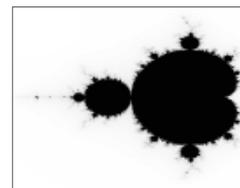


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This response is from Mohammed Amin who is the publisher of the website www.mohammedamin.com and is personally known, to varying extents, by the four members of the steering committee.

The respondent is a British citizen who is a Muslim and is of Punjabi ethnic origin. He was born in Pakistan but came to United Kingdom before the age of two and has lived in the UK for approximately 62 years. More information about the respondent is available at http://www.mohammedamin.com/About_me.html

This response is given in a personal capacity and should not be attributed to any of the organisations with which the respondent is involved. Permission is hereby given to the Commission to publish the response in whole or in part as the Commission considers appropriate. The respondent intends to publish his response on his own website.

[General questions for consultation](#)

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

At a purely personal level, I do feel comfortable with the diversity of modern British society. I see myself as a European liberal and as a Muslim and see no contradiction between those two identities.

[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 UK is a very peculiar country. Unlike the USA we have an established church, but one which does not abuse its privileges and does not oppress adherents of other religions. Indeed the leadership of most minority religions considers that the Anglican Church provides a kind of "umbrella" for faith in Britain which helps to protect minority religions from oppression by extreme secularists. In many ways minority religions fare much better in the UK than in a country such as France which is technically secular but which maintains many disguised privileges for Roman Catholicism. For example the French state pays to maintain almost all religious buildings (without distinction by religion) if they happened to have been built before 1905; that in practice means churches but not mosques.

Our civil and criminal law is largely satisfactory regarding issues of religion and belief.

The interaction with issues of race and ethnicity is largely a red herring arising from the fact that two particular religious groups, Jews and Sikhs, constitute both a religious group and a racial group. Others such as Muslims have often complained that this is unfair whereas in reality it is simply recognising an objective fact. Accordingly, incitement to racial hatred against Jews and Sikhs (and all other races) was criminalised long before incitement to religious hatred against Muslims (and other religions). That was simply a consequence of Muslims not being a racial group.

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

The accuracy and quality of media reporting varies between media organisations. The quality press and the main television broadcasters do a relatively good job most of the time.

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?

As discussed below, there are unresolved questions regarding the role of religion in primary and secondary education. In tertiary education and training and continuing development in my view religion has essentially no role to play apart from hygiene factors such as the availability of prayer space where there is a user need.

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

There is a detailed section below on social action by faith-based organisations. I have left that largely unanswered but have stated my view that social action by religious organisations is perfectly appropriate.

Political action is not asked about in detail below so I will address it here. It is a very difficult subject.

Firstly, I believe that religiously-based political parties are entirely inappropriate.

In some European countries, such as Germany with the Christian Democratic Union, there are political parties which purportedly have a connection with a religion, normally Christianity. Fortunately such a connection is today almost entirely one of nomenclature and what distinguishes the CDU from its opponents is not the religious beliefs of its members but its economic philosophy. Both in Europe and in the UK, if a political party received its support entirely from one religious group that would be immensely divisive and harmful for our democracy.

The correct model is for all religions to be represented in all political parties, so that the parties distinguish themselves from each other by their economic and social policies and not by their religious beliefs.

When it comes to legislation, one cannot expect legislators to leave their religious beliefs outside the parliamentary chamber. However I believe strongly that all political proposals must be argued for only using rational arguments and without any appeal to religious truth claims. This is explained in more detail in my short article <http://www.mohammedamin.com/Politics/The-proper-boundary-of-Political-Islam.html>

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 position of the state should be that religion is a private matter between the individual and God. Wherever possible the state should avoid legislation which makes it impossible for individuals to practice their religious beliefs. For example I would regard it as entirely wrong to ban kosher or halal slaughter.

Beyond that, the position of the state should be that all British citizens are equal and they are individual free agents unconstrained by the religious traditions of the families or communities into which they may have been born.

No individual is required to give any credence to the religious beliefs of any other individual. However civility of discourse should be expected as simply constituting good manners.

These principles allow most sources of dispute to be sidestepped.

For example it is controversial in some Muslim majority countries who is a Muslim. Elsewhere in the world we see people who call themselves Muslim being killed by other people who also call themselves Muslim but who regard their victims as being non-Muslim. In the UK the government does not care what religion any particular citizen is. The census which is prepared purely for information purposes proceed entirely by self-classification.

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?

