



DEBATE PACK

Number 0047, 28 February 2018

Freedom of religion or belief

Summary

A general debate on freedom of religion or belief will be held in Westminster Hall on Thursday 1 March at 1.30pm.

The subject of the debate was determined by the backbench Business Committee following an [application from Jim Shannon MP](#). The motion for the debate is:

That this House has considered freedom of religion or belief.

The debate is timed to coincide with the 37th session of the [UN Human Rights Council](#) to be held from 26 February to 23 March 2018. The Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body within the United Nations system responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe.

The proceedings of this debate can be viewed on [Parliamentlive.tv](#)

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

By Sarah Priddy

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1. Background

Jim Shannon MP is the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. The Group's purpose is:

Raising awareness and profile of international freedom of religion or belief as a human right among parliamentarians, government, media and the general public.

In a debate to mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in October 2017, Mr Shannon outlined article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights and stated that the Group:

stand(s) up for the rights of those of a Christian belief, those of other beliefs and those with no belief.¹

In representations to the Backbench Business Committee for a debate on freedom of religion, Mr Shannon highlighted human rights issues faced by minorities across the globe, in particular: the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the Yazidis in Iraq, and the issue of the Baha'i faith in Iran. Mr Shannon noted that the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council is between 26 February and 23 March 2018 and that this presented an opportunity to press the international community for action to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.

1.1 Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The freedom of religion or belief is stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)² and in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The UK was a signatory of the UDHR and is a party to the ICCPR. The right is also contained in Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), to which the UK is also a party, and is entrenched in the Human Rights Act 1998.

Article 18 of the UDHR is as follows:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

The ICCPR and ECHR add some additional text after this.

Article 18 of the ICCPR is as follows:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to

¹ [HC Deb 26 Oct 2017 cc197-236WH](#)

² [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948

have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

Article 9 of the ECHR is as follows:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

1.2 United Nations Human Rights Council

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The [Human Rights Council](#) holds at least three sessions a year over a period of ten weeks or more. They take place in March, June and September. The 37th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council runs from 26 February to 23 March 2018. The [website of the UN Human Rights Council](#) provides links to:

- [Order of the Day \(daily agenda\)](#)
- [Bulletin of informal meetings](#)
- [Resolutions, etc.](#)
- [Documentation](#)

Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. The mandate holder has been invited to identify existing and emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief and present recommendations on ways and means to overcome such obstacles.

2. Press articles

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

[New report reveals religious persecution children face around the world](#)

Tola Mbakwe, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW)

27 Feb 2018

A new report, [Faith and a Future](#), has examined the religious discrimination children face in school. The report was presented in the House of Commons on Tuesday, encouraging the government to take a stand for religious freedom around the world.

[EU agrees to prepare sanctions on Myanmar generals](#)

Reuters Staff, Reuters

26 Feb 2018

European Union foreign ministers agreed on Monday to prepare sanctions against Myanmar generals over the killings of Rohingya Muslims and to strengthen the EU arms embargo, accusing state security forces of grave human rights abuses.

[Iran: Dozens of women ill-treated and at risk of long jail terms for peacefully protesting compulsory veiling](#)

Amnesty International

26 Feb 2018

A [warning](#) by Iranian police that women could be jailed for up to a decade for joining protests against compulsory veiling has put dozens at immediate risk of unjust imprisonment and represents an alarming escalation of the authorities' violent crackdown on women's rights, said Amnesty International.

[Iranian Police Arrest 300 in Crackdown on Religious Sufi Minority Following Clashes](#)

The Associated Press, Haaretz

20 Feb 2018

Sufi Muslims, considered a threat by Tehran, clashed with police resulting in death of three police officers and two other militiamen

[25 Legal Experts Urge Iranian Official to Address “Public Archive” of Abuses Against Baha’is](#)

Center for Human Rights in Iran

10 Feb 2018

Twenty-five professors, lawyers and judges from around the world have called on the head of Iran's High Council for Human Rights, Mohammad Javad Larijani, to address documented human rights violations against members of the Baha'i faith in Iran compiled on a newly launched [website](#).

