



UNIVERSITY
of York

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF FOR ALL

Recognising and protecting the non-religious in the asylum system

Dr Lucy Potter, March 2026



About the author and contributors

Dr Lucy Potter is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of York. A specialist in forced migration and non-religious identities, her research investigates the intersections of apostasy, human rights, and the UK asylum system. Her work focuses on the specific protection needs of individuals who have left a religion, particularly those facing persecution for blasphemy or non-religious expression. This report builds on her doctoral research, which provides a critical evidence base for the assessment of non-religious claims within the UK's Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process.

Humanists UK is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people. Powered by over 150,000 members and supporters, we advance free thinking and promote humanism to create a tolerant society where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We provide ceremonies, pastoral care, education, and support services benefitting over a million people every year and our campaigns advance humanist thinking on ethical issues, human rights, and equal treatment for all.

This research draws on the expertise of Humanists UK and its Faith to Faithless programme, a project that supports people who have left high-control religions. By incorporating insights from their extensive casework, the report contextualises the data to ensure a robust and evidence-based analysis of the challenges faced by those leaving high-control religious environments.

Acknowledgements

This report was made possible with the guidance, support, and contributions of many. I am grateful to my doctoral supervisors, Dr Lucy Mayblin and Dr Hannah Lewis, for their invaluable supervision throughout the research process.

I would also like to thank the staff and volunteers at Humanists UK and Faith to Faithless for their expertise, insights, and collaborative support, as well as the individuals with lived experience who generously shared their stories and perspectives. I am also grateful to professionals from refugee and secular support organisations, activists, and legal representatives for kindly giving their time to be interviewed.

Additional thanks go to Dr Anna Strhan, my mentor, for her guidance and encouragement, and to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for funding this report. The views and conclusions presented here are those of the author (Lucy Potter) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the collaborative organisations or funders.

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FOREWORD: Lizzi Collinge MP

As the current Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG), Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is an area I have consistently championed, particularly for those who identify with non-religious and humanist beliefs. My work in Parliament involves engaging with evidence on where these rights are violated and seeking evidence-based reform.

This report draws on novel research, focusing on how international challenges of FoRB manifest within the UK's asylum system. In current asylum policy and practice, non-religious asylum claims are often misunderstood or inadequately assessed, despite the significant, often life-threatening, risks faced by individuals fleeing persecution for their beliefs or identity. Having spoken directly to apostates, they tell me that their experiences are not understood by our asylum system. This research by Dr Potter and her collaborators shows that these experiences are not unusual and are in fact systemic.

This report is a critical contribution to the ongoing, urgent debate on immigration and asylum reform. It clearly demonstrates that the asylum system is failing to adequately protect some of the most vulnerable people seeking sanctuary, those persecuted purely for their freedom of thought, including those who have left a religion. For the APPHG, ensuring that the UK



upholds its international human rights obligations is paramount. This research is a potent reminder that, if we are to truly fix the system, we must ensure it is equipped to competently assess and understand claims based on non-religious identity and apostasy.

My main takeaway from this research is the absolute necessity of placing the experiences and rights of non-religious asylum seekers at the heart of any forthcoming reforms. As a Labour MP, I welcome the commitment to asylum reform, but I must stress that this process must now explicitly include mechanisms to properly recognise the severe and often life-threatening risks faced by non-religious asylum seekers. I call on the Government to prioritise the recommendations laid out in this report to ensure that protections for individuals persecuted for apostasy and non-religion are fully considered and actioned as part of our commitment to human rights, freedom of thought, and compassion.

FOREWORD: Andrew Copson OBE, Chief Executive Humanists UK



This groundbreaking research conducted by Dr Lucy Potter, in collaboration with Humanists UK, provides rigorous examination of the barriers facing non-religious asylum seekers seeking safety in the UK. Its findings are stark, and remind us that we have much to do to make sure the non-religious are treated equally in public life.

At Humanists UK, we provide essential support for refugees who are seeking asylum on the basis they would be persecuted for their non-religious beliefs in their home country. We do this through our Faith to Faithless programme, which provides social and emotional support for those, including asylum seekers, who have left high-control religious groups. On the basis of this expertise and experience, we have long advocated for better understanding and treatment of the non-religious in the asylum system. We were delighted to collaborate with Dr Potter in this research to set out a clear blueprint towards equality for the non-religious in the asylum process.

Blasphemy laws are in place in 91 countries, affecting over half of the global population. 12 countries impose the death penalty for so-called apostasy or blasphemy crimes, and a further 60 countries have prison sentences for

blasphemy and apostasy. But, as Dr Potter's research sets out, this persecution and its human impact is often overlooked and misunderstood. It is essential that those who are able to flee persecution to claim asylum in the UK on the basis of their non-religious beliefs are fairly assessed in their claims, and do not face yet more discrimination on our shores.

The seven findings of this report highlight the systemic and procedural barriers faced by non-religious individuals: ranging from policy and guidance gaps, misunderstanding of apostasy, to bias in credibility assessments, and more. It pairs these with clear and concise recommendations for policy and practice within the Home Office to reform the asylum process to guarantee equal treatment for the non-religious. We hope to see these recommendations taken up and commit now to advocate on their behalf.

Abbreviations

API:	Asylum Policy Instruction
APPG:	All-Party Parliamentary Group
APPHG:	All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group
CPIN:	Country Policy and Information Note
FoRB:	Freedom of Religion or Belief
ICCPR:	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
NABA:	Nationality and Borders Act
RSD:	Refugee Status Determination
UDHR:	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Can you name philosophers who were humanists?

What are the beliefs and thoughts of prominent non-religious thinkers?

Do you drink alcohol and have you ever eaten pork?

These are all questions apostates – people who leave religion – have reported being asked during their asylum interviews with the UK Home Office. However, these questions often have no relation to the experience of someone who has left their faith and thus fall short at accurately assessing whether an individual has a fear of persecution on the basis of this.

While apostate individuals fleeing persecution are, in theory, protected under the Refugee Convention and human rights law, in practice, they risk being failed by the British asylum system due to decision-making processes which overlook their distinct and unique identities.

This report outlines the challenges faced by non-religious asylum seekers, based on three years of in-depth, qualitative research in the UK. It highlights the unique barriers they face in receiving a positive outcome on their claims of asylum. By exploring apostates' experiences navigating Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes such as the credibility assessment, providing evidence and giving oral testimony, this research finds that despite the standards established in international human rights protections of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and national asylum policies, apostate asylum seekers must work harder to prove their non-religiosity to decision-makers due to bureaucratic hurdles, encountering bias, contradictions between policy and practice and a lack of designated FoRB training.

This report provides real-life cases and experiences of non-religious refugees as they navigated the asylum claims process, insights from human rights advocates who support them, and a detailed analysis of human rights law and asylum policies regarding apostasy and non-religion.

Asylum claims on the basis of non-religious identity

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right enshrined in several human rights laws. However, advocacy groups, such as Humanists International have provided evidence of systemic persecution of non-religious people across the globe. Although religious persecution is common across religions and beliefs, when humanists, for example, are targeted for persecution, they have been reported as facing attacks more '*viciously and brutally*' than other religious groups.

However, there remain significant gaps in asylum policy and practice that protect non-religious people seeking asylum in the UK. Repeated calls have been made to the *United Nations (UN)* for states in the UK and across Europe to close these gaps, however, there has been little corresponding action to improve policy or practice for non-religious asylum claims in the UK.

Most asylum claims of apostasy and non-religion are claimed through the 'religion' ground of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Claims are progressed through Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes, and a core component is the assessment of credibility. In general, this consists of gathering relevant information from the applicant, usually through an interview, and examining this in light of external resources available to the decision-maker. The credibility assessment is an extremely important method for decision-makers to make accurate and fair decisions, however, this research shows that they are currently not fit to assess the claims of non-religious apostasy.

Proving non-religion: An unfair evidentiary burden

Religion-based asylum claims are *complex cases* due to difficulties of assessing someone's *inner beliefs*. While Christian converts can provide a baptism letter from a church that has supported them, apostates often do not have the equivalent means to evidence their beliefs.

Non-religious asylum claimants have also been *subjected to inaccurate questioning*. For example, officials sometimes refer to atheism as though it's a form of religious conversion and wrongly see atheism as analogous to adhering to a religious doctrine. Claimants have been asked to recite the Amsterdam Declaration (*a statement of the fundamental principles of modern humanism*), to quote prominent western European atheist intellectuals, such as Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, ancient Greek philosophers, and asked about their dietary preferences for pork and alcohol.

This leads to an unfair burden of evidence where the non-religious must materialise their claims, in ways not compatible with atheistic beliefs. While it's difficult to prove a lack of belief, the situation is made worse by poor *guidance of the Home Office*, which overwhelmingly focuses on Christian conversion cases.

