

Written evidence submitted by Professor Gordon Lynch, University of Edinburgh and Dr Sarah Harvey, INFORM (CWSB164)

Professor Gordon Lynch, University of Edinburgh (glynch2@ed.ac.uk), Principal Investigator:
Abuse in Religious Contexts

Dr Sarah Harvey, INFORM (sarah.harvey@kcl.ac.uk), Project Lead on Social and Cultural Risk
Factors for Abuse in Faith Communities

This submission is made on behalf of the Abuse in Religious Contexts research project. This project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, undertook its main design, data collection and data analysis work between 2021 and 2024 and is beginning to report its findings publicly from January 2025 onwards. Further details of the scope and membership of the project are given in Appendix 1 below.

1. Executive Summary

1.1 One package of work undertaken within our research project was to review a substantial database of information on minority religious groups to analyse social and cultural factors associated with abuse in religious contexts.

1.2 This analysis indicated that risks factors for abuse of children in religious contexts included:

a) children being raised in poorly-monitored educational environments which are socially and culturally isolated from wider society;

b) children being raised in a strongly hierarchical culture of deference to adults, in which their experiences of distress were minimised, ignored or rationalised, and in which children experienced little capacity for personal agency;

c) children lacking linguistic or cultural ways of expressing experiences of harm and abuse, and

d) children experiencing significant barriers to disclosing abuse to other people within or outside their faith community.

1.3 Settings in which these factors can be present, in varying ways and to varying degrees, include educational provision in faith communities that would fall under the definition and regulation set out in clauses 30-37 of the Bill. This includes currently unregulated religious schools.

1.4 These findings from our research project indicate that such religious educational provision should indeed fall under the scope and measures proposed in the Bill and that

no religious exemptions should be allowed to the definition, regulation or sanctions currently proposed in it. Examples of specific cases are given to support this conclusion.

2. Research undertaken by the project

2.1 One of the work-packages undertaken by the project was a review, led by Dr Sarah Harvey, of an existing database of information and public contacts about minority religious groups held by the charity, INFORM, to identify social and cultural factors associated with abuse in religious contexts.

INFORM (Information Network on Religious Movements) is an independent educational charity (no. 801729) based in the Theology and Religious Studies department of King's College, London. INFORM's remit is to provide information about minority religions and sects that is as accurate, evidence-based and as up to date as possible. INFORM maintains a database of over 5000 different religious movements and associated organisations (internationally, not only UK-based). As part of this project, Dr Sarah Harvey, who is the Senior Research Officer at Inform, briefly analysed the 198 religious movements on the database that had been marked with the keyword 'abuse' and then looked at 47 of these in more depth.

Findings from this analysis were discussed within the wider project team (see Appendix 1 below) and the relevance of these factors was evident to a wide range of other cases already known to the team.

Whilst educational settings was not a main focus of the project, it can be noted that 32 of the 198 religious movements analysed have also been marked with the keyword 'schooling', indicating that they have a form of formal or informal education system for their children. INFORM has completed previous projects on minority religions and education, including for the Department for Education.

2.2 Risk factors identified by this study included:

- a) the social and cultural isolation of children and adults in some faith contexts and suspicion within the faith group towards wider society;
- b) weak structures of accountability for those with formal or informal power within faith groups;
- c) blurred boundaries within the group relating to personal choices, relationships, intimacy

and touch;

d) teachings and practices which created strong hierarchies based on gender or age/childhood;

e) teachings which established patterns of control in relation to religious purification or legitimised practices of punishment, and

f) exclusion or shunning from the faith group of those who disclosed abuse.

2.3 Within these broader factors, a number of risk factors were identified that specifically related to children, including children participating in educational environments in a faith setting that were isolated from mainstream educational systems and standards and poorly monitored. Within such educational settings, children would be at further risk in environments in which:

a) they were being raised in a strongly hierarchical culture of deference to adults, in which their experiences of distress were minimised, ignored or rationalised, and in which children experienced little capacity for personal agency;

b) they lacked linguistic or cultural ways of expressing experiences of harm and abuse,

c) and they experienced significant barriers to disclosing abuse to other people within or outside their faith community.

2.4 Measures proposed in the Bill to expand the definition and regulation of independent schools can therefore be seen as an important step towards addressing educational environments in faith settings which may demonstrate risk factors listed above. Given the paramount need to protect children's well-being, the project's findings suggest that religious exemptions should not be allowed for these measures. This is consistent with other findings of the project about the need to prioritise appropriate safeguards and the risks associated with allowing religious exemptions from these (e.g. in the case of mandatory reporting).

3. Specific case examples

3.1 Just as there is diversity in the beliefs and practices of minority religions, there is diversity in their approaches to education. Some members of minority religions choose to homeschool their children (some of whom attend unregistered school settings); some children attend state-funded schools but with certain restrictions (such as not participating in RE or sex education lessons, assemblies with a worship aspect or extracurricular activities); and some send their children to independent faith schools. In addition, children might attend the educational programmes of their religious movement outside of school

hours in supplementary school settings (such as Christian 'Sunday schools', madrassas and yeshivas).

3.2 There has been much critical analysis of unregistered school settings including [IICSA 2021](#) , '[The Bloom Review](#)', 2023, and '[The Casey Review](#)', 2016.