[Christian persecution and genocide is worse now than “any time in history,” report says](#)

Cristina Maza, Newsweek

4 Jan 2018

The report examined the plight of Christians in China, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria and Turkey over the period lasting from 2015 until 2017

[Iran urged to end persecution of the Baha'is](#)

Michael Binyon, The Times (subscription)

9 Feb 2018

International lawyers and human rights activists have appealed in an open letter to the head of Iran’s High Council for Human Rights for an end to the regime’s persecution of the Baha’is.

[Human Rights: the Anglican Communion's voice at the UN](#)

Jack Palmer-White, Anglican news (blog)

26 Feb 2018

The Anglican Communion’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Jack Palmer-White, explains his office’s role at the forthcoming meeting of the Human Rights Council.

[Blame for failure to mention Rohingya 'does not lie with Pope Francis'](#)

Sally Hayden, The Independent

28 Nov 2017

Human Rights Watch says pontiff missed 'important opportunity' to raise international concerns in Burma. But a leading Rohingya blogger tells The Independent the blame does not lie with Francis himself

[Yazidis in Iraq: 'The genocide is ongoing'](#)

Samira Shackle, Aljazeera

7 Nov 2017

Members of the persecuted community are still struggling to recover from years of brutal assault by ISIL fighters.

[Christians and Yazidis in Iraq stand on the brink of extinction](#)

Chris Smith, Religion News Service

5 10 2017

Astonishingly, for three years U.S. government bureaucrats have refused to help endangered religious minority communities like Christians and Yazidis survive the genocide ISIS began in 2014. These communities stand on the brink of extinction.

[Malaysian Christians fear state crackdown amid unprecedented abductions](#)

Nicola Smith, Telegraph (subscription)

7 Jun 2017

The brazen and professional nature of his **kidnapping**, less than 100m from a police housing complex, has sparked **fears** among the **Christian** minority that a rise in religious vigilantism is threatening **Malaysia's** reputation as a tolerant Muslim nation. Mr Koh's disappearance... To continue reading this article ...

[Archaic blasphemy laws are too often abused; Prohibitions on impiety encourage the persecution of minorities](#)

Comment, Financial Time (subscription)

18 May 2018

Since biblical times the charge of blasphemy has been accompanied by a strong whiff of political persecution. Many European countries still have outdated blasphemy laws on their books, but this nebulous concept is now most often used by Muslim-majority nations as a tool to suppress critics and minorities.

[George Carey: Christians face extinction in the Middle East - the next Government must prevent it](#)

George Carey, The Telegraph (subscription)

8 May 2017

In August 2014, the militants swept through towns around Mosul and forced thousands to flee. Qaraqosh's Christians abandoned their homes and have still not returned, even though the town has now been liberated from IS.

[It's time to acknowledge the war on Christianity](#)

Tim Stanley, *The Telegraph* (subscription)

10 Apr 2017

The church bombings in Egypt follow a horrific line of religious assaults, and the West's reaction is troubling.

[Eritrea has committed widespread crimes against humanity, says UN](#)

Patrick Kingsley, *The Guardian*

8 Jun 2016

The Eritrean government has committed crimes against humanity in a widespread and systematic manner, according to a UN inquiry that calls for perpetrators to be tried by the international criminal court.

[Christians flee growing persecution in Africa and Middle East; Millions escaped countries such as Nigeria, Eritrea, Syria and Iraq in 2015, according to charity](#)

Harriet Sherwood, *The Guardian*

13 Jan 2016

Religious persecution is on the rise in Africa and the Middle East, forcing millions of Christians to flee their homes for overcrowded refugee camps and the risks of smuggling routes to Europe, according to a report.