Importance

The UK government does not record or publish data on asylum cases made on the grounds of apostasy, nor does it publish data on the religious identity of claimants. Although it is unknown how many cases the Home Office receives and assesses of this type, the *PEW Research Center* found that in 2024, 13% of global migrants had no religious affiliation. While this statistic does not disaggregate data between refugees and asylum seekers, it shows there may be a significant number of people globally who move and do not identify with the religion they were born into.

People identifying with no religious affiliation is the world's *third-largest religious category* and among the fastest growing. Levels of asylum seekers arriving to the UK are also *increasing* (although the UK receives *relatively few asylum applicants* compared to the global context – hosting less than 1% of the world's refugees). As asylum-seeking continues to be a focal point in national political discourse, understanding how to assess these claims is urgent and timely.

Researchers have also maintained that these claims are *likely to continue to grow* due to increasing fundamentalism and nationalism, due to the intersection of religion or belief and women's rights, and through sustained concern of FoRB both internationally and nationally.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

The following research identifies seven primary findings regarding the systemic and procedural barriers faced by non-religious individuals seeking asylum in the United Kingdom:

1 Policy and guidance gap

There is a significant gap in asylum policy and guidance regarding apostasy and non-religious claims. Apostates are not adequately recognised or treated fairly compared to other religion-based asylum claims, such as religious minority persecution and conversion cases.

2 Misunderstandings of apostasy

Apostasy in contexts with blasphemy and/or apostasy laws involves complex and fragmented journeys away from religion. Applicants may struggle to clearly articulate their beliefs due to fear, trauma, or the evolving nature of their identity. Apostate claimants report feeling misunderstood and inadequately recognised within the asylum system, highlighting a disconnect between lived experience and institutional expectations.

3 Bias in credibility assessments and discriminatory interview practices

Current credibility assessments unfairly disadvantage non-religious claimants due to an over-reliance on demonstrable evidence or fixed expressions of belief. Interview questions posed for ex-Muslims applicants have, at times, been discriminatory, shaped by Western, secular, and post-Christian assumptions of religion or belief. As a result, claimants' credibility is misjudged against norms that fail to account for diverse expressions of apostasy.

4 Evidential burden and unrealistic expectations in testimony

The evidential burden placed on applicants disproportionately affects non-religious claimants due to a focus on proving an identity that may not be visible or externally verifiable. There are unrealistic expectations placed on applicants to recall events or emotions from early-life experiences and to provide sophisticated and logical demonstrations of their rejection of religion. These standards lead to unfair assessments of inconsistency or insincerity.

5 Interpreter accuracy and bias

Interpreters and translators have, at times, provided inaccurate or misleading translations due to personal bias or fear of being associated with blasphemy. Apostate applicants frequently report mistrust of interpreters from their own ethnic or religious backgrounds, fearing misrepresentation or deliberate distortion of their testimony. This mistrust undermines the integrity of the asylum process and can jeopardise applicants' claims.

6 Perceived culture of disbelief and scepticism

While the Home Office has disputed the existence of a systemic culture of disbelief in asylum adjudication, multiple studies, and the experiences shared by apostate claimants and their advocates, suggest that scepticism towards applicants' claims remains a recurring concern. This perception, whether intended or not, impacts trust in the asylum process and may affect the fair evaluation of sensitive cases involving non-religious identity.

7 Limited FoRB training

There remains limited understanding of the complexities involved in apostasy-related asylum claims, alongside a broader lack of religious literacy within the decision-making process. Although specific FoRB training was previously developed, it is unclear whether it has continued, resulting in ongoing gaps in knowledge and practice.

INTRODUCTION

This report aims to contribute to the development of evidence-informed policy and practice in asylum cases involving claims on the grounds of non-religiosity. Drawing on the empirical findings from a three-year research project, the report highlights the barriers faced by non-religious and apostate asylum applicants in securing refugee status. It makes recommendations for policy to seek to bridge the gap between research, policy, and practice by providing:

1. A summary of key findings illustrating the challenges and systemic issues identified;
2. Policy recommendations to strengthen the protection framework for non-religious asylum seekers and ensure their claims are assessed accurately.

Non-religious apostates

The term ‘apostate’ refers to a person who has renounced their religious faith, and thus can involve both religious converts or those who adopt a non-religious identity. For the purpose of this report, the term apostates will be used interchangeably with non-religion¹.

While apostasy can occur in any religious tradition, this report focuses primarily on ex-Muslims, who are individuals raised in Islam who have since developed a non-religious identity. This focus reflects the nature of the research sample and aligns with a broader trend in both academic and human rights work, where charges for apostasy and blasphemy are most commonly associated within the context of Islam. This is largely because the countries enforcing the severest penalties for apostasy and/or blasphemy are predominantly *Muslim-majority states* (although not all Muslim-majority states enforce these laws), where legal and political frameworks tightly bind religion to national identity, and where dissent or non-religion is seen as a direct threat to social and political order.

For many ex-Muslims who seek asylum, becoming an apostate is not a single event but a deeply personal and gradual process, shaped by their historical, social, cultural and political backdrops. As such, becoming an apostate asylum seeker and refugee is multifaceted entailing shifts in worldviews, beliefs and involves profound emotional transformation.

Apostates who become non-religious include a range of identities, such as atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, rationalists, or some may not identify with a particular label, or change labels over time. Non-religious identities are also understood differently outside the UK, as not all forms of non-belief, non-religion, or atheism are identical.

For instance, there is no exact Arabic equivalent of ‘atheism’, and apostasy is understood more as heresy than as a personal renunciation of faith. Similarly, ideas central to Western notions of religion shaped by Christianity, such as individual ‘conversion’ or the act of ‘testimony’, are foreign in many Islamic contexts. At a deeper level, the very concept of ‘belief’ may not align neatly with Islamic frameworks or the lived experience of non-Islamic identities, highlighting the limits of applying UK-centric categories when assessing asylum claims².

Being or becoming non-religious in certain countries can result in discrimination and persecution on the basis of their lack of religion and/or leaving their religion. In fact, *the majority of*

countries globally restrict the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) to varying degrees; both *by individual member states, non-state actors and through gaps in national asylum policy* which fall short at providing protection for the non-religious who are persecuted.

The largest risk posed for the non-religious are blasphemy and/or apostasy laws. Apostasy laws are those which punish an individual for leaving their religion; while blasphemy laws are broader which tend to punish ridicule or offence to religion. These two laws, although different, can overlap, suppressing non-religious identities widely.

Humanists International’s latest review (2025) states that blasphemy laws exist in 91 countries – affecting 57% of the population. 12 countries impose the death penalty for apostasy and 60 countries enforce prison sentences for both blasphemy and/or apostasy. An additional 19 countries impose fines or administrative sanctions for blasphemy.

Despite these risks, the freedom to be non-religious or an apostate does not receive *equal protection* in international human rights law and asylum law as the freedom to be religious.

To demonstrate the lived realities of non-religious individuals residing in contexts where apostasy or blasphemy laws are enforced and religious conformity is compulsory, the following story is drawn from a research participant from the Maldives. It highlights how legal restrictions and social pressures endanger those who privately or publicly depart from state-imposed religious identities.

Freedom of religion or belief and the right to seek asylum

In the decades after the Second World War, the UK was instrumental in shaping and endorsing several landmark international treaties. Among these were key agreements that enshrined fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the right to seek asylum from persecution, principles that continue to underpin the UK’s legal commitments today.

In international law, FoRB is formally recognised through Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), and is guaranteed within Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)

The scope of FoRB was made explicit by The UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), which clarified the provisions of the article in *General Comment No.22*. This document provided further explanation that FoRB covers, ‘...is not limited in its application to traditional religions... [it] protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly constructed’.

The right to asylum is guaranteed in Article 14 of the UDHR. This right was institutionalised through the Refugee Convention (UN General Assembly, 1951) which defines a ‘refugee’ as:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.
(Article 1(A)(2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees)

The UK signed and ratified the Convention which obligates them to *respect, protect and fulfil the*

¹ While apostasy (the renunciation or abandonment of a religion) and non-religion (the absence or rejection of religious belief, including atheism, agnosticism, and humanism) are distinct concepts, in this report they are used interchangeably. This is because many asylum claims in which individuals identify as non-religious arise from experiences of apostasy, and both categories raise similar issues in terms of credibility assessment, risk evaluation, and protection under the ‘religion’ ground of the Refugee Convention.

² See, ‘Nonbelievers, Apostates, and Atheists in the Muslim World’ (2024) edited by Jack David Eller and Natalie Khazaal for more detail.

