Questions of Hope and Hate: Faith and Faultlines in a Changing Britain

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0 Executive Summary

Questions of Hope and Hate explores the rising visibility and politicisation of religion in the UK. Based on interviews with senior leaders across Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and Hindu communities, the report shows how democratic fatigue, global conflict, internal religious change, and weakened interfaith structures are reshaping civic life. Religion is not simply fading or returning—it is being renegotiated amid social strain and shifting identities.

The Political Domain: Democratic Fatigue and Transnational Pressures

Faith leaders describe the UK as experiencing:

- Declining trust in politics, weakened institutions, and fragmented party coalitions.
- Greater vulnerability to populist and identity-based mobilisation, including Christian imagery on the right and Muslim realignment away from Labour.
- Transnational mobilisation, where events across the world reverberate immediately in British communities.
- Low religious literacy in government, leading to inconsistent engagement and failure to anticipate domestic tension from global conflict.

- A shared sense of marginalisation, though in different forms. While some feel culturally sidelined, others report unprecedented levels of discrimination. Few groups feel properly understood, supported, or engaged with.

These political stresses create fertile ground for sectarian narratives and mutual suspicion.

The Intra-Religious Domain: Changing Faith Identities and Internal Diversity

Britain's religious landscape is diversifying rather than simply secularising:

- Christian affiliation has declined, but immigration has revitalised Christian diversity and some evidence suggests a revival, particularly among younger adults.
- Other traditions are demographically robust, with visible public and political presence.
- Generational shifts are reshaping communities: younger people may be more outspoken, more progressive—or, in some traditions, more conservative.
- Women and younger leaders are active at grassroots level but underrepresented in formal leadership.
- Internal diversity is substantial, producing "minorities within minorities" (e.g., progressive Jews, non-Khalistani Sikhs, politically engaged Christian conservatives).
- Online spaces increasingly drive identity formation, weakening the influence of traditional religious authorities.

These factors challenge institutions' ability to guide communities through polarisation.

The Inter-Religious Domain: Strained but Essential

Interfaith work is under unprecedented pressure:

- Global conflicts have strained relationships, particularly after 7 October 2023, making public collaboration difficult for many leaders.
- National interfaith structures have weakened, partly due to government defunding and loss of trust.
- Existing frameworks and approaches are seen as too superficial, unable to address difficult conversations.
- Local, relational initiatives show promise, especially where they engage younger people, women, and ordinary residents.
- Trusted convenors such as mayors and the monarchy retain moral authority to bring communities together.

Interfaith work remains essential but requires more resilient foundations.

Summary of Recommendations

1. **Establish consistent and strategic engagement**
   - Create stable, long-term mechanisms for government–faith relations.
   - Reduce reliance on crisis-driven or election-driven engagement.
2. **Embed religious literacy across institutions**
   - Equip civil servants, local authorities, and policymakers to understand faith dynamics, diversity, and diaspora links.
3. **Renew national narratives of belonging**
   - Promote a confident story of British pluralism rooted in shared civic values and respect for diversity.
4. **Strengthen faith leadership and institutions**
   - Support leadership development, especially for young people and women; help communities resist the misuse of religious identity.
5. **Support interfaith infrastructure and local action**
   - Rebuild credible national structures; prioritise local, relational, and practical collaboration across traditions.

1 Introduction

Britain is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-creedal democracy. Whilst this pluralism has been hard-won, belonging to a minority ethnic or religious community is not now a bar to the fullest civic participation. The emergence of political leaders from diverse faith backgrounds at both regional and national levels is evidence of this.

This rests largely on the development of open institutions and democratic norms - the rule of law, expansive suffrage, and the recognition of human rights in our legal systems. It also rests on our long – if uneven – history of religious toleration: from the Toleration Act of 1689, through Catholic emancipation, to the repeal of the Test Acts, to today's legislation against religious discrimination. Each step has marked an expansion of civic belonging to religious 'others'. Even the Anglican establishment, which once stood as a barrier to many, has in more recent decades offered something like what some call 'an umbrella under which many shelter'. Compared with, for example, republican universalism and *laïcité* in France, Britain has found a distinctive settlement in which people of different religious identities can coexist and contribute within a shared political life. The politics and policies of multiculturalism, which have successfully accommodated significant racial and religious diversity while largely avoiding sectarian politics, spring not just from our democratic but also our religious life.

That settlement now feels increasingly precarious. Faith identity and ideology are assuming a more significant role in shaping political allegiance, civic participation, and the wider culture. Religious symbols and narratives are present in political discourse in ways that both inspire and divide. Christian imagery and language have surfaced in populist

and far-right spaces, sometimes used positively to defend tradition and a broadly Christian heritage, but other times as a framework against both Islam and social liberalism. In Muslim-majority constituencies, the election of independent candidates on a Gaza platform has signalled new forms of political mobilisation. Global conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, reverberate powerfully in UK politics, undermining local and national cohesion and heightening vulnerabilities. Hindu and Sikh voices are likewise entangled in shifting patterns of identity and political alignment, shaped by diaspora dynamics and international affairs.

At the same time, Britain's traditional political coalitions – once strongly inflected by faith – are fragmenting. Labour has historically drawn strength from Catholic, non-conformist, Jewish, and Muslim communities that formed the urban working-class base, while the Conservatives were rooted in the Anglican middle and upper classes. Today, neither party can take such voters for granted, in part because of appeals to religious identity, sentiments, and solidarity. Electoral realignments and the decline of broad coalitions of interest have left space for sectarian appeals and identity-based mobilisation.

These dynamics present challenges not only for progressive movements, but for the health of Britain's democracy as a whole. Religious voters are disaffected; longstanding political-religious alignments are fraying; and faith-based identities are being strategically mobilised by political actors to deepen social divides. This is taking place in the context of wider political polarisation, declining trust in institutions, and a sense of economic and cultural insecurity. Until recently considered marginal in an increasingly secular society, faith has now emerged as a more visible and contested force in public life.

Why is this happening, and what can be done? There is a growing body of research on religion and politics in Britain, but there is a lack of actionable insight about how faith communities, or politicians, can navigate this emerging landscape. Less is known about the perspectives of those who exercise recognised authority within their communities, and who are actively engaged in mediating between faith, politics, and society.

