COMMISSION FOR COUNTERING EXTREMISM: CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Joint response from Humanists UK and Faith to Faithless, January 2019

ABOUT YOU

1) Are you replying as a member of the public, as a practitioner or on behalf of an organisation?
Organisation

3a) What is your name?
Richy Thompson and Imtiaz Shams

3c) If you are replying on behalf of an organisation, what is the name of the organisation(s)?
Humanists UK and Faith to Faithless

Do you consider your work as countering extremism?
No

Please provide a brief description of what your organisation does. (100 word limit)
At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by over 85,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

Faith to Faithless is a community services programme of Humanists UK which works to raise awareness of the issues faced by those who leave high-control religious groups or cults.

3d) Where do you or your organisation(s) work?
Across the UK and the Crown Dependencies.

3e) What is your age?
Prefer not to say

3f)What is your gender?
Prefer not to say

3g) What is your ethnicity?
Prefer not to say

3h) We would like to be able to use extracts from responses in our study. If you would not like us to use any extracts from your response or would prefer we did so without using your name or that of your organisation, please tell us here.
Yes, I am content for you to use extracts of my response in the study

3i) What is your email address?
richy@humanism.org.uk

SECTION ONE – EXPERIENCES OF AND INSIGHTS INTO EXTREMISM

1a.) Can you describe extremism?
Yes

1b.) If you said 'yes' or 'not sure', please describe what extremism looks like to you. Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
Any definition of extremism must take into consideration the legal and human rights frameworks which underpin citizens' rights in our society. The law already provides clear guidance on where expressions of political and religious beliefs can be legitimately curtailed, such as encouraging or threatening acts of violence or terrorism. Therefore, we would describe extremism as 'the manifestation of political, religious, or other beliefs in a manner that encourages, threatens, or carries out acts of violence or the wholesale eradication of the human rights of those who do not hold such beliefs.'

2a.) How helpful is the following definition of extremism?
"Extremism is the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. We also regard calls for the death of members of our armed forces as extremist". (HM Government Counter-Extremism Strategy, 2015)
- Very unhelpful

2b.) What is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
This definition is problematic because it does not place 'extremism' within an established human rights framework that protects freedom of religion or belief and freedom of speech. The mandate to respect and tolerance towards faith and beliefs conflicts with the right to free speech, which includes the right to criticise or ridicule religious beliefs. It therefore gives rights to religions rather than to people who hold beliefs. Individuals have the right to decide by their own conscience what should and should not be respected based on their own worldview, and should not be mandated to respect religious beliefs, simply because they are religious.

3.) How important do you think the following factors are when considering extremism in this country?
Extremism-related criminal offending e.g. hate crime
- Very important

Extremist events e.g. marches, events in community or commercial venues
- Fairly important

Segregation e.g. by ethnicity, religion or gender

- Very important

Incidents in regulated spaces, e.g. schools, universities, charities, prisons
- Fairly important

Size and influence of extremist groups
- Fairly important

Extremist propaganda e.g. on social or traditional media
- Fairly important

Links between extremism and terrorism
- Very important

Attitudes indicating sympathy to extremist ideas or behaviour
- Fairly important

4a.) Is there one factor from the list above that you think is most important when considering extremism?
- Yes

4b.) If you said 'yes' or 'other', please tell us which factor you think is most important and why. Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
Segregation e.g. by ethnicity, religion or gender. We believe that segregation in the school system is one of the factors that leads to the lack of cohesion between communities that fuels extremist views. When schools use faith-based admissions criteria to select their pupils, children and families are segregated in three important ways: along religious, ethnic, and socio-economic lines. These divisions deny children the opportunity to mix with members of other groups and to develop positive interactions and views about them. It creates social silos which are conducive to negative and extremist views developing towards outgroups.

5a.) Have you witnessed anything you would regard as extremist happening in your local area, elsewhere in the country or online?
- Yes, elsewhere in the country

5b.) If you said 'yes', what type(s) of extremism have you witnessed?
- Christian extremism
- Jewish extremism
- Muslim/Islamist extremism

Please answer questions 5c.) and 5d.) for each of the options you selected above.

