

Please find below my answers and thoughts regarding the questions posed by the Consultation. For background purposes, I am a practicing Hindu and I have written from a Hindu perspective (I have been fortunate enough to have been able to study Vedanta for over 14 years and I teach Hinduism at GCSE level).

I am also an international development professional with a focus on conflict transformation and justice reform; consequently I approached the task with a view to suggesting reforms and changes that can improve how the State and different religions interact, identifying imbalances and how they can be changed.

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### **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?

In Hinduism, a central understanding is that happiness comes from within, that the essence of the soul is "satchitanand" - (truth, consciousness, natural bliss) [note there is not often an exact translation from Sankrit to English, so we have to find the best fit word(s) to portray or translate the concept/ idea].

The pursuit of wealth, in Hinduism, is defined narrowly, and though "wealth" has a wider meaning than "money", it is clear that money is a means to a simple end. It is a facilitator to have the basic needs and to be used for Dharma (righteous living/ noble deeds/ right conduct). (Similarly, in Christianity, Jesus was a person who lived frugally, with few objects. Whilst 'poverty' was not his aim, living with money and luxury was not either. Rather, he wanted people to appreciate that happiness and peace comes from somewhere deeper within, not from money ("It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle"). ). This notion of money as a facilitator clashes with the economic model UK subscribes to.

Economically, the current paradigm is "Capitalism", also supported by other economic models such as neo-liberalism and underpinned by "Consumerism". The central plank of this ideology is the drive to accumulate money or proxies for money (objects) and to increase profits - often for the shareholder. Necessary to Capitalism, and it's support, is the absence of any kind of regulation, leading to a free market. Trade barriers and regulation and antithetical to free-market, open competition.

How does this affect religions? The drive to make more and more money and to establish money and wealth central to a person's aims, clashes directly with Hindu and Christian thinking (I am not as knowledgeable about Islamic and Jewish thinking, though suspect they think similarly). In Capitalistic thinking, money (or wealth) becomes the end, not the means. Consequently, citizens in (British) society are framed as "consumers" or "customers", the name of the game becomes to sell as much as you can to them, to extract money, to make profits. **The current situation is that most people are calibrate their value according to their material wealth, not by the quality of their character, their moral compass or their contribution to encouraging society to become more harmonious.** Measures of progress are in monetary terms and there is a drive to 'grow', not spiritually, but economically. Every Government bows to the 'market' and the companies and transnationals (including banks) that control and influence the market.

As Britain becomes a wholly consumer society, beliefs are influenced and changed with regards to what makes one happy and content and what is the role of an individual in society. Most people will seek to find value and happiness in exterior things (cars, houses, jewellery, phones, clothing....). Fuelling this notion are Films, soaps, music videos and other media stories and advertisements. From a Capitalism perspective, people are required to be consumers and their function is to spend. Interestingly, when the i-phone 6 came out recently, there were very long queues from early morning. When one purchaser was asked why he wanted the new phone, he simply could not answer and said that he just had to have one...! **From a Hindu (and other religions, I suspect) perspective, such an identity and method of living and being is opposite of the teachings and guidance on how to get closer to God or appreciate what our purpose is as a soul within a human body.**

Capitalism and Religion have contrary aims. As a Consumer or Customer, the only belief I need to hold is one that runs along the lines "I need that object/ item" or "I cannot be comfortable without it" or "It will increase my self-worth". Once you have installed this belief/ idea, British life, British or Hindu values (or Christian values?) become secondary or inferior to the value gained by being the owner of that object.

Consequently, for much of British Society, youth and young professionals especially, the fundamental desire becomes to earn lots of money. Why? To spend on objects or lifestyles that give [temporary] happiness and a sense of worth or belonging. Belief in - or prayer - to God, or a higher energy, seem archaic or irrelevant. Control of the senses is too much effort. Whilst discipline does lead to greater freedom (as espoused by all beliefs), discipline is seen (like Capitalism sees Regulation) as an obstacle to 'enjoying' life and achieving goals.

To add, such an economic system requires huge resources as there is a constant demand for objects. This has an environmental impact too (clashing with tenets of Hinduism that ask us to respect the Earth...). Further, the current Economic paradigm, necessary funnels money into fewer (offshore) bank accounts and we find a situation where just 85 people between them control as much wealth as the poorest half of the global population (Oxfam Report, "Working for the Few", 2014). No religion can or does accept such inequality. As citizens, especially the younger generation, perceive such inequality or experience catastrophes (e.g. death through famine, or preventable or abject suffering...) they turn away from religion because, they reason, surely "no God can allow this..." and conclude that therefore there is no God...

