

Response to National Consultation by The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

By [REDACTED]
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General questions for consultation

1. Do you feel at ease with the diversity of modern British society in terms of religion and belief?

I do not feel any unease about the diversity of opinions in modern British society, as I would not in any society. The problem I do have is with the words “religion” and “belief”. The term “religion and belief” is carefully defined in the consultation document, and I do have a problem with diversity of views as thus defined. It is not the existence of those views, as such, but the way in which many of them have been formed. You refer to outlooks which are “genuinely and sincerely held, and worthy of respect”. I believe your implication is that if a belief is genuinely and sincerely held it is therefore worthy of respect. I do not agree with this. For an opinion to be worthy of respect it does not have to be genuinely and sincerely held, merely rationally and intelligently reasoned, although one would expect the former to follow on from the latter. Conversely, an opinion, no matter how genuinely and sincerely it is held is not worthy of respect if it is irrational.

Therefore, I do not feel at ease with the wide variety of irrationally held beliefs in the world, let alone Britain.

2. Are the current systems of civil and criminal law in the UK satisfactory in relation to issues of religion and belief, and to the overlap between these and issues of race and ethnicity?

The current systems of law, in general, are satisfactory in this respect. However, the enforcement of those laws is not always satisfactory. Laws are generally drafted to apply to all citizens equally, which of course is at it should be. However, when religious factions plead that specific laws are contrary to their religion’s beliefs, the law is all too readily bent to accommodate those foibles. This is often in trivial matters such as the wearing of religious apparel or ornaments, but sometimes occurs in more fundamental issues of human rights. Religion and belief, as defined, should not affect the forming of laws, nor the enforcement of laws. In fact, religious beliefs should be irrelevant to the law, which should purely be based and applied on humanitarian grounds. **Most importantly, the concept of Sharia law should be utterly alien to British justice**, even if both victim and perpetrator are members of the Islamic community.

One very fundamental and serious example of the bending of British laws to accommodate Islamic beliefs is the ignoring of death threats - so called “fatwas”,

specifically such threats in 1989 against Salman Rushdie, which should have been treated as the criminal acts that they were.

Religion and belief should be treated completely separately from race and ethnicity. A person has choice and control over their beliefs, or should have, but they have no choice as to the race into which they were born.

3. Do the media accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief?

I am not aware of gross inaccuracies in portraying religious and belief issues. Although I am not a reader of the tabloid press, I hear through other media that the way in which the issues are presented are often sensationalised by them, as is their style. This is not helpful in guiding people's understanding of the issues, but this probably applies less to religion than, say, politics or general social issues.

I have a lot of respect for the BBC, but I do not like some aspects of their handling of religion. I have no problem with programmes that are dedicated to religious issues. I choose not to watch or listen to them and that is a freedom everyone has. But I do object to the injection of religious spots in programs which are of general interest, as occurs with *Thought For The Day* and *Pause For Thought*.

4. Are issues of religion and belief well handled in the curricula of the UK's systems of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and in relevant systems of training and continuing development?

I have strong objections to the intrusion of religion into education. In particular, I object to:

- Blurring of fact and opinion (in which I include non-scientific theories and beliefs)
- Tax advantages for faith schools
- Compulsory worship in non-faith schools

5. Should faith-based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent?

There is no reason why faith-based organisations should not be involved in social or political action. They often do good in alleviating social problems. Their opinions on political issues should be given equal value to all others. They should have freedom to promote their beliefs, as long as the promotions are non-intrusive. However, they must comply with laws and they must not be allowed to deceive people on matters of fact.

6. How should disagreements be handled between and within different traditions and communities, and between these and other interests in public life and wider society?

The simple answer to this is that people and groups with different opinions should discuss them openly and reasonably. On the occasions when the disagreements develop into disputes they should be handled within the rule of law, without compromise for religion, belief or tradition.

Social Change

1. What would you say are the most significant social and economic changes as they affect the place of religion and belief in British public life and people's sense of being British or belonging in Britain?

The most significant changes in people's attitude to religion and belief is that in Britain, in common with most other parts of the Western world, most people are much more enlightened as to the cause of events and far less subject to the superstitions and indoctrinations of the past.

2. Does Britain show equal respect for religious and non-religious beliefs and identities?

I do not think that the people of Britain have much respect for religious beliefs, which is as it should be. However, the Government and other institutions are out of step with the people in continuing to foster religious ceremonies and other practices, and showing undue respect for religion. David Cameron was wrong to say that Britain is a Christian country. The average Briton supports moral values which are similar to those supposedly preached by Jesus Christ, but so do citizens of many countries where Christianity is not the incumbent religion. The basis and motivation for those values is a humane empathy towards other human beings as well as other living creatures, which has nothing to do with religion. Most British people do not subscribe to the superstitions and doctrines of any religion.