5c.) For option one, what attitudes, activities or behaviours have you witnessed that you regard as extremist? Please describe what you have witnessed below any of the following options that apply. (100 word limit)

- Extremism-related criminal offending e.g. hate crime
  Faith to Faithless works with people who have left extreme and coercive religious backgrounds, and are at risk of hate crimes and honour-based violence. We would classify the threatening, violent, and harassing treatment of apostates as

a manifestation of religious extremism, one which is usually hidden within the family or closed religious community. This type of extremism is present in many religious groups. In the UK, it is present in some of the Pentecostal, charismatic and Jehovah Witness churches, and the Charedi Jewish and Muslim communities.

- Extremist events e.g. marches, events in community or commercial venues
  Over the past five years, there has been an increase in the number and intensity of anti-choice demonstrations outside of abortion clinics.[1] The majority of these demonstrations are linked to Christian religious organisations. Whilst we believe in the right to free speech and assembly, where these demonstrations have resulted in women or staff at these clinics being physically assaulted, followed, or blocked from entering the premises (thereby unable to access medical care to which they have a right under law), or in threats of the same, this behaviour constitutes harassment and therefore falls under our definition of extremism.

- Segregation e.g. by ethnicity, religion or gender
  We are concerned that religious selection in state schools creates conditions of religious, ethnic, and social segregation. Although we have no data on this leading to pupils being directly radicalised, the evidence is clear that mixed schools promote tolerance and acceptance towards outgroups.[2] Therefore, we believe that the UK Government should end its support for state schools that apply religious selection criteria and reverse its decision to allow new religious voluntary aided schools to open, which can religiously select 100% of pupils. Such a level of selection by new schools has not otherwise been possible for 12 years now.

- Incidents in regulated spaces, e.g. schools, universities, charities, prisons
  Extremism in prisons is increasing as rates of conviction for terror-related offences has increased by 75%. The Government estimates that at least 700 prisoners are at risk of developing extremist views.[3] We operate the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network which provides non-religious people in prisons with an equivalent to chaplaincy services. We believe that providing equality of service for all religion and belief groups, and an environment where prisoners are exposed to different and challenging viewpoints through inclusive pastoral support, is an important element in tackling intergroup resentment and silos that lead to extremism.

- Extremist propaganda e.g. on social or traditional media
  Faith to Faithless has amassed a considerable number of primary testimonies and case studies of apostates who have received threats from extremists online. This includes calls for those who leave their religion, most notably Islam, to be killed or punished. Although it is rare for such views to be shared on mainstream

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[1] Back Off Campaign, Recorded protests outside abortion clinics, https://back-off.org/recorded-protests/

[2] *Diversity and social cohesion in mixed and segregated schools in Oldham,* DfE, August 2017: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/634118/Diversity_and_Social_Cohesion_in_Oldham_schools.pdf

[3] *Government bolsters crackdown on extremism in prisons*, 11 April 2018 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-bolsters-crackdown-on-extremism-in-prisons

media, we are concerned that it does happen. For example, the BBC Asian Network recently asked listeners whether the decision of teenager Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun to flee Saudi Arabia to avoid murder as an apostate was worthy of respect.[4]

5d.) Do you think this type of extremism…?
- Is increasing

What is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
As outlined above, we have witnessed an increase in extremist actions both in the anti-abortion movement, and in the prison system. In the former, we believe that the upscaling in activity is mostly due to increased funding and influence from evangelical Christian organisations abroad. In the prison system, the likely cause of an increase in extremism is demographic changes to the prison population such as increased convictions for terrorism offenses and the return of Syrian fighters. The prison service needs to adapt the prison regime to remove religious and ethnic divisions and promote intergroup integration.