This project, *Questions of Hope and Hate*, seeks to help fill that gap. Conducted in September 2025, it draws on 13 semi-structured interviews with senior leaders across Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu traditions. These leaders occupy diverse institutional roles – from denominational heads, to civic advocates, to interfaith activists – but share responsibility for shaping the voice and public presence of their communities.

The report is not intended as a comprehensive account of the changing role of religion in British politics, but as a preliminary diagnostic at a moment of flux. It asks how faith leaders perceive the present political context, what issues most concern their communities, how they see relations within and between traditions, and what they believe political institutions and leaders could do differently. The aim is to generate insight

that is both descriptive and practical: capturing lived realities and offering recommendations that can guide political, civic, and faith actors.

It is always tempting to look for a single cause or a single problem - the one thing that is leading towards a more sectarian religious politics, and therefore a set of simple responses which might offer a solution. On the basis of our research, we find that we must reject this approach. Rather, we should understand first that there is something happening across religious traditions and that this deserves investigation and explanation in order to ground a wise and effective response. Therefore, while it is important to understand what is happening inside any particular religious tradition - i.e., theological discourses which pull towards particular outcomes - we must also pay attention to the prevailing social and political context. It is only in the interaction of multiple and diverse factors across domains of the political, the intra-religious, and the inter-religious that we will properly identify what is happening.

This short report will adopt a framework which first looks at the political context, then the intra-religious, before turning to the inter-religious - and then, in a final section, exploring a range of responses that might be appropriate. At the risk of doing the very thing we warn against - that is, making an overly simplistic argument - our findings take the form of A+B=C. Democratic fatigue and weakened political institutions create a fertile soil for politicised forms of faith to take root, and these are placing extraordinary pressure on inter-religious work and, indeed, common life. As our interviewees were keen to point out, this is not by any means the whole - or perhaps even the main - story to tell about faith in public life. In particular, there is much to celebrate in work for cohesion and social contribution, to which we only occasionally allude. This story is, however, an emerging and troubling story, and one which deserves attention.

The authors wish to acknowledge the limited scope of this research project. We have adopted a method which leans heavily on elite informant interviews, selected through purposive sampling, in a short period of time, and backed by a literature survey. It emphasises the factors which have some resonance across religious traditions, and theologically thoughtful readers may feel that it does not discuss the role of diverse theological movements and influences within religious groups. Additional work through institutional analyses, mapping trends in public opinion, careful theological investigation, and more would supplement, refine, and no doubt challenge some of these findings.

2 The Political Domain

In 2003, Alistair Campbell intervened in the closing stages of an interview between a Vanity Fair journalist and Tony Blair. On Campbell's account, he was preventing the journalist from spinning out a new and potentially complicated line of questioning at the end of his allotted time. But his intervention - "we don't do God" - became an aphorism for Britain's largely secular politics. The influence of the mainstream Christian denominations looked limited, and the establishment of the Church of England was a vestigial privilege that was so anaemic that it was not worth the trouble it would take to remove. It was not just Alistair Campbell who did not do God, no-one seemed that interested. Even the comparatively 'faithful' politicians seemed meek in their articulation compared to their US counterparts.

There were, of course, exceptions. Blair himself had linked his Christian faith with a sense of moral kinship to President George W. Bush. Within domestic politics overall, faith perspectives were very much present across a range of debates: welfare reform, international development, and religious freedom, amongst many others. They were rarely, however, particularly decisive. There were also a series of moral flashpoint issues similar to those that had galvanised US evangelicals - but again it is notable that religious campaigners rarely prevailed.

What is Happening?

Two decades on, the religious landscape looks markedly different. The Unite the Kingdom march, with its use of religious symbols and language, took place during the course of this research project and was mentioned by many interviewees. This event came on the back of some two years of Gaza protests which bear a strong religious charge. Prima facie, these are

instances of the emergence of a more sectarian mode amongst religious actors.

Secular commentators are worried, but so are many religious communities - either because of the threat that such mobilisations present to their own community, or their sense that their own tradition is being misunderstood, corrupted or instrumentalised.

We sought to explore how our interviewees - religious leaders with a national profile from diverse communities - felt about the rise of a more visibly religious politics. The majority we spoke to said that rising polarisation, along with racial and religious prejudice, were priority concerns for their community (albeit alongside 'bread and butter' political questions like economy, health and housing). Yet few saw this renewed visibility of religion as spontaneous. Instead, they traced it to deeper social and political currents.

1. Democratic Fatigue

It is widely acknowledged that, along with similar western democracies, the United Kingdom is experiencing democratic fatigue. Levels of trust in political systems are at historic lows. Public institutions face complex problems which do not have obvious or short term answers. Public institutions and political leadership are accused of being weak and compromised, sometimes justifiably.

Long-term social and economic change and short-term political volatility have seen a breakup in the coalitions which previously supported the two 'main' political parties, and voters have shifted to the left and the right. One interviewee spoke of a strong and pervasive **"decaying nation"** narrative.

Religious leaders see their communities as caught up in these social shifts. In terms of the political affiliations of religious groups, it is clear that those that had previously been aligned in large part with one or other of two broad political coalitions are now either unaligned (e.g., Catholics) or realigning (e.g., the detachment of Muslims from Labour). It is also the case that populist political movements find something in some religious expressions which they share: insider/outsider narratives which offer protection and succour for one identity group against the threats presented by another. These narratives are harder to sustain in open and mixed institutions or broad-church political movements - yet these are the very institutions which are perceived to be failing.

The emergence of a politicised Christianity was a provocation for this research, and it became much more visible at and after the Unite the Kingdom rally. While interviewees felt that some sincere concerns were being surfaced, others saw this instrumentalisation of religion by bad actors. They argued that such religious expression was inconsistent with core tenets of Christian faith, or did not spring out of an authentic religious life. They were therefore resistant to identifying their religious faith too closely to an ethnicity or culture: **"For a number of our people, Christian nationalism can't be a thing, because what that then does is create a**

subculture of what it means to be Christian, yet Christianity is there for every tribe, every tongue, every ethnicity, every background, every age group, and so on".