It is not surprising therefore people, especially the young either turn away from religion, or get absorbed into extreme forms of ideology to make the world right.

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

It is vital to ask "What is meant by Britain"? "Britain" cannot show anything as it is not an entity with a conscience or defined entity. It is important to question "Who represents Britain"?

Looking at the media, the right wing press (Daily Mail, Telegraph, Express) - show little or no understanding of Hinduism or Islam. Their business model seems to focus on advocating Nationalism, which is portrayed as Britishness, and linked to 'tradition' and 'history'. Sadly, for many ethnic minorities, British history involves much violence and subjugation against their country of origin.

What it means to be British is a fundamental question for all. And intricately woven into being British is Christian belief and thought. David Cameron saying Britain is a Christian country

sends the signal that other faiths will not be respected or be given equal treatment, but will be *tolerated*. If the current Prime Minister represents Britain, for example, then clearly there is no equal respect or status for other religious beliefs.

There are some clashes with the (media?) notion of Britishness and some tenets central to Hinduism and Islam. For example, If Hindus, advocated for vegetarianism, or Muslims advocated the banning the consumption of pig meat; one can imagine the vilification by the Daily Mail or Telegraph or Sun, saying it was an attack on the 'great British bacon sarnie'. No doubt UKIP or the BNP would argue that 'we' are attacking Britishness and 'we' should...Go Home! Minority religions, it seems, are tolerated as guests in the home as long as they remain polite and do not upset the host. As soon as they seem to impinge or become vociferous, then the idea of Britishness is erected, to counter the effects of minority religion influence. A 'them' and 'us' continuously to pervade, even though British Hindus, for example, make a significant contribution to the UK.

Religiously, Parliament and the Monarchy are intertwined with Christianity. The Queen is the head of the Church of England. The Archbishop of Canterbury has incredible political clout. There are 26 bishops of the Church of England that sit in the House of Lords (Lords Spiritual). Where are the Hindu Lords Spiritual? There is clearly no equality - or no proper secularity.

If Christianity is institutionalised in Parliament, then what laws and rules emanate will often be in line with Christian thought and ideology (of course there is the odd exception like gay marriages, etc.). This means that Hindu and Islamic thinking is near irrelevant. For instance, in Islam, drinking alcohol is forbidden. To respect this, there could or should be a clear government policy of facilitating the reduction of alcohol consumption towards zero. This would help counter all kinds of social ills such as binge drinking, alcoholism, drink driving...Interestingly in India, Gujarat (the Prime Minister's home State ) is a dry State with a ban on the sale of alcohol, and the Government of Kerala recently announced a move to ban the selling of alcohol. The point is that as alcohol is allowed in Christian ideology, then its ban will never materialise. To illustrate: Hinduism (Jainism and Buddhism) all advocate the respect of an animal's right to live, and to live without suffering. It is hard to see where "Britain" shows 'equal' respect for this significant belief and teaching, even when, paradoxically, British culture is said to be one which 'loves' animals (predominantly the cat, dog and horse variety of animal!). The conclusion to be drawn is, No, 'Britain' does not show equal respect for all religions.

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?

Yes, without a doubt the House of Lords traditions are archaic (the current ceremony dates from 1621). Today's British Society is modern with an emphasis on equal opportunities and achieving by merit. Important to Hindu ideology is the concept of equality - from a divine level where we are all souls, without colour, caste, gender or race) - and from a societal level where each performs his or her duty to the best of their ability - working dharmically, i.e. nobly or righteously, but never with an expectations on the fruits of action (Bhagavad Gita Ch2, v 47 onwards).

Further, Hereditary Peers tend to be white British, this therefore often precludes Hindus, Jains, Muslims...as they tend to be brown British. In and of itself this leads to a religious inequality - not of religious representation per se (as some may not be religious) but of 'culture'. There is a thing such as Hindu Culture and whilst not defined, it can be recognised to include (in no particular order) being a vegetarian, not drinking alcohol, treating guests with utmost respect, strict discipline for your children and the yourself, regular visits to the

temple, performing seva (selfless service), belief in the soul, striving to be humble, non-violence (in thought, as well as deed), etc. With a House of Lords of predominantly white men, this leads to religious inequality. Mix with that the fact that 26 Lords are Lords Spiritual, with prayers read every day, then the religious inequality becomes accentuated.

The legal ceremonies, also have Christian underpinnings. The start of the legal year is marked with a religious service in Westminster Abbey in which judges arrive from the Royal Courts of Justice followed by a reception at the Houses of Parliament, hosted by the Lord Chancellor. The religious service includes prayers, hymns, anthems and psalms, with both the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice reading a lesson. Again, ostensibly men wearing wigs and long robes is out of touch with modern Britain, but also there is no space for other religions to take part or input - it is purely a Christian event (and if space is given, it is as a token gesture).