Ibrahim - Maldives (asylum granted 2023), aged 20s

Ibrahim grew up in the southern islands of the Maldives, a country where Islam is not only the state religion but a legal requirement for all citizens. Throughout his childhood, the country was governed by an authoritarian regime that restricted religious expression and entrenched a culture of fear. From a young age, Ibrahim became aware of the brutal consequences faced by those who challenged the state-enforced religious unity. He heard accounts of people being tortured or dying in custody after expressing dissenting or non-conforming beliefs.



In public, Ibrahim carefully maintained what he described as a 'halal persona': outwardly conforming to Islamic norms in appearance, conduct, and speech. Privately, however, he created an online space where he could express the aspects of himself that were criminalised or condemned in Maldivian society, his atheist beliefs and his homosexual identity. The digital world became the only place where he could exist without self-censorship.

Despite using a pseudonym, his identity was discovered. His name and details were later published in a local newspaper, exposing him to the risks faced by suspected apostates and LGBTQ+ individuals, including social ostracisation, mob violence, and the threat of legal punishment under the country's blasphemy laws.

Once exposed, Ibrahim could no longer remain safely in his home community. He was forced to flee abruptly, leaving behind his family, home, and sense of belonging. After a precarious journey, he reached the United Kingdom, where he claimed asylum in 2022.

During his asylum interview, however, both the interviewing officer and his lawyer focused predominantly on his sexuality, paying little attention to the equally grave risks associated with his non-religious beliefs. This not only forced Ibrahim to work harder to evidence his lack of belief, but also reflects a broader problem in asylum practice: when non-religion is overlooked or misunderstood, the full scope of a claimant's persecution is missed, weakening the protection they are entitled to.

His experience exemplifies the dangers that apostates face in countries where the law, public institutions, and social norms converge to make non-religion a life-threatening position.

rights enshrined within it and to do so on the basis of non-discrimination³.

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
(Article 14(1), UDHR)

The UK is also part of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), so the UK is obligated to secure fundamental rights for all individuals in its jurisdiction, including asylum seekers. This is enforced through the *Human Rights Act 1998*.

To receive refugee protection in the UK, asylum seekers must meet one or more of the grounds outlined in the Refugee Convention, for reasons



of: 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UN General Assembly, 1951).

The Convention does not outline a standardised approach by which claims for asylum should be determined. In the UK, Asylum claims progress through Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes to determine whether a person has a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted' for the grounds listed above. In the UK, apostate asylum claims are usually claimed under the 'religion' ground of the Refugee Convention. The RSD process typically involves conducting a credibility assessment, consisting of an interview, the consideration of documentary and written evidence, and consulting external resources like *Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs)* and *Country Policy Information Notes (CPINs)*.

Over the last few years, the Home Office's key API on '*Assessing Credibility*⁴ has shown some development for assessing religion-based claims by updating its terminology to clarify that these cases do cover non-religious beliefs, suggesting that there is an awareness of a gap in policy. However, the sections included for religious conversion and apostasy are still predominantly

framed through more common types of religion-based asylum claims, reflecting a continued emphasis on conventional religious frameworks.

In effect, asylum credibility assessments are poorly equipped for the unique challenges faced by apostates and are based on guidance aimed at *religious* belief systems. This creates conceptual and practical issues for the non-religious who must navigate their identities to fit within bureaucratic processes that tend to be restrictive on apostasy, despite the non-religion also being at risk from persecution.

There is a significant body of academic research, advocacy resources, and press coverage on religious-based asylum claims, which largely focus upon religious conversion cases (and most commonly considering converts from Islam to Christianity). The claims of apostates, who do face a form of religious persecution, are consistently lacking within these resources.

Although there is overlap between their experiences of the asylum process and those of conversion, sexuality⁵, and political dissenters, apostates face a series of distinct challenges that should be considered within their own right.

³ For the 'Respect, Protect, Fulfil' duty see: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 'International Human Rights Law'. For the UDHR quote: UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III), available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html>
For the Non-Discrimination principle: This is found in Article 3 of the 1951 Convention: 'The Contracting States shall apply the provisions of this Convention to refugees without discrimination as to race, religion or country of origin'.

⁴ Home Office. (2022a). "Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims lodged before 28 June 2022." Retrieved Version 10.0, from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62bb17ed8fa8f5720dbef445/Assessing_credibility_and_refugee_status_pre_28_June_2022.pdf & Home Office. (2022b). "Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims lodged on or after 28 June 2022" Retrieved Version 11.0, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/country-policy-and-information-notes#a>

⁵ The Home Office has demonstrated a capacity for policy change, most notably in its response to sustained advocacy concerning sexuality-based asylum claims. Advocacy by organisations such as, Asylum Aid and Rainbow Migration led to a series of briefings recommending revisions to Home Office policy, staff training, and decision-making quality assurance. In response, the Home Office adopted several of these recommendations, developing a dedicated *Asylum Policy Instruction (API) on assessing sexuality-based asylum claims* and introducing a revised framework for evaluating credibility. Since 2017, the Home Office has also published statistical data on asylum claims where sexual orientation formed part or all of the basis for protection, including figures on initial decisions, appeals, and final outcomes.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The research drawn on and summarised in this report came from an in-depth, qualitative research project undertaken over three years (2022-2025), funded by the University of Sheffield. The research was conducted through a collaboration with a human rights organisation, *Humanists UK*, who provided contextual information and access to key stakeholders and participants. This report is funded through an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the University of York.

There were three focused research questions guiding this study:

1. How are non-religious beliefs conceptualised within Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and incorporated within Home Office asylum determination policies?
2. Within the UK's Home Office, how are legal frameworks implemented, and are there gaps or tensions between official guidance and practice?
3. What are the experiences of non-religious asylum applicants in the UK asylum system?

The findings of this research was conducted through a triangulation of UK Home Office policies, international law, and 34 in-depth interviews (12 with asylum claimants and 22 with human rights advocates), discussed here in turn.

Human right advocates

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 human rights advocates who work with and support non-religious refugees. The advocates brought varied job roles, expertise, lengths of service in the field, and diverse experiences working with apostate refugees. They consisted of legal professionals, including solicitors, caseworkers, and a barrister as well as workers and volunteers within Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that advocate for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) such as, Humanists International, Humanists UK, Humanists Global, Faith to Faithless, Secular Rescue, Faithless Hijabi, the Council of Ex-Muslims Britain and Amnesty International.

Refugees

Semi-structured interviews were also used to

explore the lived experiences of people who sought (or are seeking) asylum in the UK. The sample of participants with experience of claiming asylum was male (n = 10) and female (n = 2). Their ages range from early 20s at the age of their asylum claim to late 50s. Countries of origin included Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Maldives, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh. While there were no specific criteria regarding the religion the refugees had left, all participants from a refugee background were previously identified as Muslim and were consequently understood as apostates from Islam.

Documents

To supplement the narratives captured through interviews, this research also conducted a content analysis of key documents used in asylum decision-making. The documents were purposively selected and included Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR (1948) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966). The content of policy documents provided by the UK's Home Office in asylum determination cases were also analysed. These were purposively selected and consisted of the '*Asylum Policy Instructions*' (APIs), such as the '*Assessing Credibility*' guidance and '*Country Policy and Information Notes* (CPINs) (see Appendix for details on document versions).

Analysis

Interview data was transcribed verbatim, stored on NVivo, and was analysed using thematic analysis until data saturation was achieved. Documents were content-analysed for the representation of non-religious and apostate human rights.

FINDINGS

The data analysis revealed the barriers apostate asylum seekers face when navigating Refugee Status Determination (RSD). Using all three data-sets, there were similarities between the experiences of non-religious asylum seekers and the accounts of human rights advocates who support them in their claims. These findings demonstrate correlations between other studies conducted in a *European context*, and it is also reasonable to suggest that a broader population of apostate asylum seekers, whose claims are assessed using the asylum policies at the time of conducting research, would face similar challenges. This section begins with a summary of the key findings found for the challenges of asylum assessments for apostasy. They will then be explained more thoroughly and illustrated through quotes from participants that are anonymised to protect their identities.

1 Policy and Guidance Gap

There is a significant gap in asylum policy and guidance regarding apostasy and non-religious claims. Apostates are not adequately recognised or treated fairly compared to other types of religion-based asylum claims such as, religious conversion⁶.

This overarching policy gap sets the foundation for the challenges that follow. Without clear guidance or understanding of what constitutes an apostasy claim, caseworkers, interviewers, and decision-makers are left to interpret such cases through their discretion, resulting in inconsistencies across officials and drawing on inappropriate techniques of determining credibility.

2 Misunderstanding apostasy

Apostasy in contexts with blasphemy and/or apostasy laws involves complex, often fragmented journeys away from religion. As a result, applicants may lack the ability to articulate beliefs clearly due to fear, trauma, or an evolving identity and worldview.

