

Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life: community, diversity and the common good

NATIONAL CONSULTATION

June – October 2014

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WHAT THIS CONSULTATION IS ABOUT

Setting the scene

Here is a selection of media headlines from the first few months of 2014. Such headlines set the scene for explaining what this consultation is about.

- 'Religious difference, not ideology, will fuel this century's epic battles' (*Observer*, January)
- 'Culture, not faith, is the key to continuity' (*Jewish Chronicle*, February)
- 'UK among most sceptical in world about religion' (*Daily Telegraph*, April)
- 'The British Muslim is truly one among us – and proud to be so', (*Daily Telegraph*, April)
- 'Cameron says Britain should be "more confident about our status as a Christian country – and more evangelical about faith"' (*Daily Mail*, April)
- 'Is British Christianity under threat from aggressive secularism?' (*Daily Express*, April)
- 'UK's first Hindu secondary school could open in Harrow' (*BBC News*, May)
- 'Amritsar commemoration: Sikhs march through London', (*BBC News*, June)
- 'All schools must promote "British values", says Michael Gove' (*Guardian*, June)

Background and purpose

This consultation is an activity of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, which was convened in 2013 by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, to consider the kinds of issue that are raised in the headlines cited above. The Commission is independent and is chaired by the Rt Hon Baroness Butler-Sloss of Marsh Green GBE, formerly president of the Family Division of the High Court.

The steering committee consists of Dr Shana Cohen, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, Dr Edward Kessler MBE (vice-chair) and Professor Tariq Modood MBE. There is a full list of the Commission's patrons and members on pages 11–12.

The purpose of this consultation is to invite your thoughts, ideas and proposals.

Terms of reference

The Commission's formal terms of reference are as follows:

- to consider the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain, and the significance of emerging trends and identities
- to examine how ideas of Britishness and national identity may be inclusive of a range of religions and beliefs, and may in turn influence people's self-understanding
- to explore how shared understandings of the common good may contribute to greater levels of mutual trust and collective action, and to a more harmonious society
- to make recommendations for public life and policy

General questions for consultation

The commission would like to know your views on the following general questions:

1. Do you feel at ease with the diversity of modern British society in terms of religion and belief?
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?
3. Do the media accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief?
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?
5. Should faith-based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent?
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?

Notes on terminology

The phrase **religion and belief** in this document has the same meaning as in legislation. It refers to broad religious traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism; to denominations within such traditions; to non-religious approaches to life such as humanism; and to outlooks which may not be systematic but which are genuinely and sincerely held, and worthy of respect in a democratic society. It includes all the dimensions of belief, practice and identity that may be involved in a religious or non-religious approach to life.

For any one individual, so far as the law is concerned, belonging to a religion does not *necessarily* involve holding certain distinctively religious beliefs or taking part in certain distinctive religious activities such as attendance at public worship. Rather, it may be to do with identifying oneself with a broad cultural tradition, or with being seen by others to be identified with a broad tradition.

The term **public life** in the Commission's terms of reference is similar in meaning to phrases such as public sphere, public square and public space. It refers to areas of society where people from different backgrounds and affiliations meet and work together to legislate, organise and discuss with each other without needing to agree on fundamental religious or philosophical beliefs. Such areas include the legal, political and education systems, social action of various kinds, and the media.

How to respond

You are welcome to send thoughts stimulated by some of the media headlines on page 2, or by some of the general questions listed on page 3.

Instead or as well, you are welcome to send thoughts on one or more of the specific topics outlined on pages 5–9. They are to do with social change (page 5), law (page 6), media (page 7), education and training (page 8), social action (page 9), and dialogue and engagement (page 10).

You are not expected to answer every question in this booklet. Rather, you are welcome to focus just on the questions and topics which are of most interest to you. It is hoped you will illustrate your thoughts with reference to your own personal experience, if appropriate.

