Cumberland Lodge

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Report

Faith & Belief 2040:
Fostering Social Cohesion

Hannah Timson

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Foreword

In November 2020, we hosted Faith and Belief 2040, a virtual conference examining what the UK's faith and belief landscape is likely to look like by 2040, based on current trajectories, and the implications for social cohesion. We focused on ways of preparing for the challenges and opportunities posed by significant changes that are already underway.

Held in partnership with the Faith & Belief Forum and Humanists UK, this conference was originally due to take place over two days at Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park. Due to pandemic restrictions we took our discussions online, via Zoom, using Q&A sessions and virtual breakout rooms to facilitate open group discussion. We hosted four sessions over the course of a fortnight, involving a diverse delegation of participants, representing a range of ages and faith and non-faith backgrounds, from across the UK.

Our freelance Research Associate for this project, Hannah Timson, has captured key themes and perspectives from every session and distilled them into areas of focus to inform future policy and practice.

We are grateful to everyone who took part in this conference, for sharing their expertise, views and personal experiences. A list of everyone who contributed can be found on pages 16–20.

We hope that this report inspires people to devise new collaborations and practical initiatives in response to our rapidly changing faith and belief landscape, and we encourage you to share it widely.

Canon Dr Edmund Newell
Chief Executive
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About the author

Hannah was commissioned to support our Faith & Belief 2040 conference as a freelance Research Associate. She is an MA Sociology student at the University of Exeter. Having completed a BA Hons degree in Theology and Religion, she is directing her research towards the field of religion and belief in modernity. She is particularly interested in how the effects of changing patterns of belief influence mental health, loneliness, community development, and the use of secular spaces.

Hannah is a former president of Humanist Students in the UK, and until recently she oversaw the development of both the student and community arms of Exeter Humanists.

Our partners

We are grateful for the input and support of our conference partners, the Faith & Belief Forum and Humanists UK, in developing this programme of discussions.

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① Introduction

The faith and belief landscape of the UK is shifting. In November 2020, Cumberland Lodge convened an interactive online conference, Faith & Belief 2040, in collaboration with the Faith & Belief Forum and Humanists UK. The conference brought together participants from a range of ages and faith and non-faith backgrounds to discuss current trends in how people across the UK identify with faith and belief, what further changes we might see by 2040 if these trends continue, and their wider societal implications.

Delegates had the chance to hear from a raft of high-profile speakers and to take part in breakout-room discussions and question-and-answer sessions, on four topics:

- Religious diversity
- Impacts on identity
- Social cohesion
- Moral courage.

Our aim was to promote open dialogue and a candid exchange of views, in particular, on how we might best prepare for changes we expect to see over the next 20 years, in ways that are inclusive and foster social cohesion.

2 Religious diversity

Our first conference session focused on how the faith and belief landscape of the UK has changed since the 1980s. Over the past 40 years – and hence, within the lifetime of a significant proportion of the population – studies show that Britain has seen a continuous decline in religiosity (those who state they are religious) and in overall church membership among Christian denominations. At the same time, British society has become more multicultural, with a corresponding increase in religious diversity. If these trends continue at their current rate, projections show that the faith and belief landscape of the UK in 2040 will not only be markedly different to that of living memory, but from a much longer historical perspective as well.

In particular, Christianity, which has been central to British cultural identity since the fourth century, is in rapid decline in terms of organisational membership and self-reported affiliation. In contrast to the declining number of Christians, the number of Muslims in England and Wales has been rising significantly, from 1.55 million in 2001 to 2.71 million in 2011. [1] Similarly, the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Sikh faiths all registered increased affiliation across this ten-year period (2001 to 2011). However, as well as growing diversity, the 2018 *British Social Attitudes Survey* also showed, for the first time, that the majority of the UK population (52%) self-identified as not 'belonging to any religion'.[2] Whether or not these trends have continued to the present will soon become clear with the publication of data from the 2021 Census.

Another aspect of the changing religious landscape of the UK is what one conference speaker called a 'spiritual revolution': a move away from organised religion towards more individualistic, privatised and varied expressions of spirituality. This observation is supported by the *British Social Attitudes Survey*, which shows that amongst people who do not have a stated religious affiliation there remains a high prevalence of belief in a higher power and an afterlife.[3] It was suggested that the internet has been instrumental in this shift, as it gives access to a wide range of

spiritual material that is generally accessed while people are alone rather than in a communal gathering.

