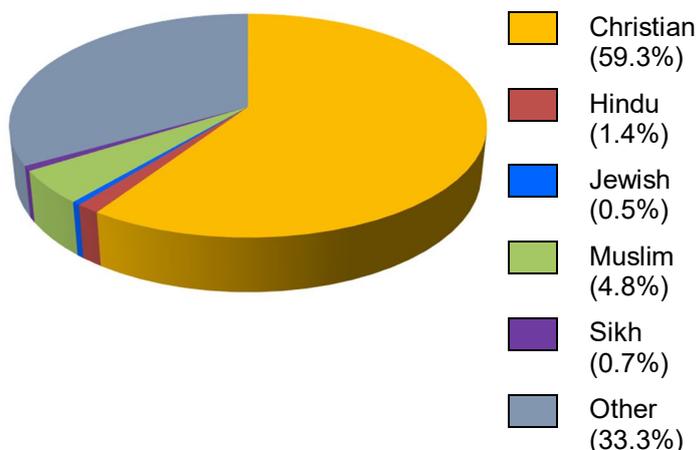
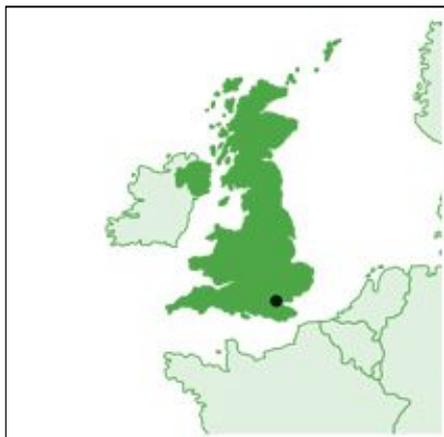


UNITED KINGDOM



Area: 242,514 km ²	Population¹: 64.5 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): English
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Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The United Kingdom is signatory to a number of 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), which came into full force in 2000.

The Church of England, as the established church, was central to public religious life for more than 450 years and still retains some of its constitutional privileges, e.g. 26 bishops sit in the UK parliament's House of Lords. Although the majority of the UK population still identify with Christianity, research indicates that regular Church attendance fell dramatically during the late 20th century. Immigration and demographic changes have contributed to the growth of other faiths, most notably Islam.²

According to the Pew Forum's last assessment, while government restrictions of religious freedom remained low, social hostilities were high. The examples given below suggest that social hostilities have remained high throughout the period 2014-15.³ Additionally religious believers tend to be discriminated against when their own beliefs conflict with societal norms. For example, medical staff with conscientious objections to providing abortifacient forms of contraception because of their religious beliefs are "ineligible" for Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists Diploma course, as the syllabus involves "willingness during training to prescribe all forms of hormonal contraception".⁴

Incidents

Related to Islam

According to Greater London's Metropolitan Police Service, 1,052 Islamophobic offences were recorded across the capital in 2015 – compared to 623 the previous year.⁵ In some boroughs there was a dramatic increase, e.g. in Merton, south-west London, the number of offences rose from eight to 29.⁶ On Saturday, 26th September 2015 Morden's Baitul Fatah Mosque – in the London Borough of Merton – was the target of an arson attack by two teenagers. The blaze left an

administration building badly damaged but the mosque itself was not harmed. One man was taken to hospital suffering from smoke inhalation.⁷ The complex belongs to the Ahmadiyah branch of Islam which is considered heterodox by many mainstream Muslims. Despite the religious nature of the target, police claimed there was “nothing to suggest this was a hate crime”. The cost of repairing the damage was estimated to be at least £2million.⁸

Hate crimes against Muslims in London tripled following the Daesh (ISIS) attacks in Paris,⁹ and a number of mosques and Islamic institutions were targeted across the country. A man was arrested after two pig heads were placed outside the gates of Markazul Uloom, an Islamic girls’ boarding school in Lancashire, at the end of December 2015. The incident followed a backlash by the local community after the school submitted plans to convert a building on site into a school mosque, which would have involved adding a dome and minarets. An online protest petition against the change of use generated almost 2,000 signatures and graffiti reading “no mosque” was daubed on one of the school’s walls. Christopher Armstrong, the Anglican Dean of Blackburn, said the attacker “could not have tried harder to insult followers of the Muslim faith. This comes at a time after the Paris attacks when some people feel particularly vulnerable.”¹⁰