Two fundamental trends have changed Britain's religious landscape during my lifetime:

- a) The growth of agnosticism and atheism. From being a very small minority, the 2011 census for England & Wales showed that 25% reported themselves as having no religion.
- b) The decline of Christianity, down to 59% in the 2011 census, and the rise of minority religions of which the largest is Islam at 4.8%.

The result is a very different society from one in which almost everyone was an Anglican apart from the minority who were Roman Catholic and a tiny number of Jews. Accordingly while Britain is, and

will be for centuries, a Christian country in terms of its heritage, in terms of its current beliefs it is only 59% Christian, with probably a much lower percentage who are actively practising.

Accordingly it would be a fundamental mistake to link people's sense of being British to Christianity. Instead it is essential to have a form of national identity that is appealing to all citizens (or at least as many as possible) irrespective of their religion or belief or lack of it.

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

Apart from a few historical legacies (such as requiring the monarch to be an Anglican) the state does show equal respect for religious and non-religious beliefs and identities most of the time.

The behaviour of individual British citizens of course varies with some showing more respect than others.

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?

At present minority beliefs are still heavily outnumbered by Christianity. However, while it is reasonable for Christian practice to be preponderant in view of the 59% of the population who self-describe as Christians, it would be appropriate to introduce other religions and beliefs in rough proportion to their numbers. For example, for every 12 occasions on which any event is opened by Christian prayers, on one occasion it could be opened by a Muslim blessing etc.

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?

It is important that all religions and beliefs are recognised and respected by the state, including on ceremonial occasions, in the approximate proportions in which they are represented in our society.

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

The Commission should call for greater recognition in the trappings of civil life for our country's modern religious diversity. It cannot be right that all state religious activity is Anglican, when only 59% of our society describes itself as Christian, with that percentage including Roman Catholics and the other non-Anglican Christian churches.

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 believe that the strengthening of equalities legislation in the form of the Equality Act 2010 has been very positive. At times this has given rise to difficult cases about the boundary between individual religious freedom and the equality rights of other individuals. By and large, I believe that UK law gets it right; if you offer bed and breakfast facilities, you do not have the right to decide that you will not serve gay people any more than you have the right to not serve black people.

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

The fundamental principle here should be that the state upholds its secular law but should have no involvement with matters of religion. Accordingly the state is the arbiter of civil marriage and civil divorce while having no role in deciding whether people enter into a relationship which they regard as a religious marriage and no role in deciding how that religious marriage and relationship should be terminated.

At the same time, it is not unreasonable for the state to take the conduct of the parties with regard to religious matters into account in dealing with a civil divorce. For example Muslim and Jewish men sometimes refuse to give their wives religious divorces. In my view the provisions of the Divorce (Religious Marriages) Act 2002 are entirely appropriate, and in no way an encroachment on religious freedom.

Minority religious tribunals play two roles, which need to be considered separately.

- a) There is a purely religious role regarding matters which the state should have no view on. The simplest example is dealing with religious divorces. I understand that in religious terms a Beth Din cannot terminate a Jewish marriage but it can effectively order the husband to grant his wife a Jewish religious divorce. I understand that in the case of Islam a Shariah court can grant an actual religious divorce directly.
- b) The second role is to act as an arbitration tribunal under the provisions of Arbitration Act 1996. Both parties must assent before the religious tribunal is able to deal with the matter. Here the broad framework is laid down by statute and the religious tribunal is required to meet various criteria and if it fails to do so its decision will be invalid.

For purely religious issues in section (a) in my view the state should not interfere even if the processes of the religious tribunal appear unfair, for example by treating men and women differently.

However with regard to matters within (b), the state does have legitimate grounds for setting out minimal criteria since the arbitration award is to be recognised and enforced by the state and is made under a form of devolved power. Accordingly in my view it is legitimate for the state to deny standing to a religious tribunal that treats the evidence of men and women differently. Baroness Cox has a bill before the House of Lords, the Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill, which seeks to

prohibit such discrimination. It would appear that the Bill would only be applicable to matters within (b) above, but it would be helpful if the Bill could be amended to make that clear.

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?

The main problem from anti-terrorism legislation, in my view, is that many Muslims have incorrectly seen the legislation as discriminatory.

Both Labour and Conservative governments have failed to adequately explain to British Muslims that terrorism by Muslims is a problem for everyone in British society. Many Muslim organisations have sought easy popularity with their members by taking an anti-government line instead of educating their members regarding the threat posed by terrorists and the distorted interpretations of Islam that underlie the ideology of Muslims who wish to become terrorists.

