

# Sharia, security and the church: dangers of the British Home Office inquiry

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Feminist campaigners from minority women's organisations in Britain, backed by prominent women human rights advocates from all over the world, wrote an [Open Letter](#) to Theresa May, then Home Secretary, criticising the way she was intending to carry out a long-awaited [review of sharia](#) in Britain. May was forced to [defend 'one law for all'](#) when she became Prime Minister.

An investigation shows that the concerns of campaigners such as myself were well-founded. The Home Office has established a panel which is fit for the purpose of a theological exercise rather than a human rights investigation. The appointment of a theologian to chair it and imams as advisors to the Review Panel, was a thoroughly bad sign as far as feminists were concerned. It is a basic tenet of human rights that procedures should ensure impartiality, and that those involved in an institution should not be investigating themselves – that is, assuming that the panel actually intends to conduct a thorough investigation. If the Sharia Review Panel is examined as an outcome of [counter-extremist measures](#), as well as the battle of the Church of England to create religious exemptions from secular law, then its composition makes perfect sense. That probably explains why the Home Office and the panel Chair, the theologian Mona Siddiqui, have remained unmoved as evidence of discrimination on the panel emerges.

The One Law for All [campaign](#) looked into the backgrounds of the imams. One of them, [Said Ali Abbas Razawi](#), has a disturbing tendency to talk about end times in apocalyptic and very sexist terms:

"Homosexuality will increase, zinaa [adultery] will increase in society; illegitimacy will increase in society. Men will look like women; women will look like men. What does that mean? What does that mean? That means men won't be manly anymore... Heralding the last days... they will be wearing clothes which are tight and will be see through. They will have clothes but they won't have clothes on."

Mona Siddiqui, Chair of the Review Panel, told the *Independent* that imams are on the panel because they 'have the ear of the community'; a remark that led to such outrage, that we decided to call for a [boycott](#) of the inquiry.

But the same Imam. Said Ali Abbas Razawi, leads delegations to Iran, and attacks ISIS. His apocalyptic views on the end times are simply not alarming to officials dealing in counter-extremism. The dominant view of counter-extremist officials is that fundamentalists or what they like to call 'non-violent extremists' or sometimes 'moderates' are part of the solution.

When questioned about the suitability of imams as advisors, the Home Office insisted on providing the same pro forma answer again and again, that stated that the Imams were 'recognised, credible experts chosen for their *'full and thorough understanding of the religious and theological issues pertaining to specific aspects of Sharia Law'*.

The government has carefully restricted what the independent panel is supposed to do. Rather than examine the dangers of legal pluralism, as campaigners had suggested, it endorsed 'sharia law' as 'a source of guidance to many Muslims, 'and limited the panel to '*assessing whether Sharia may be being misused, or exploited, in a way that may discriminate against certain groups, undermine shared values or cause social harms.*' The focus on group rights and social cohesion gives the game away. Harms to women are to be investigated, but only in the most limited way.

Even before the start of the review, it was clear that the battle was half lost. Survivors of church abuse are as aghast as we are. Sue Cox of [Survivors Voice Europe](#), an organisation for survivors of Catholic church abuse said, "I am equally horrified at the inclusion of Imams in this enquiry. This can NEVER be independent or impartial, and the very presence of a member of the organisation being investigated as advisors to this panel is ludicrous, a bit like putting Dracula in charge of a blood bank."

But it is not simply imams and theologians who are of concern. The campaigners had called for a Judge-led inquiry which would be able to compel evidence. The British Home Office said that a public inquiry would not be appropriate in this case because they were held about an event. However, they did oblige by appointing a Judge to the Review Panel. You could say he was a perfect choice.

Sir Mark Hedley is a former Judge of the family division. He is an active Christian in the Church of England, the Deputy Chair of the Clergy Discipline Commission, Deputy President of Tribunals and is associated with the Lawyers Christian Fellowship. His knowledge of ecclesiastical courts, and the values of a fundamentalist organisation makes him the closest thing to a sharia court judge that it is possible to find in the English judiciary.