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?

Reform (public) Institutions so that the ceremonies, if indeed they are needed, are secular. Make positive changes so that there is equality of representation of spiritual belief and non-belief. Change the system that allows the Queen to be both the Head of the Church and Parliament.

If, in the work of any institution, when the question of God or religious practice or any area that needs religious input arises, then input should be sought externally, not from those that work within the institution or are a part of it. This goes to reducing conflict of interest (or conflict of conscience) and helps to create objectivity and equality. To this extent, we should look at the French State model which splices out religion from all State functions.

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

There should be greater training and awareness of different religions and their central tenets. Part of officials' work development or professional training (CPD points, etc.) should be about awareness of 'culture' and to explore if they exercise decisions according to their culture (i.e. subjectively), or if they are wholly objective and impartial.

Positive reform should be made to ensure that Institutions have (Christian) religion removed from their ceremonies (House of Lords, opening of the Legal Year, etc.) There should also be very clear guidelines to the press about the need to uphold religious harmony and not create or fuel conflict. Explosive headlines and biased reporting can very quickly reverse gains and polarise along religious fault lines.

Equally being British should be seen as an organic, changing identity. If being British is just about history, then those ethnic minorities by race and religion, or those immigrants who become British, will feel left out as their historical tie to Britain is short and shallow.

Central to all religions is the concept of respect for the 'other', a cultivation of humility and a detachment from material objects, especially as a source of happiness and self worth. Whilst Government policies should be secular, they should also recognise common human values shared by the majority of the population, irrespective of religion. The Commission can recommend that all political parties look deeper into such values and include them in their manifestos. A cultural change in attitude can improve how citizens interact, can reduce conflict and improve co-operation, and can change the direction for people to lead happier

lives. This helps where peace and happiness emanate from and are cemented in good relations, a sense of harmony and a natural will/ desire to support one another. Certainly this will help in times of austerity, will improve social capital, etc., but will also help shape how Britain interacts in world and what international policies it creates.

## Law

The reintroduction of Caste by the British Government through the 73rd amendment to the Enterprise and Regulatory Reforms Bill, is a retrograde step. There is no issue of caste in the UK, yet because of an incredibly flawed piece of research by a myopic academic, this issue has been foisted on the Hindu people.

As a practicing Hindu I have never had to think of my caste in the way I have had to recently as a result of Government 'initiatives'. Hindus in the UK get along well and there is no caste discrimination at any level. A visit to any temple will provide ample evidence. The academic study focussed on a handful of Hindu Punjabis in the Wolverhampton area! Whilst there may be specific and local issues, this does not at all affect or touch upon the harmonious relations between the other 99.9% of Hindus.

The problem is that the Government did not properly or at all consult with the mainstream Hindu organisations. So legislation passed, which affects all Hindus in an incredibly detrimental way has been pushed through. Further, as the person leading this crusade is Lord Harries, a Bishop, this did little for inter faith and instead made many Hindus weary of political Christians trying to undermine Hindu harmony. (It is noted Lord Harries is part of the Steering Committee)

### Sharia Courts:

There should be only one legal system, introducing Sharia or Beth Din Courts weakens the paramouncy of the legal system and its 'monopoly on justice'. Further, by allowing one religion (say Islam) to have its own courts, this creates an inequality between religions and can lead to, for example, Sikhs or Jewish people to ask for their courts.

### Recommendation:

The Human Rights Act is vital and necessary. The Governments idea to repeal the Act is worrying, especially when David Cameron has said that the UK is a Christian country. Whilst religious relations in the UK have been very good, it is actions like the ones described that can and perhaps will unsettle the balance. This Government is not sensitive to minority religions and change must happen through raising awareness and maintaining channels for more meaning participation of relevant stakeholders. This requires commitment, will and research.

