

## **Securing Religious Freedom: Why British Leadership on FoRB Should Be Written into Law**

**By Marc Sidwell**



Published in 2023 by The Henry Jackson Society

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## Executive Summary

In the last five years, the promotion of international religious freedom has become a new priority, and a notable success story, for British diplomacy. But this vitally important policy now faces both political change and Foreign Office inertia. To build on all that has been achieved, the Government should act decisively, follow the recommendation of the Truro Report and make championing international religious freedom an official duty of Whitehall, embedded in legislation. The law which brought similar reforms to the US Government, the International Religious Freedom Act, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and shows the enduring value of such a commitment.

Britain took up the mantle of defending international religious freedom in recognition of a rising tide of persecution worldwide. This disproportionately affects Christians, but counts its victims across all faith groups – and atheists as well. In this new role, Britain has found itself uniquely well placed, providing a complementary vision to the longstanding commitment of the United States.

Yet despite early successes, Britain's policy on international religious freedom now stands at a crossroads. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has many other priorities, and the initiatives set in motion by Theresa May and Jeremy Hunt are at risk of losing momentum. A looming general election could allow a new government, with no statutory obligation to prioritise the issue, to push it down the agenda or even dismiss the initiative wholesale.

That would be a grave mistake. As America learned during the Cold War, the defence of religious freedom abroad is not just a humanitarian priority but a key component of standing up for the values of the free and democratic world. An increasing body of research shows that the price of religious repression is measured not just in human suffering, vast and appalling as that toll remains, but in the growth of intolerant, dangerous ideologies, as well as economic immiseration.

The global decline in religious freedom is both a humanitarian and a strategic crisis. By taking religious freedom seriously, we can see emerging threats more clearly, and understand better how to act against them. Religious restrictions in Russia were an early signal of what would become the aggressive religio-nationalism which underpins Putin's regime. Increasingly repressive blasphemy laws in Pakistan and concerns about India's commitment to religious freedom both deserve prioritisation. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s contempt for religious freedom, most visible in Tibet and its genocide of the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, as well as its intensifying persecution of Christians and longstanding repression of Falun Gong, cannot be set aside in pursuit of economic advantage. China's oppression must be challenged, as the US stood up for the Soviet Union's Jewish citizens even while pursuing détente.

This report recommends:

- Following the Truro Report's recommendation, the recently-created role of the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) should now be established "permanently, and in perpetuity [...] with appropriate resources and authority".
- Legislation should be brought forward, inspired by the United States' International Religious Freedom Act, to establish an Office of International Religious Freedom within the FCDO.
- Religious freedom should be understood not only in terms of human rights but also as a strategic issue. It should be used to help judge security risks and, where necessary, be prioritised, even if it conflicts with other short-term goals. An international religious freedom adviser should be appointed to the National Security Council.
- Protecting religious freedom for all must also be treated with greater urgency within the UK. Domestic policymaking should be coordinated with our international religious freedom strategy.

## Introduction

*“Freedom of religion is central to the ability of peoples to live together. We must always examine the ways in which we protect it.”*

President Obama, Cairo, 2009<sup>1</sup>

The promotion of international religious freedom stands at a crossroads in Britain. In the face of a global crisis of religious violence and discrimination, the UK has in recent years approached the topic with refreshing energy. In July 2018, then-Prime Minister Theresa May appointed Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon to a new role as the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief.<sup>2</sup> On Boxing Day the same year, then-Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt announced a global review of the persecution of Christians, led by the Bishop of Truro, Philip Mounstephen. The review, Hunt wrote, should question “whether we are doing all we can”, while asking tough questions and offering ambitious policy recommendations.<sup>3</sup>

These two actions have reverberated through British foreign policy ever since. Lord Ahmad remains a strong advocate of religious freedom within his current role as Minister with responsibility for Human Rights and for the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the United Nations. Meanwhile, his successors to the role of Special Envoy have continued to champion international religious freedom, with the present incumbent, Fiona Bruce, currently also Chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA).

The Truro Report made extensive recommendations, which have had considerable impact on the practice of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), as confirmed by an independent review last summer.<sup>4</sup> While not every recommendation has yet been acted on, many were, and progress continues to be made. Only this June, another recommendation of the Truro Report was implemented when the UK co-sponsored with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) a resolution at the United Nations Security Council which reaffirmed the right

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a new beginning,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 4 June 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

<sup>2</sup> “Lord Ahmad appointed as PM’s Special Envoy to promote religious freedom,” Prime Minister’s Office, 4 July 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lord-ahmad-appointed-as-pms-special-envoy-to-promote-religious-freedom>

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Hunt, “We must not allow a misguided political correctness to stop us from helping persecuted Christians,” *The Telegraph*, 26 December 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/12/26/must-not-allow-misguided-political-correctness-stop-us-helping/>.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Mounstephen, “Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians,” 2019, <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/storage/2019/07/final-report-and-recommendations.pdf>; Malcolm Evans, Nazila Ghanea, Ahmed Shaheed, Gehan Gunatilleke and Caroline Roberts, “Assessment of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review of FCDO Support for Persecuted Christians,” 15 April 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bishop-of-truros-independent-review-of-fcdo-support-for-persecuted-christians-assessment-of-recommendations-implementation>.

to freedom of religion or belief under international law and explicitly condemned antisemitism for the first time in the body's history.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, with so much achieved, it is unclear what happens next. With its independent review complete, the momentum from the Truro Report is winding down. The role of the Special Envoy, meanwhile, still lacks any statutory basis, despite this being a key Truro recommendation. With an election looming, and a change of governing party likely, there is no certainty that the Special Envoy role will continue. Even if it does, it remains to be seen if it will be treated as a priority. For all that has been done, outside those who follow the issue, religious freedom is still often seen as a niche topic.