[We must go beyond platitudes to protect religious minorities](#)

Justin Welby, 1 Apr 2016

1 Apr 2016

Around the world, people of all major religions, including large parts of the Christian family, live as minorities. In some places, they live as equals, valued as citizens and play a full part in the life of their communities and countries. But in many parts of the world, unknown to most of us, Christians find themselves under attack, without legal rights, with believers being murdered and their places of worship destroyed.

3. Parliamentary material

3.1 Debate

[International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day](#)

Motion that this House has considered International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

26 Oct 2017 | Backbench debates | House of Commons | 630 c236WH

3.2 Questions

[Developing Countries: Minority Groups](#)

Preet Kaur Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, if she will make representations to her international counterparts, including the UNHCR, for regular reporting on the effectiveness of funding for religious minorities.

Alistair Burt | Department for International Development: The UK's humanitarian aid operates under international humanitarian principles and is provided based on need. Our partners carry out vulnerability assessments to ensure aid effectively reaches those most in need, including those from religious minorities, as it is recognised that religion may be a factor in causing vulnerability. We regularly review and discuss programme effectiveness with our international partners. The UK has an ambitious agenda for reform of the humanitarian system and is pressing to ensure that every pound of taxpayers' money is spent as effectively as is possible to do so.

20 Feb 2018 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 127091

[Developing Countries: Minority Groups](#)

Dr Lisa Cameron: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, if her Department will make an assessment of whether its aid delivered through UN agencies is reaching religious minorities.

Harriett Baldwin | Department for International Development: Our humanitarian aid operates under International Humanitarian Law and is provided based on need. As such it is available to people of all faiths and of none. All our partners carry out comprehensive vulnerability assessments to ensure aid is reaching those most in need, including those from religious minorities as it is already recognised that religion may be a factor in causing vulnerability.

We keep this under close review. For example, we will take on board the outcomes of a roundtable between UNHCR, local faith leaders and faith-based NGOs which was convened in Amman, Jordan by our Embassy officials on 23 January. This forum discussed UNHCR's systems for ensuring impartiality and assessing vulnerability and protection

needs (including resettlement opportunities) for refugee groups of all faiths.

26 Jan 2018 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 123775

Community Relations: Religion

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, pursuant to the Answer of 7 November 2017 to Question 107852, on Community Relations: Religion, what the criteria are for the allocation of funds to religious organisations.

Mr Marcus Jones | Department for Communities and Local Government: Integration funding is used to support work which brings communities together and promotes tolerance. Under section 70 (1) of the Charities Act 2006, a relevant Minister may give financial assistance to any charitable, benevolent or philanthropic institution in respect of any of the institution's activities which directly or indirectly benefit the whole or any part of England. Proposals from any organisations, including those with a significant faith element, are assessed on value for money, deliverability and feasibility, as well as the likely outcomes to be achieved.

23 Nov 2017 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 113312

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, what grants his Department has made to which (a) Muslim, (b) Jewish, (c) Christian and (d) inter-faith organisations for the purposes of integration and community cohesion in each year since May 2015.

Mr Marcus Jones | Department for Communities and Local Government: The Department for Communities and Local Government provided funding totalling £9.7 million in 2015/16 and £11.2 million in 2016/17 to a range of organisations delivering projects and activity to help create more integrated communities. Within those totals, the following grants were provided to support organisations or activities with a significant faith element.

Organisation	2015/16 (£000s)	2016/17 (£000s)
Anne Frank Trust UK	63	84
Board of Deputies of British Jews	25	10
Faith Matters	182	504
Fayre Share Foundation	125	175

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust	980	980
Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom	220	305
MITZVAH DAY 365	20	10
The Church Urban Fund	1,500	1,960
Ummah Help	333	400
Wiener Library	300	0

07 Nov 2017 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 107852

Religion: Freedom of Expression

Lord Pearson of Rannoch: Her Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth on 3 July (HL47), whether UK citizens are free to criticise religions in private and in public.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth | Department for Communities and Local Government: Citizens of the United Kingdom are of course, free to criticise religions in private and public. However, it is not acceptable to stir up or promote hatred and violence against people because of their faith. Freedom of speech is one of the values that underpin our society but there are limits – it is not acceptable for people to abuse freedom of speech to incite hatred and division.