This lack of understanding about the nature of apostasy feeds directly into the way asylum officials

assess credibility and conduct asylum interviews. When decision-makers interpret apostasy through their own points of view, which tends to be a post-Christian lens⁷, they expect coherent and logical narratives of journeys to non-religion. This includes the need to make rational declarations of belief and providing evidence of participation in non-religious groups. By doing so, decision-makers risk misjudging the authenticity of such claims.

3 Bias in credibility assessments and discriminatory interview practices

Focusing on assessments which determine credibility puts non-religious claimants at a disadvantage. This is due to a lack of standardised guidelines, which leads to officials conducting assessments based on their subjective interpretations of cases.

For ex-Muslim claimants, expectations to answer questions about their apostasy has resulted in discriminatory interview practices. Some have been asked inappropriate or irrelevant questions about Islam, while others face scepticism for not articulating their beliefs in ways familiar to Christian or secular frameworks.

⁶ Though the fieldwork of this research was conducted when the former Conservative government was in power, the findings found in this research remain relevant and timely as apostate asylum policy and practice remain underdeveloped with the Labour government.

⁷ A 'post-Christian' lens refers to a context in which Christianity is no longer the dominant cultural force but continues to shape underlying assumptions about religion. In asylum assessments, this lens often treats (non-)religion as a voluntary, belief-centred identity expressed through conversion-style narratives and binary distinctions between 'religious' and 'non-religious', making other forms of apostasy or non-religion less legible.

There are also difficulties in articulating one's experience and worldview in an interview format, due to trauma, memory, internal shame and due to sanctions of blasphemy/apostasy which silence non-religious expression. Officials interpret uncertainty, emotion, or evolving belief as a lack of credibility rather than as natural consequences of trauma⁸.

4 Evidential burden and unrealistic expectations in testimony

The evidential burden placed on applicants is unrealistic and particularly disproportionate for non-religious claims due to a focus on providing 'objective' evidence for their beliefs and persecution.

For religion-based claims, decision-makers often rely on tangible or demonstrable expressions of faith (or no faith), such as participation in local faith groups, community events and through the ability to discuss doctrine, used as proxies for credibility.

Refugee claimants are also questioned on quite a high-level of sophisticated understanding of the doctrines and practices of their religion or beliefs such as, being asked to recite the Amsterdam Declaration or explaining the philosophies of Ancient Greeks or of prominent non-religious thinkers. This line of questioning puts the bar of evidence high and risks disadvantageous apostates who have limited educational skills or are from lower-class backgrounds.

Applicants are also questioned on events or emotions from early life or distant pasts, leading to unfair judgments of inconsistency.

5 Interpreter accuracy and bias

Interpreters and translators have, at times, provided inaccurate or misleading translations due to personal bias or a fear of blasphemy themselves. Apostate applicants also report mistrust of interpreters from their own ethnic or linguistic background, fearing judgement,

inaccurate translations or a risk of exposure to communities in the UK and countries of origin.

Issues with interpretations can result in inaccuracies being recorded, putting apostate claimants at a disadvantage in articulating their experiences logically and coherently and thus further undermine the fairness and consistency of asylum decisions.

6 Perceived culture of disbelief and scepticism

Although the Home Office has repeatedly denied the existence of a 'culture of disbelief', substantial research evidence and stakeholder testimony continue to demonstrate its persistence within asylum adjudication. Apostate claimants in this study frequently encountered doubt and suspicion on the basis of their non-religious identity. Advocates and legal representatives corroborated these experiences, describing an environment in which applicants must work harder to 'prove' the credibility of an 'absence' (non-religion).

7 Training and knowledge gaps

Current training provision for asylum decision-makers does not consistently address the specific challenges posed by apostasy and non-religious claims.

The first *Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) training* for Home Office decision-makers was rolled out in 2019, with the intention that it would become mandatory and delivered annually. The training was described by a human rights advocate as 'pioneering' in its scope and ambition. Its aim was to enhance the knowledge and understanding of caseworkers who assess claims involving religious persecution.

However, during the course of this research, it remained unclear whether the training had continued beyond its pilot phase, or whether it had achieved a sustained and measurable impact on asylum decision-making practices.

Policy recommendations

Following from these key findings, the following recommendations for policy and practice at the Home Office are suggested:

1 Update asylum policies

Update all asylum policy and guidance (APIs and CPINs) to explicitly recognise the range of human rights abuses faced by non-religious people, ensuring parity with religious minorities and conversion cases. Distinguish apostasy claims from broader religion-based guidance.

2 Training for non-religious apostasy

Train decision-makers to recognise the iterative, non-linear nature of belief change and avoid imposing expectations of coherent or fixed narratives. Ensure that all asylum claims recorded on the grounds of apostasy and non-religion are accurately recorded.

3 Revise credibility guidance

Revise credibility assessment guidance to reflect non-religious belief systems, ensuring that credibility is not judged through tangible or religiously framed evidence. Reinforce adherence to existing legal standards of credibility in practice. Improve training so that stereotyping and stereotypical expectations of non-religion do not appear in asylum interviews.

4 Adjust evidential burden and unrealistic expectations in testimony

Revise the evidential requirements for non-religious claims so that the absence of objective evidence does not negatively affect case outcomes. Update guidance to promote trauma-informed, culturally sensitive questioning that accommodates memory gaps and evolving belief narratives.

5 Improve interpreter practices

Strengthen interpreter vetting and training, provide applicants with full interview transcripts, and introduce a grace period for corrections to transcripts without adverse credibility implications.

6 Fair and consistent decision-making

Execute structural reforms to replace adversarial scrutiny with empathetic inquiry, integrating bias-reduction tools and trauma-informed protocols alongside broader system reforms to ensure a fair, consistent, and accountable decision-making process.

7 Strengthen training and knowledge

Establish a structured, continuous learning framework to be rolled out for all Home Office staff who have contact with asylum claims and assessments. Maintain active engagement with civil society and expert-led initiatives on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Building upon this overview, the following sections provide a detailed analysis of each key finding, supported by primary evidence and direct testimony from the participants interviewed.

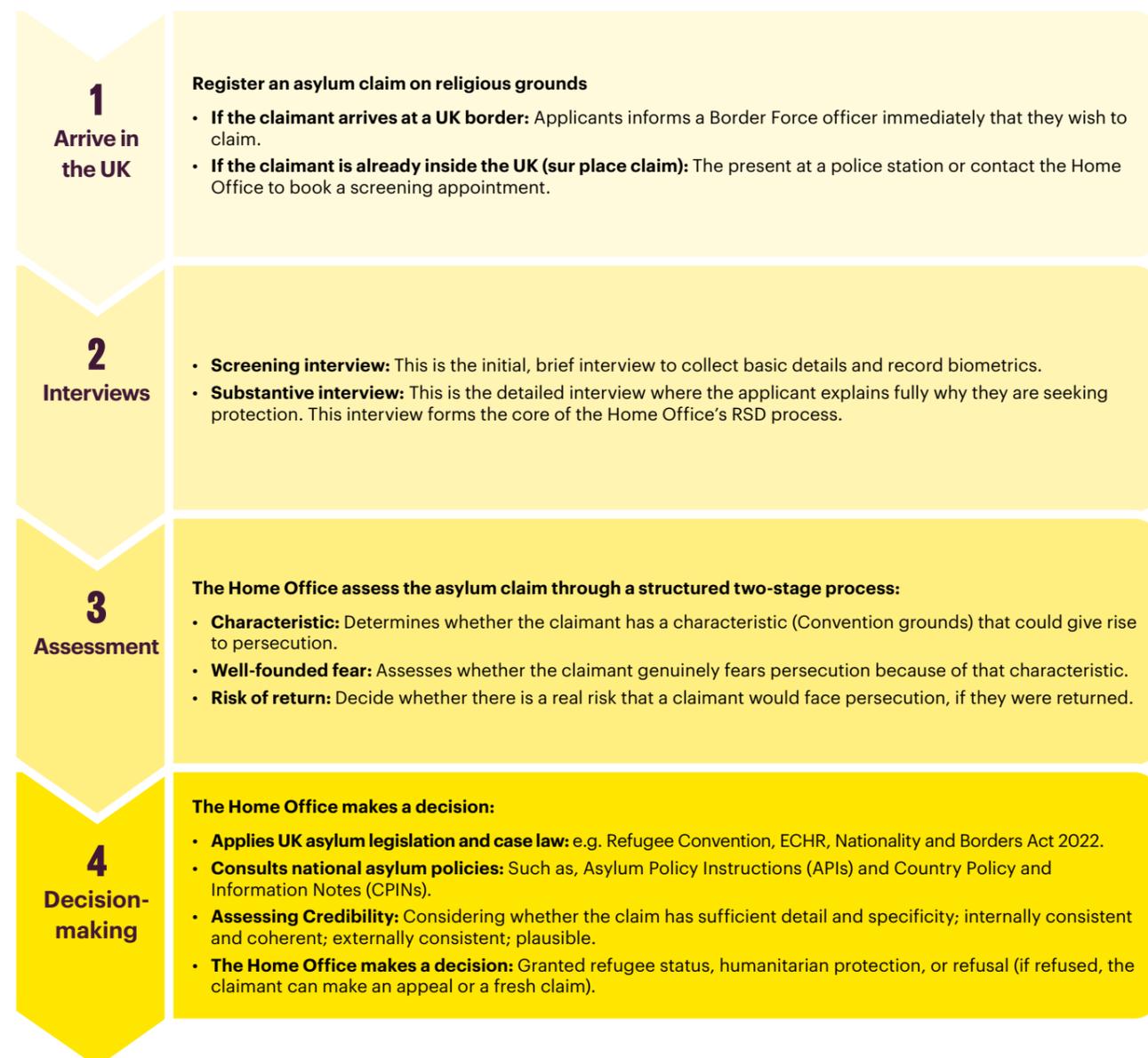
⁸ See, Potter (in press), 'Becoming Non-Religious: Exploring the Emotional Experiences of Apostasy and Refugee Status Determination', *Secularism and Nonreligion*, forthcoming.