6a.) Can you describe the harms caused by extremism?
Yes

6b.) If you said 'yes' or 'not sure', how would you describe these harms? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
The harms caused by extremism can be extensive and affect many areas of life and society. At its most severe, there is a link to violent acts of terrorism, that result in murder, injury, and damage to property. However, the effects of extremism can be more personal. As described above, those who leave coercive religions or cults can experience violence, either honour-based or as part of an exorcism, but also shunning, shaming, homelessness, and familial breakdown because of extremist religious views.

If you said 'no', what is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
N/A

7a.) From the following list, which are the three groups you believe are most at risk of harm caused by extremism?
- Everyone

7b.) What is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
Extremism is not a particular set of beliefs formed by one group in society about another, but a description of the manner in which beliefs can be used to harm the rights of others. Therefore, we do not believe that one group can be adequately singled out as being most at risk. However, we will add that current legislation on hate crime does not offer adequate protection to those who positively hold non-religious worldviews, such as humanism, and statutory services are in need of training in dealing with the specific

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[4] The Telegraph. 2019. *BBC deletes tweet asking whether Saudi woman's decision to flee threat of murder was worthy of respect*
https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/09/bbc-forced-delete-tweet-asking-followers-debate-whether-respected/

needs of those who leave high-control religions.

8a.) Have you seen evidence of extremism online causing harm?
- Yes

8b.) If you said 'yes' or 'not sure', how would you describe these harms? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
As part of our work supporting non-religious people who are claiming asylum in the UK because they would face persecution in their home countries because of their lack of belief, we have witnessed online extremism in the form of death threats and threats of violence. Most often these threats are sent from extremists outside of the UK, but not in all cases. These threats can have a hugely damaging effect for the recipient and their physical and mental wellbeing, and we have found that recipients are unclear whether they can report threats to the police in the UK.

8c.) Would you describe extremism online compared to extremism in your local area as…?
- More harmful

8d.) What is the main reason for your answer? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
Online content that encourages or incites the viewer to commit or threaten acts of violence or harassment, or call for the wholescale removal of rights of others, has the potential to be more harmful than extremist events in the community or rallies due to the increased reach of its audience, and because views are more likely to be presented without counter-narratives or critical engagement.

9a.) Does extremism cause harm to society and its institutions more widely e.g. to democracy?
- Not sure

9b.) If you said 'yes' or 'not sure', how would you describe these harms? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
There are no direct examples of the actions of extremists greatly damaging any of our institutions. However, we are concerned that some of the duties placed upon higher education institutions (HEIs) by the Prevent strategy have chilled free speech. Section 11 of the current Prevent guidance to HEIs is too broad and should remove the part stating that an extremist view is one 'shared by terrorist groups.' The fact that a belief is shared by a terrorist or proscribed organisation does not make that belief of itself extreme, or mean that it would incite the listener to take part in or support terrorist acts.

If you said 'no', what is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
N/A

10a.) Do you think more should be done to counter extremism?
- Yes

10b.) What is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
We believe that due to our already strong legislation on hate crime, terrorism, and public

order, it is not necessary for the Government to bring forward any new legislative measures to counter extremism. However, there are many policy changes, such as removing religious selection in schools, and expanding pastoral support provision in prisons, that could positively promote integration and mutual understanding between different groups in our society, and thereby alleviate misconceptions and perceptions of injustice that feed the fires of extremism. In short, more action should be taken to tackle the causes of extremism, not necessarily its expression.

11.) How much should be done in the following areas to counter extremism?

Civil society
- A lot more

Counter terrorism
- Maintain current level

Education
- A lot more

Faith
- A lot more

Foreign policy
- A little more

Integration
- A lot more

Justice
- A lot more

Law enforcement
- Maintain current level

Media
- A little more

Online
- A little more

12a.) Is there one area from the list above that you think is most important when countering extremism?
- Yes

12b.) If you said 'yes' or 'other', please tell us which factor you think is most important and why. Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
The education system is the best tool we have to counter-extremism. Indeed, schools and universities are some of the few institutions where people from a range of different backgrounds come together en masse regularly and for prolonged periods of time. We believe that extremism is often not best addressed by closing down or by policing discussion of difficult beliefs, but by exposing people to a range of different ideas and

equipping them with the critical skills needed to scrutinise them. This is best achieved through a fully inclusive Religious Education curriculum that allows pupils in all types of schools the opportunity to consider philosophical and fundamental questions and learn about each other's beliefs, including non-religious ones.