26 Jul 2017 | Written questions | Answered | House of Lords | HL1068

Religious Freedom

Jim Shannon: To ask the Minister for Women and Equalities, what the Government's policy is on protecting the right of (a) Christians and (b) people of other religious beliefs to wear or carry religious symbols in public.

Nick Gibb | Women and Equalities: The Government believes that both Christians and people of other religious beliefs should be able to wear or carry religious symbols in public so long as they act within the boundaries of the law while doing so.

29 Jun 2017 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 168

Visible Religious Symbols: European Court Ruling

Urgent question on the recent Court of Justice of the European Union ruling allowing employers to ban workers from wearing religious dress and symbols in the workplace.

15 Mar 2017 | Urgent questions | House of Commons | 623 cc408-419

3.3 Petition

Persecution of Christians

[HC Deb 17 Jul 2017 cc5-6P](#)

The petition of parishioners of the Parish of Saint John Southworth, Nelson, Brierfield and Fence, Lancashire,

Declares that the petitioners believe that attacks on Christians in 20% of the world's countries since 2014 is concerning and that more should be done to combat religious persecution.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take further action to prevent and raise awareness of attacks on Christians, worldwide.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Stephenson , Official Report, 30 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 511.] [P002032]

The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Lord Ahmad) made the following observations: The persecution of individuals based on their religion or belief remains of profound concern to the United Kingdom. The freedom to practise, change or share one's faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a fundamental human right, and the UK Government are committed to defending this human right and promoting respect and tolerance between religious communities.

The Foreign Office's work on Freedom of Religion or Belief: At country level, we lobby Governments for changes in laws and practices that discriminate against individuals on the basis of their religion or belief, and we continue to raise cases of persecution in individual countries. For example, Ministers and British diplomats recently raised religious freedom in Russia, following the Russian Supreme Court's decision to uphold a ruling that recognises Jehovah's Witnesses as 'extremists'. In Sudan, we have lobbied consistently on behalf of four imprisoned Christian pastors, who have now been released, partly due to our efforts. During his visit to Pakistan in November, the Foreign Secretary raised the rights of all Pakistani citizens, including religious minorities.

We are deeply concerned about persecution of religious minorities in the middle east, where we have seen appalling crimes committed against Christians, Madeans, Yazidis and other minorities, as well as the majority Muslim populations in Iraq and Syria. The UK is determined to seek justice for all the victims who have suffered as a result of crimes committed by Daesh around the world. At the 71st United Nations General Assembly in September 2016, together with the Government of Iraq and other international partners, the Foreign Secretary launched the campaign to bring Daesh to Justice. On the humanitarian track, Britain has pledged more than £2.3 billion to support those affected by the conflict in Syria, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. In Iraq, we are working with the authorities in Ninewa to ensure

that protection of minorities is properly addressed in their strategic vision for the region.

The UK works to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief at the United Nations. We are committed to promoting implementation of key resolutions, including Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, which focuses the international community on combating religious intolerance, protecting the human rights of minorities and promoting pluralism in society.

Our programme funds support our strategic aim to promote and protect Freedom of Religion or Belief globally. Under the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy, we are funding a project to develop lesson plans for secondary school teachers in the middle east and North Africa region to enable them to teach children about the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief. We are also continuing to support a network of human rights defenders in South Asia, and are beginning to build up a network of youth activists.

Freedom of Religion or Belief is a priority for the Prime Minister, who reiterated in her Easter message her conviction that we must “do more to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs openly and in peace and safety”. In my new role as Minister for Human Rights, I am committed to working with my Ministerial counterparts and our diplomatic network to move this agenda forward through lobbying and practical action on the ground.