1. POLICY AND GUIDANCE GAP

This section examines the procedural frameworks that shape apostate asylum claims in the UK. While the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) explicitly protects both religious and non-religious worldviews, the UK's asylum policy and practice have not consistently reflected this. Language within asylum guidance continues to privilege *religious* persecution, leading to gaps in understanding how to assess non-religious asylum claims.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes include a series of legal and administrative steps to assess whether an individual qualifies as a refugee under national and international law. In the UK context, RSD processes include the following stages:

Table 1: This model includes the four main stages showing the UK asylum claims process from arrival to decision-making.



RSD is a lengthy process, and in recent years it has been placed under significant strain, with an asylum backlog causing applicants to wait many months, or even years, for a decision.

As at 31 March 2025, there were 78,745 asylum cases awaiting an initial decision. Of those waiting, 58% had already waited more than 6 months, and 31% more than 12 months. In addition to the initial-decision backlog, there is *a large and growing appeals backlog*: by early 2025 there were about 90,000 outstanding appeals, roughly 51,000 asylum appeals among them.

The asylum process

When making an asylum claim in the UK a *questionnaire and screening interview* are typically the first steps when claiming asylum. The caseworker records notes from this initial interview which goes on the claimants record.

Although the screening process aims to establish basic information about a claimants' fear of persecution and reasons for claiming asylum, participants reported they are faced with leading questions consisting of, 'What is your religion?', excluding options for beliefs or making assumptions that they would be religious:

First of all, it started right in the morning. I went to the window, and the woman who was filling out a form for me asked for my name. In the religion section, she had already ticked Islam because of my name. I thought, 'Excuse me, come on!' My name's [name], but no, you cannot do that. I had to get it corrected.
(Zahid, date of asylum 2018, country of origin: Pakistan)

Some participants also reported being faced with border agents who do not understand that asylum could be claimed on the basis of adopting a non-religious identity.

They ask you about your religion as well. They asked me and I said, "I'm an atheist". They just looked at each other and said "wow, we have a new one". I realised that it's strange for them and it's not usual.

(Naveed, date of asylum 2018, country of origin: Iran)

After consideration of the screening stage, asylum claims can be granted if there is enough evidence, though the majority progress to a longer interview called the substantive interview.

Once both interviews have been conducted and evidence has been collected, the Home Office commences its assessment. During decision-making, caseworkers will consider the Home Office's Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs) and Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs). They may also consult other relevant sources, such as the UNHCR Handbook, case law, and applicable legislation.

However, the APIs and CPINs have considerable pitfalls when officials' assess apostasy-based asylum claims, discussed here in turn.



Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs)

At the time of this research, there were two separate Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs) in use for assessing the credibility of asylum claims: one reflecting previous guidance and another incorporating recent changes under the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA)⁹. Some participants in this study were assessed under the older policy framework, while others were judged according to the newer guidance, which remains in place and will shape future decision-making.

Pre-NABA (Home Office, 2022a) asylum assessment of credibility was conducted through an evaluation of a claimant's personal testimony and supporting evidence, including documents and country-of-origin information. Decision-makers used criteria like the level of detail and consistency of the claim, and the plausibility of the account, both internally and externally.

Post-NABA (Home Office, 2022b) introduced a two-stage test for refugee status claims – the decision-maker must first determine, on the balance of probabilities (i.e., 'more likely than not'):

- 1a. Whether the asylum seeker has a characteristic which could cause them to fear persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (or has such a characteristic attributed to them by an actor of persecution), and;
- 1b. Whether the asylum seeker does in fact fear such persecution in their country of nationality (or in a case where they do not have a nationality, the country of their former habitual residence) as a result of that characteristic.
2. The decision-maker must determine whether there is a reasonable likelihood that, if the asylum seeker were returned to their country of nationality (or in a case where they do not have a nationality, the country of their former habitual residence) they would be persecuted as a result of the characteristic

Despite these changes, the guidance on 'religion' (pre-NABA: p.27; post-NABA: p.28) and 'religious conversion and apostasy' (pre-NABA: p.28; post-NABA: p.29) remains broadly consistent across both policies.

Under both versions of the API, decision-makers must judge whether an applicant genuinely holds the religion or belief they claim, and whether their expressions of belief, both publicly and privately, put them at risk. Both APIs state that:

Simply claiming to hold a set of beliefs which result in persecution in the country of nationality (or former habitual residence) is not enough to substantiate a claim to refugee status. You must decide whether the claimant genuinely adheres to the religion or belief to which they profess to belong, how that individual observes those beliefs in the private and public spheres, and whether that would place them at risk of persecution on return to their country.
(pre-NABA: p.27; post-NABA: p.28)

Guidance discourages the use of knowledge-based questioning:

Although the assessment of credibility must not depend solely upon a test of religious or belief-based understanding and knowledge, it is reasonable to expect the claimant to possess knowledge of the core elements of any faith or belief they profess to hold.
(pre-NABA: p.28; post-NABA: p.29)

Both APIs note that the 'religion' grounds include 'theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs' followed by a section titled 'Religious conversion and apostasy'. Apostasy is defined as, 'the renunciation, abandonment of or withdrawing from a former religious identity or principle' (pre-NABA: p.27; post-NABA: p.28).

In both guidance documents, credibility is assessed by the ability of claimants to describe in detail their personal experiences:

The claimant ought to have been able to describe their personal experience in the faith they grew up in and were expected to adhere. If the asylum claim is based on their apostasy, they should have been able to explain their reasons for no longer believing in or practising that faith.
(pre-NABA: p.28; post-NABA: p.29)

As well as:

In terms of assessing whether a claimant fears persecution on the basis of their religion, on the grounds of conversion or apostasy, the claimant's testimony will be taken into account including on their beliefs and experiences in their country of nationality (or habitual residence).
(pre-NABA: p.28; post-NABA: p.29)

This guidance has significant drawbacks when considering non-religious based claims. The guidance frames claims in terms of religion, religious conversion, or apostasy. There is no detailed guidance on what constitutes a non-religious identity, leaving decision-makers with little concrete instruction on how to evaluate such claims.

Claimants are expected to demonstrate knowledge of the 'core elements' of the religion or belief they profess to hold. Though, for non-religious claimants, there is no comparable set of core beliefs to test against, making it unclear how credibility could be assessed in practice.

The guidelines risk assuming that belief is continuous, outwardly demonstrable, and consistently adhered to. Such criteria are particularly problematic for apostates, as one immigration lawyer noted:

They want genuine, detailed and believable. Your personal story that led to the decisions of abandoning the religion... that means it requires a lot of detail. It requires something that is deemed to be believable by the interviewer and the kind of credible reasoning that led to the conversion.
(William, immigration lawyer)

Despite the standards set out in asylum decision-making, the complexities of the assessment can largely come down to caseworkers training and experience, of which remains limited. As a result, 'Decision-makers are making decisions based on their own prejudices and their own understanding of the situation... so it's like "I don't think that makes sense"' (Manuel, immigration lawyer). The types of misunderstandings of apostasy are discussed on page 27.

Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs)

In addition to APIs, the Home Office produces a series of reports and guidance documents, known as Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs), which are designed to provide factual and policy-based assessments of risks in specific countries. However, CPINs have consistently failed to include accurate or adequate information regarding the persecution of non-religious individuals.