Alongside this change, it was argued that the declining influence of Christianity and an increasingly individualistic culture is changing moral attitudes in society: with a decline in the influence of the 'sacrificial ethics' of Christianity – with its focus on helping others – and the growth of what was termed a 'live your life' ethic amongst younger generations, in particular, which prioritises freedom of expression and the realisation of one's potential.

A YouGov survey carried out on behalf of Humanists UK in 2017, meanwhile, suggests that 22% of the UK population may have humanist beliefs and values because they are non-religious, use science rather than religion to understand the universe, and take a non-religious approach to ethical decisions. Humanism asserts that this life is the only life we know we have, that there is no evidence of the supernatural, and that people can live fulfilling lives on the basis of reason, with human welfare and happiness at the centre of ethical decision-making.

What is morally acceptable and normative in society is therefore changing, alongside diminishing religious affiliation. The widespread acceptance of same-sex marriages, which is contrary to much religious doctrine and teaching, is an example of this change, as is the widespread acceptance of pre-marital and non-marital cohabitation and parenting.

The shifting faith and belief landscape of the UK is, therefore, complex and involves a combination of declining religiosity and increasing secularisation, increasing religious pluralism, and increasingly individualistic expressions of spirituality. And alongside these transformations, moral attitudes are also shifting, as the influence of Christian ethics across society diminishes.

A fundamental challenge, then, is how to embrace religious and non-religious plurality in a society that has been shaped predominantly by Christianity for centuries, and where the majority of the population no longer identify as being Christian. Addressing an issue of such complexity and magnitude was always going to be beyond the scope of a short conference.

What was possible, however, was the identification and exploration of some of the most pressing issues, to shape further thinking and inform the way we respond.

Ethnicity, religiosity and identity

An interesting statistic presented at the conference is that 93% of the people who identify as 'non-religious' in the UK have a 'White' ethnic background.[4] In other words, there is a significantly higher degree of religiosity amongst those whose ethnicity is not White, and much higher secularity among those who identify as 'White'. This highlights a growing ethnic/religious divide that has been emerging over decades and has significant implications for social cohesion, particularly given the results of *The British Integration Survey* published in 2019 by The Challenge charity. This survey revealed that 44% of British people had no contact with people of a different ethnic background, in their wider social network,[5] which suggests that a large proportion of the population have little or no interaction with people of different faiths or beliefs.

One speaker observed that immigration to Britain, particularly since the 1950s, has led to a greater presence of a range of faiths and beliefs in the cultural mix. Religious identity remains particularly strong in many ethnic-minority communities. For example, as noted at the conference, religion is often a primary source of self-identity for British Sikhs.

One widely advocated approach to accommodating religious and non-religious diversity in the UK is to make society more secular. However, given the higher religiosity among people whose ethnic background is 'non-White', increasing secularism risks increasing or creating racial divisions. This could be particularly problematic amongst younger people. Whilst 70% of those aged 16-29 in the UK now self-identify as non-religious,[6] religious identity amongst younger people in minority-ethnic communities is growing. One explanation offered was that, as society as a whole becomes more secular, people from minority-ethnic backgrounds where religion remains important may feel increasingly marginalised and

so draw on religion in order to retain a strong, collective sense of identity.

Religion, then, adds complexity to identity politics and has the potential to exacerbate racial tensions in society. An example referred to at the conference was when British Muslim parents strongly rejected teaching about LGBT relationships in a primary school in Birmingham in 2019.[7] Where issues of religious, cultural and sexual identity intersect, as in this case, community cohesiveness is threatened. Given the trends described above, such issues are likely to increase in the years to come.

Impacts on the state religion

Christianity remains the official religion of the UK, and a further intersection between ethnicity and religiosity concerns the Church of England which, despite its numerical decline, remains the largest Christian denomination in the UK. It is probable that the issues raised during this conference concerning the Church of England would also apply to other Christian denominations, although there was not a chance to fully explore this in the discussions.

What was highlighted, however, is that the Church of England's leadership continues to be dominated by White men, and that many of its Black, Asian and minority-ethnic members do not feel represented. There was a consensus among participants that, as we move towards 2040, the Church of England (and by implication other denominations) will be increasingly challenged to become more representative of the population and inclusive in terms of ethnic diversity, to retain or increase minority-ethnic membership.