The Lawyers Christian Fellowship says that 'our vision. to resource, unite and equip Christian lawyers and law students in their witness to Christ. In a world where Christians all over the world are suffering greatly from very serious persecution, 'witness to Christ' could include standing up to the fanatics who persecute Christians including recent converts, and working to protect Christians (and indeed others faced with persecution). In England, Christians from minorities suffer threats and bullying.

Lawyers associated with the Fellowship vigorously oppose equality legislation. They vocally oppose the removal of religious privilege, and are vitriolic about 'the homosexual lobby'. They have fought hard to exempt religious individuals or groups from complying with legislation on same sex marriage, adoption by single sex couples and other issues important to Christian fundamentalists. The National Secular Society accuses them of [bullying tactics](#). Their recent campaigns have largely failed, but not before both Anglican and Catholic Churches threatened to withdraw their services from vulnerable individuals and teamed up with Muslim groups to try and defeat the proposals which they claimed would force them to '[actively condone and promote homosexuality](#).'

In 2012, attention was drawn to the Lawyers Christian Fellowship after an extraordinarily harsh judgement, when a woman was [jailed for eight years](#) under an 1861 law for inducing her own miscarriage. The Judge, Justice Cook, was a member of the Fellowship, as was Mark Hedley who was named as the most senior Judge who was part of it.

Hedley's presence on the Review Panel as a highly respected senior Judge who is also associated with Christian fundamentalists is consistent with the Church of England's long held support for sharia law being recognised in Britain as a supplementary law. The former Archbishop of Canterbury suggested that Britain should regulate sharia matters, in a notorious speech, when he

argued for a higher law than secular law and called for sharia to be recognised. Justice Hedley has argued that he acts on faith but upholds secular law. Why then belong to a group that has opposed every single progressive reform?

The Church of England seems to be dealing with the loss of religious belief and loss of congregations by claiming a larger role for faith in public life through its inter-faith work. Although some Christian groups [oppose](#) Sharia raging it is outside a Judeo-Christian framework. For others the assertion that secular law is not all powerful is of prime importance. When marriage equality (that is same-sex marriage) was being negotiated, the Church of England succeeded in making an exception of its duty to marry its parishioners. It asserted its right under canon law to define marriage as a single man with a single woman. Whereas other churches can opt in to perform single sex marriage ceremony, priests of the Church of England may not do so. Bishops sit in the House of Lords and are part of the legislature. They enjoy enormous power as the state religion, but they feel no obligation to live under the laws of the country. It seems absurd to have an established Church that does not abide by the will of Parliament.

The new Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, is a Conservative MP who promoted women's rights in Parliament. Will she change course? Not, it seems, if her officials can help it. They failed to answer my questions about whether they had any plans to present our open letter to their minister. Finally, the plug was pulled when I asked if the Home Office had done any assessment in planning the Sharia Review. This could have been an equality impact assessment, or consideration of safeguarding concerns, or the protection of vulnerable witnesses in the light of sharia experts being advisors. I was told, 'I've spoken to colleagues on this and we're not going to go further than the lines we've already issued. We've answered questions extensively and it should be enough for your piece.'

They told me to go direct to inquiries to find out whether there was any precedent for having priests as advisors. When I rang [IICSA](#) (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse), the press office sounded quite bewildered. They said " we are dealing with institutional failures'. Sue Cox of Survivors Voice, Europe expanded on that, 'when giving evidence to the UN committee against the holy see, we asked that ANYONE with affiliations to the church should recuse themselves from that process.'" That advice should surely apply to Sir Mark Hedley as well.

At the end of this back and forth, all the organisations which had called for the boycott received letters from the Sharia Review. There was no acknowledgement of any of the criticisms made. The campaigners were blandly asked to give evidence at the Review on August 9th, 'As well as speaking to yourself, the review team are keen to hear from people with first hand experience of the application of Sharia law. '

Not a single mention was made of the Open Letter, the boycott, or any of the concerns raised.

As it stands, the Home Office and the Review Panel fail to meet the most basic standards on impartiality, equality impact and safeguarding. It is an exercise in sharia-compliance and a dangerous tool of the government's counter-extremism strategy.

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*Gita Sahgal is a founder of the Centre for Secular Space. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.*

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