Yet the problems which the Truro Review and Special Envoy were set up to address have not gone away. If anything, they have become ever-more urgent.

To take the international religious freedom agenda forward, we must understand how much is at stake. Religious freedom is a pressing humanitarian concern, affecting vast numbers of people worldwide. The UK Government has at long last acknowledged the faith-based genocide of the Yazidi by Da'esh.<sup>6</sup> Shockingly, there are currently several other religiously motivated genocides in progress or in prospect around the world.<sup>7</sup> Yet even China's notorious genocide of the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs has not stopped Rishi Sunak's Government from pursuing an increasingly accommodationist policy toward Beijing.

Religious freedom should not be lightly set aside, and nor should it be seen as a purely humanitarian matter. It is also, as this report argues, a strategic issue, vital to our national security. Only by seeing religious freedom in this light can we grasp how much it matters and break through the reluctance of many in the foreign policy world to "do God".

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<sup>5</sup> "Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2686 (2023), Security Council Urges International Community to Prevent Incitement, Condemn Hate Speech, Racism, Acts of Extremism," United Nations, 14 June 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15321.doc.htm>; Lee Harpin, "UN Security Council finally passes resolution condemning antisemitism," Jewish News, 21 June 2023, <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/un-security-council-finally-passes-resolution-condemning-antisemitism/>.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Loft, "UK acknowledges Yazidi genocide by Daesh/Islamic State," House of Commons Library, 9 August 2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-acknowledges-yazidi-genocide-by-daesh-islamic-state/>.

<sup>7</sup> Eleni Courea, "UK Labour aims to declare China's treatment of Uyghurs 'genocide'," Politico, 29 March 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-labour-to-push-to-declare-chinas-treatment-of-uyghurs-genocide-xinjiang-beijing-rahima-mahmut/>; Sitarah Mohammadi and Sajjad Askary, "Why the Hazara people fear genocide in Afghanistan," Aljazeera, 27 October 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/10/27/why-the-hazara-people-fear-genocide-in-afghanistan>; "Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? Three Years On," APPG for FoRB, June 2023, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/Unfolding-Genocide-three-years-on.pdf>

## A Note on Terminology

**Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)** has become the most common term used in the UK by those who care about the fundamental freedom to worship, or not, according to your own conscience. It derives from Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights (UDHR), which celebrates its 75th anniversary this December, and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and remains a valuable and indeed unavoidable phrase for those working on the frontlines of this issue.

However, although FoRB is often seen as a more inclusive term than religious freedom, it is also an inelegant piece of jargon, with its meaning less than clear to outsiders. This report uses the terms interchangeably but where possible uses **religious freedom** instead.

While doing so, it is vital to acknowledge that nonbelievers also need to be cared for and protected as part of the remit of defending religious freedom. In 2016, President Obama signed an amendment to America's International Religious Freedom Act, expanding it to explicitly protect "non-theistic beliefs and the right not to profess or practice any religion". This was a valuable correction, since atheism is explicitly targeted and punished as a kind of rival faith in a number of religiously repressive countries. In 2012, Alexander Aan, a young Indonesian atheist, was jailed for two-and-a-half years for writing on Facebook that he did not believe in God.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, the Saudi Interior Ministry enacted regulations by which "calling for atheist thought" was identified as terrorism.<sup>9</sup> In 2021, the Hungarian civil servant Gáspár Békés was allegedly fired from his job because of a blogpost in which he had criticised the custom of infant baptism.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to the right to express their belief without facing discrimination or criminalisation, atheists require the same protection as religious believers.

Yet religious belief also requires protection in ways that atheism and other non-religious beliefs often do not. For the most part, atheism is an individual, private and intellectual commitment, without a communal or ritual component. In most religious traditions, by contrast, public practice, ritual and community are central, and these require additional safeguards for religious freedom to be meaningful.

In particular, this includes the right of free assembly to form worship communities, the institutional liberty to build and maintain the organisations required by a particular faith tradition, and the right to perform certain religious rituals – so long as this does not infringe on the rights of others.

The importance of ritual slaughter in both Jewish and Islamic traditions is an important example of this last point. One of the first official proofs of Nazi hostility to German Jews came

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict Rogers, "Indonesia's Rising Religious Intolerance," *The New York Times*, 21 May 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/22/opinion/indonesias-rising-religious-intolerance.html>; Benedict Rogers, "Hitchens, Jesus and Freedom: A Jailed Atheist and the Struggle Against Religious Intolerance in Indonesia," HuffPost, 25 May 2012, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ben/hitchens-jesus-and-freedom\\_b\\_1543415.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ben/hitchens-jesus-and-freedom_b_1543415.html).

