

The Commonwealth should be the natural organisation to lead on faith and the human right to choose which faith to follow

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Ahead of her oral question on Wednesday 25 April on action to promote freedom of religion or belief as part of the human rights agenda to be discussed at the Commonwealth Summit, Baroness Berridge writes about the question for PoliticsHome.

The transnational network of faith is a key element of the cultural ties that form the arteries of the Commonwealth. Today, almost 95% of the Commonwealth population profess a religious belief. However, roughly 70% currently live with high or very high government restrictions on the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Perhaps even more concerning is how approximately 88% live in countries with high or very high social hostility between religious groups.

Given this worrying situation, it was disappointing to note that FoRB was not highlighted in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) Communiqué. However, the tragedy facing the Rohingya was addressed and the Commonwealth, as one, called for repatriation, those responsible for human rights abuses to be brought to justice and the re-granting of citizenship for the Rohingya. But by failing to address the importance of the denial of FoRB and religious persecution to the recent explosion of violence towards the Rohingya, the Commonwealth seemed not to grasp the cause of the plight. Rohingya Muslims were declared illegal immigrants in 1982 and their citizenship was removed. Anti-Muslim sentiment supported by hard-line Buddhist monks has been key to stoking hatred against the Rohingya. Other Christian minorities in Myanmar, such as the Kachin, Chin and Naga peoples also face persecution, with approximately 120,000 forced to flee their homes to date. The example of Myanmar shows the devastating consequences of ignoring FoRB.

The absence of FoRB as an issue is especially concerning considering the 2015 CHOGM in Malta did highlight its importance. I hope this does not result in Her Majesty's Government (HMG) placing diminishing importance on FoRB during their time as Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth. HMG has made consistent statements about its dedication to the issue of FoRB. In her Christmas 2017 message, Theresa May called for a "reaffirmation of our determination to stand up for freedom of people of all religions to speak about and practice their beliefs in peace and safety." However, as highlighted in Lords' questions on 18 April, there are only two part-time staff members working on FoRB in the Foreign Office. Baroness Stedman-Scott, speaking for the government, admitted that, "two desk people appears remarkably light."

Even if FoRB was not specifically mentioned, issues connected to religious persecution directly relate to several targets highlighted in the Communiqué. For example, the aim "to prevent... child, early and forced marriages" as many forced marriages across the Commonwealth are connected with forced conversions. One of the most serious examples occurs in Pakistan, where an estimated 1000 young Christian and Hindu women and girls are kidnapped, forcibly converted and married off every year.

A key theme of the Communiqué is a commitment for 12 years of quality education and learning for boys and girls by 2030. Education is a multiplier right and denial perpetuates cycles of exclusion and marginalisation. According to Minority Rights Group International, the majority of children who are out of school worldwide belong to minority and indigenous groups. Barriers to education for religious minorities can come in the form of psychological and physical abuse by students and teachers, neglect in providing educational facilities, or the blanket ban of religious groups from entering education. Christian Solidarity Worldwide has discovered that in some states in northern Nigeria, predominantly Christian areas have no schools nearby. Derogatory comments about religious minorities are prevalent in school textbooks in Pakistan. In Punjab in August 2017, with his teacher looking on, a Christian boy, Sharoon Masih was beaten to death by his classmates. If Commonwealth states are to deliver on their pledges to provide quality education to all they must address educational bias on religious grounds.

As the next Head of the Commonwealth, HRH Prince of Wales, has been an outspoken advocate on religious persecution and will head a religious organisation, the Church of England, the Commonwealth should be the natural multi-lateral organisation to lead on faith and the human right to choose which faith to follow, if any.

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