Others felt the use of religious rhetoric and symbolism was 'imported': **"When America sneezes, Britain catches a cold. I think that America impacts us. It's an uncomfortable yet necessary conversation that this is happening in the backdrop of the death of Charlie Kirk. He's said to have been a very strong evangelical, and we see the evangelical community within the U.S rising up."** This would be consistent with research that indicates a very low prevalence of Christian nationalism in the UK and indicates that a changing information environment connects us in new ways to international crises, movements and moments.

Interviewees also pointed to contextual factors for growing religious sectarianism. Factors like economic exclusion might make people more vulnerable to such an appeal. Those who felt that the system had failed, or that they were excluded from a decent life, were again liable to blame marginalised groups, or be drawn into doing so by populist leaders, whether religious or political. One Muslim leader said: **"They are looking to scapegoat a community, and because the majority of the immigrants are coming from those countries of Muslim background, people just think that they are the ones that are taking our resources."** The equation of Christian with British heritage or western values is primarily a way of saying 'not Muslim', but the protesting against a perceived loss of what has been called 'cultural coherence' is related to a sense of loss and marginalisation across a range of issues - economic, social and political.

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2. Transnational Solidarities

It is inevitable that growing diversity in the UK would involve a balancing of solidarities. What is the relationship between citizenship (someone's Britishness) and their religious or ethnic identity? Questions of migration and integration hovered in the background of these conversations. On the one hand, interviewees were keen to point out that 'other' religious/ethnic communities care about exactly the same issues as the general public - cost of living, work, health, education and housing. On the other, communities are also strongly motivated by unique transnational solidarities - the Israel/Gaza conflict is the most prominent case, but not the only one. Others are centred on the Indian subcontinent, such as the movement for an independent Khalistan and the rise of Indian nationalist sentiment. As discussed above, even 'Christian nationalism' derives at least some energy from international events and figures.

These solidarities have been enabled, in part, by an information environment which creates a visceral and real time connection with events, such that domestic and even local frustrations can be fed by overseas events. A Sikh interviewee observed, for instance, that ongoing tensions between Hindus and Sikhs in Canada is contributing to concerns here in the UK. This 'diasporic immediacy' strengthens communal identity but can heighten grievance and mistrust, particularly where political institutions appear unresponsive or inconsistent.

Some interviewees spoke about their engagement with the government on issues of international concern. They spoke in terms of a lack of religious literacy (probably the single most prominent theme in all our interviews), and a failure to predict collateral damage to UK cohesion. The implication is that for each of these international incidents, governments need to be more prepared to manage tensions and vulnerabilities of religious communities.

This might be challenging for political leaders, for whom these issues may be marginal and opaque, and the concerns of particularly religious communities on particular international questions may not be something they actively track. Nevertheless, aside from an absence of religious literacy, many interviewees noted too much churn in government, specifically regretting the loss of Lord Khan which squandered a period of trust and relationship building with and between faith groups. Others just wanted consistency: **"I really wish they'd just appoint a faith minister and keep them. Because we had Maeve Sherlock for ages, who was amazing, and then Lord Khan, but we're now beyond the third faith minister we'll be meeting in, what, 13 months? Maybe less? And I think that makes it difficult, because you start building a relationship. I would have thought the faith brief could be given to someone where it's less likely to need to be shaken up as much, because otherwise, how do you do the relationships thing properly?"**

3. A Shared Sense of Marginalisation

Interviewees from different traditions spoke about the ways that their communities felt in some way beleaguered, isolated or pressured. This took on a different shape in the different faith traditions.

For one Christian interviewee, Christian values were the 'peeling wallpaper' of society, citing a loss of support for the family, integrity in business, the principle of forgiveness, and even freedom of speech/conscience. This was not necessarily the fault of a government, wider society, or a secular culture as such. Churches had failed to articulate a sufficiently compelling vision for society or individuals. Another felt that although they were 'in the room' when it came to some aspects of public policy, they were undervalued compared to their considerable delivery of services to the public.

For other faith communities felt a still more acute sense of vulnerability. Jewish interviewees reported that the discourse around the Israel/Gaza conflict was making Jews in Britain feel increasingly marginalised, attacked, and misunderstood, and at "levels unprecedented within

living memory". One said the experience of the Jewish community in France should be seen as salutary: Jews have left France because of the experience of growing anti-Semitism associated with segments of the Muslim population. The protests had caused them to doubt that the conditions of respectful coexistence, never mind cohesion, were still in place.

> **"I guess most Muslims would say that they are perceived as either a security issue, a cohesion issue or an immigration issue".**

Muslim interviewees described a long-standing lack of consistent engagement with government, and in some cases a deliberate "closed-door" approach of previous administrations. They voiced frustration that Muslims are frequently treated as a security or cohesion issue rather than as full civic participants: **"I guess most Muslims would say that they are perceived as either a security issue, a cohesion issue or an immigration issue".** This interviewee commented that 'street-level' antagonism was also present in the corridors of power, which in turn gave legitimacy to extreme political narratives.

A number of interviewees expressed the opinion that their community modelled the attitudes and practices of successful integration. This was encouraging, in that it articulated a desire for a much deeper sense of solidarity with religious others. On the other hand, this often came with a sense that the outputs didn't match the inputs - that they were not getting back the sense of inclusion that they were putting in.

Conclusion

The re-politicisation of religion in Britain reflects deeper democratic fatigue. Weakened institutions, economic insecurity, global crises, and mutual mistrust have produced conditions in which politicised expressions of faith are more likely to take root. Faith commitments remain powerful sources of compassion and service, but they can equally be mobilised to inflame grievance and division.

The faith leaders we interviewed were keenly aware of this tension, and expressed some concern around it. Generally speaking, they shared the sense that these trends were part expressions of legitimate concerns expressed in unproductive ways, or else that sectarian approaches were epiphenomena of broader political flux. Important factors include the rapidly evolving information environment and the challenge of negotiating the tensions of religious and national identities. Their reflections point to a landscape in which religion is neither retreating nor merely resurgent, but being renegotiated — between conviction and identity, between local and global loyalties, and between the promise of moral energy and the peril of populist capture.