Apostasy

The conference noted that internal tensions and divisions are not limited to Christianity in the UK. One speaker highlighted the issue of apostasy (when people leave their faith), and how

this can create 'minorities within minorities'. One speaker described the difficulties faced by apostates from ethnic-minority communities in the UK (who lose or reject their birth religion) in terms of the rejection – and in some cases violence – they often suffer for leaving the accepted beliefs and cultural norms of their families and wider communities.

This discussion about apostasy led to calls from participants for better support structures for people who cannot find solace within their own communities, and it was suggested that the internet and the development of online communities could be of considerable help in this respect.

3 A 'post-Christian' era?

As well as the societal issues associated with increasing cultural diversity and the growth of secularism and religious pluralism in the UK, the conference focused on the implications of the decline of Christianity in terms of moving into a 'post-Christian' era – in the sense that Christianity is no longer a dominant factor in shaping society. This led to discussions about the use of religious buildings, the place and role of established churches, and the delivery of education, in which Christian denominations have historically played a major role and continue to do so.

Religious buildings

Church buildings have been prominent in the physical British landscape for centuries. As well as providing meeting places for worship, they often serve a wider role in community life, particularly for the commemoration of collective experiences, such as warfare, and life-cycle events at times of celebration and tragedy for communities, families and individuals. Churches also account for a significant proportion of the country's best architecture and heritage, with a high proportion being listed buildings. Indeed, churches are seen by many as cultural landmarks, besides their role as places of worship and their religious symbolism.

Whilst it was recognised that not everyone feels comfortable being in a designated religious space, participants expressed their hopes that, from the perspective of helping to foster social cohesion, under-utilised churches and other religious buildings might be made increasingly available to the wider community, not only as meeting places and spaces for the arts and cultural activities (which many are already), but for spiritual and reflective purposes, and as hubs for community support services. The shared use of church buildings by different Christian denomination is one option, and multi-faith use is another (although potentially less straightforward to achieve).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen positive examples of faith communities across the UK using their buildings and resources creatively to support others in need – for example, one of the participants at the conference was instrumental in running a Langar (free food) delivery service for vulnerable people and delivering daily meals to NHS staff, from their gurdwara. Participants were challenged to consider how these initiatives and creative uses of space might be supported, and good practice shared across different faith settings, beyond the pandemic.

Participants also discussed the value and importance of ritual and symbolism in communal life, which, within the UK's broadly Christian framework, have long been expressed through religion and located within churches. This has played an important role in helping to shape British cultural identity – for example, in influencing the way we mark Remembrance Sunday – and will inevitably come under discussion again in relation to the coronation of the next monarch, for instance. One speaker noted that secular art installations and individual charitable gestures are beginning to take the place of religious cultural touchstones, and there is a broader question about how this aspect of communal life might be expressed meaningfully in an increasingly pluralistic milieu – and the role that religious buildings could play in enabling this.

Established churches

As well as representing a significant change in the religious and cultural profile of the UK, the decline of Christian affiliation in the UK poses a problem in terms of the role and place of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, which are both 'Established' as state churches (of England and Scotland, respectively).

This church-state connection has long been an issue of contention between those who believe that religion should have a formal role in shaping public life and those who do not, but there was not a significant challenge to the issue of Establishment

while the majority of the English population were affiliated to the Church of England. With declining affiliation, this may change. The 2018 *British Social Attitudes Survey* showed that only 12% of the population of England self-identified as belonging to the Church of England – a fall from 40% in 1983.[8]

The last time disestablishment became a major issue in the UK it was triggered by the 1861 Census, which showed that only one-eighth of the population of Ireland (which was then part of the UK) were members of the established Church of Ireland (the large majority being Roman Catholic). This made a compelling case for disestablishment, which subsequently took place in 1869. A similar situation arose in Wales (in this case, because the large majority of the Welsh population were 'non-conformist' Protestants), where the Church of Wales was created as a separate denomination from the Church of England, in 1920. If the numerical decline of the Church of England and Church of Scotland continues as predicted, it is possible that the 2021 or 2031 Census results could lead to calls for disestablishment.

Unravelling the Church and State nexus would be legally complex, particularly in England where the cultural connections are so strong. It could also raise questions about the head of state being the supreme head of the Church of England and Church of Scotland, and the removal of bishops and archbishops from automatic membership of the House of Lords would mark a significant constitutional change, as they have been represented in Parliament and its predecessors since Saxon times.

