

Country Profile

United Kingdom

Thomas Sealy & Tariq Modood

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 63.2 million

Religious affiliation (percent)

Christian	59.5
Muslim	4.4
Jews	0.4
Buddhists	0.4
Sikh	0.7
Hindu	1.3
Unaffiliated	25.7
Other	0.4

Source: Census 2011

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>

Role of religion in state and government

The United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy. It is a union comprised of four countries, England, Scotland and Wales, which together make up Great Britain, and Northern Ireland. Each (except England) has a devolved government with degrees of autonomy. In terms of its state-religion relations it is best described as a form of moderate secularism with features of multiculturalised secularism.

The Church of England is established under law and the monarch is its Supreme Governor. Indeed, as part of the oath the monarch swears are the lines “to maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law” and “to maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline and government thereof, as by law established in England”.

Yet establishment is in many ways a muddled arrangement, being defined by various statutes and conventions dating back to the 16th century. State and Church structures have become increasingly autonomous from one another, although the Church remains subordinate to state authority.

This historical legacy means that the Church of England retains some privileges in its relations with the state and in comparison to other faiths. One of the most notable is the allotment of seats for Anglican bishops in the House of Lords. 26 seats are reserved for them there in their capacity as “Lords Spiritual”. Church of England ecclesiastical courts are recognised as part of state law and have certain jurisdictional autonomy in church affairs, such as over discipline of the clergy. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the Church does not receive direct state financial support. Where it does receive financial support, it is for its service provision or on the basis of heritage status. Moreover, these channels are open to other faith groups.

Freedom of religion

The UK does not have a written constitution of the kind found in other European states. The key piece of legislation is the Equality Act 2010. This act updated diverse pieces of previous anti-discrimination and equality legislation and consolidated them into one. It also supplemented the 1998 Human Rights Act, which had incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law.

Freedom of religion as a “protected characteristic” is guaranteed as a positive as well as negative right under the Act, with freedom of conscience (*forum internum*) an absolute right and freedom to manifest a religion or belief (*forum externum*) a qualified right. For a religion or belief to be recognised under the act, it must be recognized as being cogent, serious, cohesive, compatible with human dignity, and widely recognized in the United Kingdom. Faith traditions recognised as such include Christianity (and denominations within), Baha’i, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Rastafarianism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Paganism.

In balancing protected characteristics, “religious clauses” were included, as they had been in previous equality acts, granting exemptions to religious bodies to be able to discriminate on certain grounds according to religious conscience. Sexuality, or non-heterosexuality, was a particular concern for many. It has proven quite controversial, also among groups and individuals within faiths. Various cases centring on this issue have been fought in the courts.

Further exemptions and accommodations to meet some religious practice requirements also exist; for *halal* and *kosher* slaughter of animals and for circumcision of infants, for instance. Religious signs and symbols in schools along with other public spaces have been debated. High profile instances and cases have occurred around Christian crosses, Sikh turbans and kirpans, and Muslim women’s clothing. On the whole, pragmatic accommodations have generally won out.

Minority faiths do not have their own courts with a similar legal status to the Church of England. However, Catholics, Jews and Muslims do have bodies that adjudicate on areas mainly to do with family law, such as marriage and divorce, as part of what has been termed “minority legal orders”. These interpret and apply religious and cultural norms according to the faith community. They do not have legal status or recognition, however, and are subordinate to UK law in the case of conflict. Recently, sharia councils have been controversial and attracted attention, provoking a government-led inquiry into their operation.

Religious education is stipulated for state schools, and since the early 2000s there has been a significant increase in state support for and in the number of state-funded faith schools. Muslim schools have at times been extremely controversial.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

The first major Islamist-related attack on UK soil was the bombings on the 7th of July 2005 (7/7) in London. Four coordinated bombings targeted the transport network during rush hour. Three underground trains and a bus were struck, killing 52 people and injuring 784.

