



Kingdom

Stable / Unchanged

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **59.3%**
- Hindus : **1.4%**
- Jewish : **0.5%**
- Muslims : **4.8%**
- Sikh : **0.7%**
- Others : **33.3%**

64,500,000

242,514 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The UK is signatory to international conventions on human rights which hold it to commitments regarding religious freedom and belief, such as the European Convention on Human Rights. The convention, which outlines the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 9), was incorporated into UK law in the Human Rights Act (1988), although it only fully came into force in 2000.

The Church of England, as the established church in England, has dominated public religious life for more than 450 years and enjoys a small number of legal privileges, for example 26 Anglican bishops sit in the UK parliament's House of Lords. Although the majority of the UK population still broadly identify with Christianity – according to the last census 59.3 percent self described as Christian^[1] – regular Church attendance fell dramatically during the late 20th century.^[2] Immigration and demographic changes have contributed to the growth of other faiths, most notably Islam.

Although Religious Education is a legal requirement in state-funded schools in England, more than a quarter of the country's secondary schools do not offer religious education. Fiona Moss of the National Association for RE warned that schools would produce students that were "not religiously literate".^[3] During the period under review, a number of public figures including Aaqil Ahmed, head of religion at the BBC, and Justin Welby, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, expressed concerns over rising levels of religious illiteracy.^[4]

According to the Pew Forum's last assessment while government restrictions of religious freedom remained low, social hostilities were high.^[5] Home Office data shows an increase in "racially or religiously aggravated offences" from April 2016, peaking in July 2016 (5,949 religious hate crimes were reported for 2016-17). "These increases fit the widely reported pattern of an increase in hate crime following the EU referendum."^[6] Additionally, religious believers have experienced discrimination when their own beliefs conflict with changing societal norms.

Incidents

Related to Judaism

For 2017 the Community Security Trust recorded 1,382 anti-Semitic incidents – the highest annual total recorded by the organisation. This included a 34 percent increase in the number of assaults recorded which rose to 145. Increased assaults on individuals perceived to be "foreign" following the result of the Brexit referendum and publicity regarding controversies about alleged and actual antisemitism in the Labour Party were reckoned to be among factors in the increase. The 2017 figure of 1,382 incidents marked an increase from 2016 when there were 1,346 anti-Semitic incidents. Every month from May to December 2016 there were more than 100 incidents, the majority involving the verbal abuse of recognisably Jewish people. 22 percent of the overall total involved abuse on social media. There were also 107 violent incidents, mostly minor.^[7]

In September 2017, an elderly man was making his way to a synagogue in London when a white man aggressively grabbed his prayer book and skullcap, throwing both to the ground. In the same month two men of Middle Eastern appearance shouted at a Rabbi from their vehicle: "F**k off back to Israel, you Israeli C**t."^[8] In 22 anti-Semitic incidents in 2017, the victims were Jewish students or academics, compared to 41 incidents in 2016. A survey found more than a quarter of Jewish students who responded had experienced personal abuse including through social media. Most (65 percent) did not believe the NUS would "respond appropriately" to allegations of anti-Semitism following allegations of anti-Semitic remarks by NUS personnel, including its 2016-17 President, Malia Bouattia who removed Jewish students' ability to elect a representative on the union's national anti-racism committee.^[9]

Related to Islam

Incidents more than doubled between 2016 and 2017 – with police recording 110 crimes between March and July 2017, up from 47 over the same six-month period in 2016. Fiyaz Mughal, Director of Faith Matters which works to increase community cohesion, said Islamist terrorism was the biggest factor driving hate crime, but that people felt uncomfortable saying so.^[10] In particular, the June 2017 London Bridge attack triggered attacks on British Muslims, with a fivefold increase in the three days following the incident. There were reports of Muslim women being verbally abused on buses, or spat at; one lady was grabbed by the throat at a bus stop.^[11] Racist abuse, acts of vandalism and bomb threats were among reported hate crimes directed at mosques across the UK. One person was killed and 12 injured when 48-year-old Darren Osborne drove a van into a group of Muslims near Finsbury Park mosque in north London. In February 2018 Mr Osborne was sentenced to a minimum of 48 years for a terrorist offence.^[12]

In September 2017, five days after a radicalised teenager detonated a bomb on a tube train at Parsons Green station, injuring 50 people, a 47-year-old mother was run down by a car in Leicester. The impact threw Zaynab Hussein, who was returning from the school where she had just dropped off her two youngest children, against the wall of a nearby house. As she lay on the pavement the vehicle reversed over her. Mrs Hussein was later hospitalised with a broken leg and arm as well as severe fractures to her pelvis and spine. Her injuries have substantially restricted her mobility. The car then tried to hit a 12-year-old girl on her way to school, but she was only clipped. Both victims were wearing obviously Islamic headscarves. In March 2018, a jury found the driver, 21-year-old Paul Moore, guilty of attempted murder, grievous bodily harm with intent, and dangerous driving. He was given a life sentence.^[13]

