Written evidence submitted by Barnabas Fund

Anti-Christian hate crime, Islamophobia and the Islamic blasphemy laws – the spill over of anti-Christian hate crime to the UK

Barnabas Fund is a leading international aid agency providing assistance to persecuted Christians, particularly in the Islamic world. For more than twenty years it has highlighted the threat that radical Islam and shari’a enforcement pose to both ordinary Muslims and non-Muslim communities around the world, including the threats faced by Christians from Muslim-family backgrounds in the UK. Current projects include helping victims of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria and surrounding regions (https://barnabasfund.org).

Executive summary

• We welcome the Home Office’s inclusion of anti-Christian hate crime in its new action plan for the first time, but note it still fails to address the issue of violence against Christians who have converted from an Islamic family background. Attempts at “forced reconversion” back to Islam should be treated as seriously as forced marriage and FGM against which the government has initiated specific campaigns.

• The term “Islamophobia” should be replaced by “anti-Muslim hatred” as it is frequently used in an attempt to proscribe any criticism of Islam. This produces a similar effect to an Islamic blasphemy law, undermining freedom of religion, freedom of speech and academic freedom. It potentially inhibits us from speaking about some of the major causes of persecution of Christians such as shari’a enforcement.

• There is a spill over into the UK from Pakistan of anti-Christian hate crime related to campaigns supporting Islamic blasphemy laws.

• Hate crime legislation is already being used in the UK to silence Christians from expressing disagreement with Islamic Theology.

1. Introduction

1.1. We welcome the fact that the new Home Office Hate Crime Action Plan issued in July 2016 for the first time ever made reference to anti-Christian hate crime. The previous Home Office Hate Crime Action Plan issued in March 2012 had failed to make any reference at all to any form of anti-Christian hatred.

1.2. We also welcome recent moves towards the specific recording of anti-Christian hate crime and the setting up of a specific fund this summer to contribute towards security for places of worship of all faiths, including churches where there is a specific threat to their security.

1.3. We would however wish to emphasise that whilst welcome these recent developments simply represent a degree of public acknowledgement for the first time by the Home Office of the existence of anti-Christian hate crime (sometimes termed “Christianophobia” by academics)

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3 The term “Christianophobia” was first used by Professor Joseph Weiler of New York University Law School in 2004 in relation to anti-Christian discrimination in Europe. It has more recently been used by Sociologist Professor George Yancy in Hostile Environment: Understanding and Responding to Anti-Christian Bias (Downers Grove, Ill...
which has been present for many years in the UK and must be recognised. We are, however,
concerned, that the Home Office has not yet fully grasped the extent of the problem, or – if it
has - is unwilling to publicly acknowledge it fully.

1.4. Broadly speaking we would identify three main types of crimes motivated by anti-Christian
hatred in the UK:

- a) Hate crime arising from a general contempt for Christians held by some elements in
society. This includes antisocial behaviour, some of which may be specifically targeted at
those identifiable as Christians by their dress, such as Christian ministers; vandalism
specifically targeting churches; and workplace bullying of those known to be practising
Christians. Much, though by no means all, almost certainly represents a general prejudice
against religion that equally expresses itself in Anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred.
The single instance of anti-Christian hate crime mentioned in the new Home Office Hate
Crime Action Plan – a mock crucifixion and other workplace bullying of a teenage
apprentice – falls into this category.

- b) Threats and sometimes actual acts of violence carried out against Christians and
Christian property by gay rights extremists. For example, the owners of Ashers Bakery in
Belfast received both death and arson threats, as well as suffering serious damage to their
property during a recent court case relating to whether they should be compelled to bake
a cake promoting gay marriage.

- c) Attempts at forced reconversion back to Islam. This is an extremely serious issue
involving a high level of criminality that is unfortunately far from uncommon in the UK.
Barnabas Fund and other organisations have repeatedly drawn the attention of the Home
office to this – yet the new Home Office Hate Crime Action still fails to even
acknowledge its existence.

1.5. We are concerned that political correctness and fear of raising concerns about hate crime
committed against Christians by a small minority within groups which are themselves subject to
widespread hate crime, may have made the Home Office reluctant to acknowledge the latter two
types of hate crimes.

