

Oral Evidence to FCO Inquiry into the Persecution of Christians around the Globe by Luke De Pulford.

I would like to begin by emphasising that persecuted Christians do not want special treatment. They merely want to be treated like any other persecuted minority.

The reason we are here is that the UK Government has failed to treat persecuted Christians like other persecuted minorities and there finally appears to be some recognition within the Foreign Office - especially from the Secretary of State - that we have a problem.

The Foreign Secretary himself spoke of the need to banish reticence when denouncing violence against Christians. The implication is that there is reticence to banish. This is a helpful starting point, as the notion that there was any problem at all was denied by successive FCO ministers.

In response to an article I wrote for the Spectator, criticising this Review for its inability to make recommendations to other departments of State, a former Foreign Office official, said that "the FCO is fully committed to FoRB. But what it really is means is FoRB for everyone except Christians. This isn't so much an injunction but an unspoken agreement secured in corridors and private conversations" He went on to say "you'll never get them to admit this though".

I believe is the reticence the Foreign Secretary was speaking about, and he ought to be commended for identifying it and for calling this review to try to address it. The reasons for this reticence are manifold and complex. Poor religious education. Populist atheism and the hyper-simplified straw-man picture of religion it presents. Secular metropolitan culture within the civil service. The list goes on. Accurately diagnosing the malaise may be within the scope of the review, but it is beyond my expertise.

So I will keep to what I know and divide my remarks today into three sections. First, my experience as Director of the Arise Foundation. Second, my experience campaigning on behalf of persecuted Christians and some evidence which is relevant to the review. Third, what might be done about it.

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To my second point, I have been involved in advocacy for persecuted Christians and other persecuted minorities for the last decade. During this time I cannot think of a single example of the Foreign Office acting swiftly and decisively to protect someone persecuted for their Christian faith. Though there may be such examples behind closed doors, it has not been my experience. Three examples which are illustrative of the culture, if I may,

Example 1. The policy of the UK Government remains that Christians in Pakistan do not suffer persecution, but discrimination. This is the country where Christians represent only 1.6% of the total population, but make up the majority of death-row blasphemy cases. A country where, since 1990 at least 62 people accused of blasphemy were murdered by vigilantes before any trial could take place. A country which murdered Shahbaz Bhatti and Salman Taseer for daring to speak out in favour of releasing Asia Bibi, and the country which still detains her despite having acquitted her following a decade of incarceration on a trumped up charge. I ask the Inquiry what manner of depravity Christians in Pakistan must suffer before the Foreign Office deems them 'persecuted'? It is relevant

to this section that a Freedom of Information Request lodged by myself to the Foreign Office showed that not a single diplomatic telegram was sent from our Pakistani Missions to London regarding Asia Bibi until after her acquittal in 2018. This despite continual advocacy on her behalf on the UK Parliament for nearly a decade. I have made available a copy of this FOI to the Inquiry. The failure to call Christian persecution what it is has profound consequences. During a visit by Lord Alton to see 4000 Pakistani Christian refugees in Thailand, the local UNHCR representative quoted the UK line on discrimination back at him as a rationale for refusing to act.

Example 2. The Daesh Genocide. It is widely acknowledged that Christianity is on the brink of extinction in the Nineveh Plains following successive waves of violence. Christians numbered 1.5 million in 2003. Now they are reduced to about 250,000. This was known to our Foreign Missions, yet no strategy was developed to address it. I have tried to obtain diptels between our missions in the area and London to see whether the cleansing of Christians from Nineveh issue was raised with London at all during the 2003 - 2018 period. My understanding is that it was not. The information in the public domain speaks for itself: it was not until the Yazidis began to suffer during the emergence of the Sinjar crisis with all the attendant publicity that we saw concerted action from the UK. The UK has no legal mechanism to declare genocide, and the Foreign Office has still not acted upon the motion passed unanimously by the House of Commons declaring that Daesh was indeed perpetrating a genocide in Northern Iraq and Syria against minorities, including Christians. Inexcusably, successive Foreign Office Ministers have said on record that they 'personally' believed a genocide was taking place, but that the government still couldn't move from their line.