A report analysing data from Tell Mama, an organisation which monitors Islamophobic incidents, found that for 2014-15 60 percent of reported victims were women who wear a headscarf or hijab.¹¹ Fiyaz Mughal, from Tell Mama, reported that around 60 per cent of victims are women who wear a headscarf or hijab: “We also realised quite early on that women who wear niqab, the face veil, suffered more aggressive incidents – there was something about the face veil that in a way brought out the worst in the perpetrator.”¹² This was reflected in incidents in early 2016. In March students running a stall outside King’s College London’s buildings in the Strand as part of its Discover Islam week were confronted by two men. According to Issa Ruhani of the university’s Islamic Society: “two men approached the stall, acting aggressively and being verbally abusive. This escalated when one of the men reached out and violently pulled the face veil of one of our members’ face.” Questions were raised over the time that university security took to respond to the incident, apparently not arriving until a quarter of an hour after the event was reported.¹³

Against Judaism

The Community Security Trust, which provides security advice and training for Jewish community organisations, schools and synagogues, recorded 934 anti-Semitic incidents nationwide in 2015. The highest number of incidents occurred in January and February 2015, the months that Jewish communities in France and Denmark suffered terrorist attacks.¹⁴ 2014 saw a similarly high figure of 1,168 incidents, a sharp rise from 535 recorded in 2013. The charity said this increase was linked to reactions to the conflict in Gaza in July and August 2014. On 18th November 2014, the day five rabbis were killed at a synagogue in Jerusalem’s Har Nof neighbourhood, 11 incidents were recorded, including a rabbi driving in London reportedly having “slaughter the Jews” shouted at him in Arabic by a man, who then ran a finger across his own throat in a cutting action.¹⁵ The government’s Communities Secretary Eric Pickles said: “These attacks are not only an attack on British Jews, but an attack on all of us and our shared values.”¹⁶

On 7th August 2014, shadow health minister Luciana Berger, received a tweet from a 21-year-old Garron Helm, that showed her with the Star of David on her head and called her a “communist Jewess”. Mr Helm used the hashtag #Hitlerwasright. He was jailed for four weeks in October 2015. More than 2,500 messages tagged #filthyjewbitch were subsequently sent to Ms Berger.¹⁷

The connections between global incidents and aggression against the community in the UK continued in 2015. In January a Jewish school in London received a threatening phone call. The school was told by the call “Who are you, f**k you, up the Palestinians, we’re going to blow up the school.” In July, a Jewish man was in a London shop when three men – one of whom was black, the others were of Arabic appearance – entered and harassed him. One of the men said “He is from Israel” and another said “Why do you keep bombing us? I am Muslim and I don’t like what you’re doing to my people. I don’t have a problem with you but I hate you if you are a Zionist.” One

of them then said “Stupid Jews. You don’t belong here. Get out of this shop you Jew”, while knocking the victim’s kippah off his head. A Hanukkah card sent to a woman directly from Amazon had “F*ck Israel”, “#free Gaza” and “#free Palestine” handwritten on it.¹⁸ More than 70 percent of the incidents recorded in 2015 occurred in Greater London and Greater Manchester, home to the UK’s two largest Jewish communities.¹⁹

Incidents continued in 2016. Gas canisters were thrown at Jewish shoppers walking through Tottenham Hale Retail Park in north London. Their attackers shouted “Hitler is on the way to you” and “Heil Hitler” during the attack on the evening of Wednesday 7th January.²⁰