Given the declining membership of the Church of England and Church of Scotland, in both relative and absolute terms, it is likely that by 2040 there will be mounting pressure from its proponents to continue the process of disestablishment begun in Ireland and followed in Wales (and which led to the one of the longest words is the English lexicon: antidisestablishmentarianism).At the conference, participants pondered the impact of changing relationships and the balance of power between religious and political leaders, in a less religious and more religiously diverse society. In a situation where no one religion is deemed to have

the moral authority to address key issues facing society as a whole, a wider range of voices will need to be heard, and a wider range of people will need to work together to find solutions and agree the best way forward. It was suggested that this may evolve as different faith and non-faith groups increasingly unite around 'shared goods' and 'shared concerns' – such as the global climate crisis.

Education

Another area in which religious affiliation has become an increasingly problematic is education. Historically, churches have played a leading role in the provision of schools in the UK, in both the public and independent sectors. In recent years, there has also been a growth in faith schools affiliated to other religions. Critics of faith-based schools express a range of concerns: some argue that it is wrong to educate children in a religious context at all (particularly in light of the trends towards non-religious self-identification outlined above); some feel that it is wrong to educate children of diverse faith backgrounds or no faith to be educated within the influence of a particular faith tradition (often Christianity, in the UK context); and some are concerned by sectarianism that may arise from selection for schools on the basis of religious affiliation, whereby children of different faiths and cultures do not mix within a school setting.

From the perspective of social cohesion, the latter criticism is of particular concern. So, however, is imbalance between the provision of schools linked to a Christian denomination and the children they educate. For both these reasons, it is likely that the relationship between religion and education will come under increasing scrutiny – either as a matter on its own, or as part of a wider debate about the relationship between Church and State.

4 Moral courage

What became clear, during the conference, is that a range of inter-related and complex issues concerning religion, public life and social cohesion are already 'live' and, if projections about the changing landscape of faith and belief are correct, these will become increasingly prominent over the over the next two decades. Without making them self-fulfilling prophecies, it nevertheless makes sense to begin addressing these issues sooner rather than later – before they become more urgent and even more contentious.

As the final conference session made clear, dealing with sensitive issues around faith and belief, and driving social change, requires moral courage, not least at the local community level. In terms of developing moral courage, various speakers noted that, as well as being inspired by religious faith, many people find their inspiration from secular sources. Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg were highlighted as inspirational people who have demonstrated moral courage and are empowering others to work together towards common goals.

Alongside having the moral courage to deal purposefully with difficult and sensitive issues, the importance of encounters between people of different faiths and none was highlighted. Two approaches were discussed: 'side-by-side' and 'face-to-face' encounters. The former is where people of different faiths and/or cultural backgrounds work together on non-contentious projects, and it was noted that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic there have been many instances of 'side-by-side' inter-faith initiatives, with faith-groups within diverse communities working together towards common concerns – for example, by volunteering at local foodbanks. 'Face-to-face' encounters, on the other hand, refer to more formal inter-faith or cross-cultural discussions, which often focus on issues around which there are significant differences of opinion, and are often conducted by faith-group representatives in leadership roles.

Both types of encounter were regarded as important in terms of promoting social cohesion. It was noted that 'side-by-side' encounters, in particular, help people to develop personal relationships, break down preconceived barriers and provide an informal way to understand religious and cultural differences. Not only is this kind of encounter helpful in itself, but, by building trust between individuals and across communities, it can help to pave the way for fruitful 'face-to-face' encounters that address particularly difficult or contentious issues. There was a strong sense, amongst the participants, that both types of encounter are necessary for building cohesion within a diverse society, and that taking one approach alone is far less effective than a combination of both.

A related issue is about who is best placed to be involved in these encounters – particularly 'face-to-face' discussions. If they are to be effective, all participants should feel that they are on an equal footing. This is not always the case, particularly when representatives of a certain community take the lead in initiating discussions and provide a venue for them to take place that is in their own physical space. There is a further complication around how to identify participants who truly represent different groups or communities. These, however, were regarded as secondary issues to the need for both kinds of encounter.

