

HOME OFFICE CONSULTATION: DOMESTIC ABUSE ACT STATUTORY GUIDANCE

Response from Faith to Faithless, Sept 2021



ABOUT FAITH TO FAITHLESS

Faith to Faithless is a programme of Humanists UK which works to raise awareness of the issues faced by those who leave high-control religious groups or cults. Deciding to leave a religion can often mean rejection from your family and community, with little understanding of where to turn next. 'Apostates', as these people are sometimes called, may end up homeless, isolated, and at risk of abuse. Faith to Faithless provides an apostate support programme through facilitated peer support groups and other meet-ups, provides a platform for apostate voices to be heard and to raise awareness of the issues they face. We train statutory and support organisations like the police, social services, and mental health organisations to better understand the issues apostates face, and the sorts of policy and practice implications this might have for them.

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. [Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 100,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.

DOMESTIC ABUSE EXPERIENCED BY APOSTATES

Through our work, we have uncovered significant evidence of religious and honour-based abuse. This is characterised by a systemic pattern of controlling and coercive behaviour in which religious texts or beliefs are used as a reason and justification for this behaviour. Controlling behaviour may stem from the victim being perceived as sinful or openly questioning religious beliefs or practices. This can include the victim's dress or make-up which is not approved by the family/community, resisting an arranged marriage, seeking divorce, sexual abuse, or reporting domestic violence. We have amassed a considerable number of primary testimonies and case studies of abuse based on religious doctrines, and the strong links between leaving a religion and domestic abuse, forced marriage, and honour-based violence. Six of these can be found in an appendix to this submission. This abuse can develop from family and community members using shame and guilt to ostracise or control the victim through physical violence.

COMMENT ON DRAFT GUIDANCE

1. Do you have any comments on Chapter 1 ('Objectives') in terms of content or clarity?

No

2. Do you have any comments on Chapter 2 ('Understanding Domestic Abuse') in terms of content or clarity?

Overall, we welcome the draft guidance in Chapter 2 which comprehensively covers several areas of abuse that we campaigned to see included within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Most notably, the recognition of honour-based abuse (HBA) and spiritual abuse as forms of domestic abuse. However, the language used within the guidance focuses almost exclusively on religious adherents who are being abused because of or prevented from practicing the religious beliefs they would wish to. Therefore the guidance does not make clear that such abuse can, and is often, targeted at apostates: those who have left, been expelled from, or wish to leave a religion or cult. That abuse may be aimed at preventing that person from leaving or as punishment for perceived



transgressions against the tenets of the group. We wish to recommend the following amendments to the section on spiritual abuse and HBA. Additions to the text have been placed in square brackets and text to be removed has been struck through:

'Spiritual Abuse

62. Spiritual abuse is commonly understood as a part of emotional and psychological abuse that uses religion and faith systems to control and subjugate a victim. It is often characterised by a systemic pattern of coercive or controlling behaviour within a religious context.

63. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on victims. The abuse may include, the following but is not limited to:

- Manipulation and exploitation through the influence of religion;
- Enforced accountability;
- Censorship of decision making [including the active preventing of those wishing to leave a religion];
- Requirements for secrecy and silence;
- ~~Marital Rape~~ [or other non-consensual sexual acts either within or outside of marriage] and the use of religious scripture to justify that;
- Coercion to conform or control through the use of sacred or religious texts/teaching, e.g. theological justifications in sexual coercion or abuse;
- Causing harm, isolation and or neglect to get rid of an 'evil force', 'spirit' or 'jinn' that is believed to have possessed the victim. This can include accusations of witchcraft, where the term witchcraft and association with it are used in a derogatory way.
- Requirement of obedience to the perpetrator of domestic abuse, owing to religion or faith, or their 'divine' position; and
- Community isolation as a means of 'punishment' [such as the shunning or making homeless of apostates]

64. Spiritual abuse can also involve, using, or preventing a victim from practising [or leaving] their faith or religious [observances] obligations. This may include:

- Forcing the victim to act or behave in ways which contradict religious beliefs and or spiritual rituals and practice, e.g. forcing the victim to transgress religious dietary observations;
- Preventing the victim from performing [or opting out of] prayers and/or attending [or not attending] communal worship;
- [Preventing a victim from living openly according to their beliefs and conscience, whether religious or non-religious]
- Forcing sexual acts which contradict religious observance and or religious law (e.g. during and after menstruation or pre-marital sex); and,
- Forcing or limiting access to abortion, birth control or sterilisation when this will contravene religious observance.'

