

## Britain's landscape in terms of religion and belief has been transformed beyond recognition

Key symbols of the establishment must reflect modern Britain, says report. Commission identifies coronation and House of Lords as institutions that must adapt to reflect more secular and diverse values.



The most potent symbols of the British establishment, including the coronation of the next monarch and the House of Lords, need to adapt to reflect modern Britain, which is increasingly less religious, less Christian and more diverse, a major new report says.

The commission on religion and belief in British public life calls for the next coronation ceremony to reflect a pluralist society, and for the number of Church of England bishops in the House of Lords to be reduced.

Chaired by former high court judge Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, the commission's report demands a major overhaul of key areas – including education, the law and the media – to reflect the realities of 21st century Britain.

“Britain's landscape in terms of religion and belief has been transformed beyond recognition,” says the report, *Living With Difference*. It points to three “striking” trends:

- The rapidly increasing number of people with non-religious belief and identities, now almost half the population.
- The decline in Christianity, now a minority of the population – and among those, a huge shift away from mainstream denominations to evangelical and Pentecostal churches.
- Increased diversity in faith and rapid demographic growth of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu populations in the UK.

The commission – whose patrons include Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, and

whose members were drawn from all major religions in the UK as well as academia and the British Humanist Association – spent two years consulting the public. The result was a “new settlement for religion and belief in the UK”, said Butler-Sloss.

Acknowledging that society “needs customs, symbols and ceremonies which give public expression to how it sees itself”, it says that those responsible for such events, including the coronation, should “ensure that the pluralist character of modern society is reflected”.

The last coronation, of Elizabeth II in 1953, was an explicitly Christian ceremony in Westminster Abbey, with the monarch swearing to uphold Protestantism and protect the Church of England and its bishops and clergy. Tellingly, the queen has reigned over a significant decline in adherence to, and influence of, the established church.

Symbols and institutions of the nation, such as the House of Lords, must reflect the diversity of worldviews, it says. At the moment, 26 seats in the upper chamber of parliament are reserved for Church of England bishops, known as the “Lords Spiritual”. Their number should be reduced to allow representation of other faiths, the commission says.

Britain and Iran are the only countries in the world which reserve places in their legislatures for unelected religious clerics. The report cites a 2012 poll which found that almost six in 10 Britons believed bishops should not sit and vote in the Lords, and two-thirds thought bishops were out of touch with public opinion.

The commission recommends that the BBC charter, to be renewed next year, continues to require the broadcaster to cover religion, taking into account the UK’s changing religious landscape. It calls for Radio 4’s Thought for the Day slot, currently restricted to members of faith communities, to be “extended to include contributions from those who will speak from a non-religious perspective, including humanists”.

It laments a serious shortcoming in “religious and belief literacy” among media professionals. “Even if allowances are made for the pressures on journalists and for the difficulty of reporting on a far from straightforward topic, and even if it is recognised that much reporting is balanced and accurate, there is widespread public dissatisfaction with how the media handle religion and belief matters.” It recommends better training for journalists.

Many respondents to the commission specifically referred to misleading representations of Islam in the media. The report cites research which found that references to extreme forms of Islam or Muslims were 21 times more common than references to moderate Islam or Muslims.

Saying the the relationship between the media and religious institutions was one of “mutual suspicion, indeed at times antagonism”, the commission suggests that a panel of experts in religion and belief should advise the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) on complaints in this area.

It calls for far-reaching changes to the place of religion in schools, as revealed by the Observer, including the abolition of the legal requirement to hold daily Christian worship in state schools, curtailing selection on the basis of religion in faith schools, and a radical overhaul of the teaching of

religion and belief.

Anti-terror legislation should be reframed to promote rather than limit freedom of enquiry, speech and expression. The government “should engage with a wide range of affected groups, including those with which it disagrees ... and should lead public opinion by challenging negative stereotyping and by speaking out in support of groups that may otherwise feel vulnerable and excluded.”

The Ministry of Justice should study the workings of religious tribunals and courts, such as Muslim sharia and Jewish Beth Din courts, to disseminate best practice and promote gender equality.

In launching the report, Butler-Sloss said: “From recent events in France to the schools so many of our children attend, and even the adverts screened in cinemas, for good and ill, religion and belief impacts on all our daily lives. The proposals in this report amount to a ‘new settlement for religion and belief in the UK’, intended to provide space and a role for all within society, regardless of their beliefs or absence of them.”

According to Ed Kessler of the Woolf Institute, which established the commission, British society had “changed beyond all recognition in two generations ... Public policy needs, as a matter of urgency, to be overhauled to be much more pluralistic and much more welcoming of difference.”

Andrew Copson of the British Humanist Society said the report’s recommendation began “to deal with a transformed social reality in Britain and [acknowledge] that public policy has got to change to accommodate that reality ... Vital to the future of Britain as a cohesive society will be the ability of people of all religions and non-religious beliefs and identities to act together for the common good.”

The National Secular Society said the commission’s report failed to give due weight to the “religious indifference” that permeated British society. “What we have at the moment is a secularised country, but one still dominated by a disproportionate level of religious influence. This report would see that interference strengthened at all levels of society,” said executive director Keith Porteous Wood.

He added: “Disestablishing the Church of England should be a minimum ambition for a modern Britain in the 21st century.”

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