

Sharia Law Debate

Introduction

In early February, the Archbishop of Canterbury delivered a speech in which he was heard to call for some recognition of sharia law in Britain. In fact, his speech was far more complex and sophisticated than the media headlines indicated, including argument for the role of religious conscience within the public space. The Evangelical Alliance decided to launch a feedback exercise on its website and this paper represents an analysis of the response.

Terms of Reference for the Consultation

The Evangelical Alliance has been working on issues of freedom of conscience and religion for a number of years. The controversy over the Archbishop of Canterbury escalated this conversation, and we felt this was an opportune time to widen the debate to the broader Christian community.

We included the following questions to guide respondents' thinking:

1. How can religious conscience and values be protected in a secular state?
2. What is your view of Sharia law operating within the British legal system? Do you see any acceptable way aspects of Sharia could be integrated?
3. What is the relationship like between Christians and Muslims in your area? Can you describe any local examples of good or bad relations?
4. Do you agree with the Archbishop of Canterbury that, as the established/majority religion, Christians should attempt to speak for the liberties and consciences of people of other faiths in Britain as well as our own?
5. How do you think the Evangelical Alliance should respond to this debate?

Analysis of 197 replies

1. How can religious conscience and values be protected in a secular state?

By far the largest number of responses in this section urged that Christians should continue to fight and campaign for law and human rights to support freedom of religion, worship, conscience and to ensure that freedom of speech is not eroded further. Many respondents thought that there should be no state interference in freedom of religious conscience and values. They suggested that Christians needed to rediscover preaching of the gospel and the making of disciples, and that they should prioritise freedom of conscience. The government should be urged to allow conscientious exceptions to appropriate legislation which will also help preserve social capital and moral values.

2. What is your view of Sharia law operating within the British legal system? Do you see any acceptable way aspects of Sharia could be integrated?

The answer to this question was overwhelmingly negative. Many believed that sharia is essentially incompatible with UK law and that any accommodation would constitute appeasement and end up as a Trojan horse or thin end of a wedge.

Where some accommodation was seen as a possibility, this was only where clearly subordinate to or within UK law and covering appropriate limited areas.

Many people commented that sharia is already operating in UK. Therefore efforts must be directed to limiting its influence and development. There were also a number of observations that Muslim treatment of women was unacceptable.

3. What is the relationship like between Christians and Muslims in your area? Can you describe any local examples of good or bad relations?

The majority of responses to this question suggested that where there are contacts, the experience has been positive – or at least there have been no major difficulties. However, this was balanced by expressed concern about Muslim ghettos and parallel lives and that there was often little contact between Muslims and others in communities.

4. Do you agree with the Archbishop of Canterbury that, as the established/majority religion, Christians should attempt to speak for the liberties and consciences of people of other faiths in Britain as well as our own?

The response to this question was interesting, since out of those who addressed the question directly 21% agreed with the Archbishop whilst 35% disagreed.

There seemed to be a feeling that Christianity is being systematically opposed and marginalised and in this context the Archbishop was naïve, unwise or dangerous in seeking rapprochement with Islam. There was dismay that the Archbishop was apparently known more for sticking up for the rights of other faiths than he is for Christianity and that he should be speaking up above all for Christianity. Whilst many people thought that respect and peaceful co-existence with other faiths as our neighbours was important, nevertheless this should not include compromising Christianity. A number of respondents differentiated between speaking out for liberty of conscience for other faiths and defending their beliefs.

5. How do you think the Evangelical Alliance should respond to this debate?

There was a very wide spread of suggestions in response to this question, with most urging the Alliance to speak up more clearly, though a number were supportive of what we have been doing to date.

The overwhelming consensus appeared to be that there is a need for a stronger united response and voice. The Alliance, in the opinion of many, should refocus what many see as currently a relatively weak approach and become more resolute and defend more robustly Christian freedoms and conscience. Some respondents believed that an emphasis on graciousness risked being interpreted as weakness or appeasement and that the Alliance must be uncompromising in upholding biblical values and speaking out the full gospel unapologetically.

Many saw the Alliance's primary role as defending and emphasising the importance of the UK's Judeo-Christian heritage and freedoms, and with regards to the Archbishop pointing out to him his errors and telling him that he is wrong, and that he should communicate in words people can understand.

There was general agreement that the Alliance should stand for grace, love, mutual respect, tolerance, truth and freedom of speech and religion. Many urged that the Alliance should welcome people of other faiths, but nevertheless make it clear that the UK is based on a tradition of Christianity whose traditions and outlook they should agree to be part of. Accordingly, many felt the Alliance should state clearly there can never be any accommodation to sharia law or compromise on the uniqueness of Christ.

There was a clear feeling that the Alliance should be speaking out against persecution of Christians in Muslim countries, and a number urged note should be taken of the work of Patrick Sookhdeo in relation to Islamic issues.

Conclusion

The Alliance was pleased to receive these responses. We cannot be certain of how representative they are of the whole of our constituency without further work. Nevertheless, we will continue to work actively on issues of religious freedom and conscience, and also continue to work on the best way forward in balancing grace and truth as we reach out with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to our Muslim friends and neighbours.