## 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?

It is not satisfactory at all. Much of the media, when touching on religion focuses on Christian thought and Islamic issues. There isn't a balance, or even proportionate balance. Thought of the Day on Radio 4, for example, often has a Christian 'thinker'. The right (wing) press are silent on Hinduism and if the Mail, Express or Telegraph do print a story, it is often focussed on some negative aspect. For example, on 28 November 2014, the Daily Mail published this story about Nepal's Hindus slaughtering cattle for a 2 day festival:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2852739/Nepal-devotees-sacrifice-thousands-animals-Hindu-ritual.html>

Much of the story are graphic photos. Yet the fact is, that millions of cows are slaughtered everyday for food (ostensibly for 'non-Hindus'). Most people will not think of this and so the impression on the mind is the barbaric slaughter of cows by Hindus.... This is how on a conscious and sub conscious level Hinduism and other religions or any group can be and are undermined. There is no effective guidance to newspapers, and certainly no meaningful sanctions. To underline the point, The Kumbh Mela is one of the most important and largest gathering of Hindus for prayer. It is well known. The Daily Mail led their story on 8 April 2014 with this Headline: "Inside India's Kumbh Mela festival where holy men (and women) reach the gods with a little help from some marijuana and technicolour make-up".

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2599719/Inside-Indias-Kumbh-Mela-festival-holy-men-women-reach-gods-little-help-marijuana-technicolour-make-up.html>

So what must Daily Mail readers think of Hinduism...?

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

There needs to be clear guidelines to journalists. But fundamentally, EDITORS need to be told that breaching of Guidelines can lead to severe consequences, including prosecution. I appreciate that there are sometimes stories that are controversial. A killer that happens to be a Hindu is not a Hindu murderer. Nor is it relevant he is Hindu. And if it is relevant he is Hindu, then a journalist must get the view of a mainstream religious authority - to balance the negative shadow naturally thrown by coupling the words Hindu and Murderer.

Perhaps there has to be scrutiny of how words are actually put together. Journalists and Editors understand the 'power of suggestion' and there should be guidelines ensuring that there are no suggestions, or if there are, they are intended and are NOT inflammatory.

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?

The questions to be asked are:

- a) Is what I am reporting the whole truth, or is there a side I am not reporting?
- b) What is my intention and motivation in writing and publishing this article? What feelings or thoughts do I want the reader to go away with?
- c) Is it possible for a person to read what I am reporting and take a negative view?

d) If so (to c) ), then am I balancing what I am reporting a view from a mainstream (religious) organisation?

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

As above.

That when reporting, on religion, every effort must be made to report accurately and sensitively. It must be borne in mind, for many, religion defines their relationship with God and their understanding of him. This goes to the core of a person's identity and their deepest convictions, upon which everything else is based. An insult to this hurts and can anger. So a Newspaper, media outlet or any piece of public broadcast must bear this strongly in mind.

## 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?

### Benefits:

- These organisations motivation is not profit. They genuinely seem to care for the cause for which they are implementing projects.
- Such organisations have excellent 'manpower' with many people willing to help and volunteer; they also have access to other resources that can help implement projects.

### Disadvantages:

- Many religious organisations involved in social action, e.g. development aim to convert or proselytise - either overtly or covertly. This is a major issue as Government funding is being used. Also, those being helped are, by definition, vulnerable, and in a position they need help. This means they are more likely to sit and listen or partake in religious activity in order to receive the needed assistance. It is well known that Christian groups, especially from the US, try hard to convert recipients of aid to Christianity whilst giving assistance. Indeed in India it was such a problem, the Government had to legislate against it.
  - From my experience, trying to get work for an Aid Organisation that is, for example, Christian, when one is of another religion is impossible. As a development professional I have tried. For example, positions at World Vision require the applicant to be following Christianity: currently there is an open position for [Sponsorship Operations Manager](#) the job description requires one to have an "Active Christian Faith" - so not matter how qualified I was I could never get this position. Yet, World Vision gets funding from the Government, funding that comes from, inter alia, tax paid by Muslims, Hindus, Jews...
2. Are processes of consultation, collaboration and partnership between government and community organisations satisfactory? + 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?

Not at all. The government has not a clue who are the bona fide Hindu Leaders. Often you get well resourced and vociferous Hindu (men) who shout loud and say they represent the Hindu Faith, and the different government departments fall over themselves to pay homage and get his advice and views.

This is a fundamental problem within the Hindu Community and one that it needs to sort out. From the Government perspective, it should try to seek REPRESENTATIVE Hindu organisations. Some Hindu organisations purport to be representative or even democratic, they are not. I know as I have been involved in Hindu social work for many years.

There should be a small team, perhaps in the Cabinet Office, that keeps track of representative Organisations to ensure that they are who and what they say there are. For example, I can name one Hindu Organisation that is regularly requested for its views. I know that on its website it claims to represent X number of Hindu Bodies. If you look closer, these X bodies, themselves are either non-representative or defunct. Further, it will be found that the Hindu Organisation seldom contacts the X Hindu Bodies for their views, and if it does, it just speaks to a few cronies to get the views of a few men. Et Voila, the Hindu Organisation claims to be representing the Hindu Community. Whilst this is a problem for Hindus, what gives oxygen to this is that Government Departments will call and listen to its views so giving it importance.

