

Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

The Woolf Institute has convened a [Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life](#) (full title: Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life: community, diversity and the common good).

Purpose

The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life has been convened by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, to: a) consider the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain, and the significance of emerging trends and identities b) examine how ideas of Britishness and national identity may be inclusive of a range of religions and beliefs, and may in turn influence peoples self-understanding c) 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 d) make recommendations for public life and policy.

Steering group

Baroness Butler-Sloss is assisted by a steering group whose members.

Membership

The commission's membership reflects a range of backgrounds in terms of religion, conviction, occupation, age, gender and geographical location. Each member serves in an individual capacity and not as an official representative or delegate of an institution. The commission will meet for six weekends over a period of two years, November 2013– June 2015.

Local and national hearings

There will also be five local public hearings arranged - 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 also issue a general call for evidence from individuals and organisations. All evidence taken from the hearings and the general call will be fed into the final weekend meeting of the Commission before the final report.

Reporting

The commission will report in late spring or early summer of 2015

[Dr Matt Gibson](#), Lecturer in the [School of Law](#) at the University of Liverpool, comments on the Equality and Human Rights Commission's report into religion or belief in the workplace and service delivery:

“There exists widespread public confusion over laws protecting religion or belief. This is the conclusion of a report published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The report's findings stem from research undertaken between August 2014 – October 2014 which aimed to capture ‘the direct and personal experiences of employees and service users concerning religion or belief, as well as the views of employers, service providers, relevant organisations and the legal and advice sectors’.

Overview of the Report

Overall, 2483 individuals or organisations took part in the project. The report notes a range of positive experiences encountered by people in relation to manifestation of religion or belief in employment or service delivery. Here, attempts to create inclusive

environments for a range of different beliefs encouraged mutual tolerance, respect and dignity.

However, the report also highlights the many negative experiences involving religion or belief faced by employees, employers, service users and service providers.

For example, religious and non-religious people discussed how they often felt ostracised in the workplace or service sectors due to hostility about the nature of that belief. Non-religious individuals expressed concern about harassment or unwelcome proselytising from religious workers or service providers. Both religious and non-religious individuals sometimes felt disadvantaged by perceived favourable treatment of their non-religious and religious counterparts, respectively. In particular, religious employees – and employers – mentioned difficulties in determining the extent to which religiously-based requests should be accommodated at work. Furthermore, religious conscientious objection by employees and service providers on matters of sexual orientation presented problems. How far, if at all, should these beliefs be protected? What effect – if any – might this have on gay or lesbian colleagues/service users? Is there an emerging ‘hierarchy’ of legal protection between religion or belief and sexual orientation?

The Effectiveness of Current Legislation

Equality and human rights legislation provides the core legal framework for adjudication of religion or belief issues in the workplace and service delivery. Respondents disagreed on the effectiveness of this current framework. Whilst it has encouraged the positive recognition of religion or belief diversity in society, some individuals felt that it had not gone far enough in protecting minority or non-religious beliefs. Notably, Christian employees/employers and services users pointed towards a link between the framework and a loss of status for Christianity. Many individuals suggested systems of practical guidance and checklists for employers and service providers which would complement existing laws, enabling religion or belief matters to be determined more transparently and effectively.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has announced that the results of this report will inform a further report, to be published later this year, on the adequacy of laws protecting religion or belief. In addressing religion or belief concerns, it will be intriguing to see whether that second report proposes a continuation of guidance *on* the law, or whether it will advocate bolder, more substantive, changes *to* the law.