3 The Religious Domain

Decline or Diversification

If, as argued above, UK politics has been largely secular in recent decades, this reflects a wider process of religious change - declining Christian affiliation and religious practice. In 1983 the British Social Attitudes found that two-thirds of the British public identified as Christian. By 2018 this had reduced to 38%, while 52% said they had no religion. Such statistics seem to be the hard evidence that goes alongside the intuition that religion would simply recede in the modern world - Matthew Arnold's "long withdrawing roar". As in personal religious affiliation, so in public life.

These headline statistics, without wider context, offer an overly simplistic sense of religious change. Immigration has changed the face of Christianity across the United Kingdom, and indeed much of the aforementioned religious disaffiliation could be seen as the loss of an Anglican identity, arguably creating the groundwork for emerging non-ecclesial forms of Christian identitarianism. In any case, even when it comes to incontrovertible numerical decline, Professor Grace Davie memorably speaks of a move from a large 'conscript' church to a 'professional' church, with fewer but more committed adherents.

'Other' religions are demographically ever more significant and culturally more visible. The most religious places in the country are also the most religiously diverse (i.e., London and other major cities). These places are also the least Anglican, sharpening the point that what we are not seeing is secularisation but a radical multiculturalisation, and now - in rising nationalism - a reaction against this, and attempts to assert the Christian nature of our culture and heritage. While pretty much all Christian denominations and institutions have accepted, engaged and even

embraced religious pluralism, nationalist/populist sentiment may mourn and resist or reject it, fearing the loss of "western values".

These demographic trends are themselves a matter of debate and polarisation (for instance, the comparative growth of the Muslim population and the great replacement conspiracy theory). Perhaps connected to that, there is some evidence to suggest that the downward trend in Christian affiliation and practice may have been halted by a 'quiet revival'. Though survey evidence for this is contested, we may need to reconsider not only the direction of travel but also key predicative aspects of secularisation models (i.e., that religion would become more elderly and female). It is young men who are finding their way back into church. This would be a surprising reversal.

Likewise, interviewees from some other religious traditions indicated that religious identity - and associated political causes - were becoming more significant markers of identity amongst younger cohorts, again somewhat against expectations. Some were ambivalent about this process, celebrating deeper faith expression as a source of spiritual meaning and social capital, while noting that this might 'politicise', in a negative sense.

> **"Young people are more open, and they mix more, and they have more, sort of, progressive and liberal values. So certain issues which might be a culture war for an older generation, like gender and trans identity, are not necessarily manifesting in the same way for young people"**

The internal dynamics of faith communities look set to shape issues around cohesion, identity, and political engagement. Tensions are being negotiated through generational divides, leadership structures, ideological diversity, and responses to external pressures. The public presence of different religious traditions is likely to be very different, depending on how these resolve.

1. Generational and Gender Dynamics

Many interviewees spoke of generational dynamics. To the extent that a generalization is possible, older adherents are more reserved/cautious in their faith articulation, with a greater sense of being a minority that must find its place in national life. Interviewees worried for young people, who they saw as having to negotiate ongoing discrimination in a more polarised environment.

However, there was a perception that younger cohorts might be more vocal, and perhaps more comfortable, and perhaps more assertive. Interestingly, this could go in a liberal or conservative direction. So, on the one hand, having been raised in spaces where liberal norms and high levels of diversity are typical, young people might be more 'progressive': **"Young people are more open, and they mix more, and they have more, sort of, progressive and liberal values. So certain issues which might be a culture war for an older generation, like gender and trans identity, are not necessarily manifesting in the same way for young people, and I**

think that, because they're sort of the norm, and they're kind of rooted in that, I think they're more able to have some of these conversations." On the other, one Sikh interviewee noted growing resistance to mixed-faith marriages taking place in Gurdwaras because they contradict the Sikh orthodoxy in the Rehat Maryada. Although Gurdwaras historically accommodated interfaith weddings, this is generally no longer the case. Thus, the resurgence of religiosity among younger Sikhs can be positive for strengthening Sikh identity and the sanctity of the teachings, but this can also make it become divisive, conservative and insular. There is also a small number of Gurdwaras where the taking of Amrit initiation before marriage by the couple is being promoted, or in some cases required, as a condition for an Anand Karaj (Sikh wedding), meaning that even Sikh couples who are not initiated may be refused a religious wedding. This is seen as highly divisive, and if it is rolled out by the majority of Gurdwaras it will exclude large numbers of non-initiated Sikhs and deepen internal community tensions.

Interviewees also felt that coming generations might approach interfaith engagement, or just ordinary common life, with fresh energy and higher expectations. Numerous interviewees, while acknowledging the importance of faith leader engagement, felt that 'old men in funny hats' were too dominant: **"Some of the challenges have been around the age of interfaith leadership groups that often tend to be very old, and being a very young leader who's in that space is part of the challenge. Interfaith is kind of perceived as something for older people. Young people are not really included, which is a missed opportunity."** These participants advocated a fresh approach which prioritised young people, and argued that young generations might catalyse different kinds of engagement. On the Israel/Gaza conflict, one participant suggested that the conflict had been so traumatic for both sides that one of the only remaining approaches was to involve new cohorts in inter-community engagement.

Similar points were made about the presence (or absence) of women in positions of religious and public leadership. Several participants said that women are often found leading grassroots initiatives, interfaith forums, and social action, yet remain underrepresented in formal leadership. Sometimes, women in leadership experienced ongoing discrimination, with critics implying they were merely media friendly figureheads and the acceptable face of a particular tradition.

2. Leadership vs. Grassroots Dynamics

> **"Interfaith is kind of perceived as something for older people. Young people are not really included, which is a missed opportunity."**

Those who commented on this re-emergent and changing religiosity were, however, not necessarily confident in the ability of formal religious institutions to engage, shape, or lead it. Large religious institutions have considerable power and command considerable resources, but they have a rhizomatic complexity, and even then are only partly able to capture what a religious community is. Some denominations are hierarchical in nature, such that it is relatively

clear where to go for 'a position'. But this is the exception rather than the rule, with most traditions having highly distributed forms of organisation and leadership.