Further high-profile attacks include the attempted bombings of the London and Glasgow airports in 2007 and the Manchester Arena suicide bombing in 2017. The latter, which targeted a popular music concert (by singer Ariana Grande), was the deadliest attack since 7/7. It killed 23 people (including the bomber) and wounded as many as 250. The attack was claimed by ISIS. There have also been increasing low-level attacks. Two attacks in 2017 were the first with multiple fatalities since 2005, both involving vehicles being driven into pedestrians in London followed by knife attacks. Britain, furthermore, has also been one of the main source countries for foreign fighters.

The cornerstone of the government's national strategic response is CONTEST, which was first developed in 2003 and has undergone subsequent revisions. It is owned by the Home Office and overseen by the Home Secretary and Prime Minister with a significant role for the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT), an Office created in 2006 and located within the Home Office.

CONTEST comprises four aspects, each with its own main aim: *Pursue* aims to stop terrorist attacks; *Prevent* is designed to stop people becoming or supporting terrorists; *Protect*, which largely encompasses the security services working with the private sector, seeks to ensure that critical national infrastructure is physically protected and thereby reducing the UK's general vulnerability; and *Prepare* is directed at mitigating the effects and consequences of an attack in its immediate aftermath and enabling a return to normal operating procedure as quickly as possible.

Under the aegis of *Pursue*, several pieces of legislation have been enacted to respond to forms of terrorism and increase and expand the scope and powers of government departments and agencies.

The *Prevent* strand has probably attracted the most sustained attention, scrutiny and criticism. *Prevent* represents "soft" measures or the "hearts and minds" approach to addressing the social, cultural and ideological aspects of (de)radicalization, and to promote a particular kind of Islam and Muslim, the so-called "moderate", and to help develop a *British* Islam. Recently it has been expanded to address non-violent extremism. At the core of *Prevent* is working with community actors and organisations seen to have "insider" knowledge and therefore considered best positioned to influence people to keep away from extremism. This has gradually expanded to include public as well as private sector workers with duties to report suspected cases of radicalisation.

Religious diversity governance assessment

A shift in policy and discourse has occurred over recent decades when it comes to minorities in Britain, and religious minorities (especially Muslims) have been at the forefront. Whilst minorities were defined in relation to “race” in the 1950s and 1960s, this gave way to “ethnicity” in the 1980s and 1990s, and since the turn of the century these groups have come to be defined more and more through “religion”. As a result, the government has involved, consulted, partnered with and supported faith-based organisations much more systematically. Responsibility for relations with faith communities currently lies with the Department for Communities and Local Government, although a number of government departments consult with faith groups on various policies and department officials attend meetings at the Faith Communities Forum and the Inter Faith Network, two national umbrella networks for faith organisations.

Religious bodies are important actors across multiple areas of society and although the established Church might still be seen as privileged, areas such as welfare, education and service provision are becoming increasingly multi-faith. Since the 1980s, faith-based organisations have played an increasingly important role in terms of welfare provision. They reflect the growing plurality and competition among service providers in the “third sector”. A predominant way in which religious organisations play a public role is through gaining charity status. The “advancement of religion” is recognised as a charitable purpose under the Charities Act 2011, and it is from gaining charitable status that financial benefit in terms of tax reliefs are open to religious bodies. Indeed, the vast majority of religious organisations and churches are charity organisations, and they are mostly overseen by the Charity Commission.

Significantly, this shift and the emergence of public religion and of religious diversity is occurring in a context of growing concern over social and cultural integration of minority communities, with a particular emphasis on the “otherness” of Muslims. This is due in no small part to how their religion is perceived amid fears related to radicalization. Given the institutional arrangements between state and religious bodies, a notable result has been that state patronage can be removed or denied to the “wrong kind” of organisation, and previously favoured bodies may fall in and out of favour. On the whole, the government has increasingly recognised – indeed, has had a strong hand in creating - a more diversified “democratic constellation” of bodies with which it consults. Nevertheless, bound up with the increased security agenda, Muslims have faced processes of securitization in their relations to the state and Muslim groups have become a particular focus of the state’s relations with religious organisations.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu

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