



## **UK GOVERNMENT FAITH ENGAGEMENT CONSULTATION 2020 RESPONSES FROM EKKLESIA**

**Background:** In November 2020, the UK Government's Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government issued a short-period consultation on faith engagement. Respondents were given just four weeks to submit evidence and observations. Colin Bloom, the advisor appointed to carry out what is deemed an independent review, explained: "This call for evidence will pose a series of questions around how those of all faiths, or none, perceive the government's engagement with faith organisations. Because the review is specifically about faith and religion, priority will be given to responses that fit within those parameters. However, space is given for respondents to share their views in a way that they feel is appropriate." Ekklesia's director submitted the following responses, which included our concerns about the nature and style of the consultation itself.

### **1. In your opinion, are Faith and Religion overall positive things for society?**

[5 out of 10 on a voting index, preliminary to comments]

Faith and religion are enormously diverse phenomena, and the premise of this question is therefore deeply superficial. There are both positive and negative features in all religious traditions. Faith can contribute significantly to wellbeing, to charitable activity, and to working for justice and peace in society. It can also be hugely divisive and sectarian, and a source of both prejudice and hate. The failure of many mainstream religious bodies to fully embrace equality for all (irrespective of belief) is hugely disappointing, for example, as is the UK Government's continual collusion in this. As a general rule, religious bodies should not be given exceptions to equalities laws – and those that seek them need to recognise that diversity exists within as well as between their communities of belief.

The recent IICSA findings in relation to the Church of England and the Catholic Church in England and Wales on abuse, and the manifest failings of religious institutions in safeguarding is a major concern. There needs to be more independent scrutiny and regulation in these areas, including mandatory reporting. The issue of spiritual abuse (coercion, the inducing of guilt and fear, etc.) within narrower and more dogmatic religious organisations, along with the promotion of fake and dangerous 'conversion therapy' targeted at LBQTIA+ groups within and beyond their bounds is a concern which Faith Engagement should pay particular attention to.

In any area of engagement, there should not be an automatic assumption that religion = good or religion = moral, any more than there should be an assumption that religion = immoral or bad. We need to learn to speak more discriminatingly of faiths, denominations, sects and religions (plural) and less of 'religion' as a catch-all when assessing the impact and worth of religion and faith on, and in, society. This is something scholars and researchers have been highlighting for many years.

### **2. During the Covid-19 pandemic are you aware of a faith organisation or religious community which has supported your neighbourhood through running a community project or offering support?**

Foodbank and social care support has been vital. Faith groups have played a significant role in this, but so have secular community organisations. On the positive side, caring neighbourhood activity

assistance has been vital for many – especially the lonely and isolated – during the pandemic. Churches, mosques, temples and Gurdwaras have reached out. On the other hand, religious groups of a more fundamentalist variety often seek to exploit vulnerability and to tie proselytising to service provision. There needs to be more attention paid to this.

### **3. Before the Covid-19 pandemic were you aware of a faith organisation or religious community having made a positive contribution to your neighbourhood?**

Both positive and negative impacts routinely arise from religion and faith, and from the communities that embody them, as outlined in 1. above. This can and should be recognised by people of faith, as well as those who are sceptical or non-believers. Faith Engagement by the Government should involve facing these realities, not hiding from them. Asking only about positive contributions suggests that, while the constructors of this survey are rightly aware that religious communities can make a beneficial impact on society, there seems to be an assumption that possible malign influences do not need acknowledging or exploring. This is concerning.

### **4. Do you feel Government engages meaningfully with people of faith?**

[5 out of 10 on the index]

### **5. Do you think Government understands people of faith?**

[5 out of 10 on the index]

Government engagement with people of faith is uneven and often far too instrumental, functionalist and self-serving in both directions. It too frequently seems to be about gaining support for Government in exchange for recognition, support and even privilege for religious institutions – which may or may not benefit the people of faith and belief for whom they claim to speak. There is also too much uncritical affirmation of persons claiming to be 'community leaders', something which needs more honest questioning. There is too little engagement between Government and scholarship and research around religion or belief. In the view of the think-tank Ekklesia, of which I am Director, we need a focus on Faith and Belief Engagement, recognising that not all spiritual and philosophical beliefs are inherently religious, and that the needs and contributions of the non-religious need to be recognised far more.