Even centralised religious institutions are often contested spaces, and interviewees spoke to tensions between formally recognised leaders/voices and grassroots movements within traditions. In particular, interviewees reported that interfaith work is being questioned/opposed by grassroots voices, making life more difficult for individuals and institutions that wanted to work towards greater cohesion.

> **"I do think there's a greater sympathy towards the refugee, as there should be."**

In emergent religious life, new adherents may not look to formal leaders for guidance, with their views (religious and political) being shaped online, or by a combination of online and offline communities. This is significant, since participation in a physical religious community is a good predictor of 'openness', particularly where communities are themselves diverse. For instance, on issues like immigration, religious practice is an indicator of moderate political views compared with non-practicing religious identity. One Christian interviewee contrasted compassion for refugees amongst evangelical churches with the views of the Christian populists: **"I do think there's a greater sympathy towards the refugee, as there should be."**

There are other forms of institutional disconnection. For instance, one interviewee said that while the Church of England remains institutionally present in every community, it is not necessarily well connected to certain constituencies, such as the white working class. Populist narratives around the loss of western values or Christian culture might be circulating online, and drawing support from disenfranchised communities, but this does not automatically mean that institutions have the relationship or capacity to shape these narratives, in spite of the fact that they feel religious.

3. Ideological Diversity Within Communities

Across all major faith traditions, interviewees emphasised that internal theological and ideological diversity is a defining feature of religious life in Britain. Such diversity of views is entirely natural, interviewees were keen to point out, and observers should be careful not to stereotype, generalise, or assume a political view on the basis of religious identity. Nevertheless, it is a reminder that leaders and representatives are engaged in a constant process of internal negotiation.

When asked about the most pressing issues for their communities, participants reflected this breadth of concern. Some Christian leaders focused on moral and ethical questions, such as assisted dying, abortion, or the perceived erosion of other values, but also highlighted the erosion of public services. Others, from different traditions, spoke of Islamophobia, antisemitism, and religious misunderstanding. Concern around polarisation, populism, prejudice and the rise of religiously inflected populism was universal, but so was economic insecurity and the cost of living.

Christian interviewees stressed that believers could be found across the political spectrum yet remain united by what one described as a shared "Kingdom identity." For many, this plurality within the church was an opportunity to model how conviction and difference might coexist. Nonetheless, it demands continual negotiation, especially when denominational positions on social or political issues diverge from local sentiment. One interviewee reported that a denominational leader did not want to publicly oppose the use of Christian symbols at the Unite the Kingdom rally, fearing that it might appear as if they were trying to censure political debate or the airing of real grievances.

In the Jewish community, ideological diversity was most visible around Israel and Gaza. Some leaders felt that only certain representative voices were being heard by the government - those expected to keep the party line. Government might form a sense of the position of the Jewish community by consultation with insider groups, and miss the voices of more progressive voices, including those working in the humanitarian space. The result, argued one interviewee, was a narrowing of discourse that risks alienating younger or dissenting members.

A Sikh interviewee made a similar point about Khalistan: advocacy for an independent Punjab, they noted, is far from universal among Sikh leaders, yet their own silence on the issue had for them attracted criticism and social sanction.

These examples reveal the "minorities within minorities" that exist across faiths—voices that are often marginalised by internal gatekeepers or external expectations. As several interviewees observed, such plurality is also a sign of religious vitality—a living faith that continues to argue, adapt, and renew itself in response to social change: **"Religion has always adapted to time and context; faith in modern Britain must do the same. It is not right to practise faith in the same way as when it was born."** Yet for policymakers or officials seeking to work with or alongside religious communities, this poses a practical challenge: engagement through formal leadership channels alone risks missing the diversity - and power dynamics - within any given community.

Conclusion

Across these traditions, religious life in Britain is marked by transformation rather than decline. Faith communities are evolving—generationally, institutionally, and ideologically—in ways that both mirror and mediate wider social change. The significance of these dynamics is threefold. First, they shape the internal life and cohesion of religious communities. Second, they determine how those communities project themselves into the civic and political realm. Third, greater levels of religious literacy depends on a deeper appreciation of these trends, changes and tensions.

"Religion has always adapted to time and context; faith in modern Britain must do the same. It is not right to practise faith in the same way as when it was born."

Internal pluralism may be a source of friction, but it contains seeds of hope. Negotiating these tensions could equally nurture the habits of dialogue and self-critique that are essential to civic life.

The next section turns outward, exploring how these intra-faith dynamics shape relationships between traditions and the wider society — the evolving state of interfaith engagement, and the shared work of building cohesion amid growing polarisation.

4 The Inter-Religious Domain

So far we have argued that democratic fatigue in the political domain is interacting with change and renegotiation in the religious domain. Both spaces appear to be at least potentially more polarised, and at the very least more unstable. Religious and political interests contest each other in new ways.

In a multiethnic and multicreedal society, interfaith engagement is sometimes caricatured as a superficial and largely ceremonial exercise: **"I don't use the term 'interfaith' because it's been so associated with bad things. The way of going into depth with a relationship with another is not tea and samosas, you know?"** In the context described above, however, it is rapidly becoming an essential civic practice. As the previous quote suggests, it is a place in which some of the most contentious issues and most profound ideological divides must be negotiated. We sought to explore these questions with interviewees, asking about the general health of the interfaith space and institutions.

Some were concerned at the "scorched earth" approach taken by the previous Conservative administration (by which they meant the defunding of the Interfaith Network). Others, however, were critical of the status quo ante - including the Interfaith Network - precisely because of its perceived inability to confront tough cohesion questions, not least the weak response to the Hamas terrorist attack of 7 October, 2023: **"A good example of what wasn't helpful at all is the Interfaith Network. For all intents and purposes, it did some good work behind the scenes, but it was largely a talking shop, a very bureaucratic, very dysfunctional talking shop, and it fell by the wayside, and there's a bit of a legacy to it with Interfaith Week, but a lot of that is the more self-satisfying type of interfaith, unfortunately."**

Whichever view one takes, it is clear that the interfaith space is under particular pressure. The frameworks for such work are weakened, and they have lacked trust and legitimacy in some groups These pressures emerge quite directly from religious diversity and global diasporic ties, and not so much from the emergence of a religiously inflected right-wing populism (as discussed, this has not emerged from mainstream Christian institutions).