<sup>9</sup> Alex Johnson, "With Obama's Signature, U.S. Religious Freedom Law Protects Atheists," NBC News, 23 December 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/obama-s-signature-u-s-religious-freedom-law-protects-atheists-n699356>.

<sup>10</sup> "Hungarian atheist fired because of his views on baptism," Humanists International, 16 February 2021, <https://humanists.international/2021/02/hungarian-atheist-fired-because-of-his-views-on-baptism/>.



when kosher slaughter was made illegal.<sup>11</sup> In modern Europe, both Muslims and Jews can still confront politically opportunistic slaughter restrictions, which test the limits of religious freedom in the name of animal rights but with a strong undercurrent of hostile suspicion toward non-Christian cultures.<sup>12</sup>

**Religious freedom** remains a useful term not only for its clarity but because it captures the need for this wider complex of rights to be protected if religious believers are to enjoy true liberty.

The scope of religious freedom, like FoRB, includes both those who choose not to follow any religion as well as those who have religious faith. According to the charter of the International Religious Freedom Summit held annually in Washington DC, religious freedom should be understood as three interconnected levels of rights:

- The right of every human being freely to believe in religious truths, or not to believe, uncoerced by any human authority, especially the state with its extraordinary powers;
- The right to join with others in a religious community, which also possesses religious freedom. This freedom includes the right to pursue the goods natural to religious communities, such as building houses of worship, training clergy, establishing religious schools, developing and upholding religious doctrines. It includes the rights of parents to raise their children within their chosen faith community. It includes the rights of individuals and communities to share their beliefs with others and to invite others to join their religious communities. It includes the rights of adherents to leave any religious community and to join another;
- The rights of believers and of religious communities to live and act peacefully, within civil and political society, in accord with their religious beliefs. It includes the right of believers and their communities to draw on those beliefs as they participate in civic life. It includes the right to convey their religious views to the general public on issues of the common good, such as justice, peace, equality, and freedom.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to say that the conflicts between religious communities and those with different beliefs and values are always easy to resolve. Respect for religious freedom does not imply reverence. Indeed, since religious freedom in the definition above includes the right to reaffiliate or convert, it must include the right to dispute faith positions. The UN's Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of religious hatred makes clear that religious freedom "does not include the right to have a religion or a belief that is free from criticism or ridicule".<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the treatment of religions themselves, issues such as ritual slaughter, mentioned above, as well as blasphemy rules and matters relating to abortion and sexuality all present

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<sup>11</sup> "Antisemitic legislation 1933–1939," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitic-legislation-1933-1939>.

<sup>12</sup> Eddy Wax, "Belgium tests EU rules on halal and kosher slaughter," Politico, 19 August 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-becomes-eu-test-case-on-halal-and-kosher-slaughter-religious-freedoms-animal-welfare/>.

<sup>13</sup> "A Charter Of Religious Freedom," IRF Summit, <https://irfsummit.org/charter/>.

<sup>14</sup> "The Rabat Plan of Action," UNHRC, 5 October 2012, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/outcome-documents/rabat-plan-action>.

challenges where the demands of religious freedom and other rights must be weighed carefully. Such topics are beyond the scope of this paper, but one example of the thoughtful approach which is needed can be seen in the 2022 Lisbon declaration on LGBT+ issues from the International Religious Liberty Association, prioritising both individual dignity and religious freedom.<sup>15</sup>

## I. Why Faith Matters in Foreign Policy

*“[T]he American people, above all, are committed to a human détente—to the free movement of men and ideas on which a stable and more lasting peace must be based.”*

Senator Henry Jackson, on the rationale for the Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1975

This summer, Turkey nearly derailed Sweden’s accession to NATO after the Scandinavian country permitted a protester to publicly burn a copy of the Quran. Meanwhile, British diplomats find themselves having to contend with religious issues on multiple fronts. Engagement with China must be weighed against the CCP’s genocide of the predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, as well as its persecution of other religious groups, including Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and its tight restrictions on Christianity. Iran’s nuclear ambitions, the murderous actions of its terrorist proxy the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the repression of its domestic population, Iranian women in particular, are all informed by the theocratic character of the Iranian state. In Myanmar, the predominantly Muslim Rohingyas have faced genocide, while Christians have been targeted especially severely in airstrikes since the military coup in 2021, with hundreds of churches bombed, destroyed or desecrated and several pastors jailed or killed. Even Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is increasingly presented by the Putin regime as a sacred crusade for Orthodox values. In May, an aeroplane flew the icon of Saint Seraphim of Sarov along the Russian border region with Ukraine, allegedly to protect it against Ukrainian drones.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, in India, riots in Manipur terrorised a Christian minority, leaving the state and central government, both in the hands of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, facing questions about their inaction.<sup>17</sup> In Pakistan, a mob of thousands burned Christian churches after claims that pages of a Quran were desecrated.<sup>18</sup> And despite Sweden’s success in persuading Turkey to support its entry into NATO, the Danish Government has just announced a proposed law to make the mistreatment of sacred items a criminal