In 2024, this research included an analysis of how human rights abuses faced by individuals persecuted for non-religion and/or apostasy were represented within Home Office CPINs. Forty-six countries were identified where blasphemy and/or apostasy laws exist and where a corresponding CPIN was available. A further five countries, Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, were also identified; although these states have severe penalties for blasphemy (including imprisonment or death), no Home Office CPIN was available for them at the time of the fieldwork.

⁹ The guidance was revised following the enactment of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which introduced statutory changes to the assessment of asylum claims, particularly in relation to credibility, evidential disclosure, and decision-making standards, necessitating updated operational instructions.

Table 2 presents the findings:

Country	Blasphemy laws	Apostasy laws	Inclusion of persecution faced by the non-religious
Afghanistan	Death penalty	Death penalty	No
Algeria	Prison sentence	No law	No
Bangladesh	Prison sentence	No law	Yes
Brazil	De facto	No law	No
Cameroon	Prison sentence	No law	No
Egypt	Prison sentence	No law	No
El Salvador	Prison sentence	No law	No
Eritrea	Prison sentence	No law	No
Ethiopia	Prison sentence	No law	No
Gambia	Prison sentence	No law	No
India	Prison sentence	No law	No
Iran ¹⁰	Death penalty	N/A	No
Iraq	Prison sentence	No law	Yes
Jamaica	De facto	No law	No
Kenya	Prison sentence	No law	No
Kuwait	Prison sentence	De facto	No
Lebanon	Prison sentence	No law	No
Libya	In question	In question	No
Malawi	Prison sentence	No law	No
Malaysia	Prison sentence	Death penalty	No
Maldives	Prison sentence	Death penalty	N/A
Mauritania	Death penalty	Death penalty	N/A
Myanmar	Prison sentence	No law	No
Nigeria	Death penalty	Death penalty	No

¹⁰ Apostasy is punishable by death in Iran; however, the Islamic Republic has never formally codified apostasy as a criminal offence. Instead, judges rely on Islamic jurisprudence (shari'a) and the rulings of senior clerics, who consider apostasy a capital crime.

Country	Blasphemy laws	Apostasy laws	Inclusion of persecution faced by the non-religious
Pakistan	Death penalty	No law	No
Russia	Prison Sentence	No law	No
Rwanda	De facto	No law	No
Qatar	Prison sentence	Death penalty	N/A
Saudi Arabia	Death penalty	Death	N/A
Somalia	Death penalty	Death penalty	No
South Africa	De facto	No law	No
Sri Lanka	Prison sentence	No law	No
Sudan	Prison sentence	No law	No
Syria	Prison sentence	No law	No
Turkey	Prison sentence	No law	No
United Arab Emirates	Prison sentence	Death penalty	N/A
Yemen	Prison sentence	Death penalty	No
Zimbabwe	Prison sentence	No law	No

Table 2. Blasphemy and apostasy laws in countries included in Home Office CPINs, highlighting gaps in coverage for non-religious and apostasy-related persecution.

At the time of conducting fieldwork, only two countries (Bangladesh and Iraq) had explicit inclusion of information about persecution of non-religious apostates in their CPINs.

Bangladesh has a CPIN titled 'Religious Minorities and Atheists' and is the only CPIN that specifically mentions atheism in its main title¹¹. The Iraq guidance on 'Religious Minorities', includes a small section on atheists¹².

Of the 46 CPINs of countries with legal restrictions

on apostasy and/or blasphemy, 44 (=96%) contained no explicit information on persecution of non-religious people.

For the five countries with blasphemy and/or apostasy laws with no corresponding CPIN – Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE – these represent major gaps in Home Office country guidance, particularly given their consistently *high-risk scores of violating FoRB*. Their absence highlights the systemic invisibility of non-religion in asylum policies.

¹¹ Home Office. (2022). "Country Policy and Information Note Bangladesh: Religious minorities and atheists." Retrieved Version 3.0, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/country-policy-and-information-notes#a>.

¹² Home Office. (2021). "Country Policy and Information Note Iraq: Religious minorities." Version 3.0 Retrieved 3 April 2023, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/country-policy-and-information-notes#a>.

Several patterns are highlighted from this analysis:

- **Blasphemy legislation is widespread:** The majority of countries included in CPINs retain blasphemy laws, ranging from 'de facto' enforcement to the death penalty (e.g., Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia).
- **Apostasy laws are far less common but more severe:** Apostasy laws (where renouncing a religion is criminalised) exist in a smaller subset of countries but are often punishable by death (e.g., Afghanistan, Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Yemen).
- **Overlap between blasphemy and apostasy law regimes:** Countries that criminalise apostasy almost always criminalise blasphemy as well, creating a high-risk legal environment for non-religious people and apostates specifically.

A case reported by a *civil society organisation (2016)* demonstrates the consequences of this gap. An atheist claimant from Sudan was told that, because 'there was no evidence about atheism in Sudan', the Home Office interpreted this to mean that 'there are no atheists in the country', and therefore concluded that the claimant could not have been persecuted on this ground. This reasoning illustrates a significant and dangerous gap in how the Home Office assesses and documents violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in its country guidance.

Policy and guidance gap: Implications for apostate claimants

In sum, the gaps in APIs and CPINs produce several interrelated problems:

- **Defining apostasy and non-religion:** Decision-makers must possess a nuanced understanding of global belief systems, including what constitutes 'non-religious characteristics'. Without adequate training, this complexity leads to misinterpretation and inconsistency.

- **Limited inclusion of apostasy and non-religion:** Home Office APIs and CPINs rarely recognise apostasy or non-religion as distinct, valid grounds for asylum, leaving many claimants effectively invisible within policy frameworks.
- **Risk of inconsistency:** Where formal guidance is lacking, decisions rely on personal interpretation. This introduces inconsistency and bias, particularly where non-religious identities are misunderstood (see page 29).
- **Documentation gap:** Because CPINs and APIs provide limited coverage of non-religion, caseworkers may treat the absence of evidence as evidence of absence, reinforcing a culture of disbelief (see page 33).

SUMMARY

The absence of explicit recognition of apostasy and non-religion in Home Office policy creates both conceptual and procedural barriers. Without reform, including updated CPINs, explicit inclusion of non-religion within APIs, and enhanced training for caseworkers, apostates will continue to face disproportionate obstacles in demonstrating both the sincerity of their beliefs and the risks they face if returned. The post-NABA framework compounds these issues as RSD assumes that belief systems can be objectively validated, an unrealistic standard for apostates whose identities are often nuanced, fluid, and shaped by subjective experiences.

2. MISUNDERSTANDING APOSTASY

This section explores how limited understanding of apostasy (from APIs, CPINs, training and experience) shape the assessment of asylum claims. Despite formal recognition that freedom of religion or belief includes the right to change or reject one's faith, decision-making reflects narrow assumptions about how belief develops, is expressed, or ceases. For many claimants, apostasy is not a chronological journey but a gradual, internalised process shaped by intersectional characteristics and diverse country contexts.

In order to rectify this gap, it is helpful to hear more from non-religious people on the reasons for seeking asylum in the UK.

Misunderstanding the nature of apostasy

Participants described growing up in highly religious environments and where leaving religion carries high-costs both socially and legally. In participants' countries of origins, they recalled experiences of public shaming, intimidation, and extreme violence against those accused or perceived to be apostates/blasphemers. These events contributed to a pervasive sense of fear, crises of identity, and the feeling that their worldviews were under threat or collapsing.

I had my doubts and I became severely depressed because I was growing up in that environment. I didn't want to let go of my religion... A lot of my worldviews were based on religious things and taking that away basically crashed my whole perception of the world.
(Tariq, date of asylum 2022, aged 20s, country of origin, Maldives)

I was not happy with myself, quite alone, isolated and then the realisation of what was happening kicked in, maybe I was no longer Muslim?... If I'm not Muslim, am I even Pakistani?
(Omar, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, country of origin, Pakistan)

As a result, apostasy is often an internal and gradual process, shaped by fear, doubt, and reflection, rather than a single, overt act. For others, non-religious belief systems are only accessible through migration, such as people coming to the UK to study or work:

I was 18 when I moved to Britain for my studies. Exposure to different kinds of people, in Pakistan 97% of population is Muslim even the 3% they don't live with Muslim people [...] Just getting the exposure, meeting different people, getting to know them and realising, okay, maybe Islam isn't needed for you to be a good human being first of all. (Omar)

When you are brought up in that kind of society, there is very little room for exploration within religion, other than exploration of Islam.
(Amira, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, country of origin, Saudi Arabia)

For these individuals, becoming non-religious meant they did not feel safe returning to their countries of origins, and made their asylum claims 'sur place'. These narratives show that the development of non-religious beliefs does not always appear in childhood or upbringing.