That said, substantial, meaningful and public interfaith engagement could help build confidence in the integration of diverse communities. This section, therefore, explores the problems and possibilities of current interfaith engagement. The term covers a range of different kinds of activity, at different levels, with different goals, and convened by different agents. The only points on which interviewees could be said to agree were that it is an urgent necessity and that it is in a state of disrepair.

Problems

1. System Overload

For obvious reasons, participants felt that interfaith engagement had suffered from growing levels of mutual mistrust and antipathy since 7 October 2023. After initial positive moves, interfaith engagement had become slowly more difficult. One interviewee said the levels of trauma and mutual mistrust were so high that the existing generation of leaders might never be able to retrieve a sense of open engagement. Both relationships and structures were stressed to breaking, and "many of those that had been coming together would not now share a room: **"I also feel tremendously concerned and beyond traumatized by the number of children that have been killed in Gaza... it is deeply upsetting for me as a human being...the inhumanity, the level of inhumanity, and the level of denial in both communities will take generations to restore, which is very, very sad for me, as someone whose whole world and everything I believe in has been about solving that issue."**

Again, some interviewees reported frustration at the shuffling of Lord Khan out of the previous ministerial brief, in spite of what they felt had been a degree of positive work.

2. Lack of Focus on Tough Questions

Structures like the Interfaith Network (defunded, allegedly, because it invited a trustee closely associated with the Muslim Council of Britain) had failed to establish a proper basis for engagement by issuing a clear statement condemning the attacks. In linked comments, an interviewee said that there was a need to replace superficial engagement with robust and difficult dialogue with the right participants, and to ensure that dialogue is rooted in a shared commitment to British values.

> **"I don't personally believe in multi-faith worship. I believe in interfaith work, i.e, we can work with other faiths based upon the values that we agree on. But I don't believe in the worship of all faiths."**

Some Christian participants were uncomfortable with or just disinterested in interfaith approaches that erased faith distinctives. That said, they were comfortable - indeed, eager - for cooperation around concrete issues facing communities across the board - for example, serious youth violence: **"I don't personally believe in multi-faith worship. I believe in interfaith work, i.e, we can work with other faiths based upon the values that we agree on. But I don't believe in the worship of all faiths."**

Though these interviewees were speaking on very different issues they raise a similar problem, which is that there seems to be no consensus on what participants are being invited to do in interfaith spaces. While the motive for some might be to express multicultural or multi-faith unity, others wanted something different - i.e., mechanisms of concrete collaboration.

3. Lack of Diversity and Gatekeeping

In the previous section, we discussed generational and gender dynamics within religious communities. Many participants mentioned the lack of diversity in interfaith work. Young people and women were not well represented, in spite of the fact that their presence often led to more generative encounters. Some saw clerical leadership, often elderly and male, acting as gatekeepers. Narrowness could lead to inter-faith spaces being dominated by a few self-interested parties, or even (ironically) subverted to support a sectarian agenda.

One interviewee expressed concern that both interfaith work and government engagement in the UK are heavily shaped by an Abrahamic focus, leaving Dharmic communities feeling marginalised. The interviewee argued that Dharmic voices are often treated as "add-ons" or afterthoughts, with their issues receiving significantly less attention and support than those of Jewish or Muslim communities. This relates to broader concerns about visibility and attention: for example, Sikhs frequently report that government funding for hate-crime protection and places-of-worship security is inadequate, despite being disproportionately targeted due to mistaken identity and Islamophobic hostility. In addition, the government is seen as not fully recognising or grasping the growing tensions between Dharmic communities themselves, such as emerging Sikh-Hindu friction, which reflects the broader reality that "the global is becoming local."

4. Community Pushback

> **"I think people are scared. People are scared to be seen to be taking a position that means that they would get attacked, or to be seen with other faith leaders."**

Several participants - Muslim, Jewish, and Sikh - said that there was increasing resistance to and criticism of inter-faith engagement. One said that faith leaders were worried about appearing in photos with leaders from other traditions, even if they were prepared to engage on a private basis: **"I think people are scared. People are scared to be seen to be taking a position that means that they would get attacked, or to be seen with other faith leaders."** As discussed in the previous section, leaders seem to be balancing multiple interests within their own constituency.

The events of 7 October 2023, and the political and emotional aftershocks that followed, have exposed both the limits of existing structures and the moral urgency of sustained dialogue. Leaders from every tradition spoke of exhaustion and mistrust, but also of hopeful encounters that kept open the possibility of repair. The following section considers what such renewal might entail.

Possibilities

Despite fatigue and mistrust, interviewees agreed that Britain retains a strong tradition of interfaith engagement. Across faiths, leaders stressed the importance of maintaining even minimal contact as a foundation for future rebuilding.

Many of these problems emerge from an interfaith space that is pressed into service in urgent moments of tension - a crisis management approach. This leads to a lack of trust amongst religious leaders (several relayed their frustration at inconsistent engagement from political leaders). For interfaith engagement to have authenticity, legitimacy and impact, it needs to be seen as a key task for religious and political leaders alike. That said, 'more of the same' will probably not yield significantly different outcomes. Interviewees spoke about the following factors as bright spots in interfaith engagement, which might be built on in the future.

1. The Power of Local and Relational Work

Interviewees consistently highlighted local examples of cross-community engagement as the most meaningful form of interfaith work, emphasising the importance of tangible relationship building. Again, they would champion those projects which engaged younger people in particular, as well as those which brought together people who were not 'the usual suspects' (one interviewee cited an initiative bringing together white working-class residents and recent immigrants). Birmingham and Manchester have been cited as examples of cities where such positive relationships exist.

Schools were also felt to be important places to encourage greater understanding. A Catholic interview noted that many Muslim children are educated in Catholic schools. Some interviewees argued that women and younger people find a natural entry point in local and relational spaces, which are more open and less hierarchical.

