

Sectarianism in modern Britain

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From Iranian dissidents fearing deportation after seeking asylum from theocracy, to ex-Muslims driven from their homes in Bradford, Iram Ramzan looks at some worrying examples of sectarianism threatening Britain's reputation for tolerance.

Peyman (not his real name) is to all appearances like any other foreign student in Manchester. He's 30 years-old, learning English and was drawn to Britain because of its reputation for religious and political pluralism, a sort of default secularism protected by the rule of law. Peyman hopes to become a counsellor after his studies.

But his smiling face hides his desperate situation. In 2010 Peyman fled the Islam Republic of Iran to seek asylum. Unfortunately for him, the authorities did not believe he arrived when he said he did and he had his application rejected. His political and religious views (Peyman is an ex-Muslim and a critic of the theocratic regime) placed him and his family in grave danger. However like many ex-Muslims applying for asylum on the grounds of religious persecution Peyman found this difficult to prove and is still appealing his case.

"[In Iran] they had proof I was an atheist, that I was against Islam and against the Ayatollah. But here I don't have proof to get refugee status."

Peyman fears being made homeless again if he loses his right to accommodation and the potentially deadly possibility of being deported to Iran. Under the theocratic regime political and religious dissent is often conflated, mirroring the fusion of state and religious power, and blasphemy/apostasy are common charges against dissidents.

Peyman's Kurdish-Iranian family have more experience of this than many. After the revolution in 1979, the regime would round up any dissidents. His older brother was imprisoned and subsequently tortured, as were some of his other relatives for their political activities. Peyman was also beaten at a police station. "Most Iranians hate the government but they can't say it," he added.

On August 26 2015, Amnesty International [reported](#) that Behrouz Alkhani, a 30-year-old man from Iran's Kurdish minority, was executed while awaiting the outcome of a Supreme Court appeal. A Revolutionary Court had charged him with "effective collaboration with PJAK" (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) and "enmity against God" for his alleged role in the assassination of the Prosecutor of Khoy, West Azerbaijan province.

Iranians were among the [top five](#) nationalities applying for asylum in Britain in the year ending June 2015. However, it is difficult to determine how many asylum applications to the UK are based on fear of persecution on the grounds of religion or belief. Some Christian groups have done important work highlighting the cases of Christians (including ex-Muslim Christian converts) facing persecution in the Middle East and/or seeking asylum. But groups supporting atheists and other religious minorities are often less resourced or politically connected.

Iranian-born Maryam Namazie helped found the [Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain](#) in 2007 to break the taboo that comes with renouncing Islam. Eight years on, it seems that little has changed. Today, apostasy is a crime in 23 out of 49 Muslim-majority countries. In Saudi Arabia and Iran it is

punishable by death. In some countries, like Pakistan, people are accused of "blasphemy" by their fellow citizens.

Maryam said: "Those accused can be religious, including Muslims, or atheists. They may not have even done anything 'wrong'; it's an accusation that can be used by states and others in order to silence, threaten and even murder those deemed 'undesirable'."

But persecution of minorities and the enforcement of 'apostasy' taboos is also an issue in the UK. Many of those who leave the Islamic faith in this country can often be ostracised from their communities and families. Nissar Hussain (49), a married father-of-six found this out when he admitted he had converted to Christianity following the death of his older brother. His family promptly disowned him, refusing to inform him when his father had died. Even his 45-year-old wife Qubra was horrified at first, but after spending time with his Christian friends from church she also decided to convert to Christianity.

When word of Nissar's conversion got out "like wildfire", what initially started out as name calling quickly escalated into acts of vandalism.

After an arson attack on the empty house next door, Nissar decided enough was enough and moved the family to the other side of Bradford, in Manningham. All was fine until he appeared in Channel 4's [Dispatches](#) programme on Christian converts. His Muslim neighbours took offence and he recently had to quit his job as a nurse after he was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after 16 years of constant harassment.

"We're in the frontline, in the trenches," he said. "The fact that it's from my own fellow Pakistanis is traumatic. The Pakistani, Muslim community needs to exercise tolerance and goodwill towards converts such as ourselves.

"They took offence, in general, to converts. We're an offence here. This is a form of terrorism. It's so very personal. It's vindictive."

Nissar worries for the fate of his children, including his Daughter Anniesa - a 21-year-old international relations student at the University of Nottingham, who has [blogged](#) about her experiences. Anniesa recalled painful memories of being rushed upstairs after dinner, in anticipation of the next brick through the window. Although the children were not brought up religiously, she says the experience has made her Christian; only her faith, she said, keeps her "sane".

"We would get called Jew dogs, at school we were told: you're a kaafir; my mum said I can't sit next to you," Anniesa said. "I realised we were different. Mum got asked in the playground, why are you wearing salwar kameez, why aren't you wearing a mini skirt now you're not a Muslim? Christianity is equated to whiteness. She said my colour is still the same, I'm still a Pakistani woman.

"I've bottled it up. Being the eldest sister you can't let it show. I see the UK as having become radicalised. Political correctness has allowed this to ferment."

When Naz Shah MP (Bradford West) was elected it was widely viewed a rejection of sectarian politics and Nissar wrote to his new MP to ask for help. Ms Shah's office confirmed that they had received the requests for support from Nissar and a multi-agency meeting was held, with ongoing matters being dealt with by the police, though Nissar does not believe enough is being done.

Whether it is young men like Peyman or the Hussain family in Bradford, it is clear religious

persecution and sectarianism are issues Britain must grapple with at home and abroad. Our politicians often speak about our tolerant nation and condemn those countries that persecute their minorities. The Government must then uphold the criteria – which includes persecution – for those seeking refugee status. Protecting them is our moral responsibility.

Here in the UK, there are growing numbers of ex-Muslims who can now be helped by various organisations (CEMB and [Faith to Faithless](#) to name a few). Such organisations should be given more platforms to talk about the vital work they do to assist not just asylum seekers but British citizens who need their help. Otherwise this sectarianism will threaten Britain's long-held reputation for tolerance.

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