Due to the way credibility is assessed, asylum decision-makers may expect visible or chronological evidence of renunciation, and the internal nature of belief can be misunderstood, leading to misjudged credibility. Moreover,

claimants' fear of openly expressing doubt, due to potential persecution or social ostracism, can also result in cautious or inconsistent disclosure, which may be wrongly interpreted as dishonesty or lack of commitment to the claim.

Misunderstanding the risks apostates face

In instances where participants from a refugee background were directly implicated for questioning religious beliefs, they described a range of coercive and controlling measures including: being attacked by family members, shunned by friends, locked in the house and put under surveillance, pressured to marry, control over finances, being forced to pray, perform rituals and attending religious services.

These forms of abuse can be diverse, subtle, or cumulative rather than a single overt act, meaning decision-makers may underestimate their severity. For example, social ostracism combined with surveillance may be misjudged as private or familial conflicts rather than persecution, despite the profound impact on the individual's safety, freedom, and well-being.

Misunderstanding intersectional identities

The experience of leaving a religion is compounded by other aspects of identity. For example, women apostates may face gendered violence or control, LGBTQ+ apostates may experience homophobic abuse and attacks, and apostates with politicised views outside the majority may face compounded social pressures. Failure to account for these intersections in training and guidance risks further misjudging the credibility and severity of claims.

For example, participants whose claims involved sexuality-based persecution reported that decision-makers often focused on this aspect and

thus overlooked their non-religious identity. One participant reflected that *'they asked me nothing about my Humanism'* (Zahid, date of asylum 2018, country of origin: Pakistan), this obscures the full range of risks they face and can potentially undermine the credibility of their claims, increasing the likelihood of unjust refusals.

This evidence provides a more complex picture of the discrimination and persecution experienced by apostates, from psychological abuse and social ostracism to threats of violence and coercion, a nuance missed within asylum interviewers' questioning techniques.

One of the first steps to understand and address misunderstandings of apostasy would be to collect a more comprehensive range of data. *Humanists UK* observes that, although the Home Office collects information on all nine protected characteristics during initial asylum screening, it does not publish disaggregated equality data for asylum claims. They note that comparable disaggregated data are routinely published for hate crime and argue that there is no clear reason why similar analysis and publication could not be undertaken for asylum cases.

Disaggregated data would also allow policymakers and caseworkers to identify patterns of persecution specific to apostates and other non-religious claimants. Once collected, this data could inform CPINs and APIs, ensuring that caseworkers understand the diversity of non-religious persecution.

SUMMARY

To address misunderstandings of apostasy within asylum assessments, policy reform should involve explicitly incorporating the wide-range of human rights abuses faced by non-religious apostates, include targeted training modules on apostasy, case studies highlighting intersectional risks, and collaboration with organisations representing non-religious communities. Such reforms would help decision-makers to better recognise credible claims, making decisions more accurate and fair.

3. CREDIBILITY ASSESSMENT AND INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

The credibility assessment is widely recognised as the most decisive stage in the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process, and a lack of credibility is one of the most common grounds for asylum refusals. While concerns around credibility have been explored in relation to claims based on religious conversion, sexual orientation, or political opinion, apostasy and non-religious claims remain significantly underexamined.

Belief-based claims pose specific challenges. For example, many ex-Muslims do not openly 'come out' about their non-belief, for social, cultural, or personal reasons, making it challenging to articulate these experiences in an asylum interview, despite protection hinging on them. Leaving Islam is not always experienced as a sharp rupture, and public declarations of non-belief (in country of origin and the UK) may be avoided to prevent offending or upsetting others.

Home Office guidance on assessing credibility

The core document governing credibility assessment is the Home Office Asylum Policy Instruction (API) titled *Assessing Credibility* (see page 22).

Although these documents offer generally useful directions, such as evaluating claims case-by-case, avoiding knowledge tests, and recognising factors like trauma that affect testimony, they do not adequately distinguish non-religious apostasy from religious conversion and this research finds that there are discrepancies between policy and what happens in practice.

Apostasy is frequently treated as a subcategory of conversion, with atheism or non-religion framed as another form of doctrinal shift. This conflation, erases the unique dynamics of non-religious

identity and treats apostasy claims through a lens designed for religious adherence¹³.

As a result, caseworkers look for the kinds of structured beliefs, behavioural markers, and narratives associated with conversion, rather than the more gradual or private processes that characterise many journeys to non-religion.

Although Home Office guidance explicitly acknowledges that non-religious beliefs differ from religious ones, the distinction is inconsistently applied in asylum interviews. The API states:

You must also be aware that non-religious beliefs are not codified in the same way as religious beliefs often are. Those who claim to be apostates should not be expected to have a detailed understanding of the history or philosophy behind a nonreligious belief system. However, they should be able to explain their reasons for no longer believing in or practising their former faith and they should demonstrate a clear and coherent understanding of their own motivation for becoming an apostate. (API: Asylum Interviews, V9, page, 50)

However, the immigration lawyers and advocates who have supported non-religious claims shared these were not followed in practice:

¹³ This is also documented in existing research, see, Laws' (2024) *book* on emotions and non-religious asylum claims.

There are asylum policy instructions that deal with conversion cases and apostasy cases regarding credibility, it's all very reasonable. However, actually in an interview, it's not really like that.

(Samuel, immigration lawyer)

Findings from *Freedom From Torture* explain that:

Flawed credibility assessments were attributed to erroneous preconceptions and/ or a lack of understanding of the contexts in which persecution can take place, who is at risk and expectations about how they should narrate their experiences. [...] the judgement of whether a claimant is telling the truth 'is dressed up in the word 'credibility', perhaps because it is easier to say to someone 'You lack credibility' than to say 'You are telling lies.' (p.14)

Academic studies show that credibility assessments rely on the 'common sense' assumptions of decision-makers, leading to narrow, Western assumptions of religion and belief, thus they are 'unaware of the importance of cultural differences between themselves and claimants' (Thomas, 2008, p.84). Likewise, in a study of asylum adjudication in Europe, it has been reported that assessors use their own localised view of religion and its role in society.

An advocate who volunteers at a local humanist group reflected on this dynamic:

If you're an ex-Muslim, you still have some of the Muslim cultural stuff behind you and some of them, for instance, still don't drink alcohol or eat pork, they're happy to stay like that. **(Owen)**

In the following discussion, this report discusses the specific challenges faced by non-religious claimants during the asylum interview, highlighting how proving a lack of belief can be difficult and how they face stereotypical assumptions.

The asylum interview

Participants in this research consistently described the difficulty of 'materialising' their non-religion in ways considered credible. As one advocate explained, 'It is a lot harder if you don't have a set of doctrinal beliefs by which you actually live your life and can demonstrate that' (Grace, campaigner).

Discussing cases that involve unaccompanied children an advocate reflected on the invasive nature of some questions:

They are just living their life and they are suddenly being asked these really invasive and odd questions by officials: When was the last time you went to the mosque? And why? What do you think about when you don't go? Have you thought about why you do go or not? ... How do you interact with girls in your class at school?

(Manuel, immigration lawyer and campaigner)

Despite policy guidance discouraging it, advocates argued that knowledge-testing remained common. In contrast to the guidance (API: Asylum Interviews), Megan (spokesperson of a charity) noted knowledge-testing was inevitable: 'To get someone to prove that they're a humanist or prove they're non-religious, they're questioned about philosophers or expected to be able to recite the Amsterdam Declaration'. A lawyer summarised this point:

They want genuine, detailed and believable... That means it requires a lot of detail. It requires something that is deemed to be believable by the interviewer, and the kind of credible reasoning. **(William)**

Structural barriers: Linear expectations and conversion frameworks

Existing asylum frameworks are shaped by assumptions surrounding religious conversion. In practice, this has resulted in applicants being required to recount a detailed, linear narrative, moving 'logically' from early doubt to renunciation, entailing the full abandonment of religious practice.

Participants described significant difficulty when articulating non-religion to caseworkers who expected structured, doctrinal accounts, comparable to religious practice. Many also struggled to explain their worldview, especially if speaking about it for the first time.

Omar explained that he needed to address these emotions before he could proceed with an asylum application:

I was quite alone, isolated and then realisation of why that was happening kicked in and that was because maybe I was no longer a Muslim. I hadn't admitted it to myself. After a bit of soul searching so to say I realised that I no longer believe in Islam. First step was to at least admit to myself.

(Omar, refugee)

Under current guidance, delays in disclosing one's identity once in a 'safe' country can harm credibility. Though, this also relies on a 'Western conception of linear formation' (Berg & Millbank, 2009, p.197), incompatible with many apostate experiences, which may involve long periods of doubt, ambivalence, or silence.

It was usual for the refugees in this research to attend church for social support or companionship, yet such participation can be misinterpreted by decision-makers and representatives of asylum seekers as evidence undermining their apostasy, rather than circumstantial.