12c.) If you said 'not sure' or 'no', what is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
N/A

13a.) Are there particular institutions or groups that you see as having a role in improving our current efforts to counter extremism? Please select up to three from the following options that were suggested to us during our engagement and from our ongoing research.
Faith groups and leaders
National government
Public servants e.g. teachers, police officers

13b.) What is the main reason for your response? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
We believe that one of the main causes of extremism is the perception by the individual that they are the victim of (real or imagined) injustices, discrimination, or prejudice. Both national government and public servants have a legal duty to promote equal opportunities and treatment of all people under the Equality Act. If they were to do so in all decisions they made, they should be able to alleviate much inter-community tension and perceived injustices. We believe that leading figures in religious groups can also play a role in addressing and calling out prejudices and extremism.

14.) What is the one thing you would give greater priority to, in our efforts to counter extremism offline and online, and why? Please write your answer here (100-word limit)
As described above, we believe that the education system is one of the best tools we have for countering extremism. Unfortunately, its ability to promote integration, mutual understanding, and social cohesion is not being used nearly as effectively as it ought to be. We believe that opportunities for children and young people to interact with members of other groups and to critically engage with different belief systems should be actively promoted by national government. This includes removing religious selection in admissions to state-funded schools, implementing a fully inclusive Religious Education curriculum, and ensuring freedom of speech on campuses.

SECTION TWO – EVIDENCE ON EXTREMISM

1.) Do you have any evidence of the scale in England and Wales of the following factors, which have been linked to extremism? Please write your answer here (750-word limit)
• Extremism-related criminal offending e.g. hate crime
• Extremist events e.g. marches, events in community or commercial venue
• Segregation e.g. by ethnicity, religion or gender
• Incidents in regulated spaces, e.g. schools, universities, charities, prisons • Size and influence of extremist groups
• Extremist propaganda e.g. on social or traditional media
• Links between extremism and terrorism

• Attitudes indicating sympathy to extremist ideas or behaviour

With regard to apostates, we regularly work with people who have suffered abuse from extremists who have sought to limit the rights of the apostate because of their extremist views. We know that our workers, speakers, and advocates are attacked on social media on a daily basis, and we see some mainstream religious organisations condoning the extremist views of those who are anti-apostate. However, given we are the only national organisation working in this area, and there is a lack of reporting around crime that has an apostate link, it is almost impossible to quantify the scale of this. This is in urgent need of further study and research. With regard to hate crime, we also have evidence that apostates, especially ex-Muslims, can be the victims of hate crime because, due to their race or nationality, they are still perceived to be members of their former religious group.

We are aware of extensive anti-apostate propaganda both on social media and perpetuated within religious communities in which violence and calls for the execution of those who leave religions is frequently expressed. For example, Zakir Naik, founder and president of the Islamic Research Foundation, has stated 'people who change their religion should face the death penalty'[5], and prominent Islamic scholar Ali Gomaa has stated 'apostasy from Islam is a crime and is punishable.[6]' These are examples of attitudes within religious organisations showing sympathy towards ideas and behaviours that are extremist by nature. We believe that religious figures should do more to call out and condemn these extremist attitudes within their own communities.

3.) What is the most significant driver of extremism and what evidence supports this?
There is significant evidence that a lack of integration between different ethnic, religious, and social communities, especially in schools, leads to intergroup tension which drives extremism. The evidence of the benefits of mixed schooling is clear.