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<sup>15</sup> “Lisbon Declaration: Religious Freedom in Relation to Sex, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity,” International Religious Liberty Association, 29 September 2022, <https://www.irla.org/irla-lisbon-declaration-religious-freedom-in-relation-to-sex,-sexual-orientation,-and-gender-identity>

<sup>16</sup> Elle Hardy, “Putin’s holy war on Ukraine,” UnHerd, 20 July 2023, <https://unherd.com/2023/07/putins-holy-war-on-ukraine/>.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Manipur: why is there conflict and how is the government responding?” The Guardian, 21 July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/21/manipur-india-why-is-there-conflict-and-how-is-the-government-responding>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistani-christians-hold-sunday-services-churches-burnt-by-mob-2023-08-20/>

offence, in an effort to control the fallout after its own Quran-burning incidents raised the terrorist threat in Denmark to dangerous levels.<sup>19</sup>

Western society may be increasingly secular, but the security challenges which the West finds itself facing are anything but. Only by accepting the religious character of many of our biggest strategic risks can we face them honestly. By approaching them in the light of the West's commitment to religious freedom we can also find a principled and pragmatic way forward.

Religious repression is a tragedy for those affected, and the sheer scale of this is alarming enough.<sup>20</sup> Yet this violation of a fundamental human right has far broader implications. It is a canary in the coal mine – a sign of how a nation can be expected to behave on the world stage. It is also a source of future problems: there is now a significant body of research which supplements the case for religious freedom on instrumental grounds. Religious repression goes hand in hand with economic stagnation and generates more intolerant forms of belief, while religious freedom is associated with better economic outcomes, higher state capacity and more liberal doctrines.<sup>21</sup>

Religious freedom is also underappreciated as a guide to emerging security threats. In 1999, Robert Seiple, America's first ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, testified before the House International Relations Committee. The American academic and former White House staffer William Inboden has pointed out that the regimes identified in Seiple's 1999 testimony as egregious restrictors of religious freedom "overwhelmingly coincide with those the United States was already at war with or would soon go to war with, or that would emerge as first-order national security concerns." Burma, China, Iran, Iraq and Sudan were identified as "Countries of Particular Concern". Both the Taliban and Serbia were also singled out, along with Saudi Arabia and North Korea.<sup>22</sup>

A year before Seiple's testimony, President Bill Clinton had signed America's International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) into law, creating the official structures in government to take the issue more seriously. Yet US concerns for religious freedom had begun to gain momentum years earlier.

In America, the promotion of religious freedom as a core priority for national security came of age during the Cold War.<sup>23</sup> Senator Henry Jackson, whose work remains an inspiration for the publisher of this report, led the way, by helping assemble a bi-partisan coalition to connect trade policy with the Soviet empire and the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate. The amendment passed by large majorities in both houses of Congress, and in 1975 US President

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-25/denmark-to-block-koran-burnings-with-new-law-on-holy-objects>

<sup>20</sup> According to the latest data from the Pew Research Center, there were 57 governments with high or very high restrictions on religion in 2019 and 2020, the highest level since the survey began in 2007. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/29/how-covid-19-restrictions-affected-religious-groups-around-the-world-in-2020/>

<sup>21</sup> Christos Andreas Makridis, "Human flourishing and religious liberty: Evidence from over 150 countries" *PLoS One* 15 (10) (October 2020); Anthony Gill and John M. Owen IV, "Religious Liberty and Economic Prosperity: Four Lessons From The Past" *Cato Journal* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2017); Roger Finke and Brian J. Grim, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Brian J. Grim's work at: <https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/brian-j-grim>

<sup>22</sup> William Inboden, "Religious Freedom and National Security," Hoover Institution, 2 October 2012, <https://www.hoover.org/research/religious-freedom-and-national-security>.

<sup>23</sup> Luke M. Perez, "Assessing public support for international religious freedom," *International Journal of Religious Freedom* 12, no. 1/2 (2019): 109-122 (111).

Gerald Ford signed the historic Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974 into law. In return for all the economic benefits of normalised trade relations, and what was then known as most favoured nation status, the Soviets were required to let their Jewish citizens leave.

Unsurprisingly, the Soviets opposed the Jackson-Vanik amendment with a mixture of threats, lobbying and partial concessions. Less creditably for the West, the amendment also faced considerable challenge domestically, as its moral priorities ran against the foreign policy consensus of the day, being seen as a threat to détente.

Senator Jackson, however, saw the Jackson-Vanik amendment as an important statement of America's values, and its moral difference from the Soviets. In the face of Soviet oppression, realist manoeuvring had its limits. He wrote that the amendment showed Moscow that "the American people, above all, are committed to a human détente—to the free movement of men and ideas on which a stable and more lasting peace must be based."<sup>24</sup>

The Jackson-Vanik amendment demonstrated that religious freedom can belong at the heart of foreign policy, and that setting it aside for prudent reasons of state, however tempting, is short-sighted. In America, this would have a lasting impact, as the network of activists supporting the Jackson-Vanik amendment and related initiatives persisted to the collapse of the Soviet Union decades later – and beyond.<sup>25</sup> A decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the drafters of IRFA looked back to the Jackson-Vanik amendment as a template.<sup>26</sup>

No less than in 1999, religious freedom can help us see threats more clearly today. It provides a counter-argument to the sort of temporising realism that normalised Vladimir Putin's regime prior to 2022, and that continues to accept the threats posed by Iran and China. It also provides a way for the West to distinguish itself morally from its enemies. In standing up for religious freedom, we remind ourselves and the world of the values we stand for, and which those who oppose us reject.

