

Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

16th November 2022, 6 to 7.30pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

John Mason MSP
Stephen Kerr MSP
Murdo Fraser MSP

Invited guests

Philip Mounstephen

Non-MSP Group Members

Maureen Sier
Jamie Spurway
Craig Horne
Alan Meldrum
Oliver Lane
Rachel Ainsworth
Brian Miller
James Fraser
Sabah Aslam
Anna Marie Djordjevic
Kazim Ukka
Mirella Yandoli
Ephraim Borowski
Charles Warren
Chris Ringland
Ian Greenshields
Linda Oxburgh
Brian Oxburgh
Muhammad Adrees

Apologies

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Pam Gosal MSP
Katy Clark MSP
Michael Veitch
Malcolm MacLeod
Yolanda Matro

Agenda item 1

Quorate

As John Mason MSP, Stephen Kerr MSP and Murdo Fraser MSP were all present, the meeting was quorate.

Annual General Meeting

John Mason welcomed the group to the meeting. The annual general meeting of the group was the first order of business. Murdo Fraser suggested John Mason to continue as convenor of the group and this was seconded by Stephen Kerr. John then suggested that Murdo Fraser continue as the vice-convenor, and this was seconded by Stephen Kerr. The secretariat of the group was nominated to continue to be Interfaith Scotland, and this was seconded by Murdo Fraser.

John then introduced the evening's speaker, Philip Mounstephen, the Bishop of Truro, referencing the bishop's landmark report 'The Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians'.

Agenda item 2

Philip Mounstephen, Bishop of Truro: I recently met a man from the Bible Society of Iraq who showed me photos of a woman who had been badly beaten and scarred with acid by her husband because she had changed faith. I may talk in theoretical terms about freedom of religion, but it is important to remember the human impact of this.

For me this started in 2018 when I was phoned by the Archbishop of Canterbury to ask if I would lead a review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians. Jeremy Hunt was very keen that we pay attention to this issue and recognised that the foreign office does not do a lot about it. We had a small team and a challenging six-month period in which to complete the review. Throughout, the work was underpinned by some very significant primary research and witness statements.

Why was it needed? Some years ago, The Times published an article called 'Spectators at the Carnage' describing the extent of Christian persecution and the unwillingness of western politicians to speak out. Christians are, by most calculations, the most persecuted faith worldwide. While we know that Christians experienced pressure during the soviet period, in more recent years it seems to have crept up on us. We must recognise that it has multiple triggers and drivers. Perhaps it is because it has lacked a single driver that it has been overlooked in the west.

While the report focused on Christians facing persecution, it is crucial that we seek safety for all, without favour or prejudice. The review revealed that there are two systematic threats to people worldwide – climate change and denial of religious freedom. There is a global movement gathering to tackle climate change and we need a similar movement in relation to religious persecution.

The existence of the ‘Thought Police’ is among the most chilling elements of Orwell’s 1984. We must recognise that freedom of religion or belief is the right that so many other rights depend upon. Yet we see this right questioned or compromised in so many places. This is a global phenomenon with multiple drivers. There are those who would like to attribute the cause to one cause alone – Islamic fundamentalism. I was determined to ensure that we recognise the multiplicity of drivers and do not further demonise a group who already experience so much discrimination and persecution.

In many countries where we see high levels of religious persecution, we tend to also observe factors such as an authoritarian regime, the rise in militant nationalism, or the violence of drug cartels. These represent massive threats to human flourishing. We can no longer say that it is a side bar issue, these are huge issues affecting so many of us.

There are links between the climate crisis and freedom of religion or belief. Promoting climate justice and working to support freedom of religion or belief will help both challenges.

Denial of freedom of religion or belief is closely linked with gender inequality in many countries. Kidnapping, forced conversion, forced marriage and sexual violence affect women of minority faiths at extreme levels. Violating religious freedom usually intersects with denial of other key rights and freedoms. Often religious minorities suffer poverty and racism as well as other forms of discrimination and inequality. Just look at the genocidal treatment of the Uyghur in China. Currently in India there is an extreme level of intolerance on religious freedom.

If the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) took this more seriously it would enable them to do their job far better. The review was commissioned specifically for the Foreign Office but I was happy to observe that it was picked up across government. There was acceptance of the whole of the review.

The UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum is deliberately very action focused. Recently Humanist UK and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, an avowedly Christian organisation, campaigned together in relation to the sentencing of a Humanist leader in Nigeria.

There is an important link with the level of religious understanding, which particularly among politicians, has often been lacking. We simply cannot afford to be religiously illiterate in today’s world.

Agenda item 3

Next steps

What else could the Scottish cross-party group be doing?

We can raise issues with the FCDO. We may also be able to join the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum.

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