English.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, there can be serious unchecked health and safety issues in the buildings used by such establishments. Sir Michael Wilshaw, a previous Ofsted chief inspector, noted that inspectors investigating unregistered ‘illegal’ schools uncovered some with unhygienic and unsafe environments, including blocked fire exits and chemical storage in food cupboards in the same room where children ate.¹⁵⁷ To Ofsted and the Department for Education’s credit, they have made significant advancements in the investigation and prosecution of illegal schools. In 2016, a dedicated team was set up to tackle the issue. Between 2016 and March 2022, they investigated 923 suspect educational settings, of which 13% were suspected illegal faith schools.¹⁵⁸

If a future iteration of the 2022 Schools Bill does eventually pass, including the safeguarding measures originally proposed, this reviewer would welcome the Department for Education’s plans to review and strengthen legislation to tackle these issues. Plans include extending the regulatory regime for independent schools to all settings which

¹⁵⁵ Department for Education (2016) ‘Unregistered independent schools and out of school settings: Departmental advice for collaborative working between the Department for Education, Ofsted and local authorities’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/690495/La_Guidance_March_2018.pdf#:~:text=It%20is%20a%20criminal%20offence%20to%20conduct%20an,in%20the%20number%20of%20unregistered%20independent%20schools%20operating.

¹⁵⁶ The BBC (27 February 2017) ‘Is there a problem with unregistered schools?’. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43170447

¹⁵⁷ Ofsted (16 May 2016) ‘Advice letter from Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, in respect of suspected illegal schools’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523694/Unregistered_schools_advice_note_16_May_2016.pdf

¹⁵⁸ Ofsted (15 March 2018) ‘Statistical data set: Unregistered schools management information’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/unregistered-schools-management-information

appear to be providing all or a majority of a child's education, regardless of the type and breadth of education offered.¹⁵⁹ This follows the recommendations made by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse in its September 2021 report on child protection in religious organisations and settings.¹⁶⁰ The report highlighted the need for government to introduce legislation to change the definition of full-time education and to bring any setting that is the pupil's primary place of education within the scope of the definition of a registered educational setting. It also highlighted that government should provide Ofsted with sufficient powers to examine the quality of child protection when it undertakes inspections of suspected unregistered institutions. Notwithstanding the above, it is the opinion of this reviewer that the Department for Education has been far too slow in responding to this challenge, possibly because of a reluctance to tackle what they perceive to be a difficult subject.

It is a difficult subject. Faith-based educational settings can be complex, as they are often deeply entangled in the values and priorities common to certain religious traditions and can find themselves at odds with parts of the established educational framework in England. So as government continues its efforts to address these issues, this review urges officials to engage sensitively with parents and not only the leaders of the faith communities involved. As noted in a 2016 Hackney Council Scrutiny Commission report on unregistered schools, there can be a significant conflict between "the parents' wishes to educate their children in these settings, and the rights of children to a broad education, where safety is paramount".¹⁶¹

It is the opinion of this reviewer that government should go further in its efforts to register and regulate out-of-school settings. While the current Department for Education initiatives and the new proposals that were set out in the now discontinued 2022 Schools Bill are welcome, the disparate and complex nature of the out-of-school settings sector means that not all establishments will be reached by extending the regulatory regime of independent schools. All departments and agencies with responsibility for safeguarding children across religious educational settings (including the Department for Education, Ofsted, the Home Office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Charity Commission, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities via local councils) should consider what more could be done to hold the hardest-to-reach out-of-school settings to account. This could be through establishing a mandatory safeguarding reporting regime, governed by a centralised oversight body. It would not be simple and would involve difficult questions regarding the regulation of places of worship and the thresholds for regulation (no two settings are the same), as well as facing potential challenges around religious freedoms, but the mental and physical safety of our children should be paramount.

¹⁵⁹ The Schools Bill (last updated 7 September 2022). Available at: bills.parliament.uk/bills/3156

¹⁶⁰ The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse website (2020) 'Child protection in religious organisations and settings'. Available at: www.iicsa.org.uk/investigation/child-protection-religious-organisations-and-settings

¹⁶¹ Hackney Council (5 January 2018) 'Hackney's Scrutiny Commission releases report into unregistered 'schools''. Available at: news.hackney.gov.uk/hackneys-scrutiny-commission-releases-report-into-unregistered-schools/

3.5.1 Case study: yeshiva¹⁶²

A yeshiva is a Jewish educational institution that focuses on the study of traditional religious texts, primarily the Talmud and the Torah, and halacha (Jewish law).¹⁶³ Well-run yeshivas can play an important role in the upbringing of Jewish children, providing religious instruction to supplement a suitably broad education. Many yeshivas currently operate as out-of-school settings and yet some provide nearly full-time education centred on religious instruction, starting in the early morning and continuing late into the evening. While yeshiva students can be simultaneously schooled elsewhere or home educated, some spend most of their time in yeshiva class, which in the opinion of this reviewer amounts to replacing a suitably broad full-time education with an unsuitably narrow one.

A narrow curriculum of religious instruction can mean students finish school without any qualifications, because studies in maths or science may not be considered essential for their futures as rabbis or Jewish scholars. In 2018, the BBC reported on a former yeshiva student in England leaving with a very limited ability to communicate, speak or write in English.¹⁶⁴ Such a limited form of education can leave young people with very little career choice outside of the scholarly path determined by the yeshiva.

In 2018, Hackney Council strongly urged the government to intervene to enable effective safeguarding of between 1,000 and 1,500 boys attending unregistered Orthodox Jewish educational settings in London.¹⁶⁵ Despite this, in 2020 the council acknowledged that frustratingly little progress had been made.¹⁶⁶ This is partly because out-of-school settings can operate below the threshold of the official definition of 'school', either through their hours or by only covering one or a very limited range of disciplines, meaning it can be argued that they are not providing a primary or secondary education. They are therefore not regulated as schools, leaving local councils with little powers to investigate or intervene.

3.5.2 Case study: madrassah¹⁶⁷

A madrassah is a centre for Islamic religious instruction, teaching children Arabic to recite the Quran, as well as the principles and practices of the faith. Well-run madrassahs can play an important role in the upbringing of Muslim children. A 2016 estimation suggested

¹⁶² The two case studies in section 3.5 focus on yeshivas and madrassahs as they were the two types of faith-based educational settings most mentioned in call for evidence responses.

¹⁶³ Wikipedia (last updated 27 November 2022) 'Yeshiva'. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeshiva

¹⁶⁴ The BBC (27 February 2018) 'Is there a problem with unregistered schools?' Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-43170447

¹⁶⁵ Hackney Council, uploaded via Hackney Citizen (15 January 2018) 'Investigation into unregistered educational settings in Hackney'. Available at www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/UES_report.pdf

¹⁶⁶ Hackney Gazette (20 January 2020) 'No real progress' in Hackney Council campaign to ensure Jewish faith schools become registered'. Available at: www.hackneygazette.co.uk/news/education/no-real-progress-in-hackney-council-campaign-to-ensure-jewish-3650012

¹⁶⁷ The two case studies in section 3.5 focus on yeshivas and madrasahs as they were the two types of faith-based educational settings most mentioned in call for evidence responses.

there were around 2,000 madrassahs operating in the UK.¹⁶⁸ Like yeshivas, while there is no legal requirement to register madrassahs (as they are out-of-school settings, not schools), it is important that government establishes an effective approach to ensuring all madrassahs operate with due regard for children's safety and wellbeing, as many already do.

Parents may value the after-school religious instruction provided by madrassahs, as well as the social benefits, but further study for prolonged periods of time after the school day can leave children tired and unable to learn as well as they could with appropriate rest and leisure time.¹⁶⁹

A government consultation in 2015 seeking views to formally register and regulate out-of-school settings, including madrassahs, received significant backlash from some faith leaders.¹⁷⁰ Proposals for regulation were not taken forward.¹⁷¹ The Department for Education instead published a voluntary code of practice for out-of-school settings in 2020 to set standards and expectations for providers, and ensure settings are properly managed and children safe.¹⁷² The national platform madrassah.co.uk went further and developed a madrassah quality standards framework and accreditation scheme that complies with the Department for Education's code of practice and provides legal policies, procedures and professional support on governance.¹⁷³ However, as with yeshivas, this reviewer believes more should be done. The Department for Education should acknowledge all madrassahs that have embraced its code of conduct. But it should do more to ensure that no child falls through the gaps of what remains a voluntary policy by revisiting proposals to formally register and regulate out-of-school settings.

The need to tackle safeguarding issues in supplementary educational settings was highlighted in a 2017 Charity Commission statutory inquiry (concluded in 2019) of the Essex Islamic Academy, which operated a mosque and a madrassah in Barking.¹⁷⁴ The inquiry report has now been withdrawn in line with the Charity Commission's publication policy for statement of regulatory inquiries after two years. In this case, the report was

¹⁶⁸ The BBC (7 January 2016) 'Mosques oppose madrassa registration'. Available at:

www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35252469#:~:text=There%20are%20believed%20to%20be.and%20practices%20of%20their%20faith.

¹⁶⁹ Institute for Public Policy Research (2011) 'Inside madrassas: Understanding and engaging with British-Muslim faith supplementary schools'. Available at:

www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2011/11/inside-madrassas_Nov2011_8301.pdf

¹⁷⁰ The BBC (7 January 2016) 'Mosques oppose madrassa registration'. Available at:

www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35252469#:~:text=There%20are%20believed%20to%20be.and%20practices%20of%20their%20faith.

¹⁷¹ School Week (10 April 2018) 'Out-of-school settings won't be forced to register – for now'. Available at: schoolsweek.co.uk/out-of-school-settings-wont-be-forced-to-register-for-now/

¹⁷² Department for Education (2020) 'Keeping children safe in out-of-school settings: Code of practice'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-out-of-school-settings-code-of-practice

¹⁷³ Madrassah.co.uk website (accessed 30 November 2022). 'Madrassah standards'. Available at: madrassah.co.uk/standards/

¹⁷⁴ The report was withdrawn on 29 November 2022 but is available through the national archives, or on request. Charity Commission for England and Wales (2019) 'Charity Commission Inquiry into Essex Islamic Academy'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-essex-islamic-academy

withdrawn because of the time lapse, and not because of any other reason relating to its evidence or findings. The report found that a staff member without appropriate background checks “showed extremely graphic and violent propaganda videos produced by the proscribed terrorist organisation, Daesh, to a number of children as young as 11 at the charity’s madrassah [...] Footage also encouraged individuals, who could not travel to a conflict zone to fight for Daesh, to carry out terrorist attacks in their home country. The footage provided a number of different methods in how to achieve this.”¹⁷⁵ Another staff member, convicted under the Terrorism Act 2006, was also found to have assisted teaching of children at the charity, including alongside the aforementioned staff member.¹⁷⁶ The Charity Commission’s investigation found that the charity’s former trustees “breached their duties to ensure that adequate processes and procedures were in place to protect the charity’s beneficiaries. This failure by the trustees resulted in the charity being abused to facilitate terrorism offences.”^{177, 178} The Charity Commission’s statutory inquiry decision report notes that two staff members were convicted of the preparation of terrorism acts in 2018 and automatically disqualified for life from serving as trustees or senior managers of any charity in England and Wales. All five trustees at the time were disqualified in 2018 from being trustees of any other charities and holding any office or employment with senior management functions in any charity in England and Wales for a 10-year period. The report recognises “significant improvements in the charity’s governance and safeguarding procedures” following the disqualification of the former trustees, the appointment of new trustees and a move to new purpose-built premises, enabling the charity to fulfil its essential role in the community.¹⁷⁹ This example is unusual and is very far from the normal experience of the vast majority of children who attend madrassahs or any other out-of-school setting. However, we live in an imperfect society and recent history has taught us that dangerous and predatory individuals may use unregulated out-of-school settings to harm children in all kinds of ways. Therefore, there should be no question that wherever the safeguarding of children is concerned, government should mandate additional vigilance, working with faith leaders, teachers, trustees and parents to enforce strict standards for children’s safety.

¹⁷⁵ See ‘Findings’ in Charity Commission for England and Wales (2019) ‘Charity Commission Inquiry into Essex Islamic Academy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-essex-islamic-academy

¹⁷⁶ See ‘Findings’ in Charity Commission for England and Wales (2019) ‘Charity Commission Inquiry into Essex Islamic Academy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-essex-islamic-academy

¹⁷⁷ ‘Former trustees’ refers to the trustees who were in post at the time the serious incident report was submitted to the Charity Commission on 14 June 2017 and were subsequently disqualified following the investigation.

¹⁷⁸ See ‘Conclusions’ in Charity Commission for England and Wales (2019) ‘Charity Commission Inquiry into Essex Islamic Academy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-essex-islamic-academy

¹⁷⁹ See ‘Conclusions’ in Charity Commission for England and Wales (2019) ‘Charity Commission Inquiry into Essex Islamic Academy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-essex-islamic-academy

3.6 Faith-sensitive student finance

In the field of higher education, this review found significant demand for an alternative student finance option which accommodates the prohibition of ‘riba’ (interest) in Sharia law within Islam. At the time of writing, it is estimated that annually, around 12,000 students are either forgoing university entirely or forced to self-pay because of the lack of alternative student finance.¹⁸⁰ With the increase in tuition fees for students in England (to £9,000 in 2012 and to £9,250 in 2017), and increases to the fee loans available to pay them, attending university can become impossible for some Muslims unless they can independently finance their tuition and living costs. Interim survey results from the Muslim Census suggested that almost one in six Muslim students are self-financing directly due to the lack of interest-free student finance. This is resulting in restrictions regarding which course and university they attend, with potential additional stresses of working full-time hours alongside their studies to fund fees and living costs.¹⁸¹ Even if it does not prevent some Muslims from attending university (Muslims make up 12% of university students, showing a particular keenness for learning as they represent around 6.5% of the population according to the 2021 Census), it certainly could affect their ability to participate on an equal footing with other students.¹⁸²

“The biggest proof is that they introduced interest-based student finance in 2012 which is against Islamic rules and other religions to engage in interest, so they have forced us to commit a sin in our religion to obtain an education. It would have been better if it was a fixed rate based against a national projection of inflation over 30 years. Then it would have worked. But not interest based, this is wrong!”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

In 2014, following a consultation where 94% said there would be a demand for Sharia-compliant student finance, government committed to introduce and work on its development.¹⁸³ Prior research also highlighted significant obstacles faced by Muslim students within the current higher education system beyond student loans, including the

¹⁸⁰ Muslim Census (updated May 2022) ‘Lack of alternative student finance has directly disadvantaged almost 120,000 students’. Available at: muslimcensus.co.uk/unequal-access-to-university-education/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20report%20published,36%2C655%20Muslim%20students%20per%20annum

¹⁸¹ Muslim Census (updated May 2022) ‘Lack of alternative student finance has directly disadvantaged almost 120,000 students’. Available at: muslimcensus.co.uk/unequal-access-to-university-education/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20report%20published,36%2C655%20Muslim%20students%20per%20annum

¹⁸² For estimation of the number of Muslims in the student population, see Muslim Census (updated May 2022) ‘Lack of alternative student finance has directly disadvantaged almost 120,000 students’. Available at: muslimcensus.co.uk/unequal-access-to-university-education/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20report%20published,36%2C655%20Muslim%20students%20per%20annum. For the proportion of Muslims in the population of England and Wales, see Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) ‘Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021’. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

¹⁸³ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) ‘Government response to consultation on a Sharia-compliant alternative student finance product’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/sharia-compliant-student-finance

availability of prayer rooms, access to chaplains and advisers, and islamophobia.¹⁸⁴ Given the strength of evidence, it is regrettable that little has been done recently to progress proposals for alternative student finance. It remains to be seen if the Department for Education will choose to implement alternative student finance, following the consultation on the lifelong loan entitlement which closed in May 2022.¹⁸⁵ Sharia-compliant mortgage options have been available in the UK for many years, and it is important, on equalities grounds, to provide Sharia-compliant student finance within the higher education system too. This reviewer urges government to take action on this important matter as part of its plans for higher education reforms.

3.7 Recommendations 7 to 9

Recommendation 7

Government should look again at why religious education (RE) in schools has become the ‘Cinderella subject’ and should consider methods for improving the teaching of faith literacy and RE, with a view to cultivating a more inclusive society where people of all backgrounds are able to engage in debate about the different faiths and beliefs that shape society. Possible solutions could include the introduction of minimum standards regarding timetabling and resourcing to bring RE alongside other humanities subjects which would then be centrally inspected by Ofsted, the introduction of religious studies GCSE into the English Baccalaureate, or even outreach programmes to university graduates of theology and religious studies to ensure higher levels of faith literacy among RE teachers.

Recommendation 8

Government should ensure that ‘out-of-school settings’ which include faith-based settings operating below the current minimum threshold for registration as independent schools, and those that provide supplementary religious instruction, are properly registered and regulated (creating a new registration scheme and/or mandatory safeguarding reporting regime governed by a centralised oversight body as necessary). They should also ensure appropriate resources are allocated to meet children’s welfare and safeguarding requirements.

¹⁸⁴ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) ‘BIS research paper number 55: Amplifying the voice of Muslim students: Findings from literature review’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32387/11-1305-amplifying-voice-of-muslim-students-literature-review.pdf

¹⁸⁵ Department for Education (24 February 2022) ‘Closed consultation: Lifelong loan entitlement’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/lifelong-loan-entitlement

Recommendation 9

Government should accelerate proposals to introduce Sharia-compliant student loans on equalities grounds. Faith-sensitive student finance should be made available from the beginning of academic year 2024-25.



Chapter 4

Faith in prison and on probation

4.1 Introduction

It is the right of all prisoners to be treated with respect, “due to their inherent dignity and value as human beings”, and to be treated equally on the grounds of race, heritage or religion, in addition to all other protected characteristics.¹⁸⁶ By law, prisoners have the right to access a chaplain who represents their faith, and it is the duty of all chaplains to meet new prisoners within 24 hours of their arrival in prison.¹⁸⁷ Equally, the Probation Service has a duty to assist in the care and welfare of ex-prisoners who are re-establishing their lives outside of prison. Where prisoners have a faith, it is the duty of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to recognise and support the role it plays in their lives and in their rehabilitation.¹⁸⁸

Statistics provided by the Ministry of Justice from 2020 indicate that 68% of all prisoners have a faith, which is considerably higher than the general population of England and Wales in the 2021 Census.¹⁸⁹ This reviewer has no doubt that for the majority of prisoners, the prevalence and diversity of faith in prisons has a positive impact on their outcomes and the prison environment more generally. However, the closed, high-pressure environment of prisons makes them fertile grounds for extremists recruiting to dangerous ideologies, including some that use faith-inspired arguments. Ideologues and extremist teachers can perpetuate a feeling of grievance and legitimise a prisoner’s perceived sense of victimhood. When someone feels that they have faced injustice or unfairness, and are looking for a meaning or a cause, they can be easily manipulated. The prison chaplaincy service gives prisoners the opportunity to observe and practise their religion, provides pastoral support, helps confront extremist ideas and identify those who appear vulnerable to extremism, and assists in the rehabilitation of prisoners affected by extremist ideas. However, the ability of HMPPS to meet the needs of the prison population is significantly undermined if the vetting of chaplaincy staff and volunteers is not sufficiently robust (see section 4.4). The Ministry of Justice has a duty to ensure that harmful teaching and practices do not occur within the prison system. HMPPS should ensure consistency and

¹⁸⁶ United Nations and United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (14 December 1990) ‘Universal Instrument: Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners’. Available at: www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/basicprinciplestreatmentofprisoners.aspx

¹⁸⁷ National Offender Management Service (2016) ‘Faith and pastoral care for prisoners’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909661/psi-05-2016-faith-and-pastoral-care-for-prisoners.pdf

¹⁸⁸ In prisons, the following prison service instruction has been in application since 2016, providing instructions and guidance for prisons to enable the religious practice of prisoners and for the provision of pastoral care through chaplaincy teams. This is complemented by the Probation Service’s 2020 national partnership framework with faith-based communities (including prison chaplaincy). HM Prison and Probation Service and Ministry of Justice (6 September 2016, updated 12 October 2022) ‘Guidance: Faith and pastoral care for prisoners: PSI 05/2016’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/faith-and-pastoral-care-for-prisoners-psi-052016. HM Prison and Probation Service (27 July 2021) ‘National partnership framework’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnership-framework

¹⁸⁹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) ‘HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual report 2019-20’. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/HMI-Prisons_Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20-WEB.pdf. Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) ‘Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021’. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

credibility across safe faith-based approaches to prevent ‘at-risk’ prisoners from becoming radicalised or to help others become deradicalised from extremist ideologies (see section 4.6).

Due to the low number of respondents to the call for evidence with experience of the criminal justice system, unlike with previous chapters, the bulk of the evidence from this chapter was collected through stakeholder meetings with Ministry of Justice officials, chaplains and previous service users, as well as several prison visits. There are clearly good examples of chaplains, volunteers and probation staff making a real difference in the lives of prisoners and those on probation. From these conversations, it was clear that there are parts of HMPPS where faith is celebrated, and the value of the chaplaincy service provided by both HMPPS chaplains and volunteers is understood and promoted. But it was also apparent that practice is worryingly inconsistent. It is hard to quantify the scale of this inconsistency, but it was clear from conversations with chaplains that there are real concerns regarding the effectiveness of the chaplaincy service, with some areas falling well short of prisoners’ needs. For example, this reviewer heard that in some prisons, the governor fully understands the role and value of the chaplain and they are brought into the senior management team and very much feel part of the running of the prison. But in others, chaplains feel like they are only there because they have to be and are therefore largely ignored or left to their own devices. This inconsistency needs to be addressed.

As identified elsewhere in this report, faith literacy among government employees is inadequate. This is no different in HMPPS. In fact, while mandatory faith literacy training used to exist, it was removed from prison officer entry-level training many years ago and replaced with voluntary faith awareness training. It is heartening to know that efforts have been made recently to improve the faith literacy of HMPPS staff, with new online resources, webinars, ongoing intranet recognition of festivals and holy days, and an updated version of the faith awareness training. It is too early to test the effectiveness of these new initiatives. But it remains this reviewer’s opinion that mandatory faith literacy training should be reintroduced as part of entry level training for all staff (prison officer entry-level training has recently been replaced by the prison officer apprenticeship), reflecting the significant role that faith and religious practice can play in prison life. This training should involve an understanding of religious practice and theology, as well as intrafaith issues. Being aware of the tensions and differences between sects, denominations or cultural adaptations within faiths in an enclosed, heightened and often stressful environment is key to preventing disagreements and worsening tensions within prisons. Promoting new and existing faith literacy training for staff, employing more chaplains, and strengthening links between the chaplaincy service, the Probation Service and external mainstream faith-based organisations, would make a very significant difference to the level of faith literacy within the prison system.

Credit should be given to senior officials in the Ministry of Justice who have already engaged constructively with many of the concerns raised as this review progressed. The review also recognises and applauds the contribution made by faith-based charities and Humanists UK to support prison chaplaincy and the welfare of those imprisoned, on remand (meaning either on bail or in custody) or on probation. However, this reviewer also heard views that HMPPS’s approach to civil society partnership is worryingly inconsistent. Therefore, this chapter suggests that government should be even more willing to partner with faith-based civil society organisations within the prison system, reflecting the more general recommendation on faith-based partnerships raised in chapter 2.