### **6. Could the Charity Commission do more to support registered faith charities?**

Yes

### **7. How could the Charity Commission do more to support registered faith charities?**

The Charity Commission of England and Wales should scrutinise and hold religious charities to account far more, given recent exposure of failings of governance and performance (for example in relation to the Independent Enquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, IICSA). Religion should not be assumed within the law or its application to be automatically a public benefit, but should need to demonstrate such benefit in order to secure funding. Charities with religious or non-religious foundation should be treated in the same way, with no favouritism to one or the other. The Charity Commission itself requires scrutiny, too, as does the law in this area. It is not appropriate that the Commission should be chaired by someone with open and declared party political interests, as is currently the case, for example. Religious and other interests should also be declared by staff and consultants to ensure balance and fairness.

Once again, this is a disturbingly loaded question. It should be about accountability, not simply support.

### **8. Do you believe local councils and local public services like schools, the NHS and emergency services look for, and take opportunities to create, productive partnerships with local faith organisations?**

There has been growing faith awareness, faith sensitivity and faith engagement in recent years, although this has often been uneven. Expertise is not always present in the ways that it needs to be. This openness and engagement is a good thing. Faith and religion is often an important part of people's lives, especially in multi-ethnic communities. However, this does not mean that services should be delivered in a way that gives undue weight to religion. Public service should be for the whole public. The reality is that England is a mixed-belief society, and not all of those beliefs are religious. Indeed, social and census research suggests that the majority of the population is not religiously active or engaged. Sensitivity to faith needs to recognise this too. Freedom of belief also requires, in some instances, protection from the imposition of belief. Chaplaincy (as part of pastoral support within the HNS and elsewhere) now needs fully to embrace both religious and non-religious life stances and convictions in its organisation, support and delivery, for example.

**9. Do you feel that freedom of religion or belief is under threat in the UK today?**

No

On the matter of freedom of religion or belief, there are well funded fundamentalist style organisations seeking to feed a narrative of anti-Christian or anti-religious persecution. This is false framing and should be treated as such. This needs particular attention, especially when such groups wrongly claim to speak on behalf of whole segments of society.

It is good that this review is looking at other areas of concern such as, but not limited to, forced marriages, religious nationalism, financial exploitation and religious-based violence. We have also mentioned spiritual abuse. Much more work is needed in this area.

**10. Have you ever felt that your freedom to express your faith, religion or belief was under threat?**

No.

**11. What more can Government do more to ensure all people have Freedom of Religion or Belief?**

Ensure that engagement is with the full spectrum of religious and faith organisations, ecumenical and inter-faith bodies on these issue – alongside secularist and humanist bodies. Seek a greater balance based on the demography of religious and non-religious belief and practice across the country.

It is entirely inappropriate that England should still have an Established Church in a plural age. This harms religious diversity, privileges a certain group, and is now widely criticised by people of faith as well as by non-believers. The Government should take steps to initiate a process leading to the disestablishment of the Church of England (as happened long ago in Wales), and should make formal recognition of England as a mixed-belief, secular (as in non-religiously established) society which seeks a level playing field for all, whatever their religious or non-religious convictions.

**12. Are there areas of religious or faith-based practice which cause you serious concern?**

Yes

Areas of practice involving forced marriages, aggressive religious nationalism, financial exploitation, religious-based violence, spiritual abuse, sexism, misogyny, discrimination, homophobia and transphobia.

**13. Have you ever felt coerced by members of your own religious community into doing something against your wishes?**

N/A, as I am responding on behalf of a think-tank.

**14. Is there anything about your faith community that you want to see faith leaders or the Government tackle?**

Yes. The removal of inappropriate exemptions from equalities legislation for the Church of England and all other denominations and faiths.

**15. Do you hold currently, or have you held a formal position as a faith leader within a place of worship or a faith-based charity?**

I am currently Director of the think-tank Ekklesia. I have formerly been Assistant General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (the official ecumenical body), Executive Secretary of the Churches' Commission on Mission (then part of CTBI), and I have worked as an Adult Education and Training Adviser within the Church of England at diocesan level.

**16. In your opinion does the government engage with the right religious and faith leaders?**

No

More engagement is needed with a greater diversity of opinion, and also with the leaders of bodies like the National Secular Society (which includes both religious and non-religious members) and Humanists UK. Too much attention is currently given to leaders of the Church of England, and sometimes to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. More care needs to be taken concerning who can legitimately speak for whom, to what extent and in what numbers, in relation to the population as a whole.