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Siegel, *Triumph Over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews* (NY: Devora, 2008), 364.

<sup>25</sup> Perez, "Assessing public support for international religious freedom," 111.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

## II. Defending Faith in Freedom: A Role for Global Britain

*“First, that we have granted to God, and by this present charter have confirmed for us and our heirs in perpetuity, that the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired.”*

Clause one of Magna Carta (1215), translated from the Latin by G.R.C. Davis.<sup>27</sup>

In America, religious freedom has historic weight, tied as it is to the founding of the nation. Religious freedom is sometimes known as the first freedom, due to its status being confirmed in the opening words of the first amendment to the US Constitution, adopted in 1791.<sup>28</sup>

Over our long history, the UK has a far from perfect record on religious freedom. Jews were invited to settle in England by William the Conqueror, but then expelled in 1290 by Edward I, not to formally return until 1655, a shameful episode for which the Church of England offered formal repentance in 2022. Both Catholics and Protestants were executed here for their beliefs, and anti-Catholic restrictions persisted for centuries.

However, Britain has a longstanding tradition, dating to the first clause of Magna Carta, of separating religious authority from the power of the state. We can also take pride in the liberal religious settlement that ultimately emerged in Britain, helping to make it stable, prosperous and a model to the world. Already, in 1764, Voltaire wrote in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, with both cynicism and admiration, of Britain’s religious toleration.

*Although Episcopacy and Presbyterianism predominate in Great Britain, all other opinions are welcome and live tolerably well together [...]*

*Enter into the Royal Exchange of London, a place more respectable than many courts, in which deputies from all nations assemble for the advantage of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian bargain with one another as if they were of the same religion, and bestow the name of infidel on bankrupts only. [...] On the separation of these free and pacific assemblies, some visit the synagogue, others repair to the tavern. [...]*

*Was there in London but one religion, despotism might be apprehended; if two only, they would seek to cut each other’s throats; but as there are at least thirty, they live together in peace and happiness.<sup>29</sup>*

Today, the UK still faces challenges of integration and of religious prejudice. Yet its open culture also offers a model of religious toleration that stands alongside that of America and

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<sup>27</sup> “English translation of Magna Carta,” British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-english-translation>.

<sup>28</sup> “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/>

<sup>29</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, Part 4 (1764), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/fleming-the-works-of-voltaire-vol-vi-philosophical-dictionary-part-4>.

in many ways complements it. The US approach demands that religion of any kind must be kept out of state affairs. Britain proves that religious freedom can also exist alongside a state religion and even a head of state who is that religion's supreme governor, a more approachable vision for societies whose culture is still highly religious.

In the wake of Brexit, as Britain works to re-establish its independent role in world affairs, the defence of international religious freedom has emerged as an area where it can show real leadership.

Alongside this year's ground-breaking UN Security Council resolution, co-sponsored with a Muslim-majority state, the UK also used its presidency of the G7 in 2021 to include religious freedom language in the Carbis Bay summit communiqué.<sup>30</sup> In 2022, the FCDO hosted the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London. As already mentioned, Fiona Bruce MP, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB, is currently chair of IRFBA, putting her at the heart of global efforts to advance religious freedom and in close contact with her American counterparts.

Britain is well placed for this role. We are widely recognised, rightly, as a successful, open, religiously plural society. We have natural allies on these issues in the Anglosphere, particularly America. We are also linked to areas where religious freedom needs defending and extending: through the global scale of the Anglican Communion, through Britain's status in the Commonwealth, through our strong connections with both Israel and our Arab allies, and through our historic ties to countries and territories such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Hong Kong.

A word must also be said about Britain's Christian heritage. The vast majority of religious persecution today is against Christians, which is why, when Jeremy Hunt commissioned a review into religious persecution worldwide, it was specifically focused on that faith.<sup>31</sup> This is counter-intuitive to many in the West, who associate Christianity with privilege or even whiteness. But in much of the world, Christianity is a religion of the poor and marginalised.<sup>32</sup> Three-quarters of Christians in India identify as lower caste.<sup>33</sup> In the Middle East, the historic and once-sizeable Christian populations have been driven almost to extinction: from a fifth of the people in the region a century ago to less than five per cent today.<sup>34</sup>

It is only natural that a country which owes so much to its own Christian heritage should have a concern for Christians elsewhere who are being persecuted.<sup>35</sup> This need not be an exclusive

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<sup>30</sup> "Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué," The White House Briefing Room, 13 June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/13/carbis-bay-g7-summit-communicue/>.

<sup>31</sup> As confirmed by the Truro Review (2019): 15. According to the charity Open Doors, one in seven Christians (360m people) experience at least 'high' levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. In 1993, Christians faced high, very high or extreme levels of discrimination in 40 countries; 30 years on it has risen to 76 countries: "World Watch List 2023," Open Doors, 2023, <https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/2023-Advocacy-Report.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> "IRFBA Statement on Christians," U.S. Department of State, 17 May 2023, <https://www.state.gov/irfba-statement-on-christians/>.