4.2 Current makeup of the prison population

Approximately 68% of prisoners report having a faith, which is considerably higher than the general population of England and Wales in the 2021 Census.¹⁹⁰ The prevalence of faith among prisoner groups varies, with 91% of foreign nationals, 87% of black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and 75% of over 50s all claiming to have a faith.¹⁹¹ Reflecting wider society, the prison population is increasingly diverse with a higher representation of minority faith groups than before. This is particularly notable in the number of individuals identifying as Muslim in the prison population (of England and Wales). In 2021, Muslims accounted for about 18% of the prison population – up from 8% in 2002.¹⁹² However, the Muslim male prisoner population in London prisons is reportedly almost 30%, which is considerably higher than the 15% in the general London population (as recorded in the 2021 Census).^{193, 194} This potentially highlights the reported prevalence of in-prison conversion.^{195, 196} In 2021, Christians made up 45% of the overall prison population in England and Wales, which is very slightly lower than the 46.2% in the general population in 2021.^{197, 198} The representation of other faiths in prisons includes those identifying as Sikh or Jewish who average about 1%. Buddhists account for approximately 2% of the prison population in comparison to 0.5% of the general population (2021 Census), also potentially reflecting the higher rates of in-prison conversion.^{199, 200}

¹⁹⁰ Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

¹⁹¹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) 'HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual report 2019-20'. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisonswp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/10/HMI-Prisons_Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2019-20-WEB.pdf

¹⁹² House of Commons Library (25 October 2022) 'Research briefing: UK prison population statistics'. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn04334/

¹⁹³ Muslim Aid (02 April 2017) 'Prisoners Project: Reflection for Ramadan'. Available at: www.muslimaid.org/media-centre/blog/prisoners-project-reflection-for-ramadan/

¹⁹⁴ Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

¹⁹⁵ Data collected by the Ministry of Justice in eight prisons between 2015 and 2018 appear to show conversion in prison is common, with 255 residents becoming Muslims, 209 becoming Christians and 92 adopting other faiths. See Inside Time (27 July 2020) 'Prisoners converting to Islam'. Available at: insidetime.org/prisoners-converting-to-islam/

¹⁹⁶ A recent study argues that contemporary European prisons are sites of intense religious change, in which many people born outside Islam and many born Muslims believe in and practise Islam for the first time. See M. Wilkinson, L. Irfan, MM. Quraishi and M. Schneuwly Purdie (2021) 'Prison as a site of intense religious change: The example of conversion to Islam', *Religions*, 12:162. Available at: usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/59784/1/religions-12-00162.pdf

¹⁹⁷ House of Commons Library (25 October 2022) 'Research briefing: UK prison population statistics'. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn04334/

¹⁹⁸ Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

¹⁹⁹ House of Commons Library (25 October 2022) 'Research briefing: UK prison population statistics'. Available at: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn04334/

²⁰⁰ Daily Record (9 October 2017) 'Buddhism revealed as fastest-growing religion in Scottish jails'. Available at: www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=3,13206,0,0,1,0

4.3 What a prisoner or probationer can expect

Prisons are tough and complex institutions where faith and religious observance play a big part in the lives of many prisoners and in the prison itself. Generally, someone who finds themselves in the prison system should expect their faith to be recognised and respected, and not be coerced into having a faith, changing their faith or not having a faith.²⁰¹ HMPPS should be commended for continually embedding the ‘Basic principles for the treatment of prisoners’ by protecting and facilitating the role of religion, belief and faith in prisoners’ lives, so the “distinct needs of prisoners with particular protected characteristics and any other minority characteristics are recognised and addressed”.^{202, 203}

“As a Hindu, with one of the lowest levels of prison rates for any religion and highest rates of employment, Hindus are almost unheard compared to other religions in media, government etc.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

The HMPPS 2016 prison service instruction regarding the specification of faith and pastoral care for Prisoners states that all prisoners have the right to register and practise their faith or belief in custody.²⁰⁴ Prisoners have the right to access a chaplain who represents their faith or belief. Chaplains must provide pastoral support to every prisoner, even those who have no faith, as noted in the 2016 prison service instruction mandate: “Governors must ensure faith provision is available to all prisoners.”²⁰⁵ Where a prisoner has exhibited a radicalised religious ideology, HMPPS and the government have a responsibility to understand how religion, belief and faith can contribute to deradicalising individuals with extremist religious views. This is a fundamental function of the Joint Extremism Unit, which is set out in further detail in section 4.6. Any effort to deradicalise prisoners without using appropriate religious and theological resources risks being insufficient and incomplete.

The duty on the Probation Service to actively consider a prisoner’s faith (if they have one) has been less clear. This is a concern the Probation Service has already recognised and is

²⁰¹ National Offender Management Service (2016) ‘Faith and pastoral care for prisoners’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909661/psi-05-2016-faith-and-pastoral-care-for-prisoners.pdf

²⁰² United Nations and United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (14 December 1990) ‘Universal Instrument: Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners’. Available at: www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/basicprinciplestreatmentofprisoners.aspx

²⁰³ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2018) ‘Equality, diversity and faith’. Available at www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/our-expectations/prison-expectations/respect/equality-diversity-and-faith/

²⁰⁴ National Offender Management Service (2016) ‘Faith and pastoral care for prisoners’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909661/psi-05-2016-faith-and-pastoral-care-for-prisoners.pdf

²⁰⁵ National Offender Management Service (2016) ‘Faith and pastoral care for prisoners’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909661/psi-05-2016-faith-and-pastoral-care-for-prisoners.pdf

addressing through their faith partnership framework.²⁰⁶ It is essential that the role of the Probation Service and its offer of ongoing support to those on probation is properly understood.

4.4 What is prison chaplaincy?

The prison chaplaincy service provides pastoral support to prisoners and staff of all faiths, beliefs and none. Since 2003, the prison chaplaincy service has taken a multifaith approach, and there are now chaplains from all major faiths able to provide pastoral support to every prison. Chaplains have a particular duty to care for the spiritual wellbeing of prisoners through supporting the “role of faith in promoting desistance from crime” and helping “prisoners meet their faith needs on release”.²⁰⁷ This duty is partially fulfilled through the links chaplains build with faith organisations outside of prison, highlighting the role faith can play in rehabilitation.

“The chaplaincy plays a full part in prison life and contributes to prisoners’ overall care, support and rehabilitation.”

HM Inspectorate of Prisons guidance on ‘Equality, diversity and faith’²⁰⁸

The HMPPS 2016 prison service instruction requires chaplains to meet new prisoners within the first 24 hours of arrival and to offer a private and meaningful conversation. The chaplaincy team also has daily contact with prisoners in segregation, confinement and healthcare facilities, with those at risk of self-harm, and with those preparing for release.

According to HMPPS, there are approximately 1,200 chaplains serving across the prison system, including those employed part-time or full-time and those serving on a sessional or voluntary basis. Chaplains are appointed according to fair and open Civil Service rules, and chaplains of any denomination can apply. In March 2019, out of a total of 474 employed chaplains working in prisons, approximately 51% were Christian and approximately 25% were Muslim.²⁰⁹ Chaplains comprise a broad spectrum of religious traditions, allowing prisoners to request access to someone of their specific faith or denomination. According to statistics from 2017, there are around 90 managing chaplains across the HMPPS estate who are responsible for overseeing and managing the provision

²⁰⁶ HM Prison and Probation Service (27 July 2021) ‘National partnership framework’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnership-framework

²⁰⁷ HM Prison and Probation Service (27 July 2021) ‘National partnership framework’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnership-framework

²⁰⁸ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2018) ‘Equality, diversity and faith’. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprison/our-expectations/prison-expectations/respect/equality-diversity-and-faith/

²⁰⁹ Ministry of Justice (2019) ‘Prisons: Ministers of religion: Ministry of Justice written question answered on 24th May 2019’. Available at: www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2019-05-16.255249.h. Crispin Blunt MP (16 May 2019) ‘Question for Ministry of Justice: Prisons: Ministers of religion’. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-05-16/255249

of the chaplaincy service. About a third of these are from Christian dominations and a quarter are Muslim, with the remaining unknown.²¹⁰

The responsibilities of chaplains are multifaceted and extend beyond merely meeting immediate religious needs, including teaching, counsel and prayer.²¹¹ Their oversight of prisoners provides an important bridge between life in prison and outside, and their understanding of faith, theology and religion enables them to identify signs of extremist ideology or radicalised theology among prisoners.²¹² Evidence submitted to this review suggested the need for a much stronger link between prison chaplaincy and the duties of the Probation Service. Some probation officers said that they would welcome greater levels of communication with prison chaplains to ensure prisoners and those on probation receive the care they need, especially in relation to faith.

Cases of forced conversion in prison are difficult to quantify, but the evidence appears to show that prisons can be sites of intense religious change.^{213, 214} Freedom of religion or belief is a human right that applies equally to prisoners, and reports of forced conversions should be fully investigated. In this, as with any other cases of potential rights infringements, HMPPS has a duty of care towards prisoners. Using the real-world, person-to-person knowledge of prison chaplains to record such data should help identify incidents of forced conversion and strategic, whole-system solutions to any drivers. The reviewer is aware that chaplains are already involved in updating faith and belief records, but would encourage the Ministry of Justice to make them integral to carrying out recommendation 11 for an urgent government review into forced conversion and radicalisation in prisons.

As noted in the United Nations handbook on managing violent extremism, the careful selection of chaplains (and other faith staff) who have the capacity to identify and address extremism can help manage risks before prisoners are released.²¹⁵ The importance of robust selection was illustrated in 2014 when the Prison Officer Association stated that

²¹⁰ Ministry of Justice (2017) 'Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request – 112352: Number of chaplains by religion'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/640126/foi-112352-religious-affiliation-by-grade-of-prison-chaplains-and-of-prisoners.docx. Ministry of Justice (1 June 2017) 'Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request – 112352: Religious affiliations of prisoners and prison chaplains'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/640126/foi-112352-religious-affiliation-by-grade-of-prison-chaplains-and-of-prisoners.docx

²¹¹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2018) 'Equality diversity, and faith'. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/our-expectations/prison-expectations/respect/equality-diversity-and-faith/

²¹² HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2018) 'Equality, diversity and faith'. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/our-expectations/prison-expectations/respect/equality-diversity-and-faith/

²¹³ Data collected by the Ministry of Justice in eight prisons between 2015 and 2018 appear to show conversion in prison is common, with 255 residents becoming Muslims, 209 becoming Christians and 92 adopting other faiths. See Inside Time (27 July 2020) 'Prisoners converting to Islam'. Available at: insidetime.org/prisoners-converting-to-islam/

²¹⁴ M. Wilkinson, L. Irfan, MM. Quraishi and M. Schneuwly Purdie (2021) 'Prison as a site of intense religious change: The example of conversion to Islam', Religions, 12:162. Available at: usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/59784/1/religions-12-00162.pdf

²¹⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2016) 'Handbook on the management of violent extremist prisoners and the prevention of radicalization to violence in prisons'. Available at: www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/Handbook_on_VEPs.pdf

chaplains with links to radicalism had “slipped through the cracks” in the vetting system.²¹⁶ While reported or confirmed incidents are very rare, feedback gathered from prison staff and chaplains through this review implied that in some cases visiting chaplains, volunteers and other prisoners have been left to teach inappropriate ideologies. Conversations revealed that when such behaviour has not been quickly or robustly challenged by prison staff and management, significant problems have arisen, including the disruption of support and events for the practice of different faiths. Similar points were raised by Ian Acheson in his 2016 review of Islamist extremism in prisons, probation and youth justice. Acheson flagged inconsistencies in management control of extremist literature and materials, and recommended stronger vetting and clearance arrangements for chaplains.²¹⁷

4.5 Faith-based organisations and HM Prison and Probation Service

The overwhelming majority of places of worship are ‘schools of virtue’. Many places of worship, alongside faith-based organisations, are expertly equipped to support prisoners while they are in prison, on remand or on probation.

HMPPS, its chaplaincy team and probation staff already engage with many faith-based organisations, including those involved in the delivery of faith services, rehabilitation, housing, work and family support. HMPPS funds the umbrella organisation Clinks, which works with people in prison and on probation and their families. A 2021 report by Clinks into key trends in the voluntary sector working in criminal justice found that 33% of voluntary organisations support people from faith communities.²¹⁸ The Probation Service is already working with mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, the Church of England, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and community chaplaincy projects, and strengthening links with prison-side chaplains. However, evidence received through this review’s stakeholder engagement suggests that HMPPS could and should draw on a far broader and geographically comprehensive range of faith-based organisations that are able to help meet the needs of prisoners. Conversations with chaplains revealed concerns regarding the resourcing of rehabilitation work, with some parts of HMPPS able to fulfil the pastoral or spiritual elements of rehabilitation, such as ensuring probationers are still attending their places of worship. Whereas in other areas where resources are stretched, this sort of support reportedly falls through the cracks and could therefore be delivered more effectively by faith-based organisations.

There are examples of good practice in this space. The 12-month early adopter pilot ran in 12 prisons and involved chaplains attending sentence planning meetings with probation

²¹⁶ The Times (2014) ‘Prison imams linked to Islamic radicals’. Available at:

www.thetimes.co.uk/article/prison-imams-linked-to-islamic-radicals-2djpb8n3f5

²¹⁷ Ministry of Justice (2016) ‘Summary of the main findings of the review of Islamist extremism in prisons, probation and youth justice: Led by Ian Acheson’. Available at:

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/547032/acheson-review-summary-aug-2016.pdf

²¹⁸ Clinks (2021) ‘State of the sector 2021: How voluntary organisations emerged from a year of criminal justice reform and the Covid-19 pandemic’. Available at: www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/clinks_state-of-the-sector-2021.pdf

colleagues. This pilot informed the development of the faith partnership framework, which the Probation Service has taken forward to strengthen their links with all faith communities, beginning more recently with the appointment of link Church of England bishops for each probation region. Further developments include resources such as the Welcome Directory, which chaplains use to support those leaving prison. The directory supports local faith communities to welcome, accept and support people leaving prison and has a growing network of around 300 registered faith communities.²¹⁹ This good practice needs to be promoted and shared across the prison system to build on its effectiveness. An inconsistent approach to integrating chaplains into the wider faith network risks overlooking important elements of prisoners' lives and experiences.

4.6 Faith literacy and deradicalisation

The review heard worrying reports from prison chaplains of radical groups having a destabilising effect on both the orderly management of prisons and the security of prisoners. This includes alleged cases of coercive conversions, illegal religious courts giving punishment to other prisoners, violent faith-based gangs and the spread of extremist material, such as talks by Al-Qaeda ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki. This is confirmed in various reports including media, academic and government sources.^{220, 221, 222} In 2020, five prison staff at HMP Whitemoor were seriously wounded by prisoners in what was classed a terrorist incident.²²³ For the avoidance of doubt, faith-based extremism is not the preserve of any one faith. As highlighted in chapter 6 of this review, there are groups exhibiting extreme beliefs or behaviours within or connected to various faith groups. These can include: white supremacist groups who sometimes depend on corruptions of Christian imagery and Christian narratives to entrench an ethno-nationalistic agenda, black nationalist groups, and Sikh extremists, including those with links to pro-Khalistan extremism (PKE). Some of these groups are active among the prison population. The nature and seriousness of the risks involved are well illustrated by incidences of Islamist extremism in prisons.

²¹⁹ The Welcome Directory (accessed 24 November 2022). Available at: www.welcomedirectory.org.uk/

²²⁰ The Times (23 December 2019) 'Islamist extremists hold Sharia trials and groom young Muslims in British prisons'. Available at: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/islamist-extremists-hold-sharia-trials-and-groom-young-muslims-in-british-prisons-2pq7ptjtp

²²¹ Ministry of Justice (2016) 'Summary of the main findings of the review of Islamist extremism in prisons, probation and youth justice: Led by Ian Acheson'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice/summary-of-the-main-findings-of-the-review-of-islamist-extremism-in-prisons-probation-and-youth-justice Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/547032/acheson-review-summary-aug-2016.pdf

²²² Ministry of Justice (2019) 'Separating extremist prisoners: A process study of separation centres in England and Wales from a staff perspective'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818624/separating-extremist-prisoners.pdf

²²³ The BBC (10 January 2020) 'HMP Whitemoor prison stabbings classed as 'terror attack''. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-51062381

“There are local initiatives by schools or the local councils – but they suffer from the same mistakes that the government and other public services, such as prisons, constantly make. The Muslims are treated as a cohesive whole with little understanding of differing cultural and faith nuances.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

To prevent the spread of religious extremism in prisons, it is important to better understand the complex issues of religious radicalisation, faith-based gangs and forced conversions and take them seriously as a religious affairs issue, not just as a security problem.²²⁴ This is a fundamental function of the Joint Extremism Unit, whose approach includes initiatives such as the Tarbiyah programme, a course for Muslim prisoners which looks at a holistic picture of Islam and challenges some of the key misconceptions, as well as the Healthy Identity Intervention and the Theological and Ideological Intervention (see section 4.7). However, during the evidence gathering process, many of the chaplains and staff this reviewer spoke with suggested that despite the best efforts of these programmes, there are still inconsistencies in approach and coverage. This leaves a faith literacy gap which is crucial for understanding and tackling the theological drivers for in-prison conversion (forced or otherwise) and radicalisation. In particular, some stakeholders raised concerns about the perceived credibility of the imams selected to deliver some of the deradicalisation courses. Prisoners apparently see many of them as ‘government imams’ and therefore resist their influence, undermining the good work they are seeking to achieve.

Religious conversion can certainly indicate positive influences on a prisoner’s life, but it can also raise concerns when rates of in-prison conversion grow quickly. The 2019 Ministry of Justice report on separating extremist prisoners noted the growing problem of religious extremism across the prison estate, including the “aggressive encouragement of conversions to Islam”.²²⁵ By any measurement of religious revival, these concerns should warrant closer and more discerning scrutiny, alongside the reports of violent gangs pressuring people to convert to Islam throughout HMPPS.²²⁶ This reviewer heard numerous stories from HMPPS staff that the phrase ‘convert or get hurt’ was commonly used by some Muslim gangs, and copies of the Quran would be left on the beds of new prisoners. Failure to identify as a Muslim meant that at best the new prisoner would be denied ‘protection’ from the dominant Muslim gang on that wing, or at worst the new prisoner would be subjected to violence and intimidation from that same gang.

²²⁴ These reports highlight the issues. Ministry of Justice (2019) ‘Separating extremist prisoners: A process study of separation centres in England and Wales from a staff perspective’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818624/separating-extremist-prisoners.pdf. Ministry of Justice (2019) ‘Exploring the nature of Muslim groups and related gang activity in three high security prisons: Findings from qualitative research’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/806660/exploring-nature-muslim-groups-related-gang-activity.pdf

²²⁵ Ministry of Justice (2019) ‘Separating extremist prisoners: A process study of separation centres in England and Wales from a staff perspective’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818624/separating-extremist-prisoners.pdf

²²⁶ The Times (7 June 2019) ‘Muslim gangs ‘beat prisoners’ who will not convert to Islam’. Available at: www.thetimes.co.uk/article/muslim-gangs-beat-prisoners-who-will-not-convert-to-islam-gcb8nb2md

As set out in recommendation 11, this reviewer believes government should carry out an urgent review of the issue of prisoners allegedly being coercively converted and radicalised in prison, as well as the issue of faith-based gangs. This will help identify any gaps in services that allow these issues to flourish, compromising the human rights and safety of prisoners, and the effectiveness of HMPPS as a rehabilitative system. The review should include a willingness and commitment to investigate cases where prison staff or volunteers have colluded to enable extremism to thrive, through retraining or removing them from service. Readers might be interested in the recent report from Jonathan Hall KC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation.²²⁷ In response to his recommendations, the government committed to “work collaboratively with stakeholders to develop a consistent, codified and rigorous approach to identifying terrorist risk behaviour” and to “equip our workforce with the knowledge and confidence to effectively deal with terrorist risk ... developing new training courses”.²²⁸ Specific attention should be given to the role of chaplaincy services, faith literacy training and the theological drivers of radicalisation in achieving these improvements, of which there was little mention in Hall’s report.

There have been positive advances in the level of training available to staff for tackling extremism, most notably in the establishment of ASPECTS in 2017 (the current core training package in prisons on Prevent and counter-terrorism). ASPECTS training has been embedded within the core training for all new prison officers and operational support grade staff, and around 40,000 public sector prison staff have now been trained.²²⁹ From 1 September 2021, virtual training was introduced alongside face-to-face so sessions can be delivered to multiple establishments simultaneously, maximising reach and targeting individuals who have yet to receive the training. But there are few signs that the problem of radicalisation in prisons is going away. Any attempt to undo the effects of radicalisation must understand the religious motivations behind such thoughts and actions. Any other approach fails to fully recognise the complexity of the issue. Furthermore, following extensive confidential conversations with chaplains serving in the prison system, this reviewer believes there needs to be a more comprehensive approach to deradicalisation which includes a theological toolkit.

Government must radically bolster the level of faith literacy training available to prison staff and officials and establish a consistent approach to understanding faith, belief and religion in prisons, developing a system, culture and mindset that allows prison staff and officials to tackle radicalisation confidently, from an informed perspective. Equipping staff and officials with an understanding of theological and religious belief will help them identify radicalised religious ideas or ideologies and help prisoners in their rehabilitation.

“One example. When advising local prisons on race relations, they were ignorant of Shia/Sunni differences and put ... Al Qaida supporters in the same cell as Shia Muslims.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

²²⁷ Ministry of Justice (27 April 2022) ‘Terrorism in prisons: Independent review of terrorism legislation’s report and government response’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/terrorism-in-prisons-independent-reviewer-of-terrorism-legislation-report-and-government-response

²²⁸ Ministry of Justice (27 April 2022) ‘Terrorism in prisons: Independent review of terrorism legislation’s report and government response’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/terrorism-in-prisons-independent-reviewer-of-terrorism-legislation-report-and-government-response

²²⁹ Joint Extremism Unit estimated figures, August 2021.

4.7 Faith and rehabilitation

HMPPS has made significant advances in how it approaches the role of faith in rehabilitation. However, more could and should be done. There is a need to fully embrace the theological and religious elements of deradicalisation programmes, particularly where the participants involved are influenced by faith-based ideas.

The Healthy Identity Intervention is the main programme for addressing extremist thinking. It focuses on the exploration of the psychosocial drivers underpinning extremist offending, but does not seek to explore religious identity. The programme does not claim to be a catch-all for rehabilitation, but only one component of it. In 2020, a psychologist involved in the development of the programme while working within HMPPS commented that there is “no certainty” that terrorism offenders can be reformed. In some cases, terror offenders who participate in the Healthy Identity Intervention may even appear to regress rather than escape their radicalised ideologies, due to their uniquely complex identities.²³⁰

The Healthy Identity Intervention in prisons employs a number of sessions to help terrorist and extremist offenders reconsider their identification with extremist ideologies. While the intervention employs a range of resources to engage with extremists, a 2018 pilot study into the programme found that a more robust and faith-sensitive approach was needed for engaging with participants who “justified offending on religious grounds”.²³¹ The study recognised the importance of facilitating “discussions around faith” and recommended that HMPPS adopt a twin-track approach, which integrates religious and theological input into the existing framework of the Healthy Identity Intervention. Implementing faith-focused resources was particularly recommended for those participants whose “offending may have partly resulted from some misinterpretation of Islamic or other religious scripture”.²³²

This reviewer therefore urges HMPPS to consider how the Healthy Identity Intervention might be made more effective by incorporating religious or theological reflection. The reviewer also urges the Healthy Identity Intervention to select facilitators who are faith-literate and are able to address the roots of extremist religious ideologies, such as Jihadism. Certain imams involved in religious counselling (not within the current Healthy Identity Intervention) have reportedly been criticised for their lack of “detailed knowledge of Jihadist ideology”, which is necessary for undoing the misunderstandings reflected in extremist ideology.²³³

A parallel and complementary programme, the Theological and Ideological Intervention, was launched in 2019 to help draw terrorist prisoners away from extremist views and behaviour by delivering interventions focused on their ideological worldview and theology. The programme has been very positively received by practitioners and has clarified strong

²³⁰ The BBC (2 January 2020) ‘Top psychologist: No certainty terror offenders can be ‘cured’’. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50967100

²³¹ Ministry of Justice (2018) ‘Intervening with extremist offenders – a pilot study’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/intervening-with-extremist-offenders-a-pilot-study

²³² Ministry of Justice (2018) ‘Intervening with extremist offenders – a pilot study’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/intervening-with-extremist-offenders-a-pilot-study

²³³ The BBC (3 February 2020) ‘Streatham attack: What do prisons do to deradicalise prisoners?’. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-51357313

demand for the provision. Conversations this reviewer had with HMPPS staff suggest it appears to have succeeded in turning prisoners away from extremist ideology in a small number of cases. Despite the need for the programme, the Theological and Ideological Intervention is not yet accredited and lacks sufficient participants and trained providers to properly evaluate its effectiveness.

A consistent theme from this reviewer's conversations with HMPPS staff was the need for much greater understanding, analysis and research on the knowledge and skills required to address these difficult issues through intervention programmes, ensuring efforts to rehabilitate terrorist offenders are as strong as possible. This may involve evaluating the sequencing of the Healthy Identity Intervention and Theological and Ideological Intervention to establish how they can complement each other in the rehabilitation process. Measuring the success of the programmes is difficult, as it takes many years to assess the impact on participants who have been released into the community. However, since its founding in 2011, and at the time of writing, there has been no extensive analysis of the benefits of the Healthy Identity Intervention from the Ministry of Justice. Such analysis is overdue.

