

Unfair treatment of faith groups 'persists', finds study

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Ten years after England and Wales' first law against religious discrimination a University of Derby-led project reveals institutions are making progress but that reports of unfair treatment from people of different religions or beliefs continue. Research for the report "Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales: A Decade of Continuity and Change" was led by Paul Weller, Professor of Inter-Religious Relations at Derby, working with Oxford and Manchester universities.

It covers the ten years since the 2003 Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations came into law; for the first time making it illegal in England and Wales to discriminate on the grounds of religion or [belief](#). It was followed by the 2006 Incitement to Racial and Racial Hatred Act, and the 2006 and 2010 Equalities Acts.

The research's chief findings include:

- general feeling among respondents that better [public education](#), and greater collaboration between different religions and communities, were now the best ways to continue to combat [unfair treatment](#) based on religion or belief;
- substantial reporting of unfair treatment on the basis of religion or belief does continue across key areas of people's lives;
- but indications that changes in the law had contributed to a reduction in the reported experience of unfair treatment on the basis of religion or belief;

- especially among certain [religious groups](#) – such as Muslims, Pagans and new religious movements – unfair treatment continues to arise in key aspects of people's lives such as work, education and encounters with the media;
- Christians citing unfair treatment around wearing crosses, reporting pressure to work Sundays by employers and a sense of their religion being marginalised whilst other faiths received fairer treatment;
- some non-religious people quizzed in the project's focus groups highlighting the sense that Christians received privileged treatment, especially around matters of education and governance.

The two year project's findings are based on responses from almost 500 religious organisations, and interview and focus group discussions with 270 people, of various faiths and none; in Cardiff, Blackburn, Leicester, Newham, Norwich, Derby, London, Manchester and Oxford. It built on previous research, particularly that conducted for the Home Office in 1999-2001, also led by Derby's Professor Weller.

Those leading the universities' research project are calling for a more rounded approach to policy making in the UK when it comes to religion and belief, discrimination and equality; seen as particularly important given the controversies which have arisen in the UK around multiculturalism and religious extremism.

Gearing UK social policy towards an idea of 'Britishness' was seen as less helpful in fostering understanding than an emphasis on citizenship, equal opportunities, greater working between and cohesion of communities, and a continued appreciation of the benefits of multiculturalism.

The project was financially supported within the Religion and Society

Research Programme, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Paul Weller, Professor of Inter-Religious Relations at the University of Derby, said: "A decade ago in domestic law it was not illegal in England and Wales to discriminate on grounds of religion or belief, so at that time those who reported unfair treatment on the basis of religion or belief had little scope for remedy.

"Since then we have had the 2003 Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations, Incitement to Racial and Racial Hatred Act, 2006, and the 2006 and 2010 Equalities Acts.

"Although unfair treatment on the basis of religion or belief continues, evidence from our field research suggests that, particularly in the public sector, these legal changes have contributed to policy development and institutional change, resulting in some improvements in both inclusive consultation and practice."

A Summary Findings document and Policy Brief for the project are now available, together with further background information, on its website at: [religion-and-society](#)"

target="_blank">www.derby.ac.uk/religion-and-society

Information on the project's broader outputs and its public engagement can accessed from the Research Councils' Gateway to Research at gtr.rcuk.ac.uk

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