<sup>33</sup> Ariana Monique Salazar, "8 key findings about Christians in India," Pew Research Center, 12 July 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/12/8-key-findings-about-christians-in-india/>.

<sup>34</sup> Hunt, "We must not allow".

<sup>35</sup> Including in many ways its core values and freedoms, as contemporary authors such as Tom Holland and Larry Siedentop have argued. See Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little,

approach. Hungary's model of foreign aid focuses exclusively on persecuted Christians in the Middle East and Africa. It is acknowledged to do good work in its remit, but as a result it lacks a wider and more inclusive vision.<sup>36</sup> Britain's approach has always seen the larger picture. It has been given energy by several committed Christians, but also by Lord Ahmad, an Ahmadiyya Muslim whose co-religionists also suffer considerable persecution,<sup>37</sup> and it continues under a Prime Minister who is a practising Hindu. It starts from the perspective of universal human rights for those of all faiths and none, and from an understanding that where Christians are being persecuted they will not be suffering alone.

Yet it is important that in standing up for religious freedom we do not insist on some sort of artificial equality of oppression. We need to prioritise areas where help is needed, where Britain can make a difference and where it is in our strategic interest to do so. If that means standing up for Asia Bibi in Pakistan, Christians at fear of their lives from Boko Haram in Nigeria, and the dwindling Christian populations of the Middle East, that must not deter us from doing what is right. North Korea remains the worst place in the world to be a Christian, and yet there is little acknowledgement or awareness of this in the UK when its strategic challenges and human rights abuses are considered.

The absence of religious freedom is a marker for instability, violent intolerance and international aggression. Taking this seriously is in Britain's interests. As recent years have shown, it is also a challenge that is within our power.

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Brown, 2019); Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Beata Paragi, "A Defender of Christendom? The Inner Logic of Hungary's Humanitarian Aid Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 5 (2023): 769-795.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick Greenwalt, Niala Mohammad and Madeline Velluro, "Factsheet: Ahmadiyya Muslims," U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, October 2021, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Ahmadiyya%20Persecution%20Factsheet.pdf>.

### III. Integrating Religious Freedom and National Security

How should Britain approach the task of integrating religious freedom issues more deeply into its foreign policy? The Truro Report, and the FCDO's response to its recommendations, has already made a start. However, as last year's Independent Review noted, some interviewees observed that there had not been a deep cultural shift in the FCDO towards prioritising religious freedom concerns. Instead, they claimed that "when FoRB issues are raised the discussion moves to human rights more generally and the focus on religion or belief is lost."<sup>38</sup>

Folding religious freedom only into wider discussions about human rights violations is doubly concerning. First, because it fails to appreciate the distinctive character of religious freedom issues. Second, because treating religious freedom purely in humanitarian terms fails to engage with its relevance to larger questions of national security.

A decade ago, Dr Eric Patterson, currently the president of the Religious Freedom Institute, laid out four ways in which religious freedom could provide a helpful lens on national security.<sup>39</sup> He revisited his paper this year to consider the model's relevance to China and to reflect on its success relative to more secular analysis.<sup>40</sup> Patterson proposed that analysts should consider (a) What a country says about religious freedom issues; (b) How it treats its own citizens on these issues; (c) How it treats its neighbours; and (d) How it acts on the international stage in supporting or challenging religious freedom.

Patterson's religious freedom lens immediately calls into question the China policy of "robust pragmatism" pursued by the FCDO under James Cleverly and Rishi Sunak. As Patterson says: "China represents a tremendous threat to religious freedom at home and abroad; and Beijing's anti-religion activities are also destabilizing its neighbors as well as the global order."<sup>41</sup> Religious freedom can help us see the egregious behaviour of certain states in a way that realist analysis otherwise too readily ignores, as happened with the Soviet Union in the era of détente.

Including religious freedom in analysing strategic security threats may also provide an early warning system for democratic backsliding and the development of aggressive forms of religious nationalism. If the West had taken religious freedom more seriously, the imposition of religious restrictions in Russia in 1997 would have sent red lights flashing three years before Vladimir Putin first became President.<sup>42</sup>

This approach, developed in America, can also help the UK assess threats which are of particular concern to its own security. Here, Pakistan's blasphemy laws stand out as especially alarming. These laws are the second-strictest in the world after Iran and were tightened

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<sup>38</sup> Evans, Ghana, Shaheed, Gunatilleke and Roberts, "Assessment of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's Independent Review," 4.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Patterson, "What They Say And Do: Religious Freedom as a National Security Lens," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2013): 22-30, <https://www.regent.edu/app/uploads/sites/6/1919/11/What-They-Say-and-Do-Religious-Freedom-as-a-National-Security-Lens-by-Eric-Patterson.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Eric Patterson, "Revisiting Religious Freedom as a National Security Lens: The Case of China," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2023): 13-24.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Wallace L. Daniel and Christopher Marsh, "Russia's 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience in Context and Retrospect," *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 5-17.