4.8 Faith and probation

According to a Prison Reform Trust report in 2021, nearly half of adult offenders (48%) are convicted again after a year of release. This proportion is higher among women (58%) and children (69%).²³⁴ While there are many complex reasons for reoffending, the high rate highlights the importance of comprehensive probation planning to reflect all aspects of individuals and draw on available civil society resources. As described in section 4.5, the Probation Service already develops links with faith communities and faith-based charities specialising in reducing the level of reoffending, which builds positive social ties and provides support for rehabilitation and desistance from crime. However, HMPPS needs to take these examples of best practice and reflect them more consistently across the country.

The 2007 report 'Believing we can' from the National Offender Management Service (now HMPPS) sought to establish stronger partnerships with faith-based organisations that specialise in reducing re-offending.²³⁵ That same year, new legislation in the Offender Management Act 2007 established conditions in the National Offender Management Service to facilitate public, private and third sector organisations offering provision of services for prisoners.²³⁶ The 2010 report on third sector organisations by the Third Sector Research Centre found a "substantial gap" between the "rhetoric" and the "actual opportunities" for third sector organisations, such as charities and places of worship, to partner in the criminal justice system.²³⁷

²³⁴ Prison Reform Trust (2021) 'Bromley Briefings prison factfile: Winter 2021'. Available at: prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Bromley_Briefings_winter_2021.pdf

²³⁵ National Offender Management Service (2007) 'Believing we can: Promoting the contribution faith-based organisations can make to reducing adult and youth re-offending'. Available at: www.mindmeister.com/generic_files/get_file/7909375?filetype=attachment_file

²³⁶ Offender Management Act 2007. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/21/contents

²³⁷ Third Sector Research Centre (2010) 'The role of the third sector in work with offenders: The perceptions of criminal justice and third sector stakeholders'. Available at: core.ac.uk/download/pdf/28905596.pdf

Improvements have undoubtedly been made since then, with numerous partnerships and initiatives such as Clinks, mentioned in section 4.5 above. Furthermore, the development of model partnerships between the Probation Service and faith groups (including information-sharing arrangements, a process for referrals, escalation of any concerns and regular reviews) is a positive sign that HMPPS is now recognising the contribution faith groups can make. Since this review's research was completed, HMPPS launched a national partnership framework to guide its work in this space, including efforts to help strengthen partnership links with faith communities and to include faith in the supervision and sentence planning of people in prison and on probation.²³⁸ In addition, HMPPS is looking to co-ordinate between Church of England bishops and regional probation directors to identify where networks and partnerships can be developed. A Faith Adviser for Probation has also been appointed. These are encouraging steps, though impact remains to be seen. But if this framework is effectively integrated into the core of HMPPS thinking, it could conceivably reduce the inconsistencies in provision of faith-literate rehabilitation support.

For HMPPS to develop stronger partnerships with faith groups, there needs to be a more comprehensive understanding of faith among its staff. Probation officers involved in an early adopter pilot on 18 sites in 2018-19 said staff "were quite anxious about saying the wrong thing" and welcomed guidance on conversations relating to faith. In response, the Probation Service commissioned a faith awareness course for all probation staff. The faith and belief awareness e-learning course was launched in 2022. There have been promising advances in promoting faith literacy in HMPPS through the development of e-learning training tools to help staff better understand faith and belief systems and to support the use of positive faith and belief networks as part of rehabilitation. However, conversations with HMPPS staff suggest that faith literacy training initiatives have been pioneered without adequate funding for their development. To ensure HMPPS sufficiently integrates faith literacy, this reviewer urges government to allocate appropriate resources for the development of training materials and to make faith and belief awareness training mandatory, not voluntary.

Alongside all other protected characteristics, consideration of faith or belief should be fully integrated into the work of the Probation Service. The introduction of the national partnership framework in 2021 (and the appointment of the Faith Adviser for Probation) are hopeful signs of change.²³⁹ Elevating the importance of faith does not mean individuals should be forced to follow a particular faith or participate in faith-based programmes. Rather, it means that probation officers should be faith-literate and entirely prepared to recommend participation in projects delivered by faith-based charities that provide support networks and help reduce the possibility of reoffending.

²³⁸ HM Prison and Probation Service (27 July 2021) 'National partnership framework'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnership-framework

²³⁹ HM Prison and Probation Service (27 July 2021) 'National partnership framework'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-partnership-framework

4.9 Recommendations 10 to 12

Recommendation 10

Government should begin an improvement review of chaplaincy services in prisons and pastoral support for people on remand and on probation. The review should focus on consistency across services, as well as exploring options for modern and effective support, including greater partnership with faith-based organisations who are well equipped to support the prison chaplaincy service.

Recommendation 11

Government should carry out an urgent review of the issue of prisoners allegedly being coercively converted and radicalised in prison, including by their peers, as well as the issue of faith-based gangs. The review should identify any gaps in services that allow these issues to flourish, including the robust vetting of chaplains, mandatory faith literacy and theological training for HM Prison and Probation Service staff, and nuanced data collection on in-prison conversion.

Recommendation 12

Government should explicitly integrate the use of religious or theological reflection as an important part of the rehabilitation of some offenders. This is particularly needed in the Healthy Identity Intervention, where suitable religious and faith-focused tools should be used alongside psychological and social ones to help deradicalise prisoners who have been converted to flawed and extremist religious ideologies. At the very least, government should evaluate the sequencing of the Healthy Identity Intervention and the Theological and Ideological Intervention to establish how they can complement each other in the rehabilitation process.



Chapter 5

Faith in the UK Armed Forces

5.1 Introduction

The UK Armed Forces (UKAF) is not only one of the biggest employers in the UK, but it is also a symbol that proclaims and protects British values at home and abroad. The UKAF remains one of the most powerful and professional armed forces in the world.

Its far-reaching and persistent engagement is evident in missions around the world which act to protect, engage, constrain and warfight.²⁴⁰ The UKAF is a vital part of the UK's global brand. The government's integrated review states that in pursuing its goals to 2030, the government will "seek to make steady progress towards the protection and promotion ... of democracy around the world".²⁴¹ Through its recruitment strategies, the UKAF has the potential to play an important role in advancing greater community integration and cohesion across the UK's diverse faith communities. This review found evidence that UKAF members from minority faith groups have an enormous sense of belonging and pride in their families and faith communities. The UKAF already accepts that the more diverse their workforce is, the stronger it will be – diversifying is not at the expense of operational effectiveness. Future Soldier (published in 2021 to outline how the British Army is changing) notes: "Maximising the potential of every individual in the Army will be critical to our success, as will be the creation of a culture where everyone is comfortable and empowered to perform to their very best."²⁴²

"It is mission critical for defence, if we are to safeguard the security, stability and prosperity of our nation, that we recruit and retain the most able people drawn from the broadest diversity of thought, skills and background. While we have made some progress on matters of diversity, inclusion and inappropriate behaviour, we are clear that if we are to improve the diversity and inclusion of our workforce, we must take urgent action to access and maximise all our talent."²⁴³

Chiefs of Staff, Ministry of Defence

There are approximately 146,000 people serving under full operational command structures (Royal Navy, British Army, and Royal Air Force Regular Forces).²⁴⁴ While the UKAF is one of the largest employers in the UK, it remains among the most agile and adaptive institutions in British public life. At its best, the UKAF has an incredible ability to

²⁴⁰ Ministry of Defence (2021) 'Integrated operating concept 2025'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1014659/Integrated_Operating_Concept_2025.pdf

²⁴¹ HM Government (2021) 'Global Britain in a competitive age: The integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf

²⁴² Ministry of Defence (25 November 2021) 'Future Soldier: Transforming the British Army'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-soldier-transforming-the-british-army

²⁴³ Ministry of Defence (24 July 2020) 'Maximising talent through diversity and inclusion'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/maximising-talent-through-diversity-and-inclusion

²⁴⁴ Ministry of Defence (updated 15 September 2022) 'National statistics: Quarterly service personnel statistics 1 July 2022'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-2022/quarterly-service-personnel-statistics-1-july-2022

innovate and overcome almost all challenges, including challenges in recruitment. Moreover, a career in the UKAF is an excellent way for people to progress and develop their skills to a high level, receiving world-class career training in almost every area of human endeavour. 83% of ex-service personnel who reported their employment outcomes within six months of leaving the UKAF in 2020-21 were employed, and only 6% were unemployed.²⁴⁵ Recognising the notable investment the UKAF offers its people, it is regrettable that the opportunity to participate in and benefit from this high-quality training is not more equitably spread across social groups including faith communities across the country.

The UKAF is a source of immense pride to the nation and projects the very best of British values to the world. However, those feelings of pride are not shared by every community in the UK. Addressing the barriers which prevent British citizens feeling able to join the UKAF is also essential if Britain is to cultivate a genuine sense of inclusion and belonging among minority faith communities. While there have been minor improvements in recent years, the under-representation of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews in the UKAF compared to the general population remains a concern and should be addressed urgently.²⁴⁶ This is important for building a diverse and dynamic fighting force that represents the diversity of the society it protects.

The UKAF should be commended for its notable efforts to create a modern and effective operational structure where people of diverse faiths and beliefs co-operate with and support each other. Throughout stakeholder interviews, service personnel consistently noted that their faith was accepted within the UKAF. However, they also felt those in superior positions or higher ranks had a limited understanding of what their religion, belief or faith meant. This was borne out in the call for evidence: 66.3% of 844 respondents who said they had served in the UKAF agreed that their (or their colleagues') faith or belief was respected and valued. However, 23.1% of respondents with experience of serving in the UKAF did not agree, particularly among minority faiths (10 out of 41 Muslims and 15 out of 24 Pagans).²⁴⁷ Regarding equal treatment of different faiths or belief systems, an overwhelming majority of atheist or humanist responses and Pagans said faiths and belief systems were not treated equally in the UKAF, compared to 83.99% of Christians who believed that they were. Many of the written responses confirmed this narrative: Christians felt welcomed, accepted, understood and equally treated, while other faith or belief groups often did not.

Moreover, despite clear UKAF guidance regarding the optional nature of some faith-related events such as church parades, there was a clear pattern among non-Christian respondents. While noting an overall feeling of acceptance, they also highlighted

²⁴⁵ Ministry of Defence (updated 15 September 2022) 'National statistics: Quarterly service personnel statistics 1 July 2022'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1049463/Career_Transition_Partnership_annual_statistics_UK_Regular_Service_Personnel_Employment_Outcomes_2020-21.pdf

²⁴⁶ Ministry of Defence (30 June 2022) 'UK Armed Forces biannual diversity statistics 1 April 2022'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1087045/Biannual_Diversity_Statistics_Publication_April22.pdf

²⁴⁷ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (13 November 2020, updated 22 February 2021) 'Closed consultation: Independent faith engagement review: call for evidence'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-faith-engagement-review-call-for-evidence

inconsistencies in understanding and respect towards religion, faith and belief, and the availability of appropriate provisions for all types of religious practice. The UKAF chaplaincy's recent introduction of civilian religious leaders as world faith officiating chaplains to the military should go some way to improving this. But if the UKAF is to retain and future-proof the relatively high levels of confidence it enjoys, it needs to continually adapt to reflect the diversity of the people it employs, serves and protects.

"Have you ever done a church parade? If you refused, as is your right, you got handed a guard duty or six."

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

This chapter looks at the ways people of faith engage with the UKAF from several perspectives. Firstly, it considers how the UKAF might improve engagement with the smaller faith groups, and how it might be able to foster a sense of 'belonging' within those communities. Secondly, it examines the UKAF's recruitment and retention record among the diverse faith communities of the UK. Finally, it considers the effectiveness of current provisions in meeting the spiritual needs of serving personnel.

The review recognises the UKAF's ability to employ the strategic and material resources at its disposal to achieve remarkable feats. The high calibre of emotionally and intellectually capable minds in the UKAF is evidence of its long-standing reputation for strategic creativity and the continual adaptation, modernisation and development of its people. It is because of these great attributes that this reviewer believes the UKAF can go further, modernising its structures to reflect the UK's religious diversity.

5.2 Belonging



The idea of ‘belonging’ has become increasingly important for how the UKAF engages with diverse religious, racial and cultural backgrounds. The feeling of belonging to a particular place or nation often transcends borders, backgrounds and birthplaces. In many ways, ‘belonging’ in the UK is about a personal identification with the values, principles and freedoms that define the nation.

The beauty of belonging is most evident in the creative co-operation between individuals and communities from different cultural and faith backgrounds, towards the mutually beneficial goals of society. A deep connection can be gained with the preservation and development of the liberties that allow people to flourish. Rather than overlooking or rejecting differences, to belong in the UK is about allowing yourself to be accepted as part of something bigger, which both acknowledges and values the abilities and perspectives that different people have to offer. Some of the benefits of belonging can be seen through appreciating the rich heritage of the many people, faiths and backgrounds who have helped build this nation and who continue to provide outstanding contributions to the governance and defence of the UK. Moreover, the different countries, languages and heritages represented in the UK and the Union Flag show that belonging and diversity are essential components of our national identity.

In 2018, the British Army launched a new campaign called This is Belonging. It prioritised building trust with all stakeholders and reaching more diverse demographics.²⁴⁸ This new approach to recruitment reflected the creative ability of the military to consistently adapt and modernise to meet society’s evolving view and expectations of the UKAF. The concept of ‘belonging’ is not only important for the UKAF’s recruitment strategy overall, but also for developing a greater sense of belonging among minority faith communities in the UK. This reviewer heard evidence of cases where Muslim, Hindu or Sikh recruits, and the families and communities they grew up in, felt a greater sense of ‘belonging’ to the UK following recruitment.

The Ministry of Defence’s ‘Guide on religion and belief in the Armed Forces’ includes an aim to “create an environment free from discrimination, prejudice, fear or misunderstanding, which can damage operational effectiveness”.²⁴⁹ The Ministry of Defence’s diversity and inclusion strategy has already delivered some small achievements in tackling racism and discrimination towards minority groups.²⁵⁰ To its credit, the UKAF readily concedes there is more to be done to address the issue of prejudice. It has established a dedicated Defence faith and belief champion and faith and belief business partner to liaise with the several faith and belief staff networks across the UKAF to understand needs and concerns and address any issues. It is partly because of this strong commitment to diversification and integration that various strands of the UKAF have been recognised in the top 100 employers on Stonewall’s UK Workplace Equality Index since

²⁴⁸ Marketing Week (19 January 2018) ‘British Army hopes criticism around campaign will help attract more diverse recruits’. Available at: www.marketingweek.com/british-army-hopes-criticism-around-campaign-will-help-attract-diverse-recruits/

²⁴⁹ Ministry of Defence (2011) ‘Guide on religion and belief in the Armed Forces’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/28127/guide_religion_belief.pdf

²⁵⁰ Ministry of Defence (2018) ‘A force for inclusion: Defence diversity and inclusion strategy 2018 to 2030’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907901/20180806-MOD_DI_Plan_A4_v14_Final-U.pdf

2014.²⁵¹ Recruitment from the Commonwealth (though currently limited) also seems to be contributing to improving faith diversity, but this issue should be tackled much more robustly for British-born recruits.

It would be naïve not to acknowledge the unique challenges that hamper the recruitment of British Muslims, the most under-represented faith group within the UKAF. Islam is the second largest religion in the UK (6.5% of the population according to the 2021 Census).²⁵² But British Muslims are severely under-represented across the UKAF and account for just 0.5% of the UK Regular Forces that declared their religion in 2022.²⁵³ Other minority faith groups are also under-represented, though not as severely as Muslims. Hinduism accounts for 1% of UK Regular Forces with a UK population size of 1.7%, Sikhism accounts for 0.1% of UK Regular Forces with a UK population size of 0.9%, and Judaism accounts for 0.1% with a UK population size of 0.5%.²⁵⁴ This is in contrast to other minority faith groups such as Buddhists, who are actually slightly over-represented in the UKAF at 0.7% of UK Regular Forces, with a UK population size of 0.5%. The number of Hindus, Buddhists and those following smaller faiths in the Regular Forces have increased in recent years (respectively: 0.7% in 2016 to 1% now, 0.5% in 2016 to 0.7% now, and 0.6% in 2016 to 1.2% now).^{255, 256} But the number of Muslim personnel in the Regular Forces has not seen significant change during this period (despite the increase in overall UK population), with an overall modest increase from 0.4% to 0.5% in the Regular Forces. It is particularly important that the UKAF works with British Muslim communities to identify and overcome whatever recruitment barriers exist and increase the number of British Muslims joining the UKAF.

Serving in the UKAF needs to be a viable career option for all faith communities within the UK, not only for giving everyone an equal opportunity to pursue what is often a rewarding career, but also for the invaluable societal good that the feeling of 'belonging' can bring. The next section looks at issues of recruitment and support for minority faiths in the UKAF.

²⁵¹ Ministry of Defence (14 January 2015) 'Military recognised in Stonewall's top 100'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/military-recognised-in-stonewalls-top-100

²⁵² Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

²⁵³ Ministry of Defence (30 June 2022) 'National statistics: UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics April 2022'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022

²⁵⁴ Ministry of Defence (30 June 2022) 'National statistics: UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics April 2022'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022

²⁵⁵ Smaller faiths include Druid, Pagan, Rastafarian, Spiritualist, Zoroastrian (Parsee), Wicca, Baha'i and other.

²⁵⁶ Ministry of Defence (24 November 2016) 'UK Armed Forces biannual diversity statistics 1 October 2016'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/574734/Biannual_Diversity_Statistics_1Oct16.pdf

5.3 Recruitment among minority faiths

Faith background is currently not included in the Ministry of Defence's intake diversity statistics, but the current figures on minority faith representation among service personnel (as set out in section 5.2 above) suggest improvements are needed. This reviewer heard reports that some people outside the UKAF have suggested a long-term strategy of 'a generation of engagement followed by a generation of recruitment' as the appropriate solution to increasing recruitment from minority faiths. However, it is the opinion of this reviewer, and the opinion of some senior individuals within the UKAF who have given evidence to this review, that this isn't fast enough. While this reviewer recognises the significant efforts in improving recruitment from typically under-represented minority ethnic communities and welcomes news of an upcoming race action plan, the UKAF should broaden its efforts now to also include faith diversity in any future recruitment action plan.²⁵⁷

Following the launch of the British Army's This is Belonging campaign in 2018 (along with its equivalent projects in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force), there was a significant jump in the number of British-born Muslims applying to join the UKAF – increasing from 330 applications in 2017 to 1,500 in 2018.²⁵⁸ This spike in interest is a positive sign of improving integration. Regrettably, the increase in applications doesn't appear to have filtered down into the number of British Muslims serving in the UKAF, with a minor increase in the number of serving Muslims (from 0.4% to 0.5%) appearing only in 2022.²⁵⁹ This reviewer would urge the Ministry of Defence to consider why the pace of change has been so slow to date. While more than 2,000 applications were made from British-born Muslims between 2016 and 2018 to join the UK Regular Forces, only 30 recruits completed their training during this period, and 30 British-born Muslims left the UKAF after completing their minimum terms.²⁶⁰ There may be legitimate reasons for this, which may reflect the natural application to recruitment rate, but the Ministry of Defence has not supplied any further explanation or additional figures to date.

It is positive to hear that since this review began, the Ministry of Defence has developed new plans to support the diverse range of faiths and beliefs within the UKAF. In particular, the broad range of faith and belief networks and champions is noted and appreciated, as they provide personnel with the opportunity to meet like-minded others and build their faith-based communities. This will hopefully increase the sense of 'belonging' and lead to

²⁵⁷ Luke Pollard MP (30 June 2022) 'Armed Forces: Ethnic groups: Question for the Ministry of Defence'. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-06-30/28479

²⁵⁸ Ministry of Defence (4 March 2020) 'Information regarding how many British born Muslims applied for the Armed Services in the years 2016 to 2018 and how many made it through their training successful'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886692/FOI2019-13195- British_Born_Muslims_in_the_Armed_Forces- Redacted _2_.pdf

²⁵⁹ Ministry of Defence (13 December 2019) 'UK Armed Forces biannual diversity statistics 1 October 2019'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/851974/UK_Armed_Forces_Biannual_Diversity_Statistics_-_1_October_2019.pdf. Ministry of Defence (30 June 2022) 'National statistics: UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics April 2022'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022

²⁶⁰ Ministry of Defence (4 March 2020) 'Information regarding how many British born Muslims applied for the Armed Services in the years 2016 to 2018 and how many made it through their training successful'. Available at assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886692/FOI2019-13195- British_Born_Muslims_in_the_Armed_Forces- Redacted _2_.pdf

positive experience stories being fed back to communities, providing unofficial recruitment outreach campaigns to minority faith groups. But this is not a given, and the UKAF should do more to proactively engage minority faith groups and develop a programme of faith-bespoke outreach activities.

The need for proactive engagement was noted during this review's stakeholder engagement process, with several Muslim service personnel stating the importance of consistent and meaningful engagement with their communities as a simple intervention that could increase trust and understanding. While there have been various efforts made by the British Army to engage with British Muslim communities across the country in past years (such as Bradford and Burnley), these engagements are perceived as momentary and insufficient.²⁶¹ It was suggested that interactions have often failed to address the issues that shape the perception of members within these communities. There also needs to be a much deeper appreciation for the diversity that exists within British Muslim communities. Elsewhere in this report, the importance of intrafaith literacy is discussed. The UKAF, like almost all public institutions, is not immune from shortcomings in this area.

Interestingly, in 2015 a former adviser to the British Army on Syrian affairs noted that there was reportedly reluctance within some British Muslim communities to join the UKAF on the assumption that the UK was waging war on the Islamic faith. The former adviser noted the value of involving Muslim military officials from partner countries at recruitment events in the UK to help bridge the gap between British Muslims' perceptions and the reality of the UKAF's activities, including partnering with Muslim or Muslim-majority countries in a global war on terrorism to prevent regional conflicts.²⁶²

This reviewer heard numerous accounts from serving personnel that in recent decades, the UKAF has demonstrated sensitivity and commitment towards people of faith by integrating religious requirements around food, dress and practices (such as prayer) into operational structures. The groundwork is there, but the pace must now step up. This review strongly recommends a new and accelerated recruitment strategy to engage effectively with minority faith communities in the UK, to complement existing efforts in Commonwealth countries. Currently, the Ministry of Defence is tendering for a new, outsourced recruitment solution, with a contract to be awarded in 2024. The resulting contract should include proposals to 'level up' and increase the number of British-born personnel that identify as Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Jewish in the UKAF. The evidence presented to this review by senior leaders and others in the UKAF suggests that the UKAF is more than capable of rising to the challenge of redressing the imbalance of faith diversity among its service personnel.

²⁶¹ The Guardian (6 February 2015) 'British army aims to recruit more Muslims after worries over low numbers'. Available at: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/feb/06/british-army-recruit-muslims-low-number-iraq-afghanistan

²⁶² Original link no longer available. A copy can be found on Mohammed Abbasi (29 November 2017) 'The British and Pakistani Armies: Sharing both a personal and institutional future'. Available at: mmabbasi.com/2017/11/29/the-british-and-pakistani-armies-sharing-both-a-personal-and-institutional-future/

5.4 Chaplaincy

“Chaplaincy services provide a key support function to servicemen and accompanied dependent families in both peace and wartime.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Chaplaincy is a vital part of the UKAF, providing a much needed and highly valued confidential space for pastoral and spiritual care, as well as moral and practical counsel to service personnel of all ranks, faiths and beliefs (or none).²⁶³ The role of a chaplain is fundamentally pastoral, and significantly different to teaching religious instruction or values. A 2017 Royal Navy publication explains that the function is called an “all souls ministry” and chaplains are known as the “friend and advisor of all on board”.²⁶⁴ The purpose of Army chaplaincy is to care for the Army’s people and to improve the Army’s culture and behaviours to forge a winning team. Chaplains also support and facilitate the practice of all faiths as required. This can include arranging worship and prayer spaces and inviting religious leaders from various faiths to help personnel with their religious practice. In 2018, the first Sikh and Muslim-commissioned chaplains were welcomed into the Royal Air Force, which suggests that until then the vast majority were Christian.²⁶⁵ This is partly due to the inherent structure of chaplaincy which, as this reviewer sees it, is based on the Judeo-Christian concept of being ‘shepherd of the flock’. However, this review found no demand from current or former service personnel of minority faiths or no faith to significantly change the existing UKAF chaplaincy structure. In fact, respondents consistently commented on how well Christian chaplains had served them. But since then, the Ministry of Defence has undertaken a review into the provision of non-religious pastoral care and the needs of under-represented faiths within the UKAF in 2021. At the time of writing, the Chiefs of Staff are reviewing its conclusions.

