

Cross Party Group on Freedom of Religion and Belief

5:30 pm, 13 June 2017

Present: John Mason MSP, Kate Forbes MSP, Maurice Golden MSP, Jeremy Balfour MSP, Allan Forsyth (Baha'i Council for Scotland), Ruth Donaldson (Christian Solidarity Worldwide), James Fraser (Release International), Alex Macdonald (Free Church of Scotland), Chloe Clemmons (Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office), Hassan Rabbani (Muslim Council of Scotland), Linda Oxburgh (Release International), Brian Oxburgh (Church of Scotland), Paul Daly (Interfaith Scotland) and Alexander Kerr (Parliamentary Officer for John Mason MSP)

Apologies: Ephraim Borowski (SCoJeC), Rev. Malcolm MacLeod (Steadfast Global), Kieran Turner (Evangelical Alliance Scotland), Anne Edwards (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) and Nigel Kenny (Christian Institute).

Welcome from Chair

John welcomed attendees to the meeting. James Fraser proposed the notes from the previous meeting on 21 February to be approved, this was seconded by Kate Forbes. John Mason stated that Paul Daly from Interfaith Scotland had agreed to act as Secretariat for the CPG going forward.

Unfortunately the planned presentation for the meeting was cancelled at very short notice, Ephraim Borowski sends his apologies for confusing the dates. John expressed thanks to Allan Forsyth from the Baha'i community for stepping in at such short notice, and to Interfaith Scotland for seeking a replacement. The SCoJeC will present at a future meeting.

Definition of the CPGs name

Gordon Macdonald raised the issue of ambiguity of the terms used in the title of the CPG – 'religion' and 'belief'. The group agreed that this could cause some issues as has been the case in other institutions such as Westminster, in society in general, and inter and intra faith understandings can all differ – John suggested that we could ask a lawyer to attend a future meeting.

Presentation: Allan Forsyth, Baha'i Community

Allan thanked the group for the opportunity to share what at times is a harrowing story of persecution of the Baha'i community in Iran and other recent developments. In sharing the story Allan hopes to build solidarity with other persecuted groups and help to ensure everyone can practise their own beliefs.

In Iran, the Baha'i community is the largest non-Muslim community – larger than Christian or Jews. Since the religion started in the mid 19th Century Baha'is have been routinely arrested, detained and imprisoned. Since 1979, over 200 Baha'is have been killed or executed as it became government policy.

The 1980s saw intervention from foreign governments which led to a lessening in the level of persecution as the Iranian government was sensitive to this pressure and would routinely deny that any persecution occurred.

However, in the late 1980s and into the 90s, a second wave occurred. Since 2005 there have been over 935 Baha'is arrested and imprisoned for being members of this community in Iran. Currently there are 95 in prison.

The discrimination and persecution takes many forms including:

- The Baha'i faith is organised through elected bodies - for example, the spiritual assembly here in Edinburgh, which extend into national and international bodies. However in Iran, unlike Christian and Jewish communities the religion is not recognised or able to operate, hence no spiritual council can form. Funerals and weddings needed 7 people to coordinate and administer. The Iranian government informed the community this would happen and they indicated it was acceptable. However all were arrested – international observers agreed it was unnecessary. They were sentenced to 10 years in prison, still in prison 7 years later.
- Education: Baha'is unable to access higher education, if members of the faith were accepted in to the education system but put Baha'i on their forms, they are then rejected. In an attempt to avoid problems for the next generation, the Baha'i Institute for higher education was established. It operates online via educators globally. It has been a really success story and has graduates coming to St Andrews University to study for Post Graduate qualifications.
- Business: if Baha'i shops are closed on holy days, the local government will force the business to close – so both national and local authority level putting pressure on the community.
- Intimidation of Muslims who associate with Baha'is as the government tries to isolate the community
- In Yemen reports of community members being arrested, tortured, etc. No absolute proof, but a similar pattern.

Elsewhere in the world, Baha'is enjoy freedom of faith – in Iran they just want to contribute to and serve their own community and the country. Baha'is don't participate on partisan politics, so the injustice is particularly hard to watch.

Q: What size is the Baha'i community globally?

A: 5-7m Baha'i across the globe – 2nd most widespread faith group globally. Countries with high populations include India, Bolivia, Vietnam, the USA and the Philippines, have high numbers. Numbers are small in Scotland, but the community is wide spread.

Q: How do you reflect in general on religious freedom in the UK?

A: Quite different in this context when compared to Iran where there is active persecution. The UK is heaven compared to that. Issues in UK are different level; here we debate the role of religion in society, in government, etc. Baha'i teachings are that religion has an important role to play, in a context where people are free to choose.

Q: Is persecution in Yemen from rebel groups, as opposed to the Government?