2. National Leadership and Symbolic Convenors

Much interfaith work is not the initiative of government or the state, but of charitable networks and religious denominations themselves. Interviewees noted that at least some of this work needed to be done in just such a way, so as to be more responsive to the interests and priorities of religious groups.

While grassroots work is essential, visible national leadership provides legitimacy and focus. Many participants referred to the convening power of King Charles III, whose moral authority and neutrality enable him to bring leaders together across traditions.

Others noted the value of mayors and metro authorities as civic convenors, providing visible spaces for shared reflection or public solidarity following crisis events.

3. Shared Purpose and Common Cause

Interviewees agreed that interfaith cooperation works best when it focuses on shared challenges rather than abstract dialogue. Practical collaboration around youth violence, climate action, or social welfare - such as the interfaith food network in Glasgow - builds solidarity more effectively than formal statements. Programmes such as Near Neighbours were cited as models. Some proposed a national fund for interfaith social projects, supporting small, local initiatives that build relationships through joint action.

Conclusion

Britain's interfaith landscape remains a reservoir of civic possibility, and indeed has become an ever greater civic necessity. The challenge is not the absence of goodwill, but the lack of resilient structures, sustained attention and a consensus around the goal of inter-faith engagement. Local relationships and trusted convenors can form the foundations of effective action, particularly when complemented by hopeful national narrative.

However, if interfaith engagement is to move beyond moments of crisis management or mere optics it must be recognised as a part of democratic life that promotes social trust and gives voice to diverse faith perspectives. There is a need for structures and institutions that can bear the greater weight of more politicised expressions of religion.

5 Concluding Discussion and Recommendations

The preceding sections have shown that the renewed visibility of religion in British public life is not an isolated phenomenon but a symptom of broader democratic and social shifts. In the political domain, the weakening of the political centre, economic precarity, and global crises have created space for religious identities to be mobilised — sometimes constructively, but often through grievance and populist rhetoric. In the religious domain, cultural secularisation coexists with revival and 'diversification': faith communities are internally dynamic, shaped by generational change, gendered leadership patterns, and growing ideological pluralism. In the inter-religious domain, the fragile infrastructure of dialogue has been tested by global conflict, exposing both the limits of the interfaith status quo and the need for local, relational work.

Together, these dynamics reveal a society negotiating the meaning of belief, belonging, and civic participation under strain. There is no doubt that faith narratives are being mobilised for the cause of division. Yet faith communities themselves represent reservoirs of trust, leadership, and moral imagination. We cannot simply wish faith out of public life, but it is possible to strengthen the institutions and relationships that allow faith to serve the common good.

Doing God: The COVID Example

Across interviews, one of the strongest and most consistent messages was the need for government engagement with faith communities to be regular, serious, and strategic — not episodic or instrumental. Many leaders contrasted the sustained, structured contact that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic with the fragmented and reactive approach

that followed. During the crisis, faith groups were recognised as essential civic partners: they delivered food and welfare support, communicated vital information, and provided moral reassurance. Participants mourned the way that the legacy of serious strategic partnership of that period had been lost. Christian interviewees, in particular, felt that they should be treated seriously as at scale providers of services to the public.

Repeatedly, participants said that government-faith engagement now feels ad hoc and transactional, and not helped by the loss of an apparently relatively trusted faith minister. Several negatively highlighted high levels of engagement during the election, in contrast with more lacklustre or crisis-driven engagement after. Such inconsistency has bred a degree of cynicism, reinforcing the perception that faith leaders are consulted only when politically convenient, and indeed that such consultation was often insincere. Interviewees were looking for better standing mechanisms for dialogue and collaboration - on the scale and urgency once seen during COVID-19 - to ensure that faith engagement is embedded as a routine feature of good governance.

How does this relate to wider questions about the politicised and divisive religious space? It is not that better or more consistent engagement would fix these problems. Rather, the sentiment of interviewees was that for faith institutions to show their best, this would be a condition, and that this would offer recognition to faith groups as important partners in public work, rather than problems that have to be solved.

Religious Literacy

Another recurring theme across interviews was the perceived lack of religious literacy within government and public institutions. This, they said, frequently led to poorly framed discussions, tokenistic consultation, or inconsistent follow-up.

The problem was seen less as hostility than as unfamiliarity: a civil service and political culture still shaped by secular assumptions and ongoing discomfort around religion, in spite of the reemergence of religion into public spaces in complex ways. Interviewees warned that this lack of understanding limits the government's ability to see both risks and opportunities: they cannot anticipate how international events, such as Israel–Gaza or conflicts in South Asia, might affect relations between communities in the UK, nor are they maximising partnership with faith-based organisations.

There is, it should be noted, a degree of ambiguity around exactly what religious literacy consists of. While the theme was probably amongst the most referenced in interviews, participants didn't always detail what they meant. Most of all, it reflects a perceived basic unwillingness to treat religious people or institutions as proper partners. Many called for structured training in religious literacy across departments and local authorities, supported by partnerships with trusted intermediary organisations. Others advocated for a permanent cross-government faith engagement strategy to embed this expertise and ensure continuity. Without greater definition, however, the phrase may become something of

a unicorn - more research is required to understand what religious leaders mean here, and what already might constitute best practice.

Centripetal vs. Centrifugal Forces

Several interviewees argued that faith in Britain is too often framed through the lenses of conflict between communities, extremism within communities, or loss of tradition and meaning. Even traditional media coverage and political rhetoric tend to highlight points of tension — whether over global crises, cultural controversy, or moral division — while neglecting the quieter, everyday contributions of faith communities to civic life. Online discourse, meanwhile, supercharges fears, division and prejudice. This imbalance reinforces public anxiety about religion in general and obscures its role as a source of moral energy, service, and solidarity. This - perhaps exaggerated - sense of division sits within a wider rubric of, to paraphrase one interviewee, a decaying nation. They represent perceptions, that are both encouraged and instrumentalised, which have a centrifugal effect of pulling communities apart from one another.

On the other hand, many pointed to the pandemic as a moment when that narrative briefly re-emerged — when churches, mosques, gurdwaras, synagogues, and temples worked together. The pandemic seems to have offered an urgent common purpose around which diverse communities could organise. In other words, it is a sense of a centripetal force which brings people together and necessitates common endeavour.