3. Should public ceremonies and institutions, for example Remembrance Day and the House of Lords, reflect the changed pattern of religion and belief in British society, and if so how?

The answer is simple in the case of the House of Lords. As part of the total reform of that institution, the right of bishops to sit and vote in the Lords must be abolished. People should be allowed to continue to commemorate any occasion in the way they see fit. What should change is the institutionalised religious content of such occasions.

4. What should be done to help people of all religions and beliefs feel their perspectives and organisations can play a part in shaping public life?

The words "*of all religions and beliefs*" are irrelevant in this question. I believe that there is plenty of opportunity and encouragement for all people who are willing to play a part in shaping public life.

5. What recommendations relating to social change should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

Simply to recognise that for most people in Britain religion is of little significance and should be de-institutionalised.

Law

1. To what extent, and in what ways, have recent legislative changes been beneficial or detrimental? In what ways, if any, do they or other existing laws need to be modified?

I am not aware of recent legislative changes that are relevant to religion and belief. If this question refers to anti-terrorism and so-called “hate” laws, they are necessary insofar as they protect people from abuse and other dangers, whether or not they are religiously motivated. But care must be taken to ensure that they do not persecute people for their ethnicity, and do not suppress the expression of opinions.

However, there are many ways in which laws need to be changed to eliminate religious privilege and to free people from the effects of religion. For example, stopping tax advantages for faith-based schools and other organisations, and ending compulsory worship in schools.

2. What is the appropriate relationship between minority religious tribunals, for example Sharia and Beth Din courts, and mainstream legal systems?

The appropriate treatment of these religious kangaroo courts is that they **must not be recognised by the British legal system**. If they wish to operate at a community level they should be allowed to do so, but **must not contravene British Law**.

3. What have been the benefits of anti-terrorism legislation and preventative action? Have there been negative effects, and if so how could these be minimised or removed?

Obviously the benefits of anti-terrorism legislation and preventative action are that they have helped prevent terrorism and its effects! If the question is whether they have been effective, any legislation is only as effective as the degree to which it is enforced. Presumably, the preventative action has been, at least partly, enabled by the legislation. As there have been no major atrocities in Britain since 7/7/05 and there have been reports of foiled attempts at such, one must assume they have been effective. There has been some negative effect on inter-ethnic relations, but this is inevitable.

4. What are the overlaps, similarities and differences between racial discrimination and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, and are these adequately reflected in the current legal framework?

The obvious difference is that one’s race is not a matter of choice, whereas one’s beliefs are. To discriminate on the basis of something over which the individual has no control is unfair and therefore wrong. Inherently, there are no similarities between these two different types of discrimination. Unfortunately, many people who in other respects are fair in their judgements seem to be unclear in this respect. I do not see any logical overlap between the two.

The confusion in many people’s mind is caused, of course, by the fact that religions are usually linked to specific races. This is owing to tradition and indoctrination through the generations, perpetrated by the religions themselves, and cannot be resolved by legal means but by education and enlightenment.

The only way in which current legislation is at fault is that it sometimes positively discriminates in favour of minorities. Whilst this can be justified for racial, gender and social discrimination because it compensates for inherent injustices over which members of minority groups have no control, nor choice as to whether they belong to those groups, there is no justification in the case of beliefs, where there is a choice.

5. What recommendations relating to the law should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

The commission should recommend the strengthening of laws to ensure fairness and equality regardless of religious belief or affiliation.

The Media

1. Is coverage of religion and belief in the media generally satisfactory, or should steps be taken to improve it, with a view to promoting a greater degree of religious literacy in the population as a whole?

As we know, the term “the media” refers to a very broad spectrum of publications, broadcasters and other organisations, with greatly varying degrees of integrity and accountability. The popular press is most concerned with pandering to its readership and improving circulation and therefore only reports on religion when the story meets those criteria. For the most part, papers are not very interested in religion and this does reflect the views of their readers.

Religious literacy, if this means knowledge and understanding of various religions, should only be promoted to the same extent that all knowledge should be promoted. There is no case for religion to be a special case, except insofar as people should be encouraged to think for themselves and question what they have been brought up to believe.

2. If improvements are desirable, what are they and how should they be promoted?

The BBC, whilst in most respects being a trustworthy supplier of information, spends licence payers money on maintaining a religious affairs department. It interrupts otherwise non-religious broadcasts with religious propaganda in the form of “Pause for Thought” and “Thought for the Day”. These do not fulfil any of the BBC’s three objectives to inform, educate and entertain. The items are intrusive and should be dropped and the Department of Religious Affairs should be disbanded.