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 Equality Act 2010 gets it broadly right by treating religion as simply another category of protected characteristic. The exemption for occupational requirements in Equality Act 2010 Schedule 9 paragraph 3 is appropriate and should remain.

When it comes to the incitement of religious hatred, the law has a delicate balancing act which can be seen in the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, which quite properly seeks to protect freedom of expression and requires the consent of the Attorney General before proceedings can be brought. In my view these safeguards are appropriate and should be retained. They are not present in the law regarding racial hatred because racial hatred and religious hatred are entirely different; racial hatred does not involve the same freedom of speech issues.

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

The fundamental principle should remain that all British citizens are subject to the same law, which is law made by Parliament with the approval of the Crown.

There are occasional arguments made for the UK to adopt something like the Ottoman millet system with different legal frameworks for different religious groups. Such arguments should be rejected as they would make individual citizens effectively captives of the religious groups that they belong to. The only acceptable principle in my view is "one law for all."

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?

It is wrong to talk about "the media" as if it were homogeneous. There are in fact many different media sources of varying quality, ranging from quality newspapers such as the Financial Times and Economist to very poor quality tabloid newspapers. The standards of the broadcast media are more uniform than the press due to the work of Ofcom, although many of the satellite broadcasters are very under resourced and have output of extremely varying quality. Finally, social media are very diverse, with everything depending upon the individual who is producing the material.

The coverage of religion in the quality press is perfectly reasonable. Sadly many tabloid newspapers are primarily driven by commercial pressures and seek out stories of "religious people behaving badly" (frequently but not exclusively Muslims) to sell more newspapers.

There is a very large divide in society between those who have a religious beliefs and those not. The media (even the quality press which reports religious matters accurately) do little to bridge that divide, but that is not necessarily their role.

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

The easiest improvement to make is for religious organisations to perform better at getting out their story.

Some are much better than others due to a combination of resources and culture. For example the media performance of the Board of Deputies of British Jews significantly exceeds that of the Muslim Council of Britain due to greater resources and greater experience of British society.

In a country with free media, the state cannot and should not attempt to mandate how the media reports religion. The sole responsibility for improving the media's coverage of religion rests with religious organisations and religious individuals themselves.

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 only requirement for journalists is to report accurately and objectively without bias. That applies to everything that they cover, religious affairs and secular affairs. No special principles are required for the reporting of religious affairs.

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 criteria for the reporting of religion are the same as the criteria for reporting anything else, as stated in the previous response.

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

The quality of the media's reporting of religion would improve if journalists were more knowledgeable. (The same applies to everything else that the media reports.) Just as a quality newspaper would never employ an economics correspondent who was ignorant of economics, it should not employ a correspondent to cover of religion who is ignorant of religion. Of course that does not require them to be a believer.

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?

Whereas we have a national curriculum for most school subjects, for religion the responsibility of drawing up curricula has been devolved to local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education. In my view this devolution has been unhelpful and it would be better to have the curriculum determined at a national level, where greater resources could be applied to getting it right once.

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?

There is an unresolved question at the heart of education about religion. Is the purpose of school to teach pupils about religion in the same manner that pupils are taught about any other aspect of society or is it to indoctrinate pupils into a particular religious belief?

In the USA the position is clear with the "separation of church and state". However the distinctive history of the United Kingdom has left us with an unsatisfactory compromise. We have state funded religious schools and state funded non-religious schools but even those non-religious schools are required to hold a daily act of Christian worship, except where a dispensation has been received, and religious education is a compulsory subject.

The general principle regarding religion and belief in education is that the education system should not treat any religion as having a higher truth value than any other. It is perfectly possible to teach

children to understand what Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists etc. believe without the school teaching children that one belief is correct and the others are incorrect.

Citizenship education needs to teach the values that underlie our society. The list recently incorporated in the Department for Education “Mainstream academy and free school: single model funding agreement” paragraph 2.47 is a good starting point:

“respect for the basis on which the law is made and applied in England; respect for democracy and support for participation in the democratic processes; support for equality of opportunity for all; support and respect for the liberties of all within the law; and respect for and tolerance of different faiths and religious and other beliefs.”

The teaching of literature and the other arts should generally be the same for all pupils but occasionally it is necessary to respect pupils' individual religious beliefs. For example children from many religious backgrounds will not wish to take part in drawing exercises with naked human models.

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?