Related to Christianity

Christians are experiencing problems when their religious views conflict with current political norms on gender and sexuality. Liberal Democrat MP Tim Farron felt pressured to quit as party leader after a media row over his personal religious views about gay sex during the 2017 general election campaign.^[14] An August 2017 Employment Appeal Tribunal found against Pentecostal pastor Barry Trayhorn, who was suspended for “homophobic comments” for quoting 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 in a May 2014 chapel service.^[15] Mrs Justice Slade said that the biblical passage quoted was “derogatory against homosexuals” and could “legitimise bullying or other mistreatment”.^[16] In October 2017 the High Court for England and Wales upheld Sheffield University’s decision to expel MA student Felix Ngole from his Social Work course for publicly posting on his Facebook page in support of American clerk Kim Davis. Judge Rowena Collins Rice ruled that although the university’s actions were “indeed severe” the perceived risk of damage justified them, as “they could be accessed and read by people who would perceive them as judgemental, incompatible with service ethos, or suggestive of discriminatory intent...whatever the actual intention was, it was the perception of the posting that would cause the damage”.^[17]

In 2016 magistrate Richard Page, 71, was sacked after telling a same-sex couple that ideally children should be raised by a mother and father. The Christian man had previously been reprimanded and had to undertake “re-education training”.^[18] Similarly, South Derbyshire Magistrate Susan Preston was given a formal warning for misconduct by the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office and ordered to stand down from hearing future family cases, after declining to sit on a case involving same-sex parenting because to her personal religious views.^[19] A Christian couple was stopped from adopting their foster children, after expressing the view that children should have a mother and a father wherever possible.^[20]

After figures on hate crime in Scotland showed Roman Catholics are more targeted than any other religious group, MSP Elaine Smith, Scottish Labour’s inequality spokesperson, said members of the religious group need more protection.^[21] A BBC Scotland video parodying the reception of Communion in the Catholic Church was described by Bishop John Keenan of Paisley as “offensive to Catholics in both the words and images used”.^[22]

Related to Religious Schools

Conservative Jewish schools, particular private Haredi intuitions, have come under increasing pressure from OFSTED over same-sex issues.^[23] Vishnitz Girls School failed three OFSTED inspections in 2016 and 2017, partly for not teaching primary school children aged between three and eight about homosexuality or gender reassignment.^[24] An October 2016 report concluded that, because of the lack of teaching in this area, “the school does not encourage pupils to have respect for other people”.^[25] The private girls’ school was not the only Jewish school to clash with OFSTED on the issue. In February 2017 Beth Jacob Grammar School in Hendon, which was ranked outstanding five years ago, was downgraded to inadequate.^[26] OFSTED noted that pupils were “not taught explicitly about issues such as sexual orientation”, while acknowledging that “pupils are taught the importance of respecting and appreciating all people as part of their Jewish faith”.^[27] Beis Aharon Primary School for Boys in Stamford Hill received six visits from OFSTED inspectors in two years, and the Secretary of State issued an order preventing it from admitting new pupils. While it improved in a number of areas of concern, as of the last inspection in March 2017 the independent school was still being criticised for the “quality of education”, for not teaching children aged between three and 13 about LGBT+ issues.^[28] Summing up after the school lost an appeal against the restriction, Judge Hugh Brayne said failure to teach students about same-sex relationships and gender reassignment “prevents the school from encouraging respect for people who have such characteristics”.^[29]

Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education Amanda Spielman singled out faith schools for criticism. She said: “We have found an increasing number of conservative religious schools where the legal requirements that set the expectations for shared values and tolerance clash with community expectations.”^[30] Tottenham MP David Lammy said: “We’ve stood by, helpless to stop what many regard as the escalating offensive on Jewish education,” and criticised what he called the “overtones of Soviet ideology” in Spielman’s conflation of “British values” with “secular values, which every school in the

land must inculcate into children”.[31] LGBT+ issues were not specifically covered in the British values for schools launched in 2014, and while respect and tolerance for LGBT+ individuals were implicit, there was nothing to suggest explicit teaching about lifestyle was required.[32] Nor would the failure of the Vishnitz Girls School to teach pupils about homosexuality explicitly violate any existing equality legislation, raising serious questions about OFSTED's interpretation of government guidance.[33]

Prospects for freedom of religion

The peak in religiously linked hate crime was connected to wider factors. While it is hoped that there will be a drop in such offences as these factors are no longer current, nevertheless each reporting period sees new triggers and continued attacks of varying severity.

The right to manifest religious views is being denied when beliefs conflict with current, progressive norms on gender and sexuality: individuals and institutions are being penalised for expressing traditional religious view of morality, even when done objectively and with no intention of causing offence. There is every reason to fear that as the debate on gender and sexuality moves further away from traditional models that those religious groups and individuals who articulate their views in this area will be increasingly sanctioned by governmental and legal institutions.

Endnotes / Sources

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- [7] CST Annual Review 2016, p. 9 <https://cst.org.uk/data/file/d/f/CST_Annual_Review_2016.1486995234.pdf>; CST Annual Review 2017, p. 17 <<https://cst.org.uk/public/data/file/a/b/IR17.pdf>> (accessed 18th April 2017).
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