I have gone into detail because this is incredibly important. The UK Government need to ensure it does a quality and correct stakeholder analysis. It cannot be lazy complacent. Consulting with the wrong stakeholder (and therefore no stakeholders) on a matter can be catastrophic, causing conflict and creating distrust.

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?

Firstly, such organisations need to be transparent in how they manage projects. There must be a clear statement in the project plan that the work will done in a SECULAR manner, without any attempt to convert/ proselytise. This must be a condition of funding.

Secondly, all staff must be trained in working objectively and in a secular manner. Whilst any individual worker may be doing the 'work for God', for example, that is their subjective motivation. When delivering outputs, they must be objectively seen as neutral and secular. This avoids undue influence and conversion, both directly and surreptitiously.

Thirdly, positions must be open to all faiths and people chosen on merit, not faith. As a Hindu, there should be no reason I cannot work for World Vision on a development project. Yes it can be a job requirement that I am respectful of all faiths - but I cannot see how my competency for a position depends on my faith (unless of course, converting others is part of the position: either advertised, or meant to be done covertly)

Fourthly, there MUST be Government oversight and a strict rule of suspension of funding if any faith organisation is found to be trying to spread its faith through covert methods, especially using government funding of projects.

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

See above.

## Dialogue and engagement

Please my point above, under Social Action, especially the issue of ensuring those that are consulted are genuine, bone fide, representative organisations that have been democratically elected and can prove they actually to a) represent the people and b) (can) provide evidence of their mechanisms and processes, including have used such mechanisms for consulting on and collating views.

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?

There does not seem to be any robust, public and transparent structures. All consultation seems to be behind closed doors. An effective dialogue requires access to participate and transparency, including advertising the results of dialogues, and agreements made, when possible.

The Government can set up a website, or some portion of a website where all dialogue and outcomes are written up. Future consultations can also be advertised with the opportunity for people to contribute through different media, including live online live real time contribution (this enables those out of London to contribute).

The fundamental principle, and guide should always be to “Search for the Common Ground”. As a starting point this is brilliant in that it focuses on commonalities, building trust and rapport and maintaining a positive, solution focussed attitude. Once this is exhausted and if differences need to be identified, this can be done. At least by this point, stakeholders will trust each other more, have created rapport and are in positive mind sets. Further, difference will pale in the light of the similarities - leading to increased chances harmony.

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

Not always clear, which is why (see 1., above) you need trust and rapport. Much depends on what we judge to be the motivations of the other. If a Muslim says to me “the caste system is odious” - my response will depend on my with him. I may agree, I may retaliate and talk about jihad, I may be defensive, I may explore his understanding. The conversation (or argument) can go in many ways.

When bringing people of different ideologies together, a lot effort has to be made in creating the right atmosphere and ensuring everyone understands why they are there. Guidelines can be drawn up highlighting this point about being sensitive to how messages are received. Further, the guidelines can bring to awareness of people’s own motivations and ensure that the objectives of the meeting are well known, so requiring the right motivations.

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

Most of the time it is a strict interpretation of their own religion and the belief that “if you are not with us, you are AGAINST us”. The more fervent the belief that you are ‘right’, the stronger the belief that the other is ‘wrong’.

Religious teachers/ leaders need to be aware of this. If such teachers hammer home such messages, it is likely those who adopt them will be intolerant. For example, if a muslim preacher drives home the message that all non-believers are fakirs and not worthy of life...as a firm believer of this, I am unlikely to want to listen to any Buddhist teachings or to even give the 'fakir' espousing them much respect.

The government should seek religious leaders who are not so polarising and empower them to advocate that views that allow space for 'non-believers'. A government sponsored leadership course for all religious leaders can give training and coaching in leadership, including:

- How to make your organisation more participatory and democratic.
- How to hold workshops and collate views
- Use of social media and other tools for gathering and collating views (e.g. FB, survey monkey)
- Skills in the use of language, surveying and the art of questioning (especially when seeking members/ adherents views).
- Basic quantitative and qualitative analysis
- How conflicts develop and how to stop them happening

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

Human Rights and such international declarations are good starting points. Workshops can be held where lists of values are drawn up and each value, scriptural authority is sought, followed by indepth discussion on the meaning of each value, together with its application. Such findings can be collated and made public. This will show the common values shared by different religions and how they are interpreted and practiced.

Shared values are: Love and Respect for God, Truth, Honesty, Humility, Loving one's neighbour, (Selfless) Service, Hard work, Integrity.

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

See above.