“Always willing to offer help and advice. Chaplaincy in the military is a difficult calling, needing to be all things to all people. It was encouraging to often have senior officers who were passionate about their faith, as of personal experience today, they exist in numbers today, being willing to declare the value of a faith in a God who can be known personally.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Disappointingly, this reviewer did hear views from active service personnel that some senior officers still fundamentally fail to understand the importance of chaplaincy services. One padre noted that senior officers have been known to conflate chaplaincy with welfare and discipline, which limits the ability of chaplains to fulfil their spiritual and pastoral role. The Ministry of Defence has introduced both holistic allies training and leading diverse and

²⁶³ Bloom review call for evidence. Responses from current and former UK Armed Forces personnel.

²⁶⁴ Ministry of Defence (2017) ‘Chapter 75: Religion and the chaplaincy service’. Available at: www.royalnavy.mod.uk/-/media/royal-navy-responsive/documents/reference-library/brd2/ch75.pdf

²⁶⁵ Royal Air Force (14 December 2018) ‘First military Sikh chaplain and Muslim padre graduate from officer training’. Available at: www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/first-military-sikh-chaplain-and-muslim-padre-graduate-from-officer-training/

inclusive organisations training, aimed at helping senior and junior staff understand the perspectives and needs of their colleagues. This reviewer strongly encourages all UKAF officers to make use of these training courses, with senior officers in particular undergoing faith literacy training (as recommended in chapter 2).

“The chaplains are doing their best to support people of faith (and of none), but they operate in an environment that is toxic to faith.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

While this review does not recommend changes to the existing structure of UKAF chaplaincy, there is a need for better resource allocation. In confidential interviews, stakeholders pointed out that while there are likely enough military chaplain posts, they are unevenly distributed. In some places there is a higher number of chaplains, while in others there are very few. The UKAF should review how it deploys chaplains to ensure all personnel have adequate access to this important source of pastoral and spiritual support. Moreover, to ensure chaplains continue to dispense excellent services at home and abroad, the UKAF should continue to support rigorous chaplain performance management, as applied to all other UKAF personnel.

“My colleagues in the military did not always understand what I was ‘bringing to the party’ but once relationships were formed, they were glad that I was there.”

Military chaplain, Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

5.5 Recommendation 13

Recommendation 13

Government and the UK Armed Forces should review recruitment campaigns, future recruitment contracts and HR policies to ensure that more minority faith groups, particularly British-born Muslims, are recruited and retained. By December 2024, the UK Armed Forces should have developed and implemented a strategy that will see the numbers of British-born service personnel from minority religions increase every year until the UK Armed Forces more accurately reflects religious diversity in the UK. Progress should be monitored annually.



Chapter 6

Faith-based extremism

6.1 Introduction

This reviewer recognises that the freedom to campaign for beliefs is a fundamental human right and an essential part of a liberal democracy. People are and always should be free to lobby, share their ideas publicly and persuade others to join their causes. As stated in article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998, everyone in the UK has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Articles 10 and 11 respectively cover freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of assembly and association.²⁶⁶ For the avoidance of doubt, it is no longer an offence under UK law to advocate for the creation of a new state, or for changes in an existing state (which may have been seen as an offence against the government or the crown in the historic past).²⁶⁷ In the UK, people are free to campaign with all the nationalistic fervour they want. Equally, they are free to persuade others to join their cause and they can champion their ideas to whoever will listen. However, there is no legal definition for extremism, so identifying when a political ideology becomes unacceptable extremist activity is a complex issue for government to consider. What is clear to this reviewer is that politically or religiously subversive tactics that violate an individual's right to hold contrary opinions, or no opinions at all, are firmly in the unacceptable space. It is a violation of the basic human rights of others and a threat to the freedoms of our democratic society to disparage people, make them or encourage others to make them outcasts, brand them as 'apostates', 'unbelievers' or 'heretics', or otherwise shun them because of different opinions (or lack of opinion).^{268, 269, 270} For the purposes of this report, the author considers behaviour that seeks to subvert democratic order (such as by denying pluralism or shutting down debate), that glorifies or condones violence or harm towards others, or that seeks to divide and undermine communities through aggressive intimidatory, racist or misogynistic tactics as harmful extremism. It is up to the government to consider the findings of this chapter and define clear terms that will help it tackle these growing issues in society today.

There are messages of peace in all major religions. In Christianity, followers of Jesus are called to love God, to love their neighbour and to love their enemies.²⁷¹ Muslims are taught in the Quran, that "whoever takes a life – unless as a punishment for murder or mischief in the land – it will be as if they killed all of humanity; and whoever saves a life, it will be as if they saved all of humanity".²⁷² They are commanded: "Do not let the hatred of a people lead you to injustice."²⁷³ Hindus are taught Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, a philosophy

²⁶⁶ Human Rights Act 1998. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1

²⁶⁷ Human Rights House Foundation (13 July 2009) 'UK government abolishes seditious libel and criminal defamation'. Available at: humanrightshouse.org/articles/uk-government-abolishes-seditious-libel-and-criminal-defamation/

²⁶⁸ Apostate: a person who has given up their religious beliefs or who has left a religious group.

²⁶⁹ Heretic: a person who is accused of having beliefs that are opposed to the official belief of a religious group and that the religious group considers wrong.

²⁷⁰ Shun: to avoid or refuse to accept someone or something.

²⁷¹ Wikipedia (updated 30 September 2022) 'Great Commandment'. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Commandment

²⁷² Quran.com (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Verse 5:32'. Available at: quran.com/5?startingVerse=32

²⁷³ Quran.com (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Verse 5:8'. Available at: quran.com/5?startingVerse=8

instructing that the whole world is one family.²⁷⁴ Sikhs are taught to treat everyone equally and respect the rights of others.²⁷⁵ In Judaism, the Talmud teaches: “That which is despicable to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah; The rest is commentary.”²⁷⁶ In the Torah it says: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”²⁷⁷ Harming or exploiting others in the name of faith is not justified or condoned by genuine scholars and teachers within any mainstream religious tradition.

Elsewhere in this report, it is made clear that the majority of faith leaders and people of faith are decent, honourable and generous people. They are a credit to this country and to their faith. The overwhelming majority of places of worship are ‘schools of virtue’ – places that help people become the best versions of themselves. It is worth repeating that faith, people of faith and places of worship are an overwhelming force for good in British society. The UK is stronger and better because faith is flourishing.

However, it is also true that in almost every faith group there exists a minority of people who turn away from conventional peaceful religious teachings towards extremism and violence. Whether this is in superficial pursuit of power and money or reflects more deeply held beliefs, these individuals use faith as an unacceptable justification for anti-social aims.

Given Islamist extremist terrorism is still the largest threat by volume, perhaps understandably policy makers and the media have been almost singularly focused on it for nearly an entire generation.²⁷⁸ But in recent years, there has been a welcome renewed pursuit of white supremacists and neo-Nazis, and a growing response to the significant and ugly rise of antisemitism. However, it is the opinion of the reviewer that this has allowed other faith-inspired extremist groups, including those with links to pro-Khalistan extremist groups, black nationalists and Hindu nationalists, to grow under the noses of the UK authorities. Though still small in scope, some worrying behaviours need to be addressed. This chapter identifies some of the gaps in national perception and awareness and seeks to raise the profile of lesser-known issues for further investigation by government.

“There are extremists who classify themselves as followers of a particular religion, yet the religion doesn’t accept them or their beliefs, so these groups are not good for religious groups. But I am with those who spread peace and let other religions carry out their beliefs and don’t violate other religions.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

²⁷⁴ Wikipedia (updated 9 November 2022) ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vasudhaiva_Kutumbakam

²⁷⁵ Sikhiwiki.org (updated 26 December 2012) ‘Learning about Sikhi’. Available at: www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Learning_about_Sikhi

²⁷⁶ Jewish Virtual Library (accessed 22 November 2022) ‘On the "Golden Rule"’. Available at: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/rabbi-hillel-quotes-on-judaism-and-israel

²⁷⁷ Bible Gateway (accessed 22 November 2022) ‘Leviticus 19: 9-18’. Available at: www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus%2019%3A9-18&version=ESV

²⁷⁸ MI5 (14 October 2020) ‘Director General Ken McCallum makes first public address’. Available at: www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-makes-first-public-address

6.2 Islamist extremism

Over the past 10 years, the subject of Islamist extremism and terrorism has been forensically studied, discussed and revisited by government, think tanks and others. From the outset, it was this reviewer's view that this report would be unlikely to add significantly to the wealth of knowledge that already exists within government. Despite this, there are still too few politicians, policy makers and civil servants who can properly articulate the real and important differences between the majority of peace-loving Muslims who practise Islam, and the minority of sometimes (but not always) violent, political Islamist extremists. This reviewer acknowledges that there are challenges in defining these terms, as Islamism is not a singular ideology. However, these important definitions need to be given high priority within the faith literacy training suggested in recommendation 4. Government should take every opportunity to robustly reinforce the difference between Islam and Islamism with all stakeholders and in the media whenever it can.

"Take action against these Sikh and Islamic groups who spread hate and glorify innocent killing and incite hate, [redacted] are misusing charity funds coming from Sikh Gurdwaras and many Islamic groups doing [the] same, no place in our civilised society for these groups, must be banned!"

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

During this review's stakeholder engagement, many Muslims described, often poignantly, how society has made them feel stigmatised and somehow responsible for or secretly supportive of acts of Islamist terrorism. This reviewer has reason to believe that this happens at all levels of society, including at the very top. Those in the political sphere are not immune from such stigmatisation, with baseless allegations of Islamist extremist sympathy and concerning anti-Muslim language not unheard of.

A British politician (X) who is a Muslim said that another politician (Y) had allegedly been spreading lies about them being an Islamist sympathiser and making clearly anti-Islamic comments to colleagues. X said they felt that they were under pressure to constantly speak out against Islamist terrorism just because they were Muslim. Furthermore, X alleges that Y had told colleagues that X was lying "because the Quran permits the use of lies in the advancement of Jihad" (which it does not). X believes that their case is not unique, and that if this can happen to a politician then it can happen to anyone.

Similarly, within the Civil Service, one senior civil servant told this review they have acutely felt a transition over the years from being identified as an "Asian civil servant" to a "Muslim civil servant", which was most pronounced immediately after Islamist terrorist incidents. They wanted to stress they had nothing but total respect and affection for their employer and their colleagues, but have been left wondering how long it will be before they are just identified as a "British civil servant who happens to be a Muslim of Asian heritage". As part of their submission to this review, that civil servant poignantly remarked: "I never felt more identified as a Muslim, and not in a good way, than I did when I came into work after the Manchester Arena bombing." Moreover, they went on to say: "As a Muslim I can't win, because some elements within the British Islamic community feel that a Muslim who works in public service, like civil servants or police officers, are seen as apologists for

government policies that they see as hostile to Islam, and society at large makes me feel like an apologist for anything bad that is done in the name of Islam.”

Islamist extremism, Islamist-inspired terrorism, and the support of terrorist and extremist organisations such as Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Boko Haram, Da'esh, Al-Shabab and others are as repulsive to mainstream British Muslims as the acts of Anders Breivik are to mainstream British Christians.²⁷⁹ It is the opinion of this reviewer that if no effort is undertaken to relieve this situation, sadly many British Muslims will struggle to feel fully accepted and integrated within society. Explanations of Islamism as an ideology in comparison to Islam as a faith could be considered within the faith literacy training recommendations for government and the education sector, set out in chapter 2.

6.3 White supremacy and British nationalism

This review recognises and applauds the efforts government is taking to tackle the issue of white supremacist groups, particularly in the proscription of ethno-centric militant extremist groups such as The Base.²⁸⁰ Following the proscription of The Base, the former Home Secretary Rt Hon Priti Patel MP clarified the government's commitment to tackling white supremacist groups: “We continue to take robust action against evil white supremacist groups, who target vulnerable people across the world to join in their hateful ideologies and their sick promotion of violence. I am committed to making it as difficult as possible for these organisations to operate in the UK, both by banning them and increasing the penalties for membership or support, in order to protect the public and our national security.”²⁸¹

Another notable white supremacist group is the Atomwaffen Division, which was proscribed by the UK in April 2021, along with its alias National Socialist Order.²⁸² National Action (proscribed in 2016) operated branches in the UK and spread the idea that Britain will inevitably have a race war.²⁸³ Such groups often use blatantly inflammatory rhetoric, which sparks fear and friction with racial and religious groups, resulting in people feeling threatened and unwelcome in society.

White supremacist ideology is often defined by a hatred of ‘otherness’, guided by adherence to SIEGE, a key body of text produced by neo-Nazi activist James Mason in

²⁷⁹ The Guardian (24 July 2011) ‘Anders Breivik is not Christian but anti-Islam’. Available at: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2011/jul/24/norway-anders-behring-breivik-beliefs

²⁸⁰ Home Office (16 July 2021) ‘Terror group The Base outlawed in the UK’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/terror-group-the-base-outlawed-in-the-uk

²⁸¹ Home Office (12 July 2021) ‘Home Secretary to ban extreme right-wing terrorist group, The Base’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-to-ban-extreme-right-wing-terrorist-group-the-base

²⁸² Home Office (23 April 2021) ‘White supremacist group, Atomwaffen Division, banned in the UK’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/white-supremacist-group-atomwaffen-division-banned-in-the-uk

²⁸³ Home Office (updated 26 November 2021) ‘Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terrorist-groups-or-organisations--2/proscribed-terrorist-groups-or-organisations-accessible-version

the 1980s.²⁸⁴ While religious ideology is not necessarily a motivating factor, Christian religious imagery and language can sometimes be attributed to an imagined past (which is de facto white), where the UK was successful and thriving. A belief that the UK is a “Christian country, and we need to keep it like that” can be used to entrench an ethno-nationalist agenda and gain public legitimacy for aggression towards others regarded as a threat to preserving what is perceived to be the national identity.

While most proscribed white supremacist movements in the UK do not involve religious symbolism, some of the more successful ‘cultural nationalism’ movements, such as Britain First, frequently employ Christian imagery or the idea of Christian values to further their nationalistic agenda.^{285, 286} In 2017, there were reported allegations that these groups had co-belligerently aligned themselves with other groups, such as the English Defence League and Sikh Youth UK, who have also allegedly propagated an anti-Muslim agenda (though Sikh Youth UK declined to make a public comment when approached by journalists).^{287, 288, 289}

Although Britain First claims to be different from ethno-centric nationalist groups, both Paul Golding (who leads the group) and Jayda Fransen (who was deputy leader until July 2019 but is now affiliated with the British Freedom Party) have been convicted of hate crimes and religiously aggravated harassment.^{290, 291, 292} Britain First’s members or followers have reportedly been involved in aggressively protesting the presence of Muslims in the UK, along with mosque ‘invasions’, distributing Bibles in mosques and handing out Christian literature in Muslim communities while carrying out ‘Christian patrols’.²⁹³

²⁸⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center (accessed 22 November 2022) ‘James Mason’. Available at: www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/james-mason

²⁸⁵ Britain First party website. Available at: www.britainfirst.org/

²⁸⁶ Britain First party website (accessed 22 November 2022) ‘Christianity as the foundation’. Available at: www.britainfirst.org/christianity_as_the_foundation

²⁸⁷ Wikipedia (updated 3 November 2022) ‘English Defence League’. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Defence_League

²⁸⁸ @ActivistsUK on Twitter.com. Available at: twitter.com/ActivistsUK?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

²⁸⁹ The Independent (10 November 2017) ‘Influential Sikh youth group associating with far-right EDL founder Tommy Robinson’. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sikh-youth-uk-muslim-film-university-tommy-robinson-edl-sex-groomers-islamophobia-racism-a8002526.html

²⁹⁰ The Guardian (20 May 2020) ‘Britain First leader Paul Golding convicted under terrorism law’. Available at: www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/may/20/britain-first-leader-paul-golding-convicted-under-terrorism-law

²⁹¹ The BBC (29 March 2019) ‘Jayda Fransen: Ex-Britain First deputy leader convicted over hate speech’. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-47750137

²⁹² The BBC (7 March 2018) ‘Britain First leaders convicted of anti-Muslim hate crimes’. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/07/britain-first-leaders-convicted-of-anti-muslim-hate-crimes

²⁹³ The Independent (16 July 2014) ‘Britain First ‘battalion’ invades mosque demanding removal of ‘sexist’ entrance signs’. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/britain-first-battalion-invades-mosque-demanding-removal-of-sexist-entrance-signs-9607978.html

“There is a threat from right wing white supremacists stemming from Europe and the US that are labelling the religion of Islam as a terror religion. Nothing could be further from the truth. The burka ban in countries like France has not helped the freedom of religion and freedom of choice for Muslim women and there is a worry that these laws could be heading towards the UK. It is also important to mention that freedom of speech does not mean freedom to offend. Freedom of speech must be exercised within the realms of ensuring that religious sentiments and beliefs are not offended.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

6.3.1 Neo-Nazi occultist groups

Over the last two decades, connections have grown between white supremacist ideologies and the ideas found in extreme occultist groups, many of which have a strong online presence. The Sonnenkrieg Division (proscribed by the UK government in 2020) was apparently influenced by the neo-Nazi occultist worldview of the secret group Order of Nine Angles (O9A), which “encourages the disruption of society, through violence, criminality and sexual offending”.^{294, 295} The O9A is the most extreme occultist group in the world according to the anti-far-right extremism charity Hope Not Hate, highlighting that O9A ideas appear to be a new influence on occultist neo-Nazi groups in the UK.²⁹⁶ The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right wrote: “These occultist neo-Nazi groups promote and legitimise sexual violence and terrorism against perceived enemies, pushing adherents beyond sharing edgy images and texts and towards real-life violence.”²⁹⁷

Recent arrests of people associated with the O9A reveal that young males in their 20s and teenagers can be especially vulnerable to these satanic neo-Nazi ideas. A 16-year-old in County Durham, convicted of planning a terror attack, was found in possession of O9A material.²⁹⁸ The evidence suggests children as young as 13 are being drawn into situations where they are prompted to commit exponentially worse criminal acts of violence, sexual violence and child abuse.²⁹⁹

With most of the information spread online through social media platforms such as Facebook groups, YouTube channels and forums, which often have thousands of followers and users a day, this is a difficult problem to tackle. But steps can be taken to increase awareness of the problem and dissuade people from absorbing the material, as outlined in recommendation 17. Hope Not Hate has urged government to proscribe neo-

²⁹⁴ Home Office (28 February 2020) ‘Order to proscribe far-right terrorist group comes into force’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/order-to-proscribe-far-right-terrorist-group-comes-into-force

²⁹⁵ The BBC (2 March 2020) ‘UK Nazi Satanist group should be outlawed, campaigners urge’. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51682760

²⁹⁶ Hope Not Hate (2021) ‘State of hate 2021’. Available at: www.hopenothate.org.uk/research/state-of-hate-2021/

²⁹⁷ Open Democracy (4 February 2021) ‘The Nazi Satanists promoting extreme violence and terrorism’. Available at: www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2021/02/26/the-nazi-occultists-promoting-extreme-violence-and-terrorism/

²⁹⁸ Hope Not Hate (19 April 2021) ‘Government misses opportunity to proscribe Order of Nine Angles’. Available at: www.hopenothate.org.uk/2021/04/19/atomwaffen-order-nine-angles/

²⁹⁹ Hope Not Hate (19 April 2021) ‘Government misses opportunity to proscribe Order of Nine Angles’. Available at: www.hopenothate.org.uk/2021/04/19/atomwaffen-order-nine-angles/

Nazi occultist groups such as O9A but at the time of writing, government has yet to take action in this area.³⁰⁰

As many of the examples above demonstrate, government is clearly committed to tackling white supremacist movements for the benefit of preserving peace, good order and the harmonious co-existence between the diverse communities represented in the UK. While important steps have been taken towards tackling neo-Nazi groups, more decisive action is needed to address their root influences. Furthermore, this reviewer recommends that government applies the same degree of scrutiny to other ethno-religious extremist groups that promote violence, aggression and sectarianism.

6.4 Black nationalists

In recent years, the phenomenon of black nationalists operating under the guise of Judaism, Christianity and Islam has arguably become more notable in the UK. Some of these groups are loosely affiliated with or align themselves with (even if unofficially) the Radical Hebrew Israelites, the Israelite Church of God in Jesus Christ and the Nation of Islam.^{301, 302, 303, 304} But it is important to note that not all members of these groups hold extremist or racist beliefs.

The common theme that characterises some of these various ethno-religious expressions is that black people are the superior race chosen by God, and that white people, including Christians, Jews and Muslims, are morally, spiritually and physically inferior. While modern activism around racial injustice has reignited a legitimate and important conversation about inequality, it may have also fuelled a small minority of ethno-religious groups to adopt a more problematic and aggressive sentiment towards racial conflict. This has become particularly concerning for the Jewish population, as they have reportedly been singled out by some extremist sects within Hebrew Israelites and the Nation of Islam.^{305, 306} As explained in chapter 4, multiple sources have reported that black nationalist groups or gangs actively recruit in the prison system (see recommendation 11).

³⁰⁰ Hope Not Hate (19 April 2021) 'Government misses opportunity to proscribe Order of Nine Angles'. Available at: www.hopenothate.org.uk/2021/04/19/atomwaffen-order-nine-angles/

³⁰¹ Hope Not Hate (26 January 2020) 'The Church of Yahawashi are inciting violence and hatred. It's time for the authorities to act'. Available at: www.hopenothate.org.uk/2020/01/26/the-church-of-yahawashi-are-inciting-violence-and-hatred-its-time-for-the-authorities-to-act/

³⁰² Southern Poverty Law Center (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Radical Hebrew Israelites'. Available at: www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/radical-hebrew-israelites

³⁰³ Wikipedia (updated 30 October 2022) 'Israelite Church of God in Jesus Christ'. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israelite_Church_of_God_in_Jesus_Christ

³⁰⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Nation of Islam'. Available at: www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/nation-islam

³⁰⁵ The Jewish Chronicle (18 September 2019) 'Street preachers who taunted Stamford Hill Jews say they will continue'. Available at: www.thejc.com/news/uk/hebrew-israelites-who-taunted-stamford-hill-jews-say-they-will-continue-aggressive-street-preaching-1.488837

³⁰⁶ Tablet (15 June 2018) 'Twitter just unverified Louis Farrakhan. Here's why it's good that they didn't suspend him'. Available at: www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/twitter-suspend-louis-farrakhan-anti-semitism

6.4.1 Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam is a black nationalist movement that originated in the United States in the 1930s and is designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.³⁰⁷ Central to the movement is the belief that black people were the original humans, and white people were created by the evil wizard Yakub 6,000 years ago.³⁰⁸ While the Nation of Islam associates itself with Islam, it uses a mixture of Islamic and Christian rhetorical imagery. But the theology and mythology is far removed from the mainstream tenets of Islam and Christianity, and is far more akin to ethno-religious nationalism, which uses religion as a tool for legitimising racial supremacy.

In the United States, the danger of black nationalist rhetoric from the Nation of Islam was highlighted in the 2021 Capitol attack in Washington DC, when Noah Green was shot after driving into a barrier. It was later discovered that Green appeared to be associated with the Nation of Islam and credited its current leader, Louis Farrakhan as his 'spiritual father', reposting videos by Farrakhan such as 'The divine destruction of America' on social media.³⁰⁹

The government should be attentive to Nation of Islam activities in the UK, particularly where religious rhetoric is used to express hate towards others or as a means to exploit vulnerable people, often using the internet and social media.

6.4.2 Black Hebrew Israelites

The Black Hebrew Israelites originated in the United States during the 1880s as a religious movement which claimed African American, Native American and South American people were descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel. It is important to note that there are non-radical sects within the Black Hebrew Israelites. However, the extremist interpretation of the belief system, referred to as 'Radical Hebrew Israelites' by the Southern Poverty Law Center, is that they have been robbed of their identity as God's chosen people, and that white people are the descendants of the Biblical character Esau, who they interpret to be of the devil.³¹⁰ Black Hebrew Israelites are a broad group, including a variety of expressions beyond the core beliefs. While they sometimes employ similar imagery to mainstream Christianity or Judaism, they frequently disassociate themselves from the mainstream faiths.

