

The Right Reverend Dr Christopher Cocksworth, Lord Bishop of Coventry

Thank you for this opportunity to submit evidence to this important Review into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) policy on persecuted Christians. I begin by supporting the argument others may make that it is imperative that the UK Government advocate more proactively for the fundamental human right that is Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), and that it be defended strongly on behalf of any persecuted religious minority, whatever faith tradition they may or may not belong to.

I am also of the view that threatened religious minorities, including Christians, are best served by the UK Government when it takes a cross-departmental approach, recognising that alongside diplomacy, policies on aid, asylum, trade, and security also have significant implications for persecuted Christians overseas.

However, I'm conscious of the limited scope of this particular Review which pertains only to the policies of one government department, the FCO, towards one religious group, Christians. In light of this, I will outline some of the particular challenges facing Christians that I have observed, and where the FCO can better support them.

I support the specific focus of this Review on Christians because there is a widespread feeling, echoed by the Foreign Secretary himself, that the FCO has shown some 'hesitation' to support Christians, in a way that contrasts with support for other oppressed religious groups. This 'nervousness' to argue for the rights of Christians is a risk to the FCO's FoRB aspirations, one that the Foreign Secretary is right to address in this Review. However, it is not the only one. Whilst the FCO has promoted FoRB, the lack of coordination between UK Government departments has real life implication as the failure of the Home Office to offer Asia Bibi sanctuary in the UK is one example among many.

The Foreign Secretary has identified that a stumbling block to the FCO giving its unswerving support to persecuted Christians is 'our imperial history'. I appreciate that this may be a cause of reticence but it needs to be countered by a fuller and fairer historical narrative that gives proper weight to indigenous activity and missionary endeavour independent of imperial control and often subversive to it.

It is unjust to allow suffering Christians today to pay the price for British action in the past, even more so when the growth of Christianity is conflated in simplistic and misleading ways with colonial history. This relates to a point to which I shall return later – the deeper understanding of religions in all their textured individuality.

Christian communities around the world, many belonging, of course, to the ancient fabric of their lands, deserve the same amount of attention and support from our Government as any other persecuted minority.

The Government says that it gives its support to the people most in need, the most vulnerable – but will the Government recognise that simply being a Christian in a hostile society is sometimes the very cause of that vulnerability? That is the heart – or, let me say more

theologically – the *crux* of the matter: vulnerability in certain places and times as a consequence of Christian identity and bearing the sign of the cross.

Furthermore, this Review must aim to decouple in the minds of governments at home and abroad, the perceived link between ‘Christianity’ and ‘the West’. Persecuted Christians today, like the first Christians, are often poor and marginalised in the non-Western world. To play into the false narrative that they are ‘Western agents’ would not only be unfair but bow to totalitarian governments that deny that their citizens have voluntarily made Christianity their own or oppressive majority-religion perspectives that write Christianity out of the history of their lands.

Turning now to the specific challenges faced by Christians, the sources of their vulnerability, the following are matters of interest to the FCO:

The constitutional identification of national identity with the majority religion excludes Christians from the feeling of sharing in their country’s national life, such as in ■■■ and ■■■.

The discrimination experienced by Christians as a result of laws which favour the religious majority, can be found in countries like ■■■.

The failure of a national government to uphold the rule of law and provide security to all its citizens, including Christians, is widespread, including ■■■.

The exploitation by religious extremists of traditional rivalries over resources and territory is also a serious problem for Christians in ■■■.

The systematic raping, killing and enslavement of Christians, as carried out by Daesh in ■■■ and ■■■.

Laws which penalise people on charges of blasphemy, such as in ■■■, put Christians who may have different beliefs to the majority religion at great risk – as shown by the ■■■ case among many others.

The requirement for churches to register or receive official recognition from the government severely restricts Christians’ freedom to worship in countries like ■■■.

Educational curricula which encourage feelings of suspicion or even hatred towards Christians, as has been the case in ■■■, perpetuates marginalisation and violence.

The ban on evangelism and conversion, common throughout ■■■ for instance, restricts the Article 18 right to change one’s religion, endangering the future of Christian communities in those places, especially in those places where there is pressure to convert to the majority religion.

These categories of persecution are not unique to Christians; indeed, the FCO has taken interest in and responded to the persecution of other groups such as the Yazidis or Rohingya

Muslims, even though nearly all of those affected are not British citizens. Is the FCO committed to even handedness by showing the same interest in non-British citizens who are persecuted Christians?

The FCO may wish to express its commitment to suffering Christians by taking urgent action in Iraq, for example. They could be supporting the post-conflict reconstruction of Iraq's Nineveh Plains, home to indigenous Christian communities. The FCO could be working alongside the Department for International Development to make adequate housing and services available to all returning Iraqi citizens, including Christians. The FCO could be working with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that local security forces are able to protect the Christian communities against any future threats. The FCO could be working with the Home Office to identify Christians who are vulnerable and need asylum in the UK as a direct result of persecution for their faith. The FCO could be lobbying the Iraqi government to reform their educational curricula so that Christians are portrayed fairly and accurately in school textbooks. The FCO could be putting diplomatic pressure on the Iraqi government to end any laws that discriminate against Christians or undermine their role in society.

Internationally, the FCO could put pressure on those signatories of the Commonwealth Charter that are failing to meet their obligations to protect FoRB for all their citizens, including Christians. It could be synchronising its existing work combating violence against women with its support of FoRB to protect Christian women who are 'doubly at risk' of persecution. The FCO could be championing training in religious literacy and exporting its expertise to other departments, especially DFID which lacks sufficient understanding of Christian communities under pressure and the flexibility to adapt its criteria to their particular needs.

It could also recognise that religious literacy requires a deeper understanding of the terrain of a religion in particular contexts, than learnt from a toolkit. Developing strong communication links with Christian leaders and their communities is vital to better appreciate the good work of Christians on the ground, and where they are under threat. Is the FCO making use of the international Christian networks that can connect them with local leaders to understand better the contours of particular contexts?

I end by confessing that our land was once a place where state and church sponsored religious persecution took place. At the same time, the lessons this country has learned on the need to protect the religious freedom of all, should give the UK an urgency to assist other countries on the same journey.