As mentioned above, we have a historical compromise regarding religious schools in the UK. On balance, after considering the issue for many years, I have changed my views and concluded that it would be better to move to the US model so that the state does not fund any religious schools. It is my view that religious schools increase division in society and detract from shared citizenship. Teaching children to believe in a religion should be a private matter for their parents, who should continue to have the freedom to pay for a private religious school if they wish.

However as long as we do have state funded religious schools in the UK, it is absolutely essential that all religions receive equal treatment, rather than preferring one religion over another.

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 believe that it is appropriate for campuses of higher and further education to provide prayer space facilities (preferably multi-religious) for the convenience of their students so that students do not have to leave the campus to practice their religion. Beyond that I do not believe that there is any place for religion in higher and further education other than as an academic subject for study the same manner as other subjects such as anthropology or sociology.

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

The Commission should recommend a broad public debate on whether the state funding of religious schools continues to be appropriate in a society which has the UK's level of religious diversity.

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?

Many religious people are impelled to undertake social action by their religious beliefs. A simple example is the desire to provide soup kitchens or shelter for the homeless at Christmas. Large amounts of charity are given by religious people for social action and this is a good thing.

I am not aware of any significant downsides from social action by religious organisations.

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

No response.

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 response.

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?

No response.

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

No response.

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?

The purpose of interreligious dialogue is often misunderstood, especially by those who are not engaged in it. In my view the objective cannot be to persuade the other party of the correctness of your own religious position; there is no realistic prospect of a Christian convincing a Jew that Jesus was God incarnate!

Instead the objective is primarily to establish better human relationships with adherents of other faiths and to gain a better understanding of how they see the world. For example a Jewish barrister and I have on several occasions presented on the subject of Jerusalem with the twist that he talks about the Muslim connection with Jerusalem while I speak about the Jewish connection. I have written about the purpose of interfaith dialogue at http://www.mohammedamin.com/Community_issues/Why_engage_in_interfaith_dialogue.html

The structures and processes for interreligious dialogue have to emerge organically from the activities of participant individuals and organisations. At best the state can be a facilitator by providing financial resources or subsidised venues. There are many organisations active in the field which will be well known to the Commission members.

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

The dividing line is given by the boundary of politeness. It is inevitable that people of differing religions will disagree quite fundamentally with the doctrines of the other person's religion. For example as a Muslim I do not accept what Christians say about the nature of Jesus.

However all such disagreement needed to be expressed politely in a manner that is not rude or abusive to the other individual. People must be treated with respect, and that has some implications for the language that is used to discuss their religious beliefs. However that should not be regarded as putting any limits upon the politely worded rejection of beliefs that one regards as incorrect.

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

I believe that intolerance develops when individuals grow up and live in a monochromatic environment where they only interact with people from their own cultural and religious background, and where they learn only about their own religious beliefs. The consequence is that they are ignorant about the beliefs of others, and furthermore have no comprehension that these alternative beliefs have their own internal logic and history.

It is easy for a Muslim who knows nothing about any religion other than Islam to not only disagree that God is a Trinity (for example) but to fail to understand that it is perfectly possible for a Christian to

regard this belief as logical with there being a fully developed Christian theology around this belief and its implications.

Rejecting the Christian belief regarding the Trinity is not intolerance, but it is intolerance to behave and speak as if "no right-thinking human" could ever believe in it.

The remedy is also straightforward. People who carry out a deep study of another religion with the express goal of "getting inside the skin" of its adherents will almost always lose their intolerance.

However a key requirement is that the study of the other religion must not be made for the purposes of disputation. There are Christians who read the Quran only for the purposes of rebutting it, just as there are Muslims who read the Bible only for the same purpose. Such individuals emerge from their studies as intolerant as when they commenced them.

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?

Each faith community in the UK has different levels of sophistication in the training of its religious leaders. As indicated above, I see real merit in the deep and sympathetic study of a different religion as part of the training of a faith leader.

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

In my view the most important foundation for shared values is that we are all human beings in a universe of awesome size and complexity.

When individuals are willing to accept that their religious beliefs are contingent, and could be wrong despite being deeply held, they are well placed for engaging with those of different belief. Conversely those who refuse to accept any possibility that they might be wrong are almost always intolerant and incapable of sympathetic dialogue with the other.

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

British organisations which train faith leaders should include a module within their training which involves the deep and sympathetic study of a different religion.

Religious organisations hiring "ministers" (to use a term which is intended to be generic) should seek evidence that the candidate has meaningful knowledge of a different religion as well as the normal process of requiring evidence of knowledge and capacity in the religion practised by the organisation.