'So-called Honour-Based Abuse

75. This type of abuse is most commonly experienced by victims from close-knit or closed communities with a strong culture of 'honour' and 'shame', such as some minority



communities, travelling communities or closed ethnic/religious communities and other particularly isolated social groups. Victims may be female or male and those at risk can include individuals who are LGBT [and those who have left or been expelled from a religion, who are often known as apostates].'

Although not strictly falling under the definition of 'personally connected' to the victim as defined in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, it is important to clarify in the section describing abuse by family members that in cases of spiritual and/or HBA, within closed religious communities these behaviors and treatment can be connected to, perpetrated, or encouraged by other members of a congregation or by religious leaders. These people may not be related or be in an intimate relationship with the victim. Two case studies detailing examples of this type of abuse can be found in the appendix. A further example, not from Faith to Faithless, of religiously based domestic abuse occurred in January 2018. A priest in Oxfordshire was convicted by a church tribunal of the spiritual abuse of a teenage boy, to whom he had applied 'unacceptable pressure' during classes in religious instruction.¹ We wish to recommend the following amendments to the section on abuse by family members.

'32. Abuse within a family set up can encompass a number of different behaviours, including but not limited to violence, coercive or controlling behaviours, and economic abuse. Abuse by family members also encompasses forced marriage, "honour"-based abuse [, spiritual abuse] and female genital mutilation. [In such cases the abuse can also be connected to or encouraged by people or organisations to which the family is connected, although not directly related, such as members of religious congregations or spiritual leaders.] Further detail on these forms of abuse can be found at paras 72, 158 and 162.

We are also concerned about the exclusive language used in the section on intersectionality and related considerations, which uses the term 'faith' rather than 'religion or belief.' It is unclear why this term has been used when the section describes the protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and yet does not use the inclusive language of that Act. The term 'faith' excludes non-religious people. This is especially a problem when it comes to apostates, who may experience abuse as a result of their non-religious beliefs or their decision to leave behind a certain religion. Thus, the guidance leaves out an important and vulnerable group. We recommend the following amendments to this section:

'Faith [Religion or belief]

136. Victims who follow a religion [or belief], or are from [or have left] faith [religious] backgrounds may experience additional barriers to receiving help or reporting abuse due to issues with accessing support due to their religious or former religious identity and their [current or former religious] faith community. [This may include a mistrust of secular institutions such as police or schools.] Many will fear their faith [religion or belief] being misunderstood and concerns around whether they will be believed.

¹ Hattie Williams, 'Oxfordshire vicar, Tim Davis, guilty of spiritual abuse against a teenage boy' *Church Times*, 08 January 2018. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/12-january/news/uk/oxfordshire-vicar-tim-davis-guilty-of-spiritually-abusing-a-teenage-boy>



137. Specialist services should seek to understand the varying manifestations of spiritual abuse and use of how each or a mix of culture, religious tradition and holy scripture can be used as tools of abuse by perpetrators.

138. Paragraphs 62 onwards provides further detail on spiritual abuse.

139. It is important that specialist services communicate their understanding of a victim's religion **[or belief, including lack of religion or belief]** to ensure they feel emotionally safe and supported. Support services should be aware that a lack of understanding of these intersections can lead to silencing victims from ~~faith~~ **[religion or belief]** backgrounds and reinforce barriers to receiving support from agencies such as the police, courts, social care, and housing.

140. Many victims from ~~faith~~ **[religion or belief]** backgrounds can share concerns centred on their race, and sexuality. It is important to be mindful of intersectionality and associated considerations when looking to understand a victim's ~~faith~~ or religious background.