4. Further reading and useful links

4.1 Commons Library briefings

[Ethnicity and religion: Social Indicators page](#)

27 Nov 2017 | Social indicators | SN02655

Providing summary statistics on the ethnic and religious composition of the population.

[International Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

23 Oct 2017 | Commons Debate packs | CDP-2017-0197

A debate initiated by Jim Shannon on International Freedom of Religion or Belief was held in Westminster Hall on 26 October 2017 at 1.30pm.

4.2 All Party Parliamentary Group

[APPF for International Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

Raising awareness and profile of international freedom of religion or belief as a human right among Parliamentarians, media, government and the general public in the UK, and to increase the effectiveness of the UK's contribution to international institutions charged with enforcing this human right.

4.3 Government websites

[Discrimination: your rights](#)

Types of discrimination ('protected characteristics'; How you can be discriminated against; Discrimination at work; What you can do

[Freedom of religion or belief: how the FCO can help promote respect for this human right](#)

Guidance on how freedom of religion or belief relates to the UK's strategic priorities, and how the FCO can help its promotion. FCO, Oct 2016

[Guidance: Religion or belief core script.](#)

Religion or belief in one form or another plays a part in the lives of most of the world's population. DFID celebrates and values the diversity brought to its workforce through individuals and aims to create an environment where the cultural, spiritual, religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs of all its employees are respected. DfID, Apr 2013

4.4 European Commission: International Cooperation and Development

Freedom of religion or belief

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, more commonly referred to as the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is a fundamental right of every human being. Freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in Articles 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)(link is external) and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)(link is external), which should be read in the light of the UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment No 22.

4.5 Equality and Human Rights Commission

Article 9: Freedom of thought, belief and religion

It includes the right to change your religion or beliefs at any time.

You also have the right to put your thoughts and beliefs into action.

This could include your right to wear religious clothing, the right to talk about your beliefs or take part in religious worship. Public authorities cannot stop you practising your religion, without very good reason – see the section on restrictions below.

Importantly, this right protects a wide range of non-religious beliefs including atheism, agnosticism, veganism and pacifism. For a belief to be protected under this article, it must be serious, concern important aspects of human life or behaviour, be sincerely held, and be worthy of respect in a democratic society.

4.6 Liberty

Article 9 Freedom of religion

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion includes:

- the freedom to change religion or belief;
- the freedom to exercise religion or belief publicly or privately, alone or with others;
- the freedom to exercise religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance; and
- the right to have no religion (e.g. to be atheist or agnostic) or to have non-religious beliefs protected (e.g. philosophical beliefs such as pacifism or veganism).

Freedom of religion does not prevent there being a state church, but no one can be forced to join a church, be involved in its activities or pay taxes to a church.

The role of the State is to encourage tolerance and all religions or non-religions, if regulated, must be regulated with complete neutrality.

4.7 ILGA- Europe

The right to freedom of religion or belief and its intersection with other rights

A research papers for ILGA-Euope

Dr Alice Donald and Dr Erica Howard, School of Law, Middlesex University, Jan 2015

This paper was commissioned by ILGA-Europe, to examine how the right to freedom of religion or belief intersects with other human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and to be protected from discrimination and hate speech. The paper examines in particular the tension between religious freedom and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people, which is a matter of controversy in both legal and political discourse in Europe and elsewhere. In particular, some Christian organisations and commentators have portrayed anti-discrimination law as conflicting directly with the right to freedom of religion or belief. Such arguments are increasingly couched in terms of the asserted 'right' of religious individuals conscientiously to opt out of providing goods or services to same-sex couples or to express views that might be considered by others to be homophobic or transphobic. This discourse has gone so far as to characterise the scope and application of equality law as a form of religious persecution. The aim of this paper is to assist ILGA-Europe and other interested parties to respond to such arguments in a manner which is consistent with the standards and principles enshrined in both human rights and equality law, as articulated in the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and relevant United Nations treaties and declarations, and authoritative interpretations of these instruments by the relevant courts and treaty bodies.

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