Although this movement does not pose a direct danger to British society, there is an extremist fringe which presents serious concerns, including its treatment of its members and people from other religions. This is most notable in engagements with the British Jewish population, with followers of a group calling themselves 'the Church of Yahawashi, Hebrew Israelites or the Outlaws of the House of David' (and appearing to be influenced

³⁰⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Nation of Islam'. Available at: www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/nation-islam

³⁰⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Nation of Islam'. Available at: www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/nation-islam

³⁰⁹ The Independent (3 April 2021) 'Noah Green: What we know about US Capitol attack suspect'. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-capitol-attack-noah-green-b1826324.html

³¹⁰ Southern Poverty Law Center (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Radical Hebrew Israelites'. Available at: www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/radical-hebrew-israelites

by Black Hebrew Israelite ideology) reportedly taunting Jewish communities with antisemitic comments.³¹¹

6.4.3 Israel United in Christ

Although Israel United in Christ has some similar doctrines and practices to sects within the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, it identifies itself as distinct from the black nationalist movement and associates itself with elements of Christian tradition, including Jesus Christ and the New Testament, though it distances itself from the established Christian church.³¹² This group came to the fore in 2019 when Joy Morgan, a new member of the UK branch of Israel United in Christ (established in 2017 as a satellite campus for the American church) was murdered by a then member.³¹³ Despite members of the church showing concern for Joy's wellbeing after her phone number was removed from a church instant messaging chat, they reportedly didn't contact Joy's family or the police when they failed to locate her.³¹⁴ After the culprit was convicted, figures who are seemingly leaders of Israel United in Christ in the United States appeared to issue a response through a YouTube video.³¹⁵ On watching the video, this reviewer was perplexed that the apparent public response from Israel United in Christ leaders focused on the church's reputation rather than expressing sympathy for the family of the victim.

6.5 Hindu nationalism

Nationalist movements within the British Hindu diaspora have become somewhat more prevalent in recent years. This can be seen in the sophisticated though ultimately small mobilisation of Hindu nationalist activists who reportedly targeted public figures and politicians they considered hostile to their agenda in the 2019 UK general election, and the recent tensions in Leicester in September 2022.^{316, 317} In light of this, it is important that government is aware of such developments and how they risk fracturing the stability of British Hindu communities.

In contrast to earlier generations of British Hindus, it appears a small minority are now becoming more passionate about their identification with Hindu political interests in India. While this has rarely led to obvious coercive or violent activity, some British Hindus have

³¹¹ The Jewish Chronicle (18 September 2019) 'Street preachers who taunted Stamford Hill Jews say they will continue'. Available at: www.thejc.com/news/uk/hebrew-israelites-who-taunted-stamford-hill-jews-say-they-will-continue-aggressive-street-preaching-1.488837

³¹² Israel United in Christ website (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Beliefs'. Available at: israelunite.org/about-iuic/beliefs/

³¹³ The BBC (6 September 2019) 'The murder of Joy Morgan'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-49567548

³¹⁴ The BBC (6 September 2019) 'The murder of Joy Morgan'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-49567548

³¹⁵ IUIcIntheClassRoom (12 September 2019) '#IUIC | #BBCNEWS RESPONSE #JOYMORGAN', YouTube video 2:32:59. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOlxl1QUs1s

³¹⁶ Hope Not Hate (2019, accessed 22 November 2022) 'Hindu nationalism: BJP fails in its meddling...for now'. Available at: www.hopenothate.org.uk/magazine/in-search-of-hope/hindu-nationalism/

³¹⁷ The BBC (21 September 2022) 'Leicester disorder: Fear lingers among city's Muslims and Hindus'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-62982239

expressed frustration with Hindu nationalist involvement in UK politics, which can create division within Indian communities in the UK.³¹⁸ While many faith communities are likely to be interested in regional and geopolitical disputes outside of the UK, government should be attentive to the possibility of nationalist movements exploiting religious rhetoric to incite prejudicial views that may destabilise British society.

6.6 Buddhist nationalism

The rise of Buddhist nationalism in countries such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka is currently far removed from the experience of Buddhist communities living in the UK. Yet there is a possibility that the current tensions overseas may spread to surrounding regions and initiate greater division and unrest, with different sides seeking to increase supporters abroad. Therefore, the potential for a rise in Buddhist nationalism in the UK is a possibility. This should be a watching concern for the government.

6.7 Sikh extremism and pro-Khalistan extremism (PKE)

6.7.1 British Sikh communities

The vast majority of British Sikhs contribute immensely to making the UK a stronger and more balanced society. The conduct and livelihood of Sikh communities is, in many ways, a perfect embodiment of the best of the British values that are taught in our schools (freedom, democracy, justice, tolerance and respect).³¹⁹ Sikhs have a strong belief that they are all one, and all are equal before God. It is because of this belief in oneness that traditional Sikh teaching explicitly condemns the caste system, strongly advises against denominationalism and sectarianism, and promotes the equality of women and men.

One of the defining qualities of British Sikh communities is the particularly charitable and hospitable ways that Sikhs contribute to the wider community. A community kitchen (a langar) is common practice in almost every gurdwara. Volunteers prepare free meals for everyone regardless of class, religion, gender, race or ethnicity. This hospitality was especially noted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with many gurdwaras providing vital support to vulnerable groups, including delivering food parcels to those unable to leave their homes.

³¹⁸ The Guardian (11 November 2019) 'British Indians warn Hindu nationalist party not to meddle in UK elections'. Available at: www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/11/british-indians-warn-hindu-party-not-to-meddle-in-uk-elections

³¹⁹ Department for Education (2014) 'Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools: Departmental advice for maintained schools'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380595/SMS_C_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf

The British Sikh community is one of the oldest minority communities in the UK, but the first major immigration of Sikhs to the UK was in the 1950s.³²⁰ Many settled in London and the West Midlands, and by most measurements British Sikhs have successfully integrated into communities across the whole of the UK. According to the 2021 Census results, there are approximately 524,000 people in England and Wales who identify as Sikh.³²¹ Data shows that British Sikhs have high rates of employment and home ownership.³²² Sikhs have high rates of high-skilled occupation and in 2018, over 39% of Sikhs had higher education qualifications compared to 30% of Christians.³²³ British Sikhs tend to place a high value on family life and providing direct support for extended family, especially when they are old or in poor health. According to the 2018 British Sikh report, only 2% of Sikhs in Britain have elderly family members living in care homes.³²⁴

There are approximately 250 gurdwaras in the UK, with the largest able to accommodate over 3,000 worshippers.³²⁵ The earliest gurdwara, Khalsa Jatha, was opened in 1908 in Holland Park, London, and is still in use today.³²⁶ The vast majority of gurdwaras are governed by independent and locally elected or selected management committees drawn from the local Sikh community. In the UK, there is no overarching Sikh hierarchy governing these structures, but there are bodies based in India which have significant influence. The pre-eminent organisations are Akaal Takhat and the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, based in Amritsar in the Golden Temple complex. Along with the Jathedar of Akaal Takhat (the most senior Sikh spiritual leader), the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee acts as the main spiritual and doctrinal centre for the Sikh faith globally and is the custodian of the Sikh Rehat Maryada (code of conduct). Through engagement with stakeholders, this reviewer found that while the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee cannot compel any British Sikh charity or gurdwara to do anything, the Akaal Takhat can issue edicts (Hukamnama) and advice notes (Sandesh) which have incredible influence across the organised gurdwara community and can excommunicate Sikhs from the religious community.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive contribution of Sikh communities to our society, the evidence gathering process for this review revealed some key areas of concern within small pockets of Sikh communities. This reviewer is pleased that many of these issues are now starting to be appropriately addressed by government, following his efforts to raise

³²⁰ House of Commons Hansard (30 April 2019) 'Sikhs: Contribution to the UK'. Available at: hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-04-30/debates/1D8A9453-C2DA-4757-9248-6F5BC3130BDF/SikhsContributionToTheUK

³²¹ Office for National Statistics (30 November 2022) 'Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

³²² 45% of respondents own their homes, 29% are in the process of buying, and 79% are employed or self-employed. See British Sikh Report (2020) 'British Sikh Report 2020: An insight into the British Sikh community'. Available at: britishsikhreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/British-Sikh-Report-2020.pdf

³²³ Office for National Statistics (26 February 2020) 'Dataset: Religion, education and work in England and Wales'. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/datasets/religioneducationandworkinenglandandwales

³²⁴ British Sikh Report (2020) 'British Sikh Report 2020: An insight into the British Sikh community'. Available at: britishsikhreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/British-Sikh-Report-2020.pdf

³²⁵ The Historic England Blog (14 July 2022) 'A brief history of gurdwaras in England'. Available at: heritagecalling.com/2022/07/14/a-brief-history-of-gurdwaras-in-england/

³²⁶ Khalsa Jatha website (accessed 22 November 2022). Available at: www.khalsajatha.com

these concerns and issues with the appropriate departments and officials. This reviewer now welcomes government's efforts in this space and this chapter sets out further recommendations for government to consider as it continues to develop policy and deliver action in this space.

The first area of concern is the power struggle within some areas of British Sikh communities over who will represent them at official levels and be recognised as the pre-eminent Sikh body in the UK. Government should take a pluralistic approach to engagement, and the COVID-19 Sikh roundtable set up in May 2020 is a good example of how this can be done. The approach also avoids 'gatekeeping', which limits government's capacity to engage a particular faith in all its diversity and diminishes its integration within wider society. This is explored in more detail in section 6.7.2.

The second concern is the division between some British Sikh communities which is caused by an extremist fringe ideology within the pro-Khalistan movement, a separatist movement seeking to create a sovereign homeland for Sikhs in the Punjab region.³²⁷ It is important to note that the promotion of Khalistan ideals is not itself subversive, but the subversive, aggressive and sectarian actions of some pro-Khalistan activists and the subsequent negative effect on wider Sikh communities should not be tolerated. This is addressed in sections 6.7.3, 6.7.4 and 6.7.6.

"Propagating hate and divisions, trying to brainwash youth to cause divisions and hate in India, [is] really sad. [Some Sikh extremist groups] are using places of worship to fund or getting funds under name of faith and spearheading hate, these types of organisations shouldn't be allowed to operate in our great country."

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

The third area of concern is the activities of some individuals and organisations that are demonstrably fuelling sectarianism and anti-Muslim sentiments, as well as legitimising discriminatory and misogynistic behaviour. Sections 6.7.5 and 6.7.6 provide further detail.

"Only minority Sikhs are causing divisions and hate, [the] majority are peace loving but these minority are controlling the leading Sikhs temples in England and using funds raised for worship for propagating Khalistan (breaking up of India) and openly do that on social media. All are allowed to express their views and raise concerns of any injustice in India but spreading hate and brainwashing Sikh youth is [a] matter of serious concerns and many Sikh Temples are allowing [organisations to] have youth camps where some are trying to recruit youth to follow their hate, terror and division agenda."

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Although these three areas of concern are different, they are sometimes conflated by self-appointed 'community leaders' seeking prestige or power. Sikh respondents to the call

³²⁷ Reporting on the Khalistan movement can be quite biased or fragmentary. But multiple references regarding the history of the Khalistan movement can be found here: Wikipedia (updated 20 November 2022) 'Khalistan movement'. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalistan_movement

for evidence emphasised the reality and complexity of this issue. Although no question was specifically asked about these issues, numerous respondents were deeply concerned about the division and distress caused by some activist groups aggravating communities and painting an unduly belligerent picture of the Sikh faith. These groups can associate themselves with mainstream Sikh communities, but their intimidatory and subversive methods are considered by most to be alien to the basic tenets of the Sikh faith. Respondents warned that if government doesn't distinguish extremist agendas of power, control and subversion from mainstream Sikh communities, it would result in the UK turning a "blind eye towards religious extremism".³²⁸

This review's evidence gathering also found repeated cases of individuals being intimidated and threatened by aggressive Sikh activists, either directly or indirectly through family members, for openly standing against them. The difficulty in Sikhs speaking out has been previously noted. In the 2019 report for the Commission for Countering Extremism, 'The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today', some potential respondents reportedly refused to participate because they feared backlash and others chose anonymity.³²⁹

It is important to note that Sikh identity and outlooks can be defined by historic events. Any study of Sikh activism today must take account of the Sikh historical context, including in relation to persecution and survival. This context can evoke powerful emotions of injustice and duty which can be used to lend relevance and legitimacy to actions. Any investigation into aggressive Sikh activism or extremist behaviour must therefore seek to understand the historical and philosophical root causes, while firmly setting parameters for what is and is not acceptable activity or behaviour in the pursuit or promotion of ideals. This reviewer urges government to consider the proposed recommendations with this in mind.

6.7.2 Who represents British Sikh communities?

For the government to engage with British Sikh communities in both a constructive and productive way, it is vital to address the issue of who is best placed to represent British Sikhs. This issue was raised repeatedly in written comments throughout the call for evidence, with many Sikhs concerned that the genuine interests of their communities are at risk of being overlooked due to public officials' insufficient understanding of intrafaith dynamics.

The structure of Sikh communities in Britain differs significantly from some other religions because there is no official leader or religious authority for Sikhs in the UK. Instead there is a plurality of councils, communities and groups. This complexity can create a power struggle over who will be the pre-eminent Sikh body at official levels, in government bodies

³²⁸ Call for evidence respondent. See Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (13 November 2020, updated 22 February 2021) 'Closed consultation: Independent faith engagement review: call for evidence'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-faith-engagement-review-call-for-evidence

³²⁹ Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal, University of Birmingham, for the Commission for Countering Terrorism (2019) 'The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841033/the-changing-nature-of-activism-among-sikhs-in-the-uk-today-221019.pdf

and in the media. This problem is not unique, and many other faith traditions have similar internal struggles.

These tensions can play out publicly, but they are not always clear to the average observer. As part of the evidence gathering for this report, politicians, public figures, academics and officials provided evidence, some of whom are high profile. Because of their fear of retribution, they spoke under the condition of anonymity, but their stories were all very similar. At times they have felt disparaged, victimised, harassed or threatened by aggressive Sikh activists who do not hesitate to abuse or bully anyone who either criticises them or does not follow or support their opinion. Many have been intimidated and called ‘traitors’, ‘impure’, ‘nastic’ (infidel) and ‘patits’ (heretics). Members of different political parties who have served in public office have given examples of how they felt pressured to do what these activists wanted, and how some Sikh activists claim to have power over not only the ballot box, but also the selection processes of different local parliamentary and political bodies. One public servant said they would “live in fear” of retribution if they were to speak out against the ideological narrative of the activists. Others have confirmed that investigations into this type of extremist behaviour, which this report aims to present, are long overdue.

The government must take special care in understanding and wisely navigating these aspects of Sikh communities. Through improved faith literacy training for public servants, outlined in recommendation 4 of this report, government and the Civil Service will be able to more effectively discern between those who can genuinely represent the Sikh faith and those who are exploiting the Sikh faith as a vehicle to promote divisive interests which fracture communities at home and abroad.

6.7.3 Pro-Khalistan subversion

The Khalistan movement is a Sikh separatist movement seeking to establish an independent and sovereign Sikh state called Khalistan (Land of the Pure) in the Punjab region of India. The movement grew in power and influence in the 1980s and 1990s.³³⁰ Many acts of violence and extremism occurred in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star, which remains a highly emotive issue for many Sikhs.³³¹

There is a small, extremely vocal and aggressive minority of British Sikhs who can be described as pro-Khalistan extremists, promoting an ethno-nationalist agenda. Some of these extremists have been known to support and incite violence and intimidation in their ambition to establish an independent state called Khalistan, the physical borders of which are largely shared with specific parts of the Punjab state in India. Interestingly, this territorial claim does not include the part of the Punjab located in Pakistan. It is not entirely clear if the motivation for these extremists is faith-based or not. One critic of the

³³⁰ Reporting on the Khalistan movement can be quite biased or fragmentary. But multiple references regarding the history of the Khalistan movement can be found here: Wikipedia (updated 20 November 2022) ‘Khalistan movement’. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalistan_movement

³³¹ The BBC (6 June 1984) ‘Troops raid Golden Temple in Amritsar’. Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/6/newsid_2499000/2499341.stm. The BBC (1 August 2013) ‘Why 1984 Golden Temple raid still rankles for Sikhs’. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-23514583

pro-Khalistan activists from within the Sikh community claimed they are hijacking the Sikh faith for their own nationalistic ends.³³²

This reviewer is of the opinion that every individual has the right to protest both here and abroad and values the importance of doing so within a democratic state. As Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal note in the 2019 report 'The changing nature of Sikh activism', pro-Khalistan activism "can also be described as legitimate activism rooted in grievances arising due to structural inequalities and alienation from power structures. It is important Sikhs be allowed to debate the merits of a Sikh homeland without such conversations being reflexively labelled as 'extremist' or 'terrorism'."³³³ The promotion of pro-Khalistan ideas does not have to be subversive. There are many democratic avenues for political persuasion which do not involve manipulative threats or intimidation. However, this reviewer is deeply critical of any group which uses physical, psychological or political coercion and abuse to further its interests.

While these extremists reflect a tiny minority, they attract disproportionate amounts of attention and stoke divisive sentiments in sectors of Sikh communities. This reviewer heard views that some of these groups or individuals have sought to artificially inflate their influence and legitimise dubious positions or tactics by using the 'Sikh' label to lobby political bodies. By circumventing democratic order, some groups compete for power by masquerading as human rights activists, presenting a false appearance of legitimacy.

The use of various aliases which attempt to divert public attention away from a central umbrella organisation is a common strategy used to subvert the British political order. This strategy has also historically been used by white supremacist groups where members and activists belong to more than one organisation, and some Islamist terrorist groups such as Al Ghurabaa, first proscribed in 2006, with several more aliases proscribed since.³³⁴

"Some Sikh organisations openly glorifying Hate and Terror ... they are posing threat and putting our freedom under risk."

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

This subversive way of working is not unique to the UK. Canada is also experiencing a similar phenomenon, as explained in the 2020 report by the public policy think tank the Macdonald-Laurier Institute.³³⁵ In particular, the report highlights the historic roots and continued efforts of "thugs and political hustlers" attempting to disrupt and jeopardise both

³³² Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal, University of Birmingham, for the Commission for Countering Terrorism (2019) 'The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841033/the-changing-nature-of-activism-among-sikhs-in-the-uk-today-221019.pdf

³³³ Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal, University of Birmingham, for the Commission for Countering Terrorism (2019) 'The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841033/the-changing-nature-of-activism-among-sikhs-in-the-uk-today-221019.pdf

³³⁴ Home Office (26 June 2014) 'Written statement to Parliament: Alternative names for proscribed organisation Al Muhajiroun'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/alternative-names-for-proscribed-organisation-al-muhajiroun

³³⁵ Terry Milewski (2020) 'Khalistan: A project of Pakistan'. Available at: macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20200820_Khalistan_Air_India_Milewski_PAPER_FWeb.pdf

Canadian and Indian political orders. The report's foreword also highlights how the "2018 Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada" allegedly came under fire from Sikh activists who objected to the use of language, accusing it of criticising certain Sikh groups.³³⁶ Following this pressure, the public report was modified to exclude specific terms associated with the establishment of an independent Sikh state (such as Khalistan).³³⁷

The former Premier of British Columbia (Canada), Ujjal Dosanjh, was allegedly threatened and severely beaten for speaking out against Sikh extremists and terrorists. He stated that he and others who spoke out faced a "reign of terror" that included beatings, arson, and threats of kidnapping and death.³³⁸ Testifying at a public inquiry in 2007 into the bombing of Air India flight 182, Dosanjh said most mainstream politicians and police officers viewed the problem as an internal dispute among immigrants, with no consequences for anybody else. He added: "I believe that the institutions of our society were unable to understand or comprehend it to any great degree at that time and were not able to deal with it ... and we were left to fend for ourselves."³³⁹

In light of this, it is vitally important that the government develops a more comprehensive understanding of the tactics and methods some Sikh activists employ to divert public attention away from their subversive agenda. This reviewer agrees with the 2019 Commission for Countering Extremism report that a more balanced approach is required which is not limited to a narrow focus on extremism or terrorism, but recognises the nuance of Sikh communities and the rising tensions within it: "The current 'one size fits all' approach taken by government to counter issues of 'fundamentalism' and 'extremism' fails to sufficiently understand nuances within various communities."³⁴⁰

6.7.4 Subversive activity in the UK

The issue of secessionist political agendas within the Indian diaspora was highlighted during the controversy over calls for an additional tick box option in the 2021 Census, which would allow individuals to identify as ethnically Sikh instead of, or as well as, religiously Sikh.³⁴¹ Although an ethnic tick box for Sikhs does not exist, it is still possible to identify as ethnically Sikh under the ethnic group question write-in options. Following a

³³⁶ Terry Milewski (2020) 'Khalistan: A project of Pakistan'. Available at: macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20200820_Khalistan_Air_India_Milewski_PAPER_FWeb.pdf

³³⁷ Government of Canada/Gouvernement du Canada (14 December 2018) 'Statement by Minister Goodale on the public report on the terrorist threat in Canada'. Available at: www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2018/12/statement-by-minister-goodale-on-the-public-report-on-the-terrorist-threat-in-canada.html. See update box on Public Safety Canada (29 April 2019) 'Public report on the terrorism threat to Canada'. Available at: www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcls/pblctns/pblc-rprt-trrrsm-thrt-cnd-2018/index-en.aspx

³³⁸ CTVNEWS (21 November 2007) 'Dosanjh recalls 'reign of terror' by Sikh extremists'. Available at: www.ctvnews.ca/dosanjh-recalls-reign-of-terror-by-sikh-extremists-1.264882

³³⁹ CTVNEWS (21 November 2007) 'Dosanjh recalls 'reign of terror' by Sikh extremists'. Available at: www.ctvnews.ca/dosanjh-recalls-reign-of-terror-by-sikh-extremists-1.264882

³⁴⁰ Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal, University of Birmingham, for the Commission for Countering Terrorism (2019) 'The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841033/the-changing-nature-of-activism-among-sikhs-in-the-uk-today-221019.pdf

³⁴¹ Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Sikh ethnic tick box for the UK 2021 Census – ONS assesses evidence and says 'no''. Available at: www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/sikh-ethnic-tick-box-ons-assesses-evidence.aspx

consultation, the Office for National Statistics concluded that including ‘Sikh’ under ‘Other ethnic groups’ prompted concerns and suspicions about why Sikh was being separated from the Asian or Indian tick boxes, as the majority of those answering ‘Sikh’ to the religion question in the 2011 Census and the 2017 ethnic group question test ticked the ‘Indian’ ethnic group box. This was still the case when a Sikh tick box was added to the ethnic group question in testing.³⁴²

Attempts to change the Census have come from members of Sikh communities, but they are not reflective of the whole faith community. Some respondents to this review claimed that the tick-box controversy bears all the traits of an extremist interpretation of pro-Khalistan ideology and has no relation to the ancient Sikh teachings of oneness, which they said contains no endorsement of an exclusive ethno-religious state called Khalistan. Whether or not this is the case, government must have the clarity and confidence to ensure neither the Census nor the British political system become entangled in divisive or subversive agendas.

Another example came during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when a press release criticising government’s guidance for places of worship as “offensive” was reportedly published.³⁴³ Many Sikh representatives, and indeed other faith groups, were able to recognise the importance of working together to support the government’s efforts to tackle the virus. But this reviewer was disappointed to witness the un-cooperative and disruptive behaviour of some Sikh groups intent on sowing division and asserting their influence, particularly towards the efforts of other faith representatives who were stepping up to the plate in a time of great national need.

A prominent Sikh in public life, Lord Singh of Wimbledon, has also alleged deliberate ill-treatment aimed at silencing him in his recent evidence to the House of Lords Conduct Committee. In response to a complaint made against him he stated: “[This complaint is] another example of a sustained campaign by [redacted] and [X organisation] to bully and harass me to prevent me expressing views contrary to theirs on Sikh issues”.³⁴⁴ He also said: “While I believe that [redacted] simply did what [they were] told to do, [their] actions, together with the offensive and ageist language of [redacted] and [X organisation], constituted systematic and deliberate bullying.”³⁴⁵

³⁴² Office for National Statistics (accessed 22 November 2022) ‘Ethnic group tick-box prioritisation report for Census 2021 in England and Wales’. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/ethnicgrouptickboxprioritisationreportforcensus2021inenglandandwales

³⁴³ Press release no longer available online, but the points made are also referred to here: The Times of India (16 June 2020) ‘Sikhs unhappy over govt guidelines for places of worship’. Available at: timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/uk-sikhs-unhappy-over-govt-guidelines-for-places-of-worship/articleshow/76412286.cms

³⁴⁴ The name of the organisation has been redacted for the purposes of this review.