**17. Do you feel confident that local and national Government and public servants have a good understanding of different faiths, religious practices and issues?**

No

There is clearly room for improvement in understanding how faith and religious communities function in practice (nor just in theory), and in understanding the increasing number of people who are disaffiliated but religious, religious but not spiritual, religious but also secularist, non-religious but spiritual, Humanist, atheist and / or 'nones'. Literacy in faith or belief is about recognising the interests and concerns of the great numbers outside formal or recognised structures, as well as those within. The interests of institutions should not automatically be given privilege or priority.

**18. In your personal experience do you feel the emergency services (police, fire brigade) and public health care professionals (e.g. GPs) have a good understanding and respect for different beliefs and all faiths?**

Yes

Great efforts are being made to show respect and understanding for difference in often difficult circumstances. Support and training is needed for this. (Issues of proselytism within health and other institutions do need attention, however. People should be free to practice and display, but not to coerce, when it comes to religious expression.)

**19. Do you feel confident that elected members in public office (MPs, Ministers, Local Councillors), have a good understanding of different faith, faith practices and issues concerning people of faith?**

No

It varies enormously. There can often been confusion between the beliefs and interests of the officials or representatives and those being assisted or considered. More equipping is needed in this area, including understanding non-religious convictions, as well as religious ones.

**20. In your opinion, how could Government and Public servants improve on their faith literacy?**

Consulting, training and engaging more widely – and not just with religious bodies on these issues.

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

No

As currently constituted, far too many faith-based schools discriminate in selection and employment, by imposing compulsory worship (the 1944 provisions should be scrapped, and plural civic assemblies promoted). Religious schooling can also promote inequalities and divisions. Major reform is needed along the lines promoted by the Accord Coalition, of which I am a co-founder on behalf of the Christian think-tank Ekklesia.

**22. Do you believe that Religious and Belief Education (often referred to as 'RE') is comprehensive enough within the English education curriculum to provide a good understanding of different faiths and beliefs?**

No

Religious Education should be Beliefs and Values Education, and should offer a wide-ranging understanding of different beliefs operating in England, the UK, Europe and beyond – including non-religious and Humanist beliefs. It is the role of public education to help people understand and engage with religion or belief. The promotion of faith or belief is a matter for faith or belief bodies. A boundary is needed here, but good education on these issues is also phenomenological and engaged by nature.

**23. Do you think that faith-based or religious practices in schools have a positive impact on a child's education?**

No – not as currently constituted within public schooling.

Forced religious assemblies are wrong – I say that from a Christian perspective that sees worship and prayer as inherently and necessarily voluntary and confessional. But space can and should be made for religious practice among particular groups (prayer spaces etc.), and for seeing and engaging with the practice of others in an educational way. The spiritual needs of all pupils (whether religiously or non-religiously informed, formed or expressed) should be treated with respect and sympathy.

**24. Do you think that secular or non-religious practices in schools have a positive impact on a child's education?**

Yes

Open, civic assembles and events within school time can include a mix of both religious and non-religious practices (without compulsion to participate) in order that pupils can learn and grow together. Secular should be seen as 'plural and inclusive' in this context.

**25. Do you agree with the proposed definitions of Religion, Belief and Faith as set out above?**

Only partially

Regarding 'religion': The terms "a supreme being or entity or supreme beings" is highly problematic in many religious and philosophical traditions (including Christian ones, incidentally). Add "the numinous", at least.

Regarding 'belief': adequate.

Regarding 'faith': seeing it as a subset of belief is contestable. The 'committed certainty' element is contestable – faith is a refusal of false certainty, and can and does embrace genuine doubt, as well as a rigorous engagement with reason.

Much more work is needed on these definitions.

**26. If you would like to add any further thoughts not already provided within this call for evidence, please do so here:**

A follow-up consultation based on a report from this one could improve the quality of this considerably.

**27. Are you happy to be contacted regarding your provided answers within this call for evidence?**

Yes

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*Simon Barrow*  
*Director*  
*Ekklesia*

*11 December 2020*

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**ABOUT EKKLESIA**

Ekklesia was established as a think-tank in 2002, drawing upon a network of allies and thinkers influenced and engaged with a Christian commitment to social justice, economic sharing, nonviolent peacemaking, and environmental sustainability. We have always sought to work across different traditions of religion, belief and non-belief in pursuing these goals. Today Ekklesia, which is based in Edinburgh, Scotland, continues to operate as an independent change network promoting transformative ideas for a better future. We have a particular focus on beliefs, ethics, politics and society, and the interrelation between these. [www.ekklesia.co.uk](http://www.ekklesia.co.uk)