It is difficult to see any alternative explanation for the Home Office’s silence on this issue when
the evidence of such crimes is widely available in terms of press reports. In relation to
attempted forced reconversion to Islam, specific submissions that have been made to the Home
office by ourselves and other organisations; in October 2015 Barnabas Fund produced a 5,000-
word response to the government’s newly published counter-extremism strategy. This welcomed
the government’s strategies to combat forced marriages and FGM, but also drew attention to the
need for similar action with respect to attempts at forced reconversion.

2. Attempted forced reconversion

2.1. Our experience suggests that attempts of “forced reconversion” back to Islam are widespread in
the UK for Christians who have converted from a Muslim-family background.
2.2. Such attempts may involve false imprisonment for days, weeks or even months either in the room of a house or garage, extreme physical and emotional abuse, attempts to lure the person overseas where they may be subjected to similar forms of “persuasion” and/or forced marriage to a Muslim.

2.3. Attempts at forced reconversion to Islam are frequently carried out by family members, although they may also be carried out by other members of the local Muslim community or Muslims from further afield. Refugees/asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity from Islam may experience coercion and violence at the hands of other refugees.

2.4. Although there are exceptions, in our experience some form of extreme coercion is typical for those brought up as Muslims who subsequently embrace Christianity. There are also significant reports of former Muslims who have abandoned Islam for atheism also experiencing similar levels of coercion.

2.5. The primary factor motivating attempts at forced reconversion is the shari’a (Islamic law) of classical Islam not only provides a legitimation for such acts but is frequently understood to actually require it:

2.5.1. All four schools (madh’ab) of shari’a in Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shaf’i), as well as the Ja’fari school predominant among Shi’as, stipulate that any adult male of sane mind who abandons Islam – termed apostasy (ridda) – must be executed.

2.5.2. For adult women who leave Islam the Hanafi school – which predominates in the Indian subcontinent and among those with family origins there – stipulates that if a woman who has been brought up as a Muslim leaves Islam for another faith she should be imprisoned until she repents and returns to Islam. The Ja’fari school which predominates among the Shi’a similarly requires imprisonment until she repents, but adds that she should also be beaten with rods. The other three schools of shari’a (Maliki – predominant in communities originating in North and West Africa; Shaf’i – predominant in communities originating in East Africa, Egypt and Southeast Asia; Hanbali – predominant in Saudi Arabia and Qatar) all require a compulsory death penalty for any adult woman who leaves Islam for another faith.

2.5.3. For children and young people who leave Islam for another faith the Hanafi school which predominates in the UK and the Shaf’i school both require the child or young person to be imprisoned until he reaches adulthood. All five schools of shari’a require the young person to be killed when he reaches the age of adulthood if he has not returned to Islam.

2.5.4. Shari’a itself claims to be directly derived from divine revelation (Qur’an and Hadith) and therefore superior to all man-made (i.e. parliamentary) laws. Thus, whilst shari’a is understood to require a judicial execution, its claim to superiority over parliamentary law provides a strong legitimisation for acts of violence attempting to force Christians from a Muslim family background to reconvert to Islam.

2.5.5. It is significant that the threats and actual coercion often experienced by UK Christians from a Muslim background – particularly young people and women – frequently involves
imprisonment either in one room of a house or an outbuilding such as a garage, and as such reflects the stipulations of shari’a.

2.6. Secondary motivating factors are a) honour – leaving Islam is seen as bringing shame on the family and community; b) extreme anti-Christian (and often even more extreme anti-Jewish) literature available in some Islamic centres and mosques in the UK as well as online.

2.7. There is almost certainly a very significant level of underreporting of anti-Christian hate crime experienced by former Muslims who have embraced the Christian faith. Major reasons for this include:

- Many of the victims are young people who even if they are students at university are still dependent on their families.
- Many victims of attempted forced reconversion have to leave home and remain estranged from their families. However, despite the abuse they have received as Christians, they believe that they should strive to be reconciled with their families and do not wish to do anything that may jeopardise that possibility.
- Some will be unable to endure the intimidation and violence and at least nominally agree to reconverting to Islam.
- Those who do speak out about the violence do not always feel that the police take their complaints seriously in terms of any practical action that would actually protect them.

2.8. The very small number of Christians who have converted from a Muslim-family background who have been prepared to publicly complain, e.g. to the local press, about the violence they have experienced – and often the lack of effective police action – have typically experienced even more extreme violence. For example, Nissar Hussain was hospitalised last year after being attacked by men with a pickaxe handle after speaking to the press about violence against converts from Islam. Last month he and his family had to relocate under armed police protection from the predominantly Muslim area of Bradford where they lived because of a serious threat to their lives.4

2.9. In terms of actual numbers – as with all hate crimes – it is almost impossible to give accurate figures. However, it is fair to the say that:

2.9.1. The number of UK Christians who have converted from a Muslim-family background is almost certainly well over 1,000 and may be significantly higher.