³⁴⁵ The House of Lords (2021) ‘The conduct of Lord Singh of Wimbledon’. Annex A: Report by the House of Lords Commissioner for Standards on the conduct of Lord Singh of Wimbledon, and Chapter 3, paragraphs 17 and 19. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/publications/6395/documents/70125/default/

The complaint against Lord Singh was not upheld, but the report also did not find evidence that the complaint was brought ‘in bad faith’ as part of a sustained campaign against him.³⁴⁶

It is difficult to prove given the complex structures and multiple aliases of various groups, but conversations with academics and political figures have given this reviewer grounds to suspect that there is at least overlap of membership between some Sikh groups operating in the UK and proscribed (or previously proscribed) groups. In particular, this report recommends that the MPs who are in the All-Party Parliamentary Group for British Sikhs consider the findings of this report. The parliamentary authorities must do what they can to ensure that the parliamentary estate is not unwittingly hosting organisations and individuals who have been linked to bullying and harassment at best, and subversive behaviours at worst, which are antithetic to the parliamentary estate’s own values of truth, justice, peace, tolerance and democracy.

The right to hold certain beliefs should always be upheld, as should the right to freedom of expression of those beliefs. But government must take extra care to ensure that the beliefs and subsequent behaviours of individuals or organisations do not conflict with or undermine democratic order. Government must allow for the proper level of engagement with British Sikh communities, but it must also impede the advance of subversive groups which attempt to fracture majority Sikh communities and negatively affect the stability of our society. It is important that government neither overlooks nor fails to be discerning when it comes to concerns regarding extremist ties when selecting the individuals and groups responsible for representing British Sikhs at official and political levels.

6.7.5 Sectarian or discriminatory behaviour in the UK

There are some groups operating within British Sikh communities whose strategy for protecting what they consider to be the Sikh identity is not necessarily seen in the promotion of pro-Khalistan ideology. It is instead seen in the promotion of other sectarian, discriminatory or even misogynistic ideas, such as anti-Muslim hatred, anti-British hatred and Sikh-only marriages. This sort of behaviour disrupts and undermines community cohesion.

For generations, many Sikhs have been able to marry outside the community, including interfaith marriages, without any problems. However, some groups have sought to aggressively pressure Sikh leaders and gurdwaras to ban the use of the Anand Karaj (the Sikh marriage ceremony) for interfaith marriages. In 2007, arsonists attacked the house of a gurdwara leader in Birmingham in what was believed to be a reprisal attack for allowing a mixed marriage (despite the fact that the gurdwara claimed the man voluntarily chose to convert ahead of the wedding).³⁴⁷ In 2012, a Sikh home in Coventry was attacked in an

³⁴⁶ The House of Lords (2021) ‘The conduct of Lord Singh of Wimbledon’. Annex A: Report by the House of Lords Commissioner for Standards on the conduct of Lord Singh of Wimbledon, and Chapter 4, paragraphs 58 and 59. Available at: committees.parliament.uk/publications/6395/documents/70125/default/

³⁴⁷ BusinessLive (18 June 2013, updated 31 May 2013) ‘Arson attack at home of Sikh temple leader’. Available at: www.business-live.co.uk/economic-development/arson-attack-home-sikh-temple-3971099

apparent protest against the family's daughter marrying a man of different faith.³⁴⁸ In particular, the 2016 efforts to disrupt weddings and dissuade interfaith marriages reportedly had a chilling effect on the activity of British Sikh communities. During an interfaith marriage at the Leamington Spa gurdwara, a group of more than 50 men protested the marriage.³⁴⁹ Those present at the gurdwara subsequently complained of the protestors' very aggressive language and behaviour. This reviewer has been told that since then, there has been an "infinitely small number of public interfaith marriages in gurdwaras in England". The fear tactics used have not stopped interfaith marriages from happening, but some who want to marry have reportedly done so at short notice to minimise the opportunity for backlash. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that most of these types of protests tend to occur when the Anand Karaj involves a Sikh female marrying a non-Sikh male (rather than the other way round). The protests often involve a majority male crowd, with communications often referring to protecting 'our girls or women'. Irrespective of theological convictions regarding the use of the Anand Karaj for interfaith marriage, resorting to intimidatory, misogynistic or criminal behaviour to advocate for a belief system should not be tolerated.

Several Sikhs have previously alleged that advocacy against grooming is being used as a guise to promote anti-Muslim hatred. Some members of the Sikh community have expressed concerns that others are focusing on the reported grievance of Muslim men grooming or sexually exploiting Sikh women, sometimes with the intention of converting them, to the exclusion of other types of intra-community abuse which they worry may be going ignored.³⁵⁰ Furthermore, a small minority of individuals connected to certain Sikh groups appear to have had historical associations with white nationalist groups such as the English Defence League and the British National Party (despite protestations to the contrary). These are likely to have centred around a common anti-Muslim agenda, including on tackling alleged Muslim grooming gangs.³⁵¹

6.7.6 Online and media content

Sikh extremists and their supporters often upload videos and other materials onto social media platforms such as Facebook, iTunes and YouTube which contain alarmingly dangerous and offensive imagery, language and the glorification of extremist behaviour. There are videos that incite violence and hatred towards Muslims, Hindus and even other Sikhs who disagree with the minority extremist ideology.

To avoid publicising such material, the detail is not included here. But this reviewer has been provided with examples, including very professionally curated and filmed music

³⁴⁸ The BBC (29 October 2012) 'Hate crime' attack on Sikh family home on wedding day'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-20128048

³⁴⁹ The BBC (11 September 2016) 'Leamington Spa Sikh temple protest: Fifty-five arrested'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-coventry-warwickshire-37332307

³⁵⁰ Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal, University of Birmingham, for the Commission for Countering Terrorism (2019) 'The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841033/the-changing-nature-of-activism-among-sikhs-in-the-uk-today-221019.pdf

³⁵¹ Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal and Sunny Hundal, University of Birmingham, for the Commission for Countering Terrorism (2019) 'The changing nature of activism among Sikhs in the UK today'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/841033/the-changing-nature-of-activism-among-sikhs-in-the-uk-today-221019.pdf

videos which depict the graphic abduction, torture and murder of Indian leaders, and multiple other videos inciting violence, retribution and the glorification of dead pro-Khalistan militants and AK47 machine guns. Some YouTube channels which spread such material have subscribers in the tens of thousands.

In February 2021, Khalsa Television Ltd, which served Sikh communities in the UK, was fined £50,000 by Ofcom for failing to comply with broadcasting rules. The channel aired a music video indirectly calling for violence (including murder) and a discussion programme which provided a platform for views that amounted to indirect calls to action that were likely to encourage or incite crime or lead to disorder.³⁵² The discussion programme also included a reference to proscribed terrorist organisation Babbar Khalsa, which could be taken as legitimising and normalising its aims and actions in the eyes of viewers.^{353, 354} In 2022, Ofcom took the decision to suspend and eventually revoke Khalsa Television Ltd's broadcasting license following multiple breaches of broadcasting rules: "This was the third time within four years that this licensee had been found in breach of our rules on incitement to crime due to programmes inciting violence." This involved promoting violence, including murder, as an acceptable and necessary form of action to further the pro-Khalistan cause.³⁵⁵

But crucially, there is no sign that YouTube or the UK's counter-terrorism bodies have investigated the explicit glorification of violence and terrorism being promoted by Sikh extremists on YouTube channels and social media platforms. However, in November 2020, the government granted Ofcom the responsibility of regulating video sharing platforms. This reviewer is of the opinion that extremist videos uploaded to the internet should be dealt with in a similar way to content that incites violence on television stations. Indeed, should the Online Safety Bill be approved, there will be ample scope for directly addressing extremist content spread by aggressive ethno-nationalist groups.³⁵⁶ The impact assessment of the Online Safety Bill specifically recognises the risk of extremist content as part of the rationale for intervention, ensuring online platforms are held to account for violent, harmful and abusive content.³⁵⁷

6.7.7 Tackling the problem

These subversive, sectarian and discriminatory activities do not reflect the true nature of the majority of British Sikh communities, who, for the most part, are the ones adversely affected by this behaviour. There have been previous attempts to curtail this sort of activity. For example, Babbar Khalsa International was proscribed in 2001 under the

³⁵² Ofcom (12 February 2021) 'Decision – Khalsa Television Limited'. Available at: www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/bulletins/content-sanctions-adjudications/decision-khalsa-television-limited

³⁵³ Wikipedia (updated 2 November 2022) 'Babbar Khalsa'. Available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babbar_Khalsa

³⁵⁴ Ofcom (12 February 2021) 'Decision – Khalsa Television Limited'. Available at: www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/bulletins/content-sanctions-adjudications/decision-khalsa-television-limited

³⁵⁵ Ofcom (21 June 2021) 'Updated breach decision and surrender of licence – Khalsa Television Limited'. Available at: www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/bulletins/content-sanctions-adjudications/updated-decision-and-surrender-ktv

³⁵⁶ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (12 May 2021) 'Draft Online Safety Bill'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-online-safety-bill

³⁵⁷ Department for Culture, Media and Sport (26 March 2021) 'Online Safety Bill: Impact assessment'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985283/Draft_Online_Safety_Bill_-_Impact_Assessment_Web_Accessible.pdf

Terrorism Act 2000.³⁵⁸ Babbar Khalsa International is known for its use of violent force and planned terrorist attacks, which has led to multiple arrests of suspected members in India, Canada and the United States over the last 20 years.^{359, 360, 361} However, International Sikh Youth Federation, which has also allegedly been responsible for assassinations, bombings and kidnappings targeting Hindus, moderate Sikhs and Indian government officials, was de-proscribed by the UK government in 2016 following an application to remove them from the list of terrorist organisations in the UK.^{362, 363} The International Sikh Youth Federation has been banned in multiple countries and is still listed as a terrorist entity in Canada.³⁶⁴

As this report has previously stated, several members of Sikh communities believe there is overlap between some Sikh groups operating in the UK now, and proscribed (or previously proscribed) groups. This is extremely difficult to prove given the complex structures and multiple aliases of various groups. But nevertheless, this reviewer urges government to investigate and reconsider some of its previous conclusions regarding the activity of these groups.

This reviewer does acknowledge that it would be difficult to proscribe specific groups unless they meet the clear threshold for terrorist behaviour. But this leaves a significant policy gap that must be plugged. Government needs to take steps to define and deal with the subversive and sectarian behaviour described in this chapter, which in the opinion of this reviewer should be viewed as harmful extremism, to ensure it cannot continue or be emulated by other faith-inspired ethno-nationalist groups. Democratic order, the fabric of our society, and the ability of faith communities to live cohesively and peacefully is at risk if this is not addressed.

³⁵⁸ Home Office (updated 26 November 2021) 'Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2/proscribed-terrorist-groups-or-organisations-accessible-version#list-of-proscribed-international-terrorist-groups

³⁵⁹ South Asia Terrorism Portal (accessed 23 November 2022) 'Incidents and statements involving Babbar Khalsa International: 1985-2012'. Available at: www.satp.org/terrorist-groups/arrest/india_babbar-khalsa-international-bki

³⁶⁰ The Times of India (3 July 2006) 'Canada to deport Babbar Khalsa militant'. Available at: timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/canada-to-deport-babbar-khalsa-militant/articleshow/1701270.cms

³⁶¹ The United States Department of Justice (18 December 2013) 'Reno man charged with conspiring to provide material support to terrorism groups in India and Pakistan'. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/reno-man-charged-conspiring-provide-material-support-terrorism-groups-india-and-pakistan>

³⁶² The Mackenzie Institute (7 January 2016) 'Terrorism profiles: International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF)'. Available at: mackenzieinstitute.com/2016/01/international-sikh-youth-federation-isyf/

³⁶³ Home Office (updated 26 November 2021) 'Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2/proscribed-terrorist-groups-or-organisations-accessible-version#list-of-proscribed-international-terrorist-groups

³⁶⁴ Public Safety Canada (updated 25 June 2021) 'Currently listed entities'. Available at: www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrnt/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx#33

6.8 Recommendations 14 to 17

Recommendation 14

Government should redouble its efforts to reinforce the distinctions between extremist Islamism and Islam and between Islamist extremists and Muslims. The vast majority of British Muslims do not condone the behaviour or values of Islamist criminals who perpetrate acts of violence, terror and extremism. Government should continue to seek ways of ensuring that British Muslims do not feel unfairly associated with violent Islamism or Islamists who operate with violent or subversive tactics, and ensure that these distinctions are heavily supported in the faith literacy training mentioned in recommendation 4.

Recommendation 15

Government should continue to crack down on white supremacist and neo-Nazi terrorists and extremists who are using religion or religious imagery to promote their hateful ideology. In addition, government should keep a watching brief on religiously motivated black nationalist groups. Government should also be much more alive to the very small but growing phenomenon of extreme Hindu nationalism and Buddhist nationalism.

Recommendation 16

Government should clearly define and investigate extremist activity and identify where this exists within the Sikh community, taking steps to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of subversive and sectarian Sikh extremist activity. Government should ensure that unacceptable and extremist behaviours are not inadvertently legitimised by government or parliamentary engagement. The reconsideration of previous decisions regarding the activity and legality of certain groups should be included. This will require improving faith literacy across government and the parliamentary estate, particularly on intrafaith issues, so government can be more discerning regarding engagement and representation within British Sikh communities.

Recommendation 17

This reviewer welcomes much in the Online Safety Bill. Government should use the provisions within the bill to exert much greater pressure on YouTube and other social media platforms to remove content uploaded by extremist groups (often intrafaith) which glorifies terrorist activity and is therefore illegal. Similarly, content, including in other languages, which may not be illegal but which incites anti-Muslim hatred, anti-Hindu hatred, hatred towards Sikhs, or any other kind of violent prejudice, racism or misogyny should be treated as harmful. It should be removed on the basis that it incites violence or religious-based sectarianism and is therefore potentially psychologically damaging for children and adults, as well as compromising the safety and security of faith communities in the UK. This requires improved faith literacy across government, including on historical context and events so government can better understand the root causes of tension and hate.



Chapter 7

Faith-based exploitation

7.1 Introduction

While all faiths can and mostly do co-exist peacefully in the UK and make a positive contribution to society, a small number of individuals and groups can undermine the fundamental rights and values of our society, using psychological or spiritual manipulation to control behaviours, either for financial or reputational gain.

While this review's call for evidence didn't include a specific question on financial exploitation, a number of responses from Christians, humanists and atheists raised it as a general concern. This review therefore sought to investigate these matters with faith leaders, including those who have a stronger emphasis on what is known as the 'prosperity gospel'. Some questioned why the review was seeking to address this issue at all, while others asked why more hasn't been done to crack down on people they described as 'charlatans' and 'hoodwinkers'. It is this reviewer's opinion that these sorts of people abuse faith and people of faith to manipulatively extract funds, loans and savings from those who assume them to be trustworthy. Meanwhile, legitimate faith-based charities and places of worship often end up supporting the victims.

"Amongst Christians, there are ministers and churches that seemingly seek to enrich themselves, which is the extreme effect of a 'prosperity gospel'. Those people and organisations need scrutiny and perhaps greater regulation."

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Similarly, when people of faith become caught up in high-demand groups or destructive cults which employ abusive or coercive means of maintaining membership, this can cause huge damage to individuals and their communities.

This report does not comment on any individual faith's doctrines or theological understanding of giving or generosity. This chapter focuses on the small number of groups and individuals using the platform of religion and faith as the basis for exploitation, whether financial or social. Legitimate organisations have nothing to fear: this chapter has been shaped by many voices.

7.2 Financial exploitation

Faith-based charities and places of worship need to raise money to cover their expenses. Places of worship – such as churches, gurdwaras, mandirs, mosques, synagogues, temples and viharas – are normally charities because they tend to have 'exclusively charitable purposes'. This means that everything they do is for the public benefit and fits within the legal descriptions of charitable purposes in England and Wales. There are currently approximately 35,000 registered charities in England and Wales which state that they deliver religious activities according to the Charity Commission for England Wales's public Register of Charities. Registering as a charity often enables these organisations to raise money from grant-making trusts, as well as receive taxable benefits on certain costs like rate relief and other discounts, and benefit from gift-aid. For most places of worship, the majority of income comes from their members through cash offerings or electronic banking, supplemented by income from hosting life events such as baptisms, weddings and funerals, and letting out

property. It is important to note that encouraging generosity is not the problem. Selflessness and charity are often praised as virtues in society by people of all faiths, beliefs and none. There is a clear difference between legitimate and voluntary raising of funds, and when deception, coercion or exploitation of trust are used to extract money from people.

It would be naïve to think that corrupt people do not operate in the faith sector. For as long as there has been organised religion, individuals have sought to enrich themselves through the exploitation of others, whether through abusing the sale of indulgences or other mystical methods.³⁶⁵ According to responses to the review's call for evidence, this behaviour appears to be most prevalent in a minority of fringe Christian settings (though not exclusively). It bears all the hallmarks of coercion and exploitation and, in most cases, sadly seems to target poor and minority ethnic communities. Similar reports have been made in the press, and contributors to the review sometimes referenced those cases. Examples include:

- numerous reports of people drawing authority from faith to demand money, gifts and payments in kind from people who often cannot afford it, in exchange for promises of a future spiritual benefit or present alleviation from immediate health issues or other challenges, or for a promise that God will pay them back many times over^{366, 367}
- pressures to invest in the projects of the organisation or its leaders, including reports that members of a certain faith group were encouraged to hand over life savings, take out large loans, re-mortgage their homes or commit benefit fraud, or had loans taken out in their names without their knowledge³⁶⁸
- pressure to make significant financial contributions to pay for cars, housing and holidays as a 'love offering' to a religious leader
- property fraud and tax evasion under the guise of spiritual leadership³⁶⁹

³⁶⁵ In the Roman Catholic Church, an indulgence is the remission of a temporal punishment brought about by sin. This punishment consists of either earthly sufferings or time spent after death in purgatory. Typically, a writ of indulgence is issued by the church and given to an individual who has demonstrated some type of penance, or good work.

³⁶⁶ The BBC (16 June 2016) 'Bogus Birmingham faith healer jailed for £145,000 con'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-36552533

³⁶⁷ This high-profile case from the United States illustrates a certain modus operandi seemingly rooted in theological doctrine. See The BBC (29 May 2019) 'The preachers getting rich from poor Americans'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-47675301

³⁶⁸ The case of SPAC Nation was mentioned by respondents. This is a complex case, summarised below to the best of this reviewer's knowledge at the time of writing. In December 2019, a BBC Panorama investigation exposed a range of alleged financial abuses at SPAC: The BBC (16 December 2019) 'SPAC Nation: Church group 'financially exploited members''. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-50815142. The charity had been subject to an ongoing regulatory compliance case by the Charity Commission since April 2018, and a statutory inquiry since December 2019: The Charity Commission (13 December 2019) 'Charity regulator opens inquiry into SPAC Nation'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/charity-regulator-opens-inquiry-into-spac-nation. A review by the Metropolitan Police initially found no criminal action, but after receiving new allegations opened a criminal investigation into individuals associated with SPAC Nation in 2020: Huffington Post (23 May 2020) 'SPAC Nation: Police raid six houses and arrest man, 24, amid investigation into individuals linked to church'. Available at: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/exclusive-police-launch-criminal-investigation-following-allegations-against-individuals-linked-to-spac-nation_uk_5ec6836dc5b61d6d759b15ea. In June 2022, SPAC Nation was wound up in the public interest in the High Court: The Insolvency Service (17 June 2022) 'Church group wound-up in court'. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/church-group-wound-up-in-court

³⁶⁹ The BBC (22 April 2016) 'Faith leader Mehboob Akhtar jailed for multimillion-pound fraud'. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-36103880

“Any religious groups stealing money from the sick and the poor, as we have seen recently with the [X] church, concerns me too.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

The manipulative control that many of these so-called faith leaders have means victims often appear to be willing givers to the cause. Predators appeal to victims’ genuine beliefs, making them reluctant to report a scam to the authorities. This review acknowledges the legal difficulty of intervening when someone has consented to donate their money. However, more could be done to resource and equip policy makers and officials to increase their level of awareness and discernment regarding intrafaith issues concerning exploitation and abuse. Increasing faith literacy could in turn increase the level and consistency of reporting to help determine the size and scale of the problem, and what interventions may be possible (including referral to criminal authorities if necessary).

Prosperity gospel

This review does not seek to undermine or belittle any doctrine which defines how some people practise their faith. However, in the interest of safeguarding individual rights in a democratic society, it is important to note areas within faith communities that are vulnerable to financially exploitative behaviours. The prosperity gospel is a common doctrine found in various church settings, and for the most part it is unproblematic and uncontroversial. At its best, it encourages people to give generously and seek success in work and business. At its worst, it can pressure poor and vulnerable members to give more than they can afford to the church organisation, under the uncertain premise that God will return the favour.

Many MPs are aware of these fringe activities happening in their constituencies and have raised this in the House of Commons or in written questions. In 2020, a parliamentary debate was held about the case of SPAC Nation and investigation into financial exploitation.³⁷⁰ Serious allegations have been made in recent years by alleged victims of this kind of exploitation, and some of the cases this report would have highlighted are currently under active police and Charity Commission investigations. To avoid prejudicing those specific cases, this report addresses these important issues in generalised terms.

7.2.1 The police and places of worship

The faith literacy training recommended in chapter 2 also covers the importance of intrafaith literacy. Training should be included as part of a toolkit to support public services, such as the police, to be able to identify exploitative and abusive behaviour in places of worship and understand the complexities behind this behaviour, which may evade scrutiny more easily due to religious freedoms. Moreover, some faith communities do not have a positive, trusting relationship with the police. Improving faith literacy within the police would go some way towards encouraging a more positive and constructive relationship between the police and places of worship. This would help the reporting and processing of such

³⁷⁰ House of Commons Hansard (8 January 2020) ‘SPAC Nation: Volume 669’. Available at: hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-01-08/debates/04DE1B71-C7FD-46EE-BDC5-B11182AD9BF5/SPACNation

claims, establishing a deterrent which could discourage faith leaders and places of worship from misusing their influence.

7.2.2 The Charity Commission and faith-based charities

The Charity Commission registers and regulates charities in England and Wales so the public can support them with confidence. Under the Charities Act 2011, charity is a legal status for bodies whose purposes are recognised as exclusively charitable and are for the public benefit, which is a legal requirement. The Charity Commission holds charities to account, including in addressing mismanagement and determining whether organisations adequately meet the legal definition to operate as charities. This reviewer recognises that the powers of the Charity Commission to regulate charities relate to the actions of trustees and their legal duties as well as charity law requirements, rather than the behaviour of select individuals. In this instance, a referral to the police may be more appropriate. However, like the other public services set out in chapter 2, the Charity Commission must be sufficiently informed about faith and intrafaith matters to regulate any faith-based organisations under its remit appropriately. This reviewer is not calling for the Charity Commission to be more suspicious of faith-based charities. But the fact that exploitation still occurs and that some individuals and organisations are still acting with impunity suggests that more could be done to increase faith literacy among Charity Commission and law enforcement employees to support nuanced and faith-literate intervention.

7.2.3 Official investigations in faith-based organisations

The review found that a number of police and Charity Commission investigations into faith-based exploitation are underway. This is very welcome, although it is clear that neither the police nor the Charity Commission always have the capacity or intelligence networks to tackle these issues. Therefore, understandably, prioritisation based on risk assessment is required. However, this reviewer believes that these practices are more prevalent than currently acknowledged, as victims and witnesses are particularly reluctant to come forward due to the shame and potential disrepute allegations may bring to their personal faith and communities. The Charity Commission's investigations team appears particularly overstretched when faced with the scale of this issue. Indeed, perpetrators of financial exploitation have often cultivated the appearance of legitimacy as trusted members of their communities, and in some cases present themselves as reputable spokespeople for their faith communities, in regular dialogue with government leaders, police and their local councils.³⁷¹ It should not be up to faith communities alone to pick up the pieces and repair the damage that fraudulent leaders have wreaked on them. Improved faith literacy training that specifically covers potential exploitation within faith communities would enable the police and the Charity Commission to better identify problematic behaviour and equip them with the knowledge and language to confidently engage with faith communities on this sensitive issue. Increased faith literacy could then be used to develop faith-specific communication campaigns focused on education within particularly vulnerable communities. This would support potential victims to clearly spot the signs of financial exploitation and understand how to report concerns to the relevant authorities, improving

³⁷¹ See references to SPAC Nation above and here: The Guardian (12 November 2019) 'Tory-supporting church 'asks young members to hand over thousands''. Available at: www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/12/spac-nation-church-asks-young-members-to-hand-over-thousands

the Commission's intelligence picture and their ability to tackle the issues before they are entrenched.

7.3 High-demand groups

Faith communities inherently involve degrees of power and influence, especially where a hierarchy of leadership or eldership exists. This means there is a possibility that certain sects, denominations or communities evolve into high-demand groups or destructive cults which intentionally or unintentionally use coercive and spiritually abusive means to control the behaviour, loyalty and uniformity of membership.