Responses can be of any length and can be accompanied by copies of relevant documents. In its eventual report the Commission will acknowledge all the responses which it receives and will almost certainly wish to quote from some of them.

Contacting the Commission: The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, Woolf Institute, 12–14 Grange Road, Cambridge CB3 9DU. Email: maa74@cam.ac.uk

Deadline for submission of responses: We hope you can please respond by 31 October 2014.

SOCIAL CHANGE

Context

People's sense of being British and of belonging in Britain changes with social, political and economic trends, as does the place of religion and belief in public life. Significant trends in recent years include a decline in religious practice, belief and identity, and growth in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities; the growth of religions other than Christianity as a consequence of migration patterns; the increasing impact of globalisation in its various forms (political, economic, cultural, ecological, and so forth); and a greater sense of multiple loyalties and identities.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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?
2. Does Britain show equal respect for religious and non-religious beliefs and identities?
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?
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?
5. What recommendations relating to social change should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

LAW

Context

Under the Human Rights Act 1998 everyone in Britain has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. We are free to change our religion or belief if we wish and to express our religion or belief, alone or in a wider community, subject to the rights and freedoms of others. Under the Equality Act 2010, religion or belief is a protected characteristic similar in its legal status to age, disability, gender, race and sexual orientation. Case law has recognised Jews and Sikhs as ethnic groups. The criminal justice system now defines incitement to religious hatred as a crime and does not accept that there is any religious justification for acts of terrorism.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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?
2. What is the appropriate relationship between minority religious tribunals, for example Sharia and Beth Din courts, and mainstream legal systems?
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?
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?
5. What recommendations relating to the law should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

THE MEDIA

Context

Most people are influenced not only by their personal experience, or by the views expressed directly to them each day by their friends, families and colleagues, but also by what they see, read and hear in the media – newspapers and magazines, radio and TV, websites and blogs, the social media – and in culture more generally, including film, theatre, music, fiction and art.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Context

Throughout the UK there are requirements relating to religious education and worship in schools, and also to the teaching of history and of citizenship. All faith communities organise educational activities for their own members, ranging from award-bearing courses for their leaders and potential leaders to a wide range of more informal events, including talks, discussions, study groups and sermons. Amongst all citizens there seems to be an increasing need for 'religious literacy' – knowledge and understanding of Britain's diversity of religion and belief.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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

SOCIAL ACTION

Context

Many organisations defined by a religion or belief engage in social action locally and nationally. Together with other civil society organisations, they engage in social action not only of their own accord but also often at the request and on behalf of government, and in partnership with government.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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

DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT

Context

There are theological and philosophical differences between Britain's religion and belief traditions that appear to be irreconcilable. In addition, there are significant differences within each tradition about whether and how it should be reinterpreted, and about relations with other traditions. Nonetheless, there do appear to be substantial shared values between people of different religions and beliefs in Britain.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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?
2. How clearcut is the difference between reasoned criticism on the one hand and bigoted or closed-minded opposition on the other?
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?
5. What are the foundations for shared values and what might some of those shared values be?
6. What recommendations relating to dialogue and engagement should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

COMMISSION ON RELIGION AND BELIEF IN BRITISH PUBLIC LIFE

PATRONS

Professor Lord Parekh of Kingston upon Hull, emeritus professor of political philosophy at the universities of Hull and Westminster

Sir Iqbal Sacranie OBE, formerly secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain

The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Lord Williams of Oystermouth, master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and formerly Archbishop of Canterbury

The Rt Hon Lord Woolf of Barnes, formerly Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales

CHAIR

The Rt Hon Baroness Butler-Sloss of Marsh Green GBE, formerly President of the Family Division of the High Court (*chair*)

MEMBERS

The Commission's members are all serving in personal capacities, not as representatives of bodies with which they have connections.