2.9.2. Our experience is that some form of extreme coercion is the typical experience of those who have freely chosen to convert to Christianity from a Muslim-family background.

3. Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hatred

3.1. The term “Islamophobia” has been used in relation to two areas that should be quite distinct but are often confusingly mixed together. These are a) the encouragement and incitement of anti-Muslim hatred and criminal acts of violence against Muslims b) criticism of Islamic belief or practice.

3.2. We are seriously concerned that many campaigns against “Islamophobia” conflate anti-Muslim hatred with criticism of Islam as a religion. As such they undermine historic national values of freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and academic freedom and in effect promote the equivalent of an Islamic blasphemy law in the UK.

3.3. As an organisation supporting persecuted Christians, we are deeply concerned that this dual usage also potentially inhibits us from speaking about some of the main causes of anti-Christian persecution, including the treatment of Christians stipulated by shari’ā.

3.4. The MCB’s submission to the committee that “The term Islamophobia is defined as ‘unfounded hostility towards Muslims and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’”, thereby appears to limit it to anti-Muslim hatred. However, we note the MCB’s own website defines Islamophobia more broadly, stating, “It also includes prejudice that promotes fear against Muslims and Islam,” therefore seeming to imply that their position is in reality that mere criticism of the religion of Islam and its ideology should also be termed “Islamophobia”.

3.5.

4. Islamophobia, Pakistan’s blasphemy laws and anti-Christian hatred – the spillover to the UK

4.1. The background to the conflation of campaigns against both anti-Muslim hatred and attempts to prevent any criticism of Islam is that the most serious offence in the shari’ā of classical Islam is blasphemy against Muhammad. Consequently, in countries such as Pakistan where shari’ā is enforced blasphemy against Muhammad carries a mandatory death penalty, with the related offence of blasphemy against the Qur’an carrying a sentence of life imprisonment.

4.2. In December 2005 the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) announced a 10 year strategy, section VII of which was entitled “Combating Islamophobia” a term it defined as “defamation” of religion (it made no reference at all to anti-Muslim hatred) and called on “all states to enact laws to counter it, including deterrent punishments”. In other words it called for criticism of Islam to be made a criminal offence in all countries.

4.3. The UK has recently been experiencing a direct spillover of over anti-Christian hatred related to the blasphemy laws in Pakistan. In January 2011 the governor of Pakistan’s Punjab province, Salman Taseer, a liberal Muslim, was gunned down by his police bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri

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5 Written evidence by the Muslim Council of Britain section 2.1.
7 Pakistan Penal Code sections 295C and 295B.
because he has supported a Christian, Aasia Bibi, who had been falsely accused of blasphemy by her village mullah following an incident when a number of Muslim women accused her of drinking from the same water container as them. Qadri explicitly stated he murdered Governor Taseer because of his support for Aasia Bibi, including his calling for reform of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws. In February 2016 Qadri was executed for murder. This led to large protests in Pakistan, calling for a) Qadri to be both pardoned and declared a “national hero”, and b) the killing of Christians accused of blasphemy including the immediate execution of Aasia Bibi.

4.3.1. These anti-Christian hate demonstrations quickly spilled over to the UK. *The Times* reported that a UK imam hosting a weekly *Ummah TV* programme that is available on Sky TV, announced on Facebook he was flying to Pakistan to attend Qadri’s funeral. Another imam from Bradford, who has more than 135,000 followers on Facebook, described Taseer’s murderer as having been “martyred in the way of Allah, when he did what he did in honour of the prophet”.9

4.3.2. In the UK the most immediate consequence of the pro-blasphemy law demonstrations was the murder three weeks later of Ahmadiyya shopkeeper Asad Shah in Glasgow by Tanveer Ahmad. Tanveer claimed to have been inspired by the actions of Mumtaz Qadri, to kill Mr Shah whose Facebook comments on Islam he found “offensive”.10 A Facebook page “We support Tanver Ahmad” and calling him a “Ghazee” (leader of Islamic holy war), attracted nearly 3,000 likes.11