3. Do you have any comments on Chapter 3 ('Impact on Victims') in terms of content or clarity?

No

4. Do you have any comments on Chapter 4 ('Agency Response to Domestic Abuse') in terms of content or clarity?

No

5. Do you have any comments on Chapter 4 ('Agency Response to Domestic Abuse') in terms of content or clarity?

No

6. Do you have any comments on Chapter 5 ('Working Together to Tackle Domestic Abuse') in terms of content or clarity?

No

7. Do you have any comments on Chapter 6 ('Commissioning Response to Domestic Abuse') in terms of content or clarity?

No

8. Are there any overarching ways you think the guidance could be improved? Please provide comments.

No

9. Do you think the case studies are helpful? If there are any case studies which you did not find helpful, please provide additional comments ensuring you refer to the case study to which your comment relates.

We welcome the case study in the section on religious marriage and divorce demonstrating the type of abuse that can be experienced within religious communities when personal relationships break down. We believe that it would be useful and add clarity to the guidance



to have a similar case study in the section on spiritual abuse highlighting how this type of abuse operates within high control or coercive religious groups or cults, and the experience of those who leave such groups, such as the impact of shunning.

10. Is there anything missing in the guidance that you would like to see included?

Please see the above answer regarding a case study to be added to the section on spiritual abuse.

APPENDIX ONE

Real cases:

CHURCH ABUSE

Emma Swain was a member of a Pentecostal church for over 27 years, having joined at 14. She began to have doubts. Emma's pastor accused her of being a lesbian after claiming that God had visited them with this information. This surprised Emma, because she had never been attracted to women, but her protestations were met with suspicion. Churchgoers began to shun and bully her. She finally agreed to take part in a 'deliverance' session to rid her of her 'demons'. After multiple sessions she tried to take her life.

Emma Swain's talk for Faith to Faithless can be found on this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQSU5f1TLPo>

COMMUNAL ABUSE, ABUSIVE IMAM

'Ahmed' began to have doubts about his faith at age 12, but kept them to himself until he was in his late teens. Around this time his family began to suspect something was different about him, as he reduced the number of prayers he attended at the mosque. The final straw was when they found he was visiting websites where Islam was being debated. Although he had already left the faith, he claimed he was doubting in order to not be removed from his home. His family could not answer his questions and told him to speak to their local imam. The imam came to the house and sat down with him for a discussion.

The imam then had a private discussion with the family, where he told the family to cut off contact with Ahmed. The family did not know what to do and began to significantly curtail Ahmed's ability to see friends, who the family accused of misleading him. His father also began to physically assault Ahmed when he did not go to the mosque for prayers. Ahmed was able to leave the home in order to attend university and had all contact with his family and wider community cut. He has since suffered significant self-harming issues and is receiving counselling at university.

RECONNECTING WITH FAMILY

'Sabah' has been estranged for over two years by her family, after being caught not practising her faith, eating food that was not religiously sanctioned and having a non-Muslim boyfriend. She has spoken at one of our events and has received a hardship grant to study at King's College London. Her family contacted us seeking reconciliation, and with our support she has now been back in



contact with her family since 2016. Just last month, she attended a family wedding with her fiancé, something she would not have felt safe or able to do prior to the reconciliation process.

HIJAB RELATED

'N' left Islam aged 15. She is from a Somali background and she has had to leave home due to taking off her hijab. Her family physically abused her for taking the hijab off, and she is certain she would be at risk of honour abuse/death if she told them she is an ex-Muslim. Somali families can be specifically abusive towards women leaving the faith and taking off the hijab. She spends her free time now secretly running an online Somali ex-Muslim group.

SCHOLARSHIP

'A' left home at 16 after contacting us due to facing serious pressures and abuse from her older brother and father for being too 'western' as an Algerian Muslim girl. This included physical abuse but also lengthy emotional abuse, including being locked in her room for talking to boys. She left Islam at age 12 and only told her teacher. We helped her contact police and her school, she then left and was harassed by her family for a while. Now she has a scholarship and is doing much better, but has had to spend a lot of time in therapy to be able to function and to help with self-harm behaviours. She is 19 now. One big issue was that her school actually didn't believe her or even really help her until we got involved, they believed the parents who had learned how to game the system and give the impression they were not abusing her.

PHYSICAL ABUSE, STARVATION

'Jonathan' was an apostate that grew up in a very strict, fourth generation Jehovah's Witness background. He had watched his mother be abused by his father his whole life, until one day he had enough and pushed his father off his mother. His father physically assaulted him and his family locked him inside a room for days without food or water. He eventually managed to get out, and faced homelessness for a few weeks.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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