In 2017, the Department for Education published research that it had commissioned into 'diversity and social cohesion in mixed and segregated secondary schools'. The study, which examined the contact between young people from white British and Asian British families at secondary schools in Oldham, sought to assess the extent to which mixing in school can 'improve both attitudes towards outgroups and intergroup relations.' Researchers found that:

- 'Attitudes were more positive and, as would be expected, mixing was more frequent in mixed than segregated schools'.
- 'Mixed schools do result in more social mixing between ethnic groups over time, and mixing is reliably associated with more positive views of the outgroup.'
- 'Attitudes of pupils who mix with other backgrounds were more positive compared to those who remain with their own ethnicities.'

In addition, the study examined the outcomes of a merger of two ethnically segregated schools into a single mixed school, finding that 'over a four-year period, intergroup

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[5]

https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/273669-people-who-change-their-religion-should-face-the-death-penalty
[6] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jul/26/islamsorganicliberalism

anxiety significantly decreased, and liking and outgroup contact significantly increased for both Asian-British and White British pupils.'[7]

In May 2018, new research conducted by the University of Bristol and the London School of Economics revealed that schools that are more ethnically diverse lead to greater cohesion between children of different ethnicities. The study of 4,000 Year 10 pupils in 96 English state schools focused on children who are white British, Asian British, and black British. It looked at attitudes towards 'openness', both social and political, as well as asking pupils to rate their feelings of warmth towards those of different backgrounds on a scale from zero to one hundred.

The findings demonstrated that at more diverse schools a higher proportion of pupils express more warmth towards those of other ethnicities. For children of a white British ethnicity, for every ten percent increase in the number of black pupils in their school, their feelings towards them increase by 1.74 points on the scale. With regard to schools that are less diverse, the report warned that:

> 'highly segregated school system[s] will generate a lot of pupils with negative orientations towards other groups'

The report concluded that 'the value to researching and implementing policies to encourage integration and contact is therefore clear'.[8]

In a similar study published in January 2015, survey data was collected from over 100,000 13 and 14 year olds in 38 countries to ascertain whether or not more diverse classrooms make pupils more tolerant towards immigrants and those from different backgrounds. The research found that more diverse classrooms produce more tolerant students, and concluded that 'schools should be as inclusive in their admissions policies as possible'. The report also emphasised the need to positively encourage meaningful inter-ethnic contact and friendship within schools and classrooms so as to ensure that diversity and integration go hand-in-hand.[9]

It should be noted too, that increased diversity within schools is valued by parents. A survey published by NatCen Social Research in May 2018 found that 91% of people in Britain agree that it is either 'very important' or 'quite important' for a good secondary school to have a mix of pupils from different backgrounds.[10] This is reflected in the fact that an overwhelming majority of the population are opposed to the use of faith-based admissions criteria, which divide children along religious lines (and, by proxy, along ethnic and socio-economic lines too). 80% of the British public supported keeping the 50% cap on religious selection at free schools when polled last year (including a majority

[7] *Diversity and social cohesion in mixed and segregated schools in Oldham,* DfE, August 2017: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/634118/Diversity_and_Social_Cohesion_in_Oldham_schools.pdf

[8] http://www.cream-migration.org/publ_uploads/CDP_07_18.pdf

[9] 'Do Ethnically Mixed Classrooms Promote Inclusive Attitudes Towards Immigrants Everywhere? A Study Among Native Adolescents in 14 Countries', Germ Janmaat, Janaury 2015: http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10021124/

[10] Attitudes towards good schools and selective education, NatCen Social Research, May 2018: http://natcen.ac.uk/media/1442622/grammar-school-selective-education-report-final.pdf

within each religious group),[11] and 72% of people oppose any kind of religious selection at all in school admissions.[12]

4.) What is the ideology or worldview of extremists and what are they trying to achieve?