4.3.3. On 16 July, less than a fortnight after Tanveer appeared in court two of the main leaders of the demonstrations in Pakistan arrived in the UK for a speaking tour of mosques lasting until September. They were granted UK visas despite them having hailed Qadri as an “Islamic martyr” for murdering a politician who had stood up for a Christian accused of blasphemy and for the presence of a significant number of Christians of Pakistani heritage in the UK. The late Governor Taseer’s son, Shahbaz Taseer, also criticised the granting of UK visas:

> These people teach murder and hate. For me personally I find it sad that a country like England would allow cowards like these men in … It's countries like the UK and the US that claim they are leading the way in the war against terror [and] setting a standard. Why are they allowing people [in] that give fuel to the fire they are fighting against?12

Barnabas Fund raised serious concerns about these men being granted UK visas for a mosque preaching tour in a letter to the Home Secretary on 9 September. The reply from the Minister of State stated that he could not comment on individual cases. Whilst we understand this, granting visas to Islamic clerics who call for the killing of Christians clearly represents a failure of the system.

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5. **The misuse of hate crime laws to target Christians**

5.1. Hate crime has in fact already been used to attempt to silence Christians expressing disagreement with Islamic theology. For example, in 2015 Pastor James McConnell, minister of a large Presbyterian church in Belfast, was prosecuted for stating in a church sermon that he believed that Christianity was the only way to God and that other religions such as Islam were a satanic deception. Although Pastor McConnell was acquitted after a liberal Muslim friend spoke up defending his right to express theological disagreement, the fact that the police and Crown Prosecution Service thought it likely that they could see a Christian minister convicted of hate speech for expressing a theological critique of Islam in a church sermon, should raise serious concerns.\(^{13}\)

5.2. In this context there is a significant risk, as the example of Pastor McConnell illustrates, that some activist groups can use hate speech legislation that was passed with the best of intentions to silence critics and in effect force their own views on wider society. This is something that needs to be carefully guarded against. In this context we are particularly concerned that:

5.2.1. The use of the term “hate incident” by the police and CPS to conflate a) allegations of actual “crimes” motivated by hate with b) allegations of non-criminal “incidents” such as expressing disagreement with someone’s beliefs or actions – which is then used to justify actions falling short of actual prosecution taken against individuals.\(^{14}\) There is a serious risk that this can amount to a level of police harassment of individuals holding views that are perfectly legal but deemed not to be “politically correct”.

5.2.2. The EU agreement with internet companies announced on 31 May 2016 to work with what it terms “civil society organisations” to flag and remove comments deemed offensive within 24 hours.\(^{15}\) We concur with the view of the National Secular Society:

> Far from tackling online ‘cyber jihad’, the agreement risks having the exact opposite effect and entrapping any critical discussion of religion under vague ‘hate speech’ rules. Poorly trained Facebook or Twitter staff, perhaps with their own ideological bias, could easily see heated criticism of Islam and think it is ‘hate speech’, particularly if pages or users are targeted and mass-reported by Islamists.

> The agreement comes amid repeated accusations from ex-Muslims that social media organisations are censoring them online. The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain has now begun collecting examples from its followers of Facebook censoring ‘atheist, secular and Ex-Muslim content’ after false ‘mass reporting’ by ‘cyber Jihadists’.\(^{16}\)

\(^{13}\) This point was made by Sheikh Dr Muhammad al Hussaini reflecting on the unwarranted state interference in relations between Christians and Muslims that the case represented, in the *Belfast Telegraph* 10 November 2016 (http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/why-money-for-mosques-should-be-used-for-churches-overseas-35203254.html) accessed 25 November 2016.

\(^{14}\) Cf the CPS website page ‘Hate Crime What is it?’ (http://www.cps.gov.uk/northeast/victims_and_witnesses/hate_crime/) accessed 25 November 2016, states: “A Hate Incident is any incident which the victim, or anyone else, thinks is based on someone’s prejudice towards them because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or because they are transgender. If you, or anyone you know, has been called names, been bullied or had anything happen to them that you think may be because of one of these factors, then you should report this as a hate incident. Even if you don’t want the incident to be investigated, it is important that the police know about it, so that they can build up a picture of how many incidents are happening and where. This information can help police investigating other hate incidents. Not all hate incidents will amount to criminal offences, but those that do become hate crimes.”


\(^{16}\) National Secular Society ‘European Commission announces online crackdown on “hate speech”’