

End religious groups' self-regulation on safeguarding, inquiry told

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A lawyer representing child abuse victims has called for an end to religious groups' self-regulation on safeguarding at the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse.

Richard Scorer of Slater & Gordon – who is also a National Secular Society vice-president – delivered an opening statement to IICSA's hearings on child protections in religious organisations and settings on Monday.

He said his clients – organisations and individuals who work with, or advocate for, victims and survivors of abuse – were "unanimous in urging an end to self-regulation".

"Religious freedom is not an absolute right. It can legitimately be abridged to protect the rights and freedoms of others. And there are few rights and freedoms more important than the right of children to be free of sexual abuse.

"Pleas for religious freedom in this context are really pleas for religious exceptionalism: self-interest masquerading as principle. These pleas should be rejected."

IICSA is [due to review](#) child protection policies, practices and procedures across a range of religious institutions which has previously been beyond its remit in England and Wales.

These include institutions from religions including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, Judaism and non-conformist Christian denominations.

Richard Scorer said that "for far too long" the authorities had marked abuse in these institutions as "'too difficult' and 'too sensitive' to grapple with properly".

"In some cases, the authorities have ducked the subject for fear of provoking social tensions or stoking discrimination.

"As a result, victims and survivors in minority religious communities have been silenced and their abusers given impunity. Silenced, not only by their own communities and religious institutions, but also by the state's reluctance to tread in this territory.

"At long last, the reality of what it means to be victim of abuse in a Jewish, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Sikh or a Jehovah's Witness community might be glimpsed and maybe even understood and addressed."

He added that claims that religiosity reduces abuse were "simply not credible" and said cultures of "denial and disbelief" within religious institutions have "significant consequences for children".

He said in many of the settings under consideration, religious leaders are deeply reluctant to "admit that they even have a problem at all". And he noted that in many of the affected settings, "religious power and authority can be all encompassing".

The inquiry has since suspended the remainder of the public hearing due to the evolving situation with Covid-19.

IICSA's previous work on religion and child abuse

IICSA has previously heard extensive and damning evidence on the handling of child sexual abuse by the [Church of England](#) and the [Catholic Church](#).

Last year a report from the inquiry's Truth Project also [said](#) it was much less likely that abuse in religious contexts would be reported to the external authorities.

Richard Scorer's clients are:

- Lloyd Evans, a campaigner highlighting abuse within the Jehovah's Witnesses;
- The group Southall Black Sisters, which campaigns for the rights of women from ethnic minority backgrounds;
- NSS council member Yasmin Rehman and Sadia Hameed, who undertake similar work in Nottingham and Gloucestershire respectively;
- Migdal Emunah, the leading organisation supporting victims and survivors in Jewish communities;
- Dr Lisa Oakley, a respected academic who has researched abuse in Christian churches from a survivor perspective;
- The Interfaith Alliance, which campaigns to expose sexual abuse, bullying and discrimination in religious institutions.

[*Watch Richard Scorer's statement \(starts after 3 hours and 19 minutes\).*](#)

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