Let's just examine this for a moment. We had the House of Commons say unanimously that it wanted the treatment of Christians under Daesh to be declared genocide, and we had Ministers (Minister Ellwood, Baroness Williams and others) say that they, too, believed it to be genocide. But nothing happened because Foreign Office officials insisted that the matter would first have to be referred to international legal entities (which themselves could not act without pressure from member States, and which were unlikely to succeed because of the likelihood of vetoes from Russia and China).

It seems to me that if a country truly believes a genocide is happening and that people are being wiped out then it has a grave duty to act. Successive Foreign Secretaries have lamented failure to act over Rwanda and indicated that they wished things would have been different. But the FCO position guarantees that history will repeat itself. According to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Unearthing Atrocities: Mass Graves in territory formerly controlled by ISIL", 95 mass graves have now been found in the Nineveh governorate. How many mass graves does our Government need to see? Do we really need to wait decades for an ICC determination of genocide to confirm what we can see with our own eyes? Finally and most disturbingly the President Salih presented a draft Bill to the Iraqi Parliament two days ago which makes no mention of Christians, just Yazidis. This pours insult upon injury for those Christians whose executions, crucifixions, beheadings, rapes and mass killings are now being written out of the history books. Questions ought to be asked about what role in any the Service has played in drawing up this piece of legislation given the closeness of the relationship to date.

Example 3. The Benedict XVI memo. The now infamous memo leaked ahead of the visit of Pope Benedict XVI revealed outright disdain within the FCO for Christianity, and, in my view, breathtaking ignorance. Benedict branded condoms featured, as did a visit to an abortion clinic, and even the sale of the Vatican for the poor. Ironically I am told it actually saved the 2010 Papal Visit because the outcry forced the FCO to take the event more seriously. Perhaps more interesting is that the memo was circulated months before it was leaked, and no internal action had taken place until the point at which it was published. To repeat, nobody thought it worth acting upon for months until it was

leaked and action became inevitable through public pressure. In response to another FOI request I lodged, the Foreign Office has refused to publish the internal report which arose from the scandal.

So, the third point. What can be done?

Clearly there is an issue with religious education. To this point, I suggest three things:

- Upgrading of current religious literacy training. The London School of Economics training made a good start, but my understanding is that it should broaden its focus from basic theology to the social science of religious understanding and management of religious persecution in situ. Also, my understanding is that LSE has had to work hard to recruit delegates from the FCO.
- Country induction modules with in-depth courses should be required of everybody going to a mission in a country where anti-Christian persecution is a problem.
- Existing missions in countries of persecution should, where possible, conduct field visits to learn from those living under persecution, and make a priority of developing strong relationships with those who represent them, especially religious and civil society leaders.

Equally there is an issue identifying the problem. To this point I would suggest:

- A designated program of work to be developed with specialist advisers funded through Westminster Foundation for Democracy to build capacity in target countries of both civil society groups at risk and those who advocate for them.
- Bring together leading players in a growing range of tech companies in countries most affected to help develop technological solutions for the capture and reporting of information on persecution.

As my evidence shows, the Foreign Office is slow to raise concerns of Christian persecution. To this point I suggest:

- The Foreign Office should commission a periodic review of Freedom of Religion or Belief, comprising contributions from every Foreign Mission, where possible.

A reporting matrix ought to be developed for Missions in high-risk areas to ensure that opportunities to raise cases are not lost, as in the case of Asia Bibi.

- There is a problem of inconsistency in the approach to anti-Christian persecution and other equality issues. To this point, I would recommend that:
- To mirror recent work on Islamophobia, the Foreign Office should appoint an advisor on Christian Discrimination and Persecution, answerable to the Women and Equalities, Foreign Affairs and International Development Select Committees (NOT the Foreign Office) to ensure a consistent approach within Government towards persecuted minorities.
- The Foreign Office should develop specialist competencies within the service to consult on matters relating to religion.
- Missions should work with the Foreign Office, DFID and the British Council to make sure that their detailed equality impact assessments (both for themselves and for anybody from whom they procure from, fund, or with whom they partner) include a specific sensitisation to these human rights risks.

- A staff network within the Civil Service should be developed to parallel other areas within the equality agenda.
- Finally, the UK must find a way of expressing its convictions regarding genocide. I would therefore recommend:

Government should ask the Law Commission to look into ways the UK could make a preliminary determination of genocide unilaterally to prevent another catastrophic failure to act while atrocities are still ongoing.

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