In the majority of cases, destructive cults will not explicitly prohibit freedom of movement among members, but they may use psychological manipulation to isolate members from wider society and increase the difficulty of leaving the group, such as through financial dependency. There is no agreed legal definition for a cult.³⁷² But the serious consequences of questioning the methods and teaching of the group, or of attempting to exit the group (such as shunning or rejection by family members and being labelled an apostate), demonstrate their nature and severity. The physical, emotional and spiritual toll can be significant. Leaving a high-demand group (or any religion that someone has complex or emotional ties to) can lead to vulnerable situations where ex-members are at risk of being targeted and harassed.³⁷³

These issues are complex and must be navigated with due sensitivity. This reviewer believes that government should do more to put effective measures in place that help people attempting to leave high-demand groups, but who are unable to do so by themselves or are afraid of the ramifications it might cause.

7.4 Recommendations 18 to 19

Recommendation 18

Government and its agencies, the Charity Commission, the Crown Prosecution Service and the police should increase their awareness of faith-based financial exploitation so that perpetrators face appropriate sanctions and victims are supported. Government should consider increasing resource allocations to the Charity Commission's investigations team, so they are better able to pursue cases of financial exploitation. In addition, government should produce a toolkit for MPs, local councillors and local government officers to spot signs of faith-based financial coercion and exploitation, with clear instructions on reporting to relevant authorities including the police and Charity Commission.

³⁷² HG.org Legal Resources (accessed 22 November 2022) 'Are cults legal?'. Available at: www.hg.org/legal-articles/are-cults-legal-35055

³⁷³ Humanists UK provide valuable support to people leaving high-demand groups, and those who may be responsible for their safeguarding. See: Faith to Faithless website. Available at: www.faithtofaithless.com/who-are-we/

Recommendation 19

Government should fund a programme that supports vulnerable people to leave high-demand groups, high-control movements (often referred to as cults) or religious groups. In addition, this work should help people who face isolation as so-called 'apostates' and those facing threats of homelessness, shunning and honour-based abuse. Government should consider partnering with experts on this topic, such as the pioneering academics Dr Linda Dubrow-Marshall and Professor Rod Dubrow-Marshall at the University of Salford, and Humanists UK who currently work to support so-called 'apostates'.



Chapter 8

Religious marriage

8.1 Introduction

Marriage – the legally or formally recognised union of two people as partners in a personal relationship – is an important component of a healthy society.³⁷⁴ It is the bedrock on which families, communities and civilisations are built and cultivated. For some people, the individual and collective benefits of a happy marriage can be extensive, ranging from reduced risk of psychological or physical illness to improved life span and happiness.³⁷⁵ Some people may question certain aspects of marriage, and of course marriages are not always successful, but overall, in the opinion of this reviewer, the value and significance of marriage in a healthy society is irrefutable. It can bring stability, companionship and support, and when successful, can enable the next generation to succeed, innovate and bring positive developments to their diverse communities. While the UK has changed, and its social values and demographic makeup has become much more diverse in the past 50 years, the importance of marriage as an essential part of society has not diminished.

The Law Commission agreed to a request by government to re-examine existing weddings law to help England and Wales better accommodate the needs of modern life and the different ways that faith and belief groups now celebrate weddings. The current law, based on the Marriage Act 1949, means that couples choosing to wed must do so within a certain framework which is largely defined by Anglican, Quaker and Jewish traditions, or opt for a civil ceremony. The Law Commission's report was published in July 2022.³⁷⁶

This reviewer is grateful for the efforts of the Law Commission in making recommendations for updating weddings law in England and Wales and welcomes a number of the recommendations, including the proposal to shift the legal responsibility of ensuring informed consent onto officiants, new rights of complaint and powers of investigation by the General Register Office, and the removal of the time limit on annulling marriages due to lack of consent. The Law Commission's report has also recommended a scheme which could allow non-religious belief celebrants to conduct legally binding wedding ceremonies, which would remove the barrier for humanist couples (and others who wish to have a non-religious belief ceremony), who must currently have another service at additional cost to make their marriage legally binding. It is the opinion of this reviewer that this recommendation should be adopted by the Ministry of Justice at the earliest opportunity in line with the recent ruling of the High Court.³⁷⁷ While the Law Commission didn't consult on a duty to extend the responsibility of officiants to include

³⁷⁴ In this review's call for evidence, a large proportion of marriage references related to same-sex marriages. This featured across faiths but particularly among Christian respondents. Responses were evenly divided between those who feel the state has abandoned the 'biblical definition of marriage' and those criticising religious leaders for not doing enough to support same-sex relationships. Given the even split in responses, this review does not elaborate on this issue.

³⁷⁵ Chris M. Wilson and Andrew J. Oswald (2005) 'How does marriage affect physical and psychological health? A survey of the longitudinal evidence' (Warwick economic research papers No. 728). Available at: wrap.warwick.ac.uk/1466/1/WRAP_Wilson_twerp728.pdf

³⁷⁶ The Law Commission (2022) 'Celebrating marriage: A new weddings law'. Available at: s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lawcom-prod-storage-11jsxou24uy7q/uploads/2022/07/A-new-weddings-law-LC-report.pdf

³⁷⁷ Humanists UK (31 July 2020) 'High Court rules humanist marriage recognition failure is 'discriminatory' but stops short of formal breach due to ongoing review'. Available at: humanists.uk/2020/07/31/humanist-marriage-case-outcome/

collecting data on suspected forced marriages, this reviewer believes this could provide a valuable source of data to inform policy. Such changes are important steps towards addressing some of the issues surrounding non-legally binding religious marriages and forced and coercive marriages, as well as the disparities faced by certain faith communities and individuals.

“In England and Wales humanist marriages are STILL not legally recognised, although they have been so in Northern Ireland and Scotland for some time and more than 1,000 couples choose a humanist wedding ceremony every year in spite of the fact that they have to attend at a registry office on another day in order to make the marriage legal.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

Within many faith traditions, marriage is widely recognised as a key life event and plays an essential part in both family life and public ceremonial practice. The grand ceremony of religious weddings can be of great theological and spiritual significance for both the couple and their communities, re-enacting models and patterns set out in traditions, scriptures and liturgies passed down through many generations. People of faith almost always place a high value on the wedding ceremony as a public display of two people leaving their single lives, demonstrating their commitment to one another, and formally becoming an exclusively committed partnership in the eyes of their God or gods.

Not all wedding ceremonies result in a legal marriage. Sometimes a wedding ceremony takes place, often within a place of worship or with strong religious rituals, but the union is not legally binding. Sometimes this is what both parties want, but other times one or both individuals getting married in a religious-only ceremony are unaware that it is not legally binding. Some communities practise arranged marriages, planned and agreed by the families or guardians of the couple concerned rather than by the couple themselves. These are perfectly legal so long as there is no coercion involved and both partners agree to the arrangement in full knowledge of the facts (though from 27 February 2023, it will no longer be legal to arrange the marriage of a child due to the Marriage and Civil Partnership Act 2022, even if force, threats or coercion were not used). Arranged marriages must not be confused with coercive or forced marriages, though just as with other types of marriages, some may fall into those categories.

For marriage to serve its full purpose in strengthening society, everyone who enters into a marriage should do so freely and willingly. Coercive and forced marriages exist on a spectrum. At one end there is social, family or religious pressure, and at the other end there is force, violence and abuse. If anyone is coerced, deceived or manipulated into marriage or marriage conditions they do not consent to, it is both a denial of their freedom and a violation of their human rights. This applies to children illegally forced into marriage, adults pressured into marrying, including as an alleged cure to same-sex attraction, and anyone deceived into marriages which are not legally binding. These situations can leave both women and men in situations where they are vulnerable to mental, physical, sexual and financial abuse and exploitation. The inescapable and dehumanising consequence of a forced, coercive or underage marriage is that the victim of this crime, often a girl or

woman, will also become a victim of ongoing rape (non-consensual sex), and often other forms of domestic abuse.³⁷⁸

“It is said that we will never change what we tolerate. The inadequate action taken by successive governments to tackle the pernicious practice of forced marriage forces me to conclude that we remain either wilfully ignorant of this problem or we see it as a problem that is too hard to fix.”

Colin Bloom

A significant number of forced marriages and reported cases related to forced marriage involve victims below the age of 18. In 2020, 15% of forced marriages recorded by the Forced Marriage Unit were below the age of 16, and 11% were between the ages of 16 and 17.³⁷⁹ That this is happening in the UK in 2023 is unacceptable. To visibly commit to addressing the full range of coercion in some religious marriages, government should adopt the set phrase ‘forced and coercive marriage’ in public-facing documents, even though the full range of coercive behaviours is rightly included in its legal definition. This reviewer believes that government should seriously engage with every aspect of the crimes, injustices and mistreatment that occur under the banner of marriage, and welcomes the ambitions set out in the recently published strategy for tackling violence against women and girls.³⁸⁰ It is the opinion of this reviewer that there are some issues which government has been reluctant to fully tackle, partly due to the complexity of navigating intrafaith issues. If government genuinely values the role of marriage in building a stable and prosperous society, it must be willing to shift its approach and commit the resources to ensure that the freedom to choose and the right to enter marriage without coercion is protected in minority faith communities to the same extent as in wider society.

The seriousness of this issue has been consistently noted by previous Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson.^{381, 382, 383, 384} Boris Johnson stated that the “despicable”, “cruel and unacceptable” practice of forced and

³⁷⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth Office, Home Office, Department for Children Schools and Families, Department of Health, Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Ministry of Justice, Welsh Assembly Government, and Association of Chief Police Officers (2009) ‘Multi-agency practice guidelines: Handling cases of forced marriage’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/70188/forced-marriage-guidelines_English.pdf

³⁷⁹ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2021) ‘Official statistics: Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2020’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020

³⁸⁰ Home Office (2021) ‘Policy paper: Tackling violence against women and girls strategy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy

³⁸¹ The Guardian (4 March 2007) ‘Blair U-turn over forced marriages’. Available at: www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/mar/04/ukcrime.immigrationpolicy

³⁸² Rochdale Online (2 April 2008) ‘Brown vow on forced marriages’. Available at: www.rochdaleonline.co.uk/news-features/2/news-headlines/8166/brown-vow-on-forced-marriages

³⁸³ The Independent (8 June 2012) ‘David Cameron warning on forced marriages’. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-warning-over-forced-marriages-7831253.html

³⁸⁴ ITV (16 June 2014) ‘Forced marriages outlawed in ‘huge step forward’’. Available at: www.itv.com/news/update/2014-06-16/theresa-may-forced-marriage-cruel-and-unacceptable/

coercive marriage will no longer be tolerated within the UK.³⁸⁵ Despite these verbal assurances, along with government strategies to tackle violence against women and girls dating back to 2010 and the dedicated work of the Forced Marriage Unit, forced and coercive marriages continue to disrupt and endanger lives today.³⁸⁶

This reviewer heard testimonies from numerous victims of forced, underage and coercive marriages and the people who work with them, including charities and public servants, that the scale of the problem is clearly under-reported and does not seem to be a political priority. One campaigner described government as: “A bulldog without teeth, with limited political ambition to push through the needed policy to adequately serve the victims and future victims of this crime.” It is the opinion of this reviewer that despite many waves of societal, political and journalistic interest and claims that the UK is leading the way globally, insufficient government action has failed to eradicate this blight on the reputation of the UK as a democratic, tolerant and pluralistic country, where the rights and liberties of every individual are upheld and consistently defended.³⁸⁷ While the UK campaigns for human rights and equality across the globe, encouraging other nations to adopt stricter regulations and better standards, there are significant gaps in how its own government engages with intrafaith issues, including forced and coercive marriage in religious contexts. While this report applauds the recent Private Members’ Bill in Parliament which has successfully raised the minimum age of marriage to 18, criminalising the arrangement of marriage for those under 18, including religious-only marriages, it is unlikely to be enough due to lack of awareness among some communities.³⁸⁸ Until forced and coercive marriages are no longer reported in the UK, there is more to do to make our approach thorough, faith-literate and sufficiently resourced.

The issue of forced, coercive or non-legally binding marriage within faith communities has not always been adequately understood by government. In his landmark review ‘A choice by right’ from 2000, Mike O’Brien strongly encouraged government and society to adopt an approach known as “mature multiculturalism”, whereby they fearlessly seek to understand the values and beliefs that drive religious communities and what motivates families and parents to force their children to marry.³⁸⁹ The report went on to say: “We should celebrate our multi-cultural, multi-faith society, but we also need to make clear that difference,

³⁸⁵ The Jewish Chronicle (12 February 2021) ‘Boris Johnson says forced marriages are ‘despicable’’. Available at: www.thejc.com/news/uk/boris-johnson-says-forced-marriages-are-despicable-1.511779

³⁸⁶ Home Office (updated 8 May 2015) ‘Policy paper: 2010 to 2015 government policy: Violence against women and girls’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-violence-against-women-and-girls/2010-to-2015-government-policy-violence-against-women-and-girls. Home Office (updated 21 July 2021) ‘Policy paper: Ending violence against women and girls strategy: 2016 to 2020’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls-2016-to-2020/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy-2016-to-2020-accessible-version

³⁸⁷ A Home Office nationally representative survey and other stakeholders from relevant sectors that informed the July 2021 strategy for tackling violence against women and girls generally agreed that there had been no significant changes in prevalence in the past five years. See Home Office (2021) ‘Policy paper: Tackling violence against women and girls strategy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy

³⁸⁸ Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/28/enacted

³⁸⁹ Home Office (2000) ‘A choice by right: The report of the working group on forced marriage’. Available at: www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_22604-2_0.pdf

diversity and cultural sensitivity are not excuses for moral blindness.” In the opinion of this reviewer, it is hard to see that any UK government has been fearless in this regard, and several governments have seemed hesitant to take into account the cultural and religious aspects of these kinds of harmful practices. Forced marriage emerged as a top concern for people of all faiths in the call for evidence. According to experts working in the charitable sector who gave evidence to this report, a major part of this challenge is a lack of faith literacy and cultural understanding. Although forced marriage is a criminal offence, it is the opinion of this reviewer that many of the people with the ability to intervene – for example, teachers – appear either untrained or afraid of challenging perceived social norms, possibly because of the fear of causing offence.

“In conversation with my local MP it became clear that she had no understanding that women of certain religions are discriminated against in their religious marriages. UK law needs to ensure that everyone benefits from equal protection under the law regardless of religion.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

By equipping everyone with the necessary information to consciously and freely choose whether and how to marry, some of the issues surrounding ongoing spousal abuse and coercion, whether social, sexual, or economic, can be avoided. Government must ensure that necessary protections are in place and that the law on forced, coercive and underage marriage is applied equally to all, regardless of faith background.

8.2 Non-legally binding religious marriages

As of 2021, marriage registration services have sought to improve the process of legal marriage registration through the introduction of cheaper and more accessible electronic systems.³⁹⁰ Despite these advances, there are still troubling cases of people, especially women, finding themselves in marriages which are not legally binding according to the law of England and Wales. While this is not always problematic, the lack of legal protection opens the door to a range of issues, particularly in cases of divorce or inheritance where spouses have no legal right to reparations or possessions. Although they may have taken part in a religious marriage ceremony, if this is not conducted in accordance with the Marriage Act 1949 or is not preceded or followed by a separate civil wedding, the rights of the other spouse (very often women) can be severely compromised.

“I am concerned from several experiences that women may not have full access to the law or the protection which it gives in certain religious marriages.”

Bloom review, call for evidence respondent

³⁹⁰ Home Office and HM Passport Office (4 May 2021) ‘Improvements introduced to marriage registration’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/improvements-introduced-to-marriage-registration-system

Studies conducted on this issue show that there are valid religious and cultural reasons why a couple might choose to have a non-legally binding marriage.³⁹¹ For instance, while co-habitation is not endorsed by most religious teachings, some couples may prefer a religious-only marriage if they do not wish to enter a legal contract where finances or possessions are shared, or where they are not ready to marry legally but wish to live together. Studies have shown that some people might prefer religious marriage over a legally binding marriage because a religious divorce may be less burdensome than the process of civil divorce.³⁹² Some couples may also genuinely regard religious law as more valuable than civil law.

Religious-only marriages are particularly common within British Muslim communities (where they are referred to as a Nikah). There are an estimated 100,000 Nikahs within British Muslim communities, with reports that as many as 70% to 75% of Muslim marriages in the UK have not been registered under the Marriage Act 1949.³⁹³ However, such marriages have their own strict criteria of validity, including being carried out by an authorised person, witnessed signing of documents and the consent of both prospective spouses. A survey of 903 Muslim women by Channel 4 found that 28% of those in non-legally binding marriages were unaware that their Nikah was not recognised in British law.³⁹⁴ While Muslim marriages have been the focus of studies and surveys, there is a lack of information on the extent that it affects other faith communities. This is partly due to the attention afforded to the Muslim context by high-profile court cases (such as Akhter vs Khan 2018).³⁹⁵ Through this review's engagement with members of other communities, it became evident that the issues surrounding non-legally binding religious marriage, such as coercive deception and lack of understanding, also occur among other groups, including Sikhs, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, and Charedi Jewish communities. Such cases, the reviewer heard, were often hidden or unaddressed by the religious communities themselves, partly due to 'honour cultures' and the fear of being rejected or mistreated by the community, where seeking a divorce or simply speaking out about an abusive or unhappy marriage may be labelled shameful.

³⁹¹ Rajnaara C. Akhtar (2020) 'Non-legally binding Muslim marriages in England and Qatar', EJIMEL, 8 (1), 13-24. Available at: www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/187603/1/EJIMEL_SpecialIssue81.pdf. Annelies Moors, Rajnaara C. Akhtar and Rebecca Probert (2018) 'Contextualizing Muslim religious-only marriages', Sociology of Islam, 6(3), 263-273. Available at: brill.com/view/journals/soi/6/3/article-p263_263.xml?language=en. Uddin Islam (2018) 'Nikah-only marriages: Causes, motivations, and their impact on dispute resolution and Islamic divorce proceedings in England and Wales'. www.researchgate.net/publication/330663104.

³⁹² Annelies Moors, Rajnaara C. Akhtar and Rebecca Probert (2018) 'Contextualizing Muslim religious-only marriages', Sociology of Islam, 6(3), 263-273. Available at: brill.com/view/journals/soi/6/3/article-p263_263.xml?language=en

³⁹³ Dame Louise Casey (2016) 'A review into opportunity and integration'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575973/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf

³⁹⁴ Rajnaara C. Akhtar (2017) 'The truth about Muslim marriages: 60% of Muslim women surveyed are in marriages not recognised by law'. Available at: assemble.me/uploads/websites/39/files/5a140876945ed.pdf

³⁹⁵ Akhter v Khan and another [2020] EWCA Civ 122, [2020] All ER (D) 88 (Feb). Family Law analysis available at: [www.familylaw.co.uk/news_and_comment/court-of-appeal-clarifies-the-law-on-marriage-formalities-\(akhter-v-khan\)](http://www.familylaw.co.uk/news_and_comment/court-of-appeal-clarifies-the-law-on-marriage-formalities-(akhter-v-khan))

This reviewer believes that the government should employ all its creative resources to ensure those at risk of harm receive the information, support and protection they need and deserve. From speaking to community stakeholders, it is clear the issue must be addressed across multiple levels. Firstly, this reviewer believes that by adopting a greater sensitivity towards the nuances of intrafaith issues, government will be better able to identify and tackle the cases of religious marriage where freedom of choice is under threat. Secondly, government should support third party organisations which encourage greater understanding of the risks of non-legally binding marriages across our society, such as the previously funded Register Our Marriage.³⁹⁶ This, and similarly independent initiatives, co-contribute to educating and supporting current and prospective spouses in making informed choices. They also support faith leaders. Thirdly, officiants and religious representatives responsible for conducting marriages, whether legally-binding or not, must be held accountable for ensuring that both parties involved are able to give informed consent to their chosen form of marriage. Vary rarely do individuals who are preparing to marry have the mindset of one day separating. It is therefore vital that an independent, responsible party conducting the ceremony makes clear the realistic limitations, protections and preventions available to both spouses and any subsequent children. Where faith leaders wilfully fail in this duty to obtain informed consent, they should face significant sanctions. This may include the loss of their right to officiate marriages, and potentially fines for not protecting the rights of those they are marrying.

The freedom to celebrate and practise religious marriage should be upheld. Where ignorance, deception and manipulation are involved, government should address this sensitively but fiercely, protecting the rights of individuals as well as freedom of religion or belief.

8.3 Forced and coercive marriages

Historically, forced and coercive marriages were a common feature of most societies, including aristocracies. Tackling the issue of forced and coercive marriage must therefore begin with understanding the similarities and differences it shares with other practices, including arranged marriage. Arranged marriages can reflect a respectable religious and cultural tradition whereby parents or matchmakers are given the privilege of seeking a spouse for their son or daughter.

However, this reviewer heard evidence that victims are sometimes pressured to marry due to family suspicions or concerns regarding sexual orientation, in the hope that a heterosexual marriage will somehow cure same-sex attraction. This is cruel and degrading. In 2019, the Forced Marriage Unit reported 29 cases involving a victim who identified as LGBTQ+, more than double the number of cases (12) in the previous year.³⁹⁷ However, as sexual orientation is volunteered information and not part of the routine questions asked, the real figure could be higher.

³⁹⁶ Register Our Marriage website (accessed 22 November 2022). Available at: registerourmarriage.org/

³⁹⁷ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2020) 'Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2019'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/894428/Forced_Marriage_Unit_statistics_2019.pdf

According to the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, an offence has been committed if anyone uses violence, threats or any other form of coercion for the purpose of causing another person to enter into a marriage, and believes that the conduct may cause the other person to enter into the marriage without free and full consent.³⁹⁸ However, when practices do not fit this commonly understood criterion for ‘forced marriage’, the public and the authorities may unintentionally overlook problematic cases of marriage or intended marriage, with a potential reluctance to both report and earmark for investigation cases at the ‘softer’ end of coercion. Ascertaining fully informed consent can be difficult when family members and wider communities, sometimes unwittingly, pressure someone to marry, and when the individuals themselves may be unaware of the extensive meaning of ‘full consent’ under the law. Perhaps because of fear or cultural misunderstanding, the authorities risk tolerating a legally unacceptable measure of coercion in these kinds of marriages.

“We have heard of cases where, having agreed to an arranged marriage, one party vocalises their non-consent to a third-party, but does not want to vocalise it to their family. This appears to be a grey area where a seemingly arranged marriage in fact involves elements of non-consent and pressure which feel closer to the definition of a forced marriage.”

Baroness Louise Casey³⁹⁹

It is vital that front-line personnel working in education, entry ports and hospitality are equipped to identify and prevent forced and coercive marriages because so many involve overseas travel, with only 5% of the reported forced marriage cases in 2019 having no link to a country other than the UK.⁴⁰⁰ Moreover, with the increasingly elaborate tactics used by perpetrators to prevent airport detection and protection orders, such as tricking victims into travelling abroad for family weddings or funerals, it is essential that key personnel receive satisfactory training in faith literacy and the signs and actions that can imply coercion. In some cases, girls being forced into marriage have only escaped by relying on their own wits and ingenuity, such as hiding spoons in their clothes to trigger metal detectors so they are separated from their parents, therefore escaping the flight at the last minute.⁴⁰¹ Potential victims should be able to trust that security officers and other public service figures in the community see them and can protect them from harm.

Since this review was initially written, government has helpfully stepped up its awareness-raising activities and now conducts monthly workshops for police officers or social workers,

³⁹⁸ Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/12/part/10/enacted

³⁹⁹ Dame Louise Casey (2016) ‘A review into opportunity and integration’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575973/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf

⁴⁰⁰ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2020) ‘Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2019’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/894428/Forced_Marriage_Unit_statistics_2019.pdf

⁴⁰¹ The Independent (16 August 2013) ‘Girls escape forced marriage by concealing spoons in clothing to set off metal detectors at the airport’. Available at: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/girls-escape-forced-marriage-concealing-spoons-clothing-set-metal-detectors-airport-8764404.html

as well as carrying out bespoke presentations to different audiences such as GPs and Border Force staff. In 2021, the Forced Marriage Unit reportedly trained 1,014 professionals in recognising and supporting potential and actual victims of forced marriage. They have also supported extensive updates to the government forced marriage guidance published in 2022, including new chapters for registrars and staff at the border, complementing an existing chapter for school staff.⁴⁰² Border Force itself has recently produced new operational guidance for its staff. Since 2013, it has supported UK policing's Operation Limelight, which takes place at airports, seaports and international rail stations around school holiday periods. This targeted operation is repeated every few months and aims to increase general awareness and target inbound and outbound traffic to and from countries with a high prevalence of harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage.⁴⁰³

These are welcome initiatives, but until every front-line public sector worker is mandatorily trained in forced marriage awareness and until potential victims no longer have to advocate for themselves and rely on their own methods to be noticed, there is more to do. With the global pandemic reducing international travel, as well as disrupting marriage and wedding ceremonies, the expectation is that while most other domestic violence crimes have increased, forced and coercive marriages are expected to have decreased in both 2020 and 2021. As global interactions begin again on a large scale, this is the perfect moment for government to prevent the re-emergence of this crime.