further at the start of this year.<sup>43</sup> Pakistan's internal religious repression is well known, having become particularly notorious for the case of Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian sentenced to death for blasphemy and then acquitted on appeal. Pakistan's lack of religious freedom has also become a broader threat outside its own borders. In 2021, then-Prime Minister Imran Khan called for Muslim-majority countries to unite to impose blasphemy laws in the West.<sup>44</sup> In 2018 he also promised to raise the matter at the UN and push for a renewed collective anti-blasphemy policy for the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which previously pursued a global blasphemy law from 1998-2011.<sup>45</sup> This issue is directly impacting Britain: Pakistan's anti-blasphemy agenda is now gaining traction among some sections of Britain's Pakistani diaspora and appears to be influencing anti-blasphemy action in the UK.<sup>46</sup>

As well as helping to identify threats, religious freedom also provides an avenue to help resolve issues before they become more serious. Taking the interaction between repression, the likely decline of religious freedom and other geostrategic risks seriously can enable the UK to respond constructively before a crisis arises. A present-day example is the case of Tunisia, which has seen its democratic progress upended by the authoritarian rule of President Kais Saïed. In an effort to shift the blame for deepening economic malaise, food shortages and other political issues, he has targeted opposition voices and scapegoated the Sub-Saharan African population. It's not hard to see the probability that religious communities could fall foul of such scapegoating, especially when they look to repressive neighbour Algeria as a fraternal ally. Tunisia, sitting between Algeria and Libya, is still a relatively stable and secure country, but it is becoming a major point in the illegal migrant route and, increasingly, those migrants seeking to reach Europe are Tunisians. In this context, religious freedom as a contributor to free and flourishing societies, and a guard against extremist ideology, should be a point of focus.

Rightly understood, prioritising religious freedom issues around the world becomes not just a valuable addition to Britain's human rights work, but an essential component of building peace and stability abroad and securing the nation at home.

This is not to say that the best approach to religious freedom violations is always to tackle them head-on. The Asia Bibi case in particular showed how the notoriety of the case in the West brought about a reciprocal hardening of attitudes within Pakistan. Something similar also appears to have happened in Nigeria, in the wake of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign.<sup>47</sup> Focusing on, for example, ensuring legal systems are operating fairly, rather than being seen

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<sup>43</sup> Ahmet T. Kuru, "The politics of blasphemy: Why Pakistan and some other Muslim countries are passing new blasphemy laws," *The Conversation*, 6 February 2023, <https://theconversation.com/the-politics-of-blasphemy-why-pakistan-and-some-other-muslim-countries-are-passing-new-blasphemy-laws-198647>.

<sup>44</sup> Asad Hashim, "Pakistan PM calls for West to criminalise blasphemy against Islam," *Aljazeera*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/19/pakistan-pm-calls-for-west-to-criminalise-blasphemy-against-islam>.

<sup>45</sup> "Pakistan's PM calls on 'Muslim world' to raise 'blasphemy' at UN," *National Secular Society*, 31 August 2018, <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2018/08/pakistans-pm-calls-on-muslim-world-to-raise-blasphemy-at-un>.

<sup>46</sup> Charlotte Littlewood, *Britain's New Blasphemy Police?* (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2023), <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/britains-new-blasphemy-police-understanding-islamist-anti-blasphemy-action-in-the-uk>.

<sup>47</sup> Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw, "How the 'Bring Back Our Girls' Tweets Changed a War in Nigeria," *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 February 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-the-bring-back-our-girls-tweets-changed-a-war-in-nigeria-11613797261>.

as partial advocates for any particular religious group, may be a more prudent strategy in some cases. Yet in other circumstances, as with the Uyghur genocide, publicising ongoing atrocities and punishing the individuals and regimes responsible is essential.

The current UN FoRB Special Rapporteur, Nazila Ghanea, produced a report earlier this year which contains a helpful guide to the tools available in the promotion of religious freedom.<sup>48</sup> These include: monitoring, assessing and reporting; bilateral engagement and political dialogue; multilateral forums; demarches and public diplomacy; education, training and capacity-building; external financial instruments; and cooperation with a range of FoRB actors, from civil society to multilateral institutions and alliances of parliamentarians.

All of these policies must be in the UK toolkit. Monitoring and assessing violations of religious freedom is particularly important and the potential of new technology to support this should continue to be developed and explored. However, these tools will only be used effectively if religious freedom becomes an enduring priority for the UK. That requires the UK to act on the Truro Report and, following in America's footsteps, create a statutory duty on government to stand up for religious freedom worldwide.

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<sup>48</sup> Nazila Ghanea, "Landscape of freedom of religion or belief: Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea" (Human Rights Council, 52nd Session, 27 February–31 March 2023): 11-16.

## Conclusion

*“What do we mean by freedom of religion, conscience and belief? Nothing more or less than the profound right of all people to live their lives in accordance with the dictates of their own conscience.”*

Sam Brownback, Former US Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom<sup>49</sup>

International religious freedom has long been a bipartisan issue in America, ever since the Jackson-Vanik amendment. While it is sometimes caricatured today as the preserve of evangelical Republicans, the key legislation, IRFA, was inspired by Scoop Jackson, signed into law by President Clinton and updated by President Obama: Democrats all. The religious freedom offices within the US State Department continue to operate under every administration, whatever its party affiliation.