As we have described above, extremism is not defined by one ideology or worldview, but describes the way in which such beliefs are expressed so as to threaten, harass, or reduce the rights of outgroups. Ultimately, all extremists are aiming to establish their worldview, whether it be far-right racial politics or a religious extremism, as the dominant political, ideological, and educational system within their society or globally. In so doing they aim to remove the rights, influence, and in some cases the existence of those who do not share their beliefs, or do not share the characteristics that define their ingroup. In the case of apostates, our experience shows that extremists want to create a climate of fear so that apostates never go public, with the consequence being that they continue to lead a double life, where they outwardly are religious, but privately do not believe in the religious dogma they are forced to live their lives by.

6.) Do you have any evidence on the harms caused by extremism, including: to
women?
to young people?
to minorities?
to society?

We work with a range of apostates who have presented the following harms as a result of the extremist views of those who abuse them for being an apostate:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Isolation and loneliness
- Confusion
- The emotional toll of 'living a double life', or fear of being found out
- Feelings of guilt, shame, and low self-worth
- Not feeling safe or wanted at home
- Negative reactions from family and friends
- Shunning or excommunication
- Confusion, fear, and distrust
- Societal prejudice against the non-religious
- They may be considered 'immoral', 'nihilistic', 'hedonists', etc.
- Most religious positions on apostasy are extremely critical of it
- Prejudice can affect the apostate at home, at work, or elsewhere
- Bullying
- Emotional and physical abuse and violence
- An apostate's family might try to have them 'exorcised' if they think they're 'possessed'

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[11] Populous interviewed 2,033 people living in Britain between May 5th to the 7th 2017: http://accordcoalition.org.uk/2017/05/29/overwhelming-majority-of-the-public-want-to-maintain-the-50-religious-selection-cap-for-new-faith-schools/
[12] http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/0mFaith-Schools_Q2.pdf

We have amassed a considerable number of case studies of the harm caused to apostates by extremists views within their former religious groups. Below,are two examples.

Case study 1: Sara
Sara had been wearing a hijab (head covering) since she was nine years old. At nine she wanted to be like her mother, and was happy to wear it. However, as she got older, especially in her teens, she started realising she didn't like the concept of the headscarf. She started to take it off when she left her home for school or to be with her friends. Sara's family found out that she had been removing her hijab, and she was physically assaulted by her father and older brother. They began to control everything she did, including where she went and who she spoke to. Sara told one of her close friends that she did not believe in her faith, but the friend told Sara's parents. Her family brought an imam home who told Sara that she could be punished by her family for not praying or following religious rituals. Eventually Sara ran away. As she had never lived by herself anywhere, she was put in very risky situations and ended up being placed in a women's shelter.

Case study 2: Jonathan
Jonathan grew up in a very strict, fourth generation Jehovah's Witnesses family. All his friends and acquaintances were Jehovah's Witnesses, and he wasn't allowed to socialise with people from outside the religion. Jonathan had watched his mother be physically abused by his father his entire life. One day he decided he'd had enough, and pushed his father off his mother when he was beating her. His father physically assaulted him, and locked him inside a room for days without food. He was told to pray for forgiveness. Jonathan eventually managed to get out, and ran away. He was homeless for a few weeks before he managed to find somewhere to stay. Jonathan was 'disfellowshipped' by the church and never sees or speaks to his family. He no longer has any religious belief.

7.) Do you have any evidence on the harms caused by extremism online? Please write your answer here (750-word limit)
We do not have separate data relating to apostate-based extremism online.

10.) Many of the people we have spoken to say that offering a positive vision for our country is key to countering extremism. What could that vision look like?
Extremism flourishes in conditions in which an individual or group perceives themselves to be the victim of an injustice or less favourable treatment by the dominant group or system in their society. To counter such narratives, government must act to reduce instances of social, religious and political injustices, where it is within its power to do so by policy or legislation, and by championing human rights and equality for all. We have for many years advocated for the advancement of a secular society, where the state respects and protects the right to freedom of religion and belief for everyone, and itself neither privileges nor discriminates in favour or against any one religion or belief group. If this vision is to be achieved in the UK, it would mean the UK Government supporting an end to religious discrimination in employment and admissions to schools.

For more details, information and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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