3. What principles should guide the education of journalists and media producers in religious affairs and the production of codes of professional ethics for them, and how can these best be built into courses for trainee journalists?

The existence of religion in the world is no more worthy of attention than, say, astrology and does not warrant special principles or codes of ethics. Being based on fiction that masquerades as fact, the ethical approach would be to expose it for the lies that it is.

4. By what criteria, in relation to issues of religion and belief, should specific pieces of work in the media and culture be appreciated or critiqued?

Religion must not be a factor in appreciation or critique

5. What recommendations relating to the media should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

A summary of the above.

Education and Training

1. Are current syllabuses for education about religions and beliefs in primary and secondary schools, including religious schools, appropriate and adequate? If not, what needs to be added or modified?

They are not appropriate. Adequacy does not enter into it. Religion as a separate subject should be omitted from state school syllabuses. It should only be taught in a historical or geographical context. If anything needs to be added, it is to inform children of the negative aspects of religion and the lies and fiction that it preaches. Schools outside the state system should be controlled to the extent that children must be protected from indoctrination and misinformation that could harm them either at the time or in later life. If independent schools choose to call themselves religious, so be it, but they should be monitored, as at present, to ensure that they are providing a good education, they **should not be given tax relief or other advantages by the state.**

2. With regard to matters of religion and belief, what general principles should guide the teaching of history and citizenship education in schools, and the teaching of literature and the other arts?

As previously stated, religion should be taught in a historical context. It should have no place in citizenship education. Its influence on literature and art should be acknowledged.

3. What should be the role of religion and belief organisations in relation to the running of state school systems? Should the state education system be permitted to select pupils and staff on grounds of religion or belief?

The answer to the first part is simple. None. And NO, nothing run by the state should be permitted to select anyone on the grounds of religion. It is strange that this question should be asked in this age of equality.

4. What is and what should be the place of religion and belief on campuses of higher and further education? In continuing professional development (CPD) in a range of occupations, what general principles should guide coverage of matters of religion and belief?

I do not have a clear idea of what is currently the place of religion in higher education, but it should have no place. In my experience, religion has never had any place in CPD, so why should it start now?

5. What recommendations relating to education and training should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

A summary of the above.

Social Action

1. What do you see as the benefits and disadvantages of social action by organisations defined by a religion or belief, both locally and nationally?

Religious people and organisations seem to believe that they have higher moral principles than their secular equivalents. Whilst there is no reason to suppose that they do, their belief does seem to motivate them to do good in many areas, and this is to be applauded. There is no real disadvantage in this except that they are deluding themselves, and perhaps others, as to their motives.

2. Are processes of consultation, collaboration and partnership between government and community organisations satisfactory?

Yes, as far as I am aware.

3. If not, how should they be improved, and what are the respective responsibilities in the public and voluntary sectors for the making of such improvements?

No comment.

4. What are the principles underlying successful social action by organisations defined by a religion or belief, and what kinds of training activity are most effective in developing leadership skills and qualities?

The many national and international charities both secular and religious are generally motivated by altruism. I do not understand why some choose to do this in the name of religion, except, perhaps, for historical reasons. If I were being cynical I might speculate that it is in the expectation of better treatment in an afterlife (hence less altruistic). I am not qualified to answer the second part of the question.

5. What recommendations relating to social action should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

Only that religious affiliation should not be a factor in determining an organisation's tax status.

Dialogue and Engagement

1. What are the principles underlying effective dialogue within and between different religious and non-religious individuals and groups? Are present structures and processes for engagement adequate for promoting this dialogue?

I do not fully understand this question. The principles underlying effective dialogue between any groups or individual are reasoned argument. I am not aware of any formal structures or processes for promoting dialogue.

2. How clearcut is the difference between reasoned criticism on the one hand and bigoted or closed-minded opposition on the other?

In my mind it is very clear cut.

3. What are the factors which lead an individual or group to be intolerant of beliefs which are different from their own?

The beliefs being based on illogical, unreasoned, muddled thinking.

4. What changes need to be introduced into the leadership training programmes of faith communities, in order to take account of differences both within and between traditions?

In my opinion and, I believe, the opinion of the majority of British citizens, there is no place for faith communities in 21st century Britain. Therefore, the question is irrelevant.

5. What are the foundations for shared values and what might some of those shared values be?

All values should be based on humanist common sense.

6. What recommendations relating to dialogue and engagement should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

No comment.