The failure of government to adequately capture forced and coercive marriages in existing reporting methods is potentially enabling such marriages to take place.⁴⁰⁴ This reviewer welcomes the commitment in the newly published strategy for tackling violence against women and girls to “explore options to better understand the prevalence of FGM [female genital mutilation] and forced marriage in England and Wales”.⁴⁰⁵ However, to commit to addressing the full range of coercive behaviour or pressure in some religious and arranged marriages, this reviewer believes government should publicly adopt the term ‘forced and

⁴⁰² Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) and Home Office (2013, updated 2022) ‘Guidance: Forced marriage’. Available at: www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage#full-publication-update-history. Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (updated 28 July 2022) ‘Guidance: Multi-agency statutory guidance for dealing with forced marriage and multi-agency practice guidelines: Handling cases of forced marriage’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-right-to-choose-government-guidance-on-forced-marriage/multi-agency-statutory-guidance-for-dealing-with-forced-marriage-and-multi-agency-practice-guidelines-handling-cases-of-forced-marriage-accessible#contents

⁴⁰³ National Police Chiefs’ Council (15 July 2019) ‘Police launch national forced marriage crackdown at airports’. Available at: news.npcc.police.uk/releases/police-launch-national-forced-marriage-crackdown-at-airports. Metropolitan Police and New Scotland Yard in partnership with the National Police Chiefs’ Council, Border Force and West Midlands Police (2020) ‘Operation Limelight: A multi-agency safeguarding operation at the UK border responding to female genital mutilation (FGM)’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/860625/operation_limelight_instructions.pdf

⁴⁰⁴ This was also noted in Home Office (2021) ‘Policy paper: Tackling violence against women and girls strategy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy

⁴⁰⁵ Home Office (2021) ‘Policy paper: Tackling violence against women and girls strategy’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy

coercive marriage’ rather than just ‘forced marriage’, reflecting the full meaning that is already established in the legal definition.

8.3.1 Scale of forced and coercive marriages in the UK

Between 2011 and 2018, the government’s Forced Marriage Unit provided advice and support in an average of 1,359 cases per year.⁴⁰⁶ The Forced Marriage Unit’s work to raise public awareness has certainly contributed to the consistency of this figure. However, it is widely recognised that cases of forced marriage, whether intended or actual, are likely to be far higher than the Forced Marriage Unit’s records – anywhere between 5,000 to 8,000 a year.⁴⁰⁷ This is due to the hidden nature of the crime and the likelihood of under-reporting in communities.⁴⁰⁸ Despite the crime’s prevalence, the number of criminal convictions remains exceptionally low, with an average of 32.5 convictions flagged as related to forced marriage per year between 2014 and 2018. This falls to only six convictions in 2019-20 and 235 protection orders issued by family courts in 2020.^{409, 410} The Forced Marriage Unit’s statistical reports, while providing a useful picture of their own work, do not reflect the overall picture of forced and coercive marriage in the UK. It may be useful to standardise and integrate figures collected by relevant charities such as Karma Nirvana to build a truer picture of the overall prevalence of this crime.⁴¹¹

During the course of researching for this review, the reviewer found worrying false perceptions among many civil servants, politicians of all parties, and society in general relating to forced and coercive marriage. Firstly, it is sometimes assumed that this issue primarily occurs within Muslim and Asian communities. But the Forced Marriage Unit is clear that forced marriage can affect anyone regardless of their age, gender, religion or ethnicity.⁴¹² Recent cases have shown that the issue can span across various regions, including the Middle East, Europe, Africa and North America. False preconceptions can mean that potential pockets of victims within other groups, such as Charedi Jewish communities and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, who can have strong religious

⁴⁰⁶ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2020) ‘Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2019’. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/894428/Forced_Marriage_Unit_statistics_2019.pdf

⁴⁰⁷ National Centre for Social Research (2009) ‘Forced marriage prevalence and service response’. Available at: www.natcen.ac.uk/media/23519/forced-marriage-prevalence-service.pdf

⁴⁰⁸ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2008) ‘Domestic violence, forced marriage and “honour”-based violence: Sixth report of session 2007-08’, (2). Available at: publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmhaff/263/263ii.pdf. National Police Chiefs’ Council (2015) ‘Honour based abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation: A policing strategy for England, Wales & Northern Ireland – eradicating honour based abuse, forced marriage and female genital mutilation together’. Available at: <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/appref/Final%20NPCC%20HBA%20strategy%202015%202018December%202015.pdf>

⁴⁰⁹ While this fall in number is partly due to changes in the collection of statistics (improved accuracy of forced marriage flagging), this remains a shockingly low number. See The Lord Bishop of St Albans (23 July 2020) ‘Question for Attorney General: Forced marriage: prosecutions’. Available at: questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-07-23/HL7247

⁴¹⁰ Ministry of Justice courts data: Family court. Available at: data.justice.gov.uk/courts/family-courts/

⁴¹¹ Karma Nirvana website. Available at: karmanirvana.org.uk/

⁴¹² Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2013, updated 2021) ‘Guidance: What is forced marriage?’. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-is-a-forced-marriage

convictions, have not received enough attention.⁴¹³ It is the opinion of the reviewer that not recording religious or ethnic group data in cases of forced or coercive marriage hampers efforts to tackle the practice. A culturally sensitive approach should be used to improve effectiveness of interventions. Secondly, many people do not realise that a significant proportion of victims are male (19% in 2019). Among victims who had a learning disability, 50% were male.⁴¹⁴

For government to develop a complete and accurate picture to inform the strategy against forced and coercive marriage in the UK, it should systematise the comprehensive collection of data regarding protection orders and forced marriage cases across government, courts and relevant charities. An absence of data cannot be assumed to mean an absence of victims.

8.3.2 Boosting the Forced Marriage Unit

The Forced Marriage Unit was established in 2005, and the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act was introduced in 2007 to protect, advise and support victims of forced marriage. The Forced Marriage Unit is a shared unit functioning across the Home Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The unit leads on the government's forced marriage policy, outreach and casework for anyone resident in the UK, and British nationals outside of the UK (including dual nationals). Part of the reason for this cross-departmental responsibility is the transnational nature of many forced marriage cases.

However, it is the opinion of this reviewer that the joint office structure significantly limits the Forced Marriage Unit's operations, as it appears that neither department takes full responsibility for spearheading the issue, developing effective engagement strategies or producing campaign material. This reviewer believes that repositioning the Forced Marriage Unit in a single department answering to a single secretary of state would enable it to better engage with other government departments, such as the Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to achieve better results at the community level. The importance of involving education officials in the strategy for combatting forced and coercive marriage cannot be overstated, as many victims are school-aged children. Education is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, tool this government has for tackling forced and coercive marriages. During research for this report a respondent said: "Government cannot arrest their way out of this problem, the biggest tool in their toolbox is education." It is essential that the Forced Marriage Unit operates effectively under one secretary of state, who is then able to take ownership of the issue and consult crucial departments such as the Department for Education appropriately, to jointly explore options for educating young people about their rights and why forced and coercive marriages are illegal.

Until recently, the only available official campaign material for educating and addressing the issue was at least eight years old and, in the opinion of this reviewer, appeared to perpetuate

⁴¹³ Nahamu (2021) 'Position paper on forced marriage: Analysis of arranged marriage as practiced in Jewish communities'. Available at: nahamu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Position-Paper-on-FM-Nahamu-Feb-2021.pdf

⁴¹⁴ Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2020) 'Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2019'. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/894428/Forced_Marriage_Unit_statistics_2019.pdf

a false narrative around the religious and ethnic profile of victims of forced marriage. This included a video campaign and images that disproportionately portrayed seemingly Muslim cases, even if it was not intended. Not only can this lead to feelings of stigmatisation within specific communities, but it also perpetuates a certain image of forced and coercive marriages that could prevent other individuals from identifying with the situation.

It is the opinion of this reviewer that the lack of religious and ethnic group data collection and the lack of overall understanding of the prevalence of forced and coercive marriage in the UK severely hampers the production of effective educational resources and advice. To be effective, resources must be relatable to the broadest range of potential victims and actively combat commonly held stereotypes among public sector workers, politicians and the wider public. Furthermore, missing data and partial representation of the issue compounds the insufficient attention this reviewer believes is afforded victims of less prominent groups, including members of Charedi Jewish communities and the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities (see section 8.3.1 above). This reviewer recognises that the Forced Marriage Unit now provides a range of engagement materials in addition to its website resources, including an e-learning course and a recent cross-platform communications campaign in 2018-19. Other positive developments include making forced marriage a mandatory part of relationships and sex education in schools. However, this reviewer still concludes that the depth and coverage of such educational material is insufficient, especially since some faith-based educational establishments (including faith-based out-of-school settings which aren't technically schools, but where some children may spend most of the day) can and do opt out from certain aspects of relationships and sex education.⁴¹⁵ This is potentially due to the legal right of parents to withdraw their children from certain parts of the subject's curriculum.⁴¹⁶

Tackling forced and coercive marriage requires multiple levels of engagement across various sectors of society and multiple government departments. While the Forced Marriage Unit invests time and resources into spreading awareness among professional sectors and in educational settings (which is a vital component of Forced Marriage Unit activity), this is not enough on its own. Many of the communities most affected by forced and coercive marriage exist outside these sectors, sometimes on the fringes of mainstream society, and are therefore inadvertently excluded from the Forced Marriage Unit's campaign efforts. In some cases, the communities involved exist outside the major professional environments of the police, social services and education, relying instead on internal community-based services. But major public services are where the Forced Marriage Unit directs most of its campaigning, so many will not be reached unless there is targeted engagement. This reviewer acknowledges that the Forced Marriage Unit directly funds a small number of community-based third sector organisations and works closely with non-governmental organisations both formally and informally, all of which increase the reach of anti-forced marriage efforts and victim support. It also provides information on forced marriage in documentation issued to new refugees.

⁴¹⁵ For example, see the purported impact of lack of sufficient relationships and sex education among the Charedi community: Nahamu (2021) 'Position paper on forced marriage: Analysis of arranged marriage as practiced in Jewish communities'. Available at: nahamu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Position-Paper-on-FM-Nahamu-Feb-2021.pdf

⁴¹⁶ Church Times (29 October 2021) 'Stop the sex-education opt-out'. Available at: www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/29-october/comment/opinion/stop-the-sex-education-opt-out

Nevertheless, while there have been notable advances in the Forced Marriage Unit's data collection and information distribution, this reviewer finds that the Forced Marriage Unit does not effectively use the data it collects to identify patterns in communities where forced marriage is prevalent (including religious affiliation). To properly tackle this issue, the Forced Marriage Unit must go beyond reporting statistics and employ a more robust data collection strategy which facilitates greater engagement with communities, including the faith or religious backgrounds of informants, perpetrators and victims to identify trends. This reviewer believes the Forced Marriage Unit should direct its efforts towards community engagement with those in greatest danger of being victimised by forced and coercive marriage. By understanding faith and faith communities, the Forced Marriage Unit will be more effective when carrying out targeted engagement with specific groups where forced and coercive marriages are more common. Engaging at ground level with faith communities and trusted faith leaders can help support understanding of the incompatibility between religion and crimes such as forced and coercive marriage, as the Scottish initiative Imams Against Forced Marriage shows.⁴¹⁷

This report acknowledges that the Forced Marriage Unit is not an emergency service, but it does operate a national helpline for reporting forced marriage cases and providing guidance on dealing with cases. It is the opinion of this reviewer that given the high-risk nature of forced marriage cases, the helpline should be free and available 24 hours a day, all year round. Currently, the helpline may not be accessible to vulnerable victims who don't have access to their own mobile phone or independent finances. While the Home Office funds a number of third sector organisations who also run helplines, only one of them provides 24-hour support, and only one of them relates to forced marriage. This review also has serious concerns about the format of the Forced Marriage Unit's public facing website. At the time of writing, the website provides no method for potential victims to seek 'hide now' protection, which would instantly divert the webpage to a basic browser and provide no search history once the button is clicked, unlike most other websites of this kind. This functionality is essential so potential victims can safely use and disguise the browser search quickly.

There have been some notable advances in issuing protection orders and tracking the number of reported cases related to forced marriage since 2005. This includes making it mandatory for police to record and pass figures on the numbers of crimes and incidents relating to forced marriage to the Home Office (effective since April 2019). Despite this, the reviewer is concerned that the current measures do not adequately tackle the problem. The under-resourcing of the Forced Marriage Unit is evident both in the limited capacity of the team, which (at the time of writing) consists of only six people who are responsible for operating its functions, the limited availability of the helpline, and the limited scope of data collection, which does not record the ethnicity or religious affiliation of victims. The absence of comprehensive data on the religious aspect of forced marriage significantly hinders Forced Marriage Unit's ability to produce relevant and targeted campaign material.

The Forced Marriage Unit must be appropriately structured, resourced and supported across government so it can provide bespoke training across the public sector and front-line services and a free 24-hour helpline for victims, as well as a redesign of data

⁴¹⁷ Scottish Government (2015) 'Imams against forced marriage statement'. Available at: www.gov.scot/publications/imams-against-forced-marriage-statement-2015/

collection methods and subsequent targeted information campaigns. It should be led at the political level by one secretary of state to ensure ownership of this important issue, but with sufficient levels of resource to ensure effective, joined-up thinking across government, particularly with the Department for Education. Only then will the government be able to comprehensively tackle the despicable scourge of forced and coercive marriage.

8.4 Recommendations 20 to 22

Recommendation 20

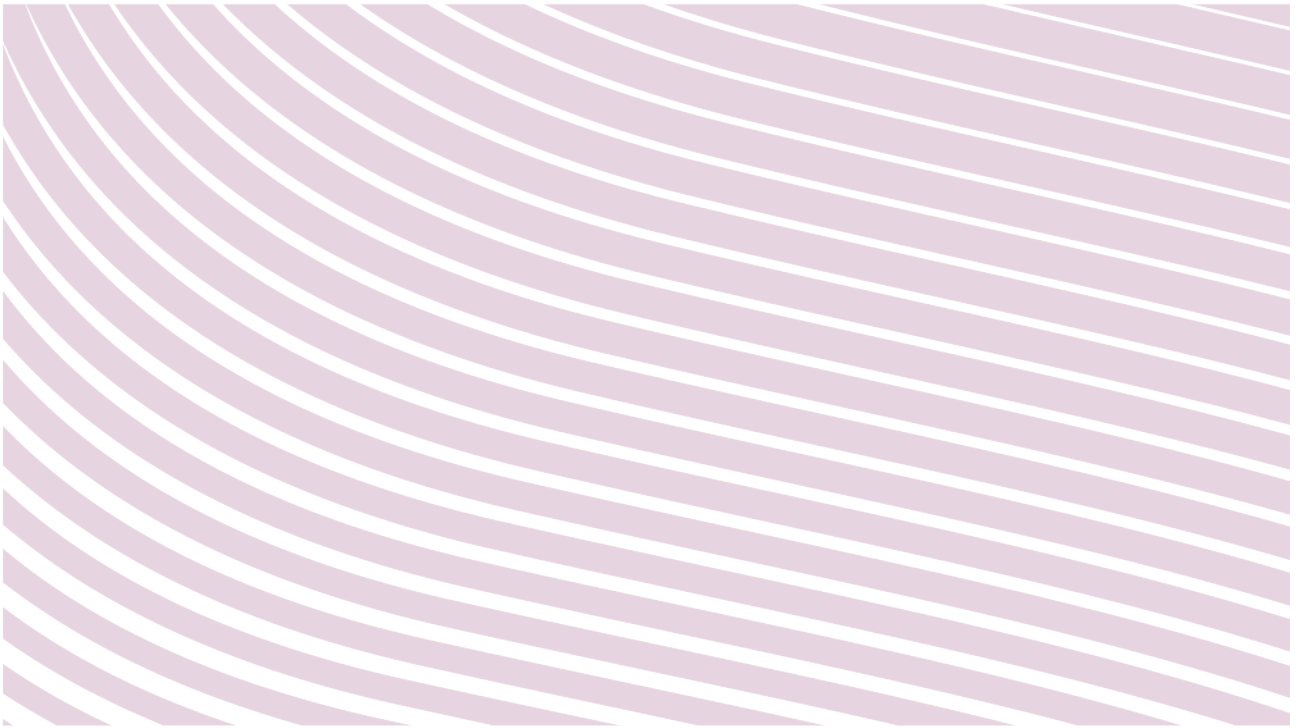
Government should amend the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to make it a criminal offence for faith leaders conducting religious and civil weddings to do so without ensuring both participants have willingly entered into the marriage. Given the additional pressure this will place on faith leaders, government should consider providing training on spotting the signs of forced and coercive marriages to support them. This should include guidance for navigating difficult situations where marriage applications need to be refused.

Recommendation 21

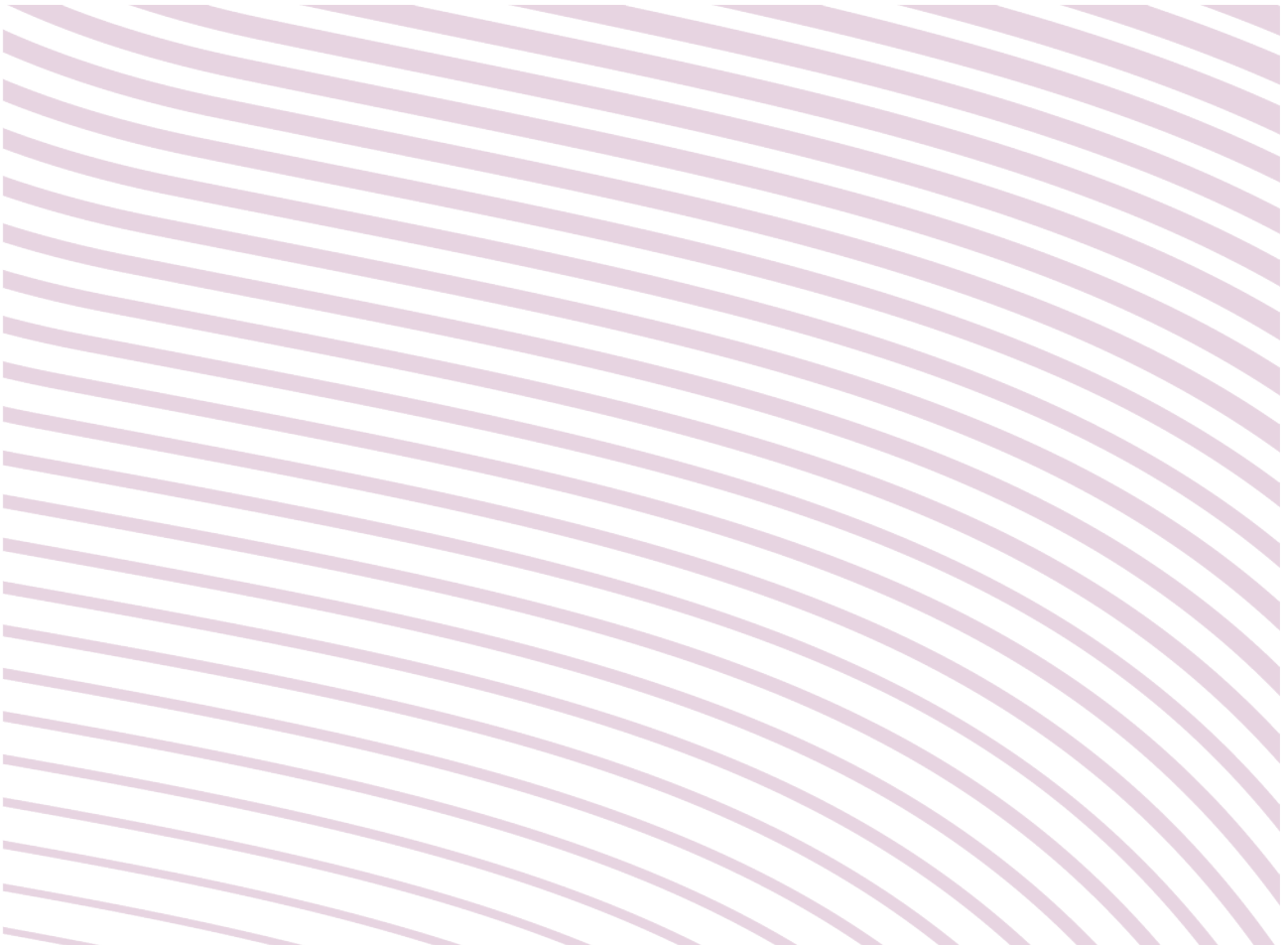
Government should redouble its efforts to tackle forced and coercive marriage by publicly adopting the term 'forced and coercive marriage' to address the full range of coercive behaviour and pressure in some religious-only or arranged marriages. The Forced Marriage Unit should be led at the political level by one secretary of state to ensure ownership of this important issue, and it should be adequately resourced within one department to house both the operational delivery and policy work. This would ensure that the policy team can adapt to perpetrators' evolving tactics while the operation team continues to support victims, as well as prioritising effective join-up across government, particularly with the Department for Education.

Recommendation 22

A review should be set up to fully investigate where existing legislation and policy are failing to prevent the crime of forced and coercive marriage, what further resources are needed, and what more can be done to meet the needs of victims and prevent others falling prey to these crimes. Government should record more quantitative and qualitative data on forced and coercive marriage, including working more closely with social services and local councils. The Forced Marriage Unit specifically should record further data – especially the religious or ethnic backgrounds of both victims and perpetrators – to identify trends and effectively target campaign materials.



Conclusion



This report has taken three years to publish. It is approximately 60,000 words, with at least another 30,000 words that ended up on the cutting room floor. With over 21,000 responses from one of the largest public calls for evidence government has had, one million pieces of data and thousands of other interactions, it has been a reasonably thorough review. Although the COVID-19 pandemic brought massive heartache and unprecedented operational upheaval, some slim opportunities for learning were followed up and are reported here.

Since this report was commissioned, we have had five Faith Ministers, four Secretaries of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (now the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities), and three Prime Ministers. Despite all the changes and pressures, for the most part the team of civil servants and stakeholders that helped get this report published have been magnificent, good natured and professional. There is a belief among some politicians that the Civil Service is either a spineless 'blob' or a rigid, impenetrable self-serving hierarchy. The overwhelming majority of public servants that engaged with this report were neither. Without them, the report would not have been possible. That said, when it comes to government's engagement with faith, many changes have already been made and many civil servants readily acknowledge that more change, sometimes radical, is needed.

The lasting impression of this review should be that faith in the UK is not dead – it is alive and well, but very different and much more diverse than it was a generation ago. Interfaith understanding among faith leaders has really improved, but intrafaith work is both undeveloped and unloved. Much more needs to be done to ensure that there is greater understanding of what is happening within each faith setting, not just across the major faith groups.

Faith literacy is woefully inadequate, particularly among civic leaders and policy makers. Much more needs to be done to ensure that those who seek to govern our country are both cerebrally equipped and intellectually curious about the subject so they can understand the people they hope to lead. If this review's recommendations are not just accepted, but also acted on, then issues like faith literacy will inevitably improve.

Some of the recommendations perhaps could have been bolder or more ambitious, but politics is the art of the possible. Every recommendation is within reach of this government, and any future government, if it wishes to grasp them. Tackling faith literacy, UKAF recruitment and prison chaplaincy are all important issues, but there is one burning injustice that this government should not shrink from, which is the issue of forced and coercive marriages. Successive governments have rightly spent a lot of time discussing violence against women and girls. Indeed, in recent years the tackling violence against women and girls strategy has been given greater prominence as a priority for government and its agencies to address. However, unless government is prepared to really tackle forced and coercive marriage, then its fine words around the tackling violence against women and girls strategy will be seen by many as meaningless. If only one thing is achieved from this report, confronting the pernicious and unlawful practice of forced and coercive marriage once and for all should be the goal.

That said, without faith, places of worship and people of faith, this country would be poorer, blander and less dynamic. Faith is a force for good, and government should do more to both understand and release the potential of this fantastic resource.

Colin Bloom
April 2023