A political row erupted in April 2016 after it emerged that before Labour MP Naz Shah was elected to parliament she had shared a graphic on Facebook suggesting Israel should be relocated to the United States to resolve Israeli-Palestinian tensions. The graphic was apparently intended to be humorous.²¹ Ms Shah apologised for her actions, but was suspended from the party after calls for her to be removed came from various quarters including Prime Minister David Cameron. On BBC Radio London, Ken Livingstone defended Ms Shah. He said the reaction had been “over the top” and stated that her actions were not anti-semitic but rather about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, Mr Livingstone controversially added: “When Hitler won his election in 1932 his policy then was that Jews should be moved to Israel. He was supporting Zionism before he went mad and ended up killing six million Jews.”²² Labour subsequently suspended Mr Livingstone “for bringing the party into disrepute”.²³ These events apparently disturbed the Jewish community. In a poll of 1,000 British Jews, only 85 said they would vote Labour if there was a general election tomorrow, a fall from the 180 polled who voted Labour under former leader Ed Miliband. Furthermore 38.5 percent of those asked rated the party’s members and elected representatives with the highest possible score for antisemitism: 5 out of 5.²⁴

Related to Christianity

There have been sporadic and apparently isolated cases of harassment and violence against Christians. Nissar Hussain, who converted in 1996, was brutally beaten by two masked unknown assailants around 5pm on 17th November 2015, causing fractures to his left knee and left hand. The incident followed months of harassment – including his car being damaged, his house in Bradford being pelted with eggs, and a mob of around 40 Muslim young men of Pakistani descent gathering outside his home in August 2015.²⁵

Churches have also been attacked. At St Mary’s Catholic Church, Sunderland, vandals smashed a window, tried to break down a door and urinated in to the holy water stoup in September 2015.²⁶ Meanwhile in July 2014, an attempted arson attack on the church of St Mary, Star of the Sea, in Newtownabbey, on the outskirts of north Belfast, was believed to be sectarian.²⁷

In a study published in early 2016, young Anglican, Baptist, and Catholic worshippers aged 11-19 reported incidents of anti-Christian name-calling, bullying and aggressive questioning about their faith by their non-Christian peers. The young people believed negative presentations of Christianity in the media, which showed it as unfashionable, reinforced such attitudes. With Church attendance declining among the age group, the study stated: “It is more acceptable to criticise Christianity than other religions.” One interviewee said that “peers were not hostile to Islam or Muslim students in school on account of their beliefs because that would be perceived to be racist. Christianity, on the other hand, could be criticised because, while there were religious boundaries between him and his ‘white’ peers as a practising Catholic, these were not racial boundaries”.²⁸

Incidents involving conflict between religious believers and equality legislation

There are continuing difficulties trying to provide on one hand freedom of speech and expression for Christians, and on the other side attempts to uphold the rights of members of the LGBT+ community. Pentecostal pastor Barry Trayhorn was employed as a gardener at HMP Littlehey and volunteered at the institution as a chaplain. During a chapel service in May 2014, Mr Trayhorn was

“moved by the Spirit” to urge the congregation to repent and quoted 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 from memory. The passage castigates various things, including adultery, homosexual acts, idolatry, greed, slander and drunkenness. He was suspended from helping at the chapel four days later, following a complaint. He was informed his comments were “homophobic”, breached national prison policy, and that there would be a disciplinary hearing. After the stress of the affair led him to be signed off work in August with stress-related conditions he was visited at home by his manager and a senior prison official on three occasions. In November he resigned, claiming he had been harassed because of his faith. Mr Trayhorn said: “All I was doing was preaching the Bible and repeating the same message of repentance that was heard in many services.”²⁹

Ashers, a bakery in Belfast (which takes its name from the phrase “Asher’s bread is rich” in the biblical book of Genesis), was taken to court over a dispute about a cake promoting same-sex marriage. Gareth Lee went in to the bakery’s Belfast Branch and requested a cake decorated with the words “support Gay marriage”, the logo of LGBT+ group Queerspace, and Sesame Street characters Ernie and Bert. A shop worker accepted the order, but subsequently the company’s directors refused to honour the request, on the grounds it would violate their Christian beliefs by advocating something they believed to be wrong. One of the directors phoned Mr Lee, explained their position, apologised, and offered a full refund, which he accepted. About six weeks later, Ashers received a letter from the Equality Commission alleging they had refused the order on the grounds of Mr Lee’s sexual orientation and therefore directly discriminated against him.³⁰ Karen McArthur of Ashers stated: “I wish to emphasise that this in no way related to Mr Lee’s sexual orientation. We have many gay customers whom we serve regularly without any difficulty.”³¹