Discussions throughout the conference highlighted how important a sense of belonging is for combating growing feelings of loneliness – which appears to be becoming an increasingly pertinent issue, as the result of a society becoming more fragmented, individualised and urbanised, and the growth of social interaction via social media. While the internet was praised at the conference for helping people to find new ways of forming and nurturing community connections – including around shared beliefs and values – it was also noted that it can be used to foster division as well, and there are still great benefits to meeting face-to-face, as had become increasingly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 Concluding reflections

The shifting landscape of faith and belief in the UK is both a driver and consequence of social change. The combination of greater religious plurality, increasingly secularism, and the diminishing influence of Christianity – and the projections of how these trends are likely to continue over the next two decades – suggests that a number of issues will come to the fore that, previously, were not as contentious or prominent.

The aim of this conference was to identify what these issues might be and to discuss how we might best prepare for them in ways that are inclusive and that foster social cohesion. A range of key themes and ideas for practical action emerged from these intergenerational and cross-belief discussions, which could provide a focus for this effort.

Responding to the declining influence of Christianity in the UK:

- We should prepare for the possible disestablishment of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, including how to amplify the voices of other religious groups within public life.

- Encourage and develop initiatives to make use of under-utilised or redundant religious buildings (particularly churches), for a wide variety of community purposes

- Identify and articulate inspiring narratives that resonate across religion, belief systems and cultures, and engender a sense of unity.

Addressing the increasing plurality of society:

- Encourage the development of religious leaders from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds, in denominations where they are under-represented

- Cultivate new leaders in different (including non-religious) walks of life who are dedicated to fostering social cohesion in increasingly diverse communities

- Develop neutral shared spaces where citizens can engage in 'face-to-face' as well as more informal 'side-by-side' interfaith and cross-cultural encounters, on an equal footing, and proactively seek out opportunities to bring people together for such encounters

- Encourage inter-faith and cross-cultural encounters that foster the ability to exchange views openly and 'disagree well' on contentious issues

- Address the issue of the rejection of apostates within faith communities and families by developing appropriate support mechanisms and through education

- Promote the positive use of digital technology, more generally, as a tool for building social cohesion

- **Develop ways of bringing people together around shared concerns – such as adapting to and mitigating climate change and safeguarding biodiversity – to connect people across faiths and beliefs, despite differences in values and cultural practices.**

Evolving education and working with young people:

- Ensure that the curricula, ethos and selection criteria of faith-based schools embrace diversity positively and promote social cohesion

- Place a higher priority on character development and the exploration of ethics and morality in school education

- Nurture and promote positive role-models, from all faith and belief backgrounds, who stand for social cohesion and can help to inspire young people

- Educate young people about how to use the internet safely and effectively, to bring them closer to others, rather than fostering feelings of division, and inspire them to develop it in a direction that will support increasingly diverse communities in the decades to come.

These ideas and suggestions highlight areas of priority and focus for supporting social cohesion over the next 20 years and beyond, in response to significant societal transformation. The decline of Christianity in society is not only an internal matter for Churches to address – it affects society as a whole and needs to be addressed accordingly. Similarly, the increasingly plurality of the UK in terms of faith and belief has implications for everyone, as we adapt to an ever-widening range of expressions of religion and culture in society. And, of course, as we deal with this now, we do so, too, with an eye to the future: the education and nurturing of young people as active and engaged citizens of the UK and the wider world is therefore of particular importance.

It was beyond the scope of this virtual conference to address the ideas and suggestions that were generated in more depth. Hopefully, though, the discussions that took place, and the ideas and themes that emerged from them, will provoke further exploration and provide a steer to us all as we navigate the complex and shifting landscape of faith and belief in the UK and its wider societal implications.

Contributors

The following is a list of the people who contributed to the development of this report by participating in the virtual conference that Cumberland Lodge convened in November 2020.

We are extremely grateful to everyone who offered their time, experience and expertise to this project. We sought, throughout, to involve representatives from a broad range of ages, and faith and non-faith backgrounds, to enrich our findings.

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Endnotes

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Cumberland Lodge empowers people, through dialogue and debate, to tackle the causes and effects of social division.

Since 1947, we have been challenging silo thinking, building powerful cross-sector networks and promoting thought leadership, to promote more peaceful, open and inclusive societies.

We host intergenerational conferences, panel discussions, webinars and retreats, alongside a vibrant programme of cultural and educational events for our local community.

We actively involve students and young people in all aspects of our work, and run dedicated programmes that nurture their potential as future thought leaders and change makers.

Our Grade II listed facilities are available to hire for residential or non-residential conferences, meetings, and private events and celebrations. Every booking helps to support our charitable work.

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