In addition, there has been critical attention in the media and by campaigning groups on practices within registered, independent schools associated with minority religious or philosophical movements. For instance:

a) concerns raised about Steiner Schools (the majority of which are registered, independent schools but with one state-funded Academy) include the religious philosophy of the education system not being made clear to prospective parents, the promotion of homeopathy at the expense of allopathic medicine and a lack of teaching on evolution (<https://humanists.uk/2019/01/17/three-state-steiner-schools-rated-inadequate-after-long-running-campaign-led-by-humanists-uk/>).

b) concerns raised about schools run by the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church include the allegation that students are socially excluded (or 'shunned') for involvement in activities disallowed by the Church, such as engaging with social media. In 2013, Wilton Park School was closed for a short time whilst this allegation was investigated but it was found to be untrue in this instance (<https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/county-council-police-dismiss-complaints-against-brethren-school/governance/article/1175581>).

3.3 The IICSA report referenced above noted the use of physical punishment of children in unregistered and supplementary school settings. In some cases, such punishment is theologically justified and/or the result of strong cultures of deference to adult authority. There have also been historical cases of the physical punishment of children in registered, independent schools established by religious or philosophical movements. For instance:

a) In 2020, 45 former pupils at the St James School and St Vedast School, both in London, received nearly £1 million in compensation for abuse suffered in the period 1975-1985. The Schools were established by the School of Economic Science, a philosophical and spiritual movement with a focus on Advaita Vedanta, an Indian soteriological philosophy (<https://www.hudgellsolicitors.co.uk/client-stories/damages-of-almost-1million-paid-to-former-pupils-of-london-schools-who-were-subjected-to-criminal-mistreatment-in-70s-and-80s> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-55342669>). The abuses arose because of a lack of oversight by school management rather than being theologically

justified.

- b) In 2008, ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) paid \$15 million in compensation to former students at its boarding schools in America and India in the 1970s and 80s. Whilst abuse had not occurred in the UK, this is an important case study as the structure and organisation of the schools, as well as the religious beliefs and practices of the movement, combined to create a situation in which child abuse and neglect was theologically justified. Scholar Burke E. Rochford has written extensively on this issue (<https://www.iskconcommunications.org/iskcon-journal/vol-6/child-abuse-in-the-hare-krishna-movement-1971-1986>). He writes that children were not valued and were taught non-attachment to the family unit so that parents could continue their religious duties; teachers were not valued and were sometimes sent to the boarding schools as punishment leading to a high turnover of ill-trained staff; there was little oversight and accountability within the schools, which became “defined by neglect, isolation and marginalization” (Rochford and Heinlein 1998: 53). ISKCON has since instituted reforms in its organisational and educational structure and no longer advocates separating children from their parents into boarding schools.
- c) There are other historical cases of minority religions which have run boarding schools internationally in which children suffered abuse. These include those run by 3HO (Deslippe and Stukin 2020), The Family International (van Eck Duymaer van Twist 2015) and Sahaja Yoga (Coney 1999).
- d) In 2024, solicitors Leigh Day began investigating the potential for legal action in light of allegations that children were sexually abused by members of the Osho / Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh communes (<https://www.leighday.co.uk/news/news/2024-news/osho-sexual-abuse-allegations-leigh-day-investigates-potential-for-legal-claim/>). This includes allegations at schools based in Suffolk and Devon in the 1980s.
- e) It is not inconceivable that further cases of historic child abuse in different minority religions will come to light. It is also not inconceivable that abuses are being perpetrated in some contemporary education settings associated with minority religions.

4. Appendix 1: Further details about the Abuse in Religious Contexts project.

Abuse in Religious Contexts, was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and is one of the first research studies internationally to have explored the experiences of victim-survivors, organisational environments and policy responses across a broad range of

religious traditions. The project has been undertaken by a core team of twelve researchers with long-established expertise in psychology, law, safe-guarding, and religious cultures, as well as with direct experience of supporting victim-survivors across different religious communities. Research undertaken has included:

- more than 40 interviews with adult victim-survivors were held, some exploring their experiences of disclosing or not disclosing abuse, others exploring insights on what enables resilience after experiences of abuse,
- consultations with experts in victim-survivor support and advocacy in different religious communities,
- secondary analysis of an extensive database on allegations of abuse in religious contexts to identify social and cultural factors in groups that can increase risks of abuse or inadequate group responses to cases of abuse,
- workshops on the use of sacred scriptures in relation to abuse across seven religious traditions,
- the first comparative international study of the nature and extent of mandatory reporting duties required of religious organisations and their staff, and
- a national survey and interview-based study exploring experiences of working relationships between statutory safeguarding organisations and those with safeguarding responsibilities in faith communities.

Findings from the project are being presented at launch events during spring 2025 with further publications and online resources to follow.

Members of the project team were: Prof Gordon Lynch (University of Edinburgh, PI); Prof Lisa Oakley (University of Chester, Co-I); Prof Johanna Stiebert (University of Leeds, Co-I); Prof Linda Woodhead (King's College, London, Co-I); Yehudis Fletcher (ISVA, project consultant); Dr Jenny Hardy (University of Chester, project researcher); Dr Sarah Harvey (INFORM, project researcher); Justin Humphreys (31:8, project researcher and consultant); Jo Kind (victim-survivor advocate, project researcher and consultant); Dr Eve Parker (University of Manchester, project researcher); Yasmin Rehman (Juno Women's Aid, project consultant); Richard Scorer (Slater & Gordon, project researcher and consultant).