# My religion is important

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## 1. Introduction

It is common to see reports of our society becoming less religious (Sherwood, 2019). This is said to be a generational phenomenon, i.e. people are less religious than their parents, and, similarly, their own children are even less religious than they were. It is also explained that non-religious parents are successful at transmitting their lack of faith to their children. This is not just a British phenomenon. The Pew Research Centre has pointed out that young adults around the world are less religious: 'younger respondents are less likely to identify with any religion in 41 countries' (Kramer & Fahmy, 2018).

One finds similar reports about Birmingham, which is my focus. We are told (Miller & Roger, 2019) that the fastest growing religious group in the city are the 'nons' i.e. people without a religious belief. The group were 342,000 in 2018, which is just under a third of the city's population. But there is more to this picture than that being painted by the headlines. First, while their numbers maybe falling, Christians are still a sizeable faith group which makes up 38% of the city.

## 2. Muslim-majority city

What is overlooked by the general reports is the presence of minority faiths, such as the 26,000 Hindus, 22,000 Sikhs and 3000 Buddhists. The more significant minority faith are the Muslims, who number at 301,000 in the city, making up 27% of the local population. Over ten years ago the Department of Work and Pensions pointed out that Birmingham was set to become the first majority Muslim city in Europe (Tackey et al. 2006). Is that possible?

The answer is in the affirmative if one looks at the younger population. In 2011, data from Birmingham Education showed that Muslims were the largest pupil religious group (at 36%), more than the Christian denominations combined (33%). Six years ago, it was reported that of Birmingham's 278,623 children, 97,099 were registered as Muslim and 93,828 as Christian in the last census. The figure for those children without a religion was 54,343 (Buckley, 2014). In my doctoral research (Iqbal, 2019), I asked 219 students, at the end of their schooling, to respond to the statement: My religion is very important in my life. The responses were as follows:

### Agree/strongly agree

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Pakistani | 89% |
| 2. | Bangladeshi | 87% |
| 3. | Indian | 86% |
| 4. | White British | 28% |

It was found that the numbers of Pakistani children are growing while the numbers of White British children are decreasing. This will have further impact on the religious presence in the local population.

Earlier, Iqbal (2013) had pointed out that, according to the Census 2011, the two most religious city electoral wards were Washwood Heath and Bordesley Green – majority Pakistani areas - and the two least religious wards were Moseley and Selly Oak - mainly white British wards. He pointed out that

Muslims had begun to move out of the inner-city areas with the result that each of the 40 city wards had at least 2 per cent Muslims in their population. The Brum Youth Trends (2017) found that the young people overall identified the least with their religion, except in B10 and B11 (mainly Muslim areas) where the situation was the exact opposite, that is, here their religion was the top most identity shaper. For White young people, their religion was the least important.

When it comes to religion, London is also bucking the trend. Bickley & Mladin (2020) have spoken of 'reverse secularisation' taking place in the capital city, pointing out that 'London is the most religious place in Great Britain, in the sense that a larger part of London's population say they have a religion, compared to the rest of Great Britain' (Bickley & Mladin, 2020, p.25). London only had 33% 'not religious' compared to the rest of Great Britain, excluding London, having 45%. The authors go on to point out that this is 'likely that this is driven by immigration and diaspora communities' (Bickley & Mladin, 2020, p.24). Furthermore, it is pointed out that 'there is a more substantial non-Christian religious presence in London'; one fifth of London's population compared to 7% in Great Britain (excluding London). The largest such non-Christian religion is Muslim, comprising ten percent compared to less than two per cent in the rest of the country.

The phenomenon of religion, especially amongst the growing ethnic minorities, is nothing new. The Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities (Modood et al. 1997) had reported the largest percentage of 'nons' were amongst the White population, at 31%; while amongst ethnic minorities very few declared as such – Indian (5%), Pakistani (2%) and Bangladeshi (1%). A similar picture was presented, in response to 'Religion is very important to how I live my life': White (13%), Indian (47%), Pakistani (73%) and Bangladeshi (76%). Later, findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey (O'Beirne, 2004) showed that 'More respondents from minority faith communities and minority ethnic groups felt religion was important' (p. viii) and '99 per cent of the respondents with no religious affiliation were white and one per cent came from minority ethnic groups' (p8).

Looking ahead, Modood (2012), an authority on religion within the multicultural context, has pointed out that religion is likely to be very much a part of our future, arguing that a super diverse racial, ethnic and religious mix in its principal cities will be the norm for social and cultural life in twenty-first century Europe.

## 3. Implications

So, what are the implications of such a situation? Our religious freedom is something we take for granted. This means both a freedom from religion and belief as well as freedom of religion. We have large numbers of citizens from both categories. The challenge facing us, therefore, is how the two can be enabled to co-exist. A starting point is for both to understand each other. Butler-Sloss (2015, p.9) referred to this as 'religious literacy' which, according to her report, was needed in every section of society and at all levels. 'The potential for misunderstanding, stereotyping and oversimplification based on ignorance is huge' (Butler-Sloss, 2015, p.9). The report called on educational and professional bodies to draw up religion and belief literacy programmes and projects. Such literacy was defined as 'the skills and knowledge required to engage in an informed and confident way with faith communities' (Communities and Local Government, 2008, p.33). Earlier, the Greater London Authority (2007, p. xv) had provided a comprehensive definition of religious literacy:

> Skills in understanding and assessing religious statements and behaviour; discerning the difference between valuable and harmful aspects of religion and religions; appreciating religious architecture, art, literature and music without necessarily accepting all the beliefs that they express or assume; and making reasonable accommodation between people holding different religious and non-religious worldviews.

Griffith-Dickson (2015, para. 6) had likened such literacy,

> to the religious equivalent of emotional intelligence; a matter of knowledge, but also an ability to be informed, aware, at home with diverse religions; the ability to conduct

oneself well when questions of faith and belief come to the fore.

Iqbal (2019), in his research in Birmingham schools, had asked the Pakistani students what their views were on this matter. An overwhelming number stated that for them it was important that their teachers understood the students' heritage, especially their religion. Several teacher interviewees, too, saw such understanding to be central to the teaching and learning process and for raising standards. Modood (2010) has pointed out moderate secularism and respect for religion are vital if we are to move from a multiculturalism of fear towards genuine pluralism, "Respect for religion and moderate secularism are kindred spirits and are sources of hope for a multiculturalism that gives status to religious, as to other, communities."

## 4. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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