A: We have seen arrests in Sanna, which is controlled by Sunni rebels – and a large demo in streets after mass arrests of Baha'is – by full the full community, regardless of religion.

Q: Are there any Baha'is in Saudi Arabia? How is the community treated in Shia countries?

A: I'm not aware of issues in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon – in Saudi Arabia there is a small community, I have personal friend there. The community doesn't operate with elected institutions, not actively persecuted, but tolerated. They must be careful as many do.

In Scotland relations between Shia and Baha'i are good, the Shia community reached out and approached the Baha'i community as they wanted to set up a dialogue group – which has been fruitful and built many friendships. Dr Maureen Sier the Director of Interfaith Scotland has been delighted by those developments.

Scotland should be proud of the way faith communities work together and are received.

Q Can you explain some of the core beliefs and how / why the religion developed.

A: A Baha'i is a follower of Baha'u'llah, who lived 150 years ago and was born in Iran, the teaching was all of humanity is one family and all world faiths originate from the same source. Differences due to historical circumstances, and need of humanity.

His message was one of unity. We believe Baha'u'llah is a divine messenger. He was subject to persecution by the Ottoman Empire, but his faith spread regardless.

Emphasis on religion to ensure people hear about it and use pioneers to spread. How most Baha'is are from the country in which they live.

In India can be intolerant of minorities – not aware of any issues. It is a multi-faith, tolerant society. The lotus temple in New Delhi is one of our most famous global icons.

Q: Is oppression of the Baha'i communities personal, cultural or ethical stand points?

A: There are several reasons, the origins may be about power – it spread like wild fire and may be been seen as a threat. Then it became part of the establishment. Baha'u'llah was imprisoned in what is now Israel – it's a place of pilgrimage – so Baha'is can be accused of being Zionist or spies.

Q: who builds the infrastructure, given origins and how wide spread it is now?

A: We focus on our local community where we engage and work out how to be of service to that community. We have methodology on community education, e.g. study circles in local communities, where people study and take social action.

It is really interesting to be part of a religion in its early stages – it shows how to build a community, how to reach out to others and stay true to principles. Even in Iran- they still reach out to their neighbours.

Q: What is the main aim – to persuade others, build up those in the faith? How does that come into conflict?

A: We are forbidden to proselytise, for example it is up to our children to decide what they choose to do, no pressure is put on them. Independent investigation of the truth is a very important principle. We believe that we are all on a spiritual journey – just using different religions to get there. All working towards betterment of humanity – not to convert people to a faith.

Q: When do Iranian government put pressure on? For example, in Christianity it is often when people baptised.

A: There is no specific point with Baha'is - even people who associate the Baha'is can face persecution. Stating a new membership in the faith puts life at risk – more accepted when people come from established Baha'i families.

Q: What is the criteria for those joining? Faith, belief or moral stance?

A: Baha'u'llah wrote 100 volumes which contain moral teachings, these are regarded as scripture to Baha'is. There is an obligatory prayer to be said once a day, and a fast for 19 days in march.

Q: Despite persecution in Iran, is the religion growing?

A: the overall numbers Baha'is have been going down – mostly this is due to people leaving Iran. Now it's fairly static. Persecution brings a community together, but still very constrained.

Q: In Iran are the Baha'I communities concentrated in villages or are they scattered?

A: A bit of both, but usually the Baha'i community is in the minority in their local community.

Ruth: what are Baha'is in Scotland doing to support persecuted groups?

A: Supporting the education institutions that have been established, getting publicity, talking to governments, the UN, human rights organisations and etc. Some action taken can have significant negative impacts for people on the ground. Recently, some MSPs got a motion with good support and various governments have taken action.

After the revolution in the 1980s, then Iran / Iraq war, there was a rise in popular prejudice against Baha'is, but this is now less pronounced. The problem seems to be with those in power. Some are now standing up to condemn what is happening.

John Mason: how can this CPG support your community?

A: I will consult with others and come back to the group with some suggestions

The group discussed writing to Iranian Ambassador – and more broadly if the CPG should do this on an issue by issue basis, or once it has gathered more evidence from other groups.

A vote was held and it was agreed unanimously that the group would await feedback and show support for persecuted Baha'is – once guidance has been received from the group.

John gave thanks to Allan for sharing the experiences of the Baha'i people in Iran and elsewhere – and for doing so at such short notice.

The group agree that at the next meeting we would hear from the Islam communities. Hassan Rabbani agreed to speak on the topic.

AOCB

The issue of counter extremism was raised as the definition of terrorism being broadened so it is no longer just people of faith being impacted. May be a large priority for the UK govt. It was agreed that Gordon was going to investigate further and share information within the group.

AP: Find a suitable lawyer to attend the next CPG and address the implication of the terms 'religion' and 'belief'