Bishop Dr Joe Aldred, executive secretary for minority ethnic Christian affairs at Churches Together in England and director of Respect Enterprises Ltd

The Very Revd Dr Ian Bradley, principal of St Mary's College, St Andrews and reader in practical theology and church history at the University of St Andrews

Dr Shana Cohen, deputy director of the Woolf Institute, Cambridge (*steering committee*)

Andrew Copson, chief executive of the British Humanist Association and a director of the Religious Education Council

Shaunaka Rishi Das, director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and Hindu chaplain at the University of Oxford

Professor Gwen Griffith-Dickson, vice-principal of Heythrop College and director of the Lokahi Foundation, and formerly professor of divinity at Gresham College

Mark Hammond, chief executive of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and visiting professor of public administration at Canterbury Christ Church University

The Rt Revd Professor Lord Harries of Pentregarth, emeritus Gresham professor of divinity, honorary professor of theology at King's College, London, and formerly Bishop of Oxford (*steering committee*)

Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal, lecturer in Sikh Studies, Department of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham

Dr Edward Kessler MBE, founder and executive director of the Woolf Institute and fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge (*convenor and vice-chair*)

Professor Francesca Klug OBE, professorial research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Human Rights at the London School of Economics and former commissioner at the Equality and Human Rights Commission

Professor Maleiha Malik, professor of law at King's College, London

Professor Tariq Modood MBE, professor of sociology, politics and public policy at the University of Bristol and founding director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship, University of Bristol (*steering committee*)

Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, community imam in Leicester, co-chair of the Christian-Muslim Forum and assistant general secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain

Professor Lord Parekh of Kingston upon Hull, emeritus professor of political philosophy at the universities of Hull and Westminster

Brian Pearce OBE, former director of the Inter Faith Network for the UK

The Revd Canon Dr Angus Ritchie, director of the Contextual Theology Centre at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine, London, and assistant priest at St Peter's Church, Bethnal Green

Rabbi Dr Norman Solomon, senior associate at the Oriental Institute, University of

Oxford, and former president of the British Association for Jewish Studies and the Birmingham Inter-Faiths Council

The Revd Dr Robert Tosh, formerly head of religious broadcasting at BBC Northern Ireland

SECRETARIAT

The secretariat is led by Mohammed Abdul Aziz, director of the Centre for Policy and Public Education at the Woolf Institute and formerly senior adviser on race, religion and community cohesion at the Department for Communities and Local Government. He is assisted by Robin Richardson, a former director of the Runnymede Trust, and by Liran Morav and Austin Tiffany, research assistants at the Woolf Institute.

WAYS OF WORKING

The commission has so far (June 2014) held three weekend residential meetings. Three further such meetings are planned for autumn 2014 and spring 2015. At each meeting there is discussion of specially commissioned papers by visiting speakers. Specific topics include the media, education, social action, dialogue and engagement, and law.

Five local public hearings have been or are being arranged, respectively in Belfast, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds and Leicester. In addition, there will be two national public hearings – one in London and the other, focusing on young people, in Birmingham.

The commission will finalise its report in the summer of 2015.

The commission is funded by grants from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Open Society Foundation and the Woolf Institute.

WOOLF INSTITUTE

The purpose of the Woolf Institute is to serve the public good. The Institute studies how relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims can enhance understanding of key concepts of public life: community and identity, personal responsibility and social solidarity. Combining theology with the social sciences and the humanities, the Woolf Institute seeks to strengthen the ethical framework that is needed for political, economic and social life.

The teaching and research examine common purpose and points of difference between Jews, Christians and Muslims from a multidisciplinary perspective, focusing particularly on Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to the pursuit of knowledge, the Woolf Institute designs public education programmes aimed at improving public and voluntary sector services and linking difference with the broader sustainability of communities.

As an independent institute working closely with the University of Cambridge, it has the expertise and flexibility necessary to combine theory, research and practice while offering world-class scholarship in a rich learning environment.

The Institute is named in honour of Lord Harry Woolf, former Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, and was founded in 1998 by Dr Edward Kessler MBE.

Further information at: **www.woolf.cam.ac.uk**

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