Mr Lee claimed he was discriminated against on grounds of his sexual orientation *and* because of his political opinion, i.e. his support of gay marriage.³² According to Judge Isobel Brownlie, Ashers had “the knowledge or perception that the Plaintiff was gay and/or associated with others who are gay... [as] the plaintiff supported gay marriage and/ or associated with others who supported gay marriage”.³³ Her assertion that support for same-sex marriage “is indissociable from sexual orientation” was used as the criterion for establishing that “less favourable treatment on the ground of sexual orientation” had occurred.³⁴ Ashers were found guilty of both direct discrimination and discrimination on grounds of political opinion.³⁵ The bakery appealed after the Belfast County Court ordered them to pay £500 in damages.³⁶

Northern Ireland First Minister Peter Robinson commented: “The issue here is where there are competing rights, ensuring that there is reasonable accommodation. That is what the Equality Commission have missed in all of this.” He added that spending £33,000 on this court case when only £500 in damages was sought from Ashers was not a good use of public money.³⁷ Gay-rights and equality campaigner Peter Tatchell wrote: “This finding of political discrimination against Lee sets a worrying precedent... This raises the question: should Muslim printers be obliged to publish cartoons of Mohammed? Or Jewish ones publish the words of a Holocaust denier? Or gay bakers accept orders for cakes with homophobic slurs? If the Ashers verdict stands it... would leave businesses unable to refuse to decorate cakes or print posters with bigoted messages.”³⁸

Incidents involving education

In 2014 a number of faith schools – Islamic, Jewish and Christian – raised concerns about aspects of Ofsted inspections. At Olive Tree Primary School, an independent Islamic institution in Luton, inspectors quizzed children about LGBT+ issues. School inspectors ended their inspection a day early after parents voiced concerns at a scheduled meeting with inspectors. Ghulam Shah said his 10-year-old son was upset after being interviewed by an inspector about his knowledge of “gay people” and homosexuality. According to Mr Shah, the inspector told his son: “It’s just a part of the law we have to ask you.” No teacher or parent was present at the interviews with the young pupils. Parents told inspectors that the interviews raised safeguarding issues and several parents said they would take their children out of school if they continued. Farasat Latif, who chairs the school trust said: “This is about sexualising young children.”³⁹

Similar objections followed unannounced inspections of three Orthodox Jewish schools in Salford. All three were downgraded and criticised. Beis Yaakov School, an all-female institute, formally complained to Ofsted after pupils were allegedly “traumatised” and “bullied” by inspectors’ questions about gay marriage, sexual reproduction and whether they had non-Jewish friends. Although the report described teaching and achievement as good it said: “The school does not promote adequately students’ awareness and tolerance of communities which are different to their own” but gave no specific details about how the institution fell short in this regard.⁴⁰ The questions on gay marriage apparently assumed a socially constructed model of marriage, which is not the accepted Orthodox Jewish model, raising questions about the religious literacy of the inspectors. Jonathan Rabson, director of the National Association of Jewish Orthodox Schools, said: “Jewish values and ethos are being questioned by inspectors in a climate of hostility designed to unsettle the pupils at member schools”. The school was subsequently placed in special measures.⁴¹ There are concerns that schools previously rated as good for education are being downgraded in inspections because of new guidelines which focus on “British values” rather than learning.⁴²

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

Based on the above evidence it appears that social hostilities have remained high, as illustrated by cases of hate crimes against members of all main religious groups, although the specific context of these offences must be considered. Not that this mitigates the hate crimes, merely that they are often linked to specific, sometimes extrinsic, factors. These extrinsic factors make it hard to anticipate future trends.

Despite a number of growing problems concerning freedom of expression government, legal restrictions are still relatively low. The letter of the law may not always be well understood within the broader society, which may assume religious rights are less valid than those of other groups. With the challenge of traditional norms by parts of the LGBT+ community gaining wider societal traction, it is likely there will be more legal cases examining the limits of freedom of expression for religious groups with different views of relationships and sexual practice.

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