In the UK, that is not yet true. The new priority given to international religious freedom has been set by a Conservative Prime Minister, a Conservative Foreign Secretary, a Conservative peer and a succession of Conservative MPs serving in the role of Special Envoy. While the all-party parliamentary group dedicated to FoRB is cross-party, it remains to be seen whether a change of government would maintain the same focus on the issue. Without any statutory commitment to even keep the role of a Special Envoy for FoRB, there is no guarantee.<sup>50</sup>

There are reasons to think Labour, if elected, will not reject the FoRB agenda wholesale. It is seen as a broadly successful initiative. David Lammy, the shadow Foreign Secretary, has spoken of the importance he places on his own Christian faith.<sup>51</sup> Other Labour figures, notably Sir Stephen Timms, have an evident interest in the subject.

Yet religious freedom is too important an issue to trust to shifting political priorities. It was for this reason that the Truro Report recommended “establishing permanently, and in perpetuity, the role of Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief with appropriate resources”, creating a role similar to the ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom in the US State Department.<sup>52</sup> Last year’s independent review noted that this would require legislation and that “no substantial action” had been taken towards it. This should be a priority and, in the absence of Government action, the large number of MPs who understand the importance of international religious freedom should bring forward a Private Members’ Bill to press the issue.

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<sup>49</sup> Sam Brownback and Katrina Lantos Swett, “This year, we must truly defend freedom of religion, conscience and belief,” The Hill, 1 January 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/3781483-this-year-we-must-truly-defend-freedom-of-religion-conscience-and-belief/>.

<sup>50</sup> The cross-party International FoRB APPG has made a similar proposal to that of the Truro Report for giving the Special Envoy role more substance, recommending in 2021 that it should be “adequately resourced and fully integrated into the FCDO”. See: APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, “Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief (2020)” (February 2021): 7.

<sup>51</sup> “David Lammy delivers Christian Aid’s Annual Lecture,” Labour, 22 November 2022, <https://labour.org.uk/press/david-lammy-delivers-christian-aids-annual-lecture/>.

<sup>52</sup> Mounstephen, “Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians,” 130.

Looking around the world today, with violations of religious freedom occurring in the highest number of countries ever recorded, it would be easy to despair. But despair is too easy. Britain's achievements in just the last few years show that a real difference can be made. It is the same lesson that America learned in the 1970s during the Cold War. The movement Henry Jackson helped to build refused to cave before Soviet tyranny in the name of détente. Instead, that cross-party alliance took a moral stand to defend religious freedom.

The Jackson-Vanik amendment broke with foreign policy orthodoxy – and succeeded. It saved Jewish lives and clarified the stakes and the nature of the sides in the Cold War. Not only that, but Jackson-Vanik became the mother and father of many more successes, by inspiring America's permanent, official commitment to international religious freedom through the passing of the IRFA. The offices and official roles instituted by that law continue to lead the world on this issue.

In the 75th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to freedom of religion, enshrined in Article 18, remains under threat. Britain has become a champion of this neglected but fundamental right in the last five years. It is a fight on behalf of some of the world's poorest and most marginalised. It is also a fight in which our national security is at stake and by which our values are defined. It is time to make an enduring commitment to that struggle.

## Policy Recommendations

- Following recommendation six of the Truro Report, and in line with similar suggestions from the cross-party International FoRB APPG, the role of FoRB Special Envoy should be established “permanently, and in perpetuity [...] with appropriate resources and authority”. This is a matter of urgency and, if necessary, a Private Members’ Bill should be used to press the issue before the next election.
- Legislation should be brought forward, inspired by America’s International Religious Freedom Act, to establish an Office of Religious Freedom within the FCDO.
- An independent commission should be established to evaluate UK religious freedom policy and shape recommendations for Government.
- Religious freedom should be understood within the FCDO not only in terms of human rights but also as a strategic issue. It should be used to help judge security risks and, where necessary, should be prioritised even when it conflicts with other short-term goals. As part of this greater strategic prioritisation of religious freedom, an adviser on international religious freedom should also be appointed to the National Security Council.
- While domestic policy on religious freedom is beyond the scope of this report, the promotion of international religious freedom demands that the UK take the issue especially seriously at home as well. Colin Bloom’s recent review of faith engagement called for the Special Envoy’s remit to be extended to domestic issues.<sup>53</sup> Whether that is the right approach requires further debate, but assuring religious freedom for all within the UK, and negotiating the challenging issues involved, must be treated with greater urgency. Domestic policymaking should be coordinated with our international religious freedom strategy.

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<sup>53</sup> Colin Bloom, “Does government ‘do God?’: An independent review into how government engages with faith,” *The Bloom Review* (April 2023): 10, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1152684/The\\_Bloom\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1152684/The_Bloom_Review.pdf).

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## About HJS

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## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Darren Spinck, Benedict Rogers and Miles Windsor for reviewing the report and offering very insightful feedback, and to Bishop Mounstephen, Sir Stephen Timms, Lord Ahmad, David Burrowes, Phil Rosenberg and others for their insights.





Published in 2023 by The Henry Jackson Society

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SW1P 4QP