This provokes the question - what are the centripetal events, stories, projects, and individuals who could be given greater support or visibility. A number of participants emphasised the need for intelligent, articulate people of faith — including younger leaders and women — to occupy leadership roles and public platforms. Their presence would not only deepen the quality of debate but model how conviction and openness can coexist in real communities, which are themselves diverse.

More broadly, interviewees spoke of the need to articulate a renewed sense of national belonging — a narrative in which everyone feels included, respected, and grounded in shared decency and civic responsibility. At a time of fragmentation and polarisation, reclaiming a generous, confident account of what it means to be British could help anchor communities in common purpose and strengthen the moral fabric of public life.

Faith, Nation, and the Struggle for Belonging

The positive and negative impact of religious belonging, language and symbolism is the pretext for this project. Religious/political identities are going to be ever more a feature of our political life, though they are multiple and manifest in different ways: new Christian symbolism of populist movements, the assertive politics of Hindutva, forms of Zionism shaped by existential insecurity, Sikh advocacy for a state of Khalistan, and Islamist visions that link faith with power.

The vectors are clear enough: the tidal forces of global instability, the perception of existential conflict (e.g., we either reassert a Christian

identity or give way to Sharia), democratic fatigue - the sense that politics isn't working, digital mobilisation by populist actors, and the anxieties of belonging that accompany diversity. Religious identity can provide a vocabulary of pride and connection, but it can also become grievance, exceptionalism, and prejudice. Left unaddressed, it risks hardening inter-communal boundaries and distorting the moral core of faith itself.

Governments cannot easily resolve this challenge. While policy can reduce external triggers - discrimination, for example - it cannot provide a compelling vision of what it is to be Christian/Jewish/Sikh etc, and British. To an extent, the work of renewal must come in large part from within faith communities themselves. That means stronger religious institutions, with leaders who can exhibit theological literacy, civic imagination, and the ability to robustly engage with attempts to instrumentalise religious language, symbols, communities and resources. These leaders must be able to speak credibly within their own traditions while engaging constructively in multi-creedal public life. Several interviewees reflected that the answer to distorted forms of religion is not less religion, but better religion — serious, compassionate, self-critical and properly organised.

Faith leaders who can hold conviction and coexistence together are essential to the future health of British democracy. In the end, the contest is not between faith and secularism, but between faith being framed as grievance or faith as an impulse to generous civic engagement.

Recommendations in Summary

1. Establish Consistent and Strategic Engagement.

Faith engagement from government and political leaders should be a permanent function, not a reactive response to crises or electoral cycles. Faith communities need to know that they have a seat at the table and are strategic partners, even if they don't always get what they want. Government needs to ensure that predictable structures are in place for dialogue between government and faith communities—regular forums, consistent ministerial responsibilities, and cross-department coordination. There needs to be continuity so that relationships survive political reshuffles and aren't dependent on individual personalities.

2. Develop New Approaches to Establish Religious Literacy.

Faith communities do not feel understood, and in many cases are not. Officials do need a working grasp of how faith communities function, their internal diversity, their sensitivities, and their transnational ties. Rather than ad hoc training, institutions should integrate religious literacy into core professional competencies (civil service, local authorities, policing, education). This includes the ability to anticipate how international events may reverberate domestically.

3. Renew National Narratives of Belonging.

Political leaders should promote a more confident story of British pluralism - one rooted in national traditions and historical Christianity, but driven now by decency, mutual respect, and shared democratic values in a multi-creedal society. Public recognition of faith contributions to social cohesion should be normalised. Faith communities emphasised their willingness to collaborate across traditions around issues that cut across identity:

- youth safety and violence
- worklessness, poverty and food insecurity
- loneliness and mental health
- community resilience in times of crisis

Governments and funders should prioritise partnership on concrete shared challenges. This will give greater visibility to constructive, pluralistic religious expression and action.

4. Strengthen Faith Leadership and Institutions.

Faith groups should invest in leadership formation that combines theological depth with civic imagination. Government and philanthropy can support networks that connect credible voices across traditions. There is a case for investing in leadership development, especially for younger leaders and women, who often carry relational and bridge-building work. Good governance in faith institutions will remain extremely important, and should be supported. Institutions that can strengthen their organisational capacity will be less vulnerable to pressures.

5. Support Interfaith Infrastructure and Local Action.

National interfaith structures need to be renewed - but they need to be credible, diverse, and capable of handling difficult issues, bearing greater weight than they have been. Local interfaith networks should focus on relationships and shared practical work, not only statements or panels. Interfaith practice must make space for younger and non-hierarchical voices, not only senior religious figures.

Questions of Hope and Hate: Faith and Faultlines in a Changing Britain

Questions of Hope and Hate explores how religion is becoming newly visible and politically charged in contemporary Britain. Drawing on interviews with senior Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and Hindu leaders, the report examines how democratic fatigue, global crises, and internal shifts within faith communities are reshaping the relationship between religion, identity, and public life.

Across traditions, leaders describe a political environment marked by declining trust, polarisation, and a sense that public institutions are struggling to respond to social and economic pressures. International conflicts have had immediate and emotional effects within UK communities, exposing gaps in government religious literacy and placing strain on local cohesion. Many communities feel misunderstood, marginalised, and poorly engaged.

Within the religious domain, Britain is not simply secularising but diversifying. Younger generations are reshaping faith expression, sometimes towards greater openness, sometimes towards renewed conservatism. Women and young leaders are central to grassroots activity but remain less visible in formal leadership. At the same time, online environments increasingly influence religious and political identity, often bypassing traditional authority structures.

Interfaith engagement, long part of Britain's civic landscape, is under pressure. Relationships have weakened, national structures have lost credibility, and many leaders are cautious about public collaboration. Yet local, relational work—especially where it involves younger people and shared social concerns—continues to offer real potential.

The report concludes that faith can be a force for cohesion or division. Strengthening engagement, improving religious literacy, renewing national narratives of belonging, supporting faith leadership, and rebuilding interfaith infrastructure are essential steps toward a more hopeful, pluralistic future.

HOPE not HATE

Good Faith Partnership