Hadi, a refugee originally from Iran, recalled being asked in his asylum interview whether he had ever attended a church in the UK. Afterwards, his lawyer advised him that he should have denied it:

They asked me, "Have you ever been in a church here in the UK?" My solicitor said I should definitely say no. I hate any religion. I told them yes - I was with a friend who invited me to a church, and I went because it's a natural need to be in a community.

Hadi emphasised that attending church had provided him with a sense of community, support, and access to resources, particularly important during the uncertainty of the asylum process. He explained:

I was in a church a few times just to see people. I can't stay a year in my room and not talk to anybody. And my solicitor said, "No, you're an atheist, why would you be in a church?"

Some were also unfairly expected to demonstrate strong philosophical or theological critiques of religion, as though non-religion necessarily stems from rational argument rather than personal transformation or lived experience.

Faith to Faithless: Case study

The client, originally from Syria, grew up in a comparatively secular environment where expressing non-religious views did not carry significant consequences. Because his shift from Islam to nonbelief was not a central part of his identity at the time, he struggled to articulate a clear, linear journey of apostasy in the way the asylum system often expects.

However, changes in the political and religious landscape drastically altered the risks he faced. As the regime became more hardline, the danger emerged not from his internal identity shift but from how his community now perceived him. Community members, seeking to demonstrate their loyalty and piety to increasingly religious

authorities such as HTS¹⁴, could report him for blasphemy or apostasy.

Meanwhile, his family and peers began performing heightened religiosity to avoid suspicion, and in doing so adopted more fundamentalist attitudes. This created an environment in which community violence against an openly atheist individual like him became far more likely, an outcome he could not have foreseen when forming his non-religious views.

This illustrates a key misunderstanding: apostasy risk is often situational and socially constructed, not the result of a dramatic personal narrative of deconversion. It is the shifting context, not a neatly articulated identity journey, that can generate real danger.

Discriminatory and inconsistent questioning

The Home Office outlines indicators of credibility, such as ‘consistency’, ‘plausibility’ and ‘sufficient detail’ to determine ‘truth’, which are interpreted by officials based in the UK.

In practice, this has led to discriminatory interviewing practices. Apostates have been asked whether they eat pork, drink alcohol, support PRIDE, or are familiar with Western philosophers or well-known atheist figures. This mirrors the approach used in sexuality-based asylum claims, where research shows that credibility assessments rely on similar patterns of stereotyping and intrusive questioning¹⁵.

Others were questioned on the reasons for retaining cultural connections to their former faith communities, or about the ways they ‘perform’ their non-religion publicly in the UK for example, explaining delays in removing religious dress like the head scarf, and continuing to attend the mosque to blend into diasporic populations in the UK.

Such judgements reveal deep misunderstandings of both non-religion and cultural identity, and risk imposing Western secular norms as the benchmark for credibility. This echoes patterns documented elsewhere, such as in *Germany*, where Muslim LGBTQI+ applicants perceived as ‘Western’ were more likely to be believed.

SUMMARY

Current UK asylum processes require non-religious claimants to fit their identities and stories into rigid templates designed around conversion, public adherence, and linear belief. These templates fail to capture the complex, gradual, and private nature of apostasy, resulting in a systematic disadvantage. Without greater religion and belief literacy, improved policy, and better adherence to *UNHCR guidance*, credibility assessments will continue to reproduce bias and misunderstanding, placing apostates at heightened risk of wrongful refusal.

4. EVIDENTIAL BURDEN AND UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS IN TESTIMONY

The terms ‘burden of proof’ and ‘standard of proof’ are used in asylum adjudication which set out the evidentiary standard or degree of proof needed to demonstrate refugee status. While there is a shared responsibility between the decision-maker and claimant, the burden of proof lies with the applicant. This section discusses the burden of proof in non-religious asylum claims.

Successful asylum applications in the UK *rarely proceed without substantial supporting documentary evidence*. UK legal processes often assign greater weight to written documentation than to oral testimony, meaning that the absence or insufficiency of such evidence can significantly increase the likelihood of the asylum seeker’s account being deemed lacking in credibility.

Non-religious people seeking asylum face major challenges when trying to provide evidence to support their claim of fearing persecution for apostasy. While all people fleeing persecution rarely have the time or ability to gather documents before leaving their country, obtaining evidence for non-religion is particularly difficult due to social and legal restrictions that limit freedom of expression. Proving non-religion can be even harder to prove because it involves demonstrating the absence of belief, which is difficult to show through evidence:

Atheists are seldom made in a single process or act of conversion. They go through stages which are often personal, quite subdued affairs, perhaps lacking key signs – even to the individual. Atheists speaking about how they got to that state of being find difficulty in identifying dates or stages, or even processes. The atheist may not be aware of when he or she became one.

(Brown, 2017, p.71)

Changes introduced by the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA), which came into force on 28th June 2022, have compounded these difficulties

by raising the evidential threshold in determining refugee status. The result is a system that imposes unrealistic expectations on claimants whose experiences of belief change are undocumented and are shaped by fear of persecution.

Although claimants are not formally required to produce documentary evidence, this approach exposes a deeper paradox within the system: how can an individual be expected to prove the absence of a belief?

Burden of proof: Before and after NABA

Before June 2022, asylum claims were assessed under a single, relatively low standard of proof: a ‘reasonable degree of likelihood’ of persecution. This standard, well established in UK and international refugee law, recognised the difficulties in evidencing persecution and encouraged decision-makers to give claimants the ‘benefit of the doubt’. Decision-makers were expected to work with claimants to establish the relevant facts, acknowledging that documentary evidence is limited.

The changes of NABA (outlined on page 22) has effectively raised the evidential bar for many asylum seekers, particularly those with non-visible or internally held identities, such as for the non-religious. While Home Office guidance acknowledges the difficulties of evidencing threats of persecution, especially where such risks

¹⁴ HTS, or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is a powerful Islamist militant group that led the offensive to topple Syria’s Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024, with its leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa (Abu Mohammed al-Jolani), becoming Syria’s de facto leader and establishing a transitional government from its former stronghold in Idlib.

¹⁵ *Investigations in the UK* found interviews in which claimants were asked why they had sex so often, how many partners they’d had, and whether they attended ‘gay’ events.

cannot be documented, it nonetheless places the burden of proof squarely on the applicant.

Challenges for apostate claimants in proving their identities

The specific challenges faced by apostate claimants in providing evidence for their identities, beliefs and fear of persecution are outlined below:

1 Proving a lack of belief is inherently difficult

The primary challenge is that non-religiosity often develops as a private or concealed experience in contexts where apostasy and/or blasphemy carry legal and social repercussions. Legal, social, and familial pressures may suppress both the development and expression of alternative beliefs, leaving claimants with little or no material evidence of risk.

The asylum assessment is built around identifying positive attributes e.g., membership to a group, participation in rituals, holding specific beliefs. Non-religion is defined partly by absence, which does not produce clear external markers. Unlike religious communities, non-religion lacks formal theology, doctrinal practices, official holidays, or physical meeting spaces, and even humanist groups may have limited infrastructure in the UK.

Faith to Faithless explained that many asylum seekers simply do not feel safe attending ex-Muslim or humanist groups at all. A significant number of clients have expressed fear that participating in such groups, particularly those for ex-Muslims, could expose them to identification, surveillance, or community retaliation. For individuals who are already vulnerable, uncertain about their future, and afraid of being forcibly returned, engaging openly in non-religious or apostate spaces can feel too risky.

Demonstrating belonging to organised communities is further constrained by trauma, economic barriers, disability or limited access to online or in-person gatherings.

Providing evidence of particular humanist or secular meetings have also sometimes not met the evidence threshold. In an *example* provided by Faith to Faithless, when one applicant submitted a confirmation of attendance for an event organised by Humanists UK as evidence, the UK Home Office rejected the application, stating it was not sufficient. In another case, despite providing evidence of personal harm and demonstrating that their life was at risk, the Home Office rejected the claim on the grounds that the harm was not proven to be linked to non-religion. The rejection letter stated:

'You provided inconsistent evidence without reasonable explanation, and your account lacked sufficient detail. Elements of your case are implausible, with inconsistencies throughout.'
(Home Office)

2 Unrealistic expectations and the link to credibility

Asylum interviews for religion or belief-based claims often probe applicants in detail about their childhood beliefs, the precise moments or stages through which their worldview changed, and the moral or ethical principles they now follow. This structure reflects an assumption that belief is linear, reflective, and doctrinal; placing an unrealistic burden on individuals who have fled persecution, trauma, or social isolation.

Apostate claimants also find it difficult to recall and articulate these details in a coherent, linear way, as belief change is often gradual, private, and shaped by social pressures:

'There are a lot of unique ways and there are a lot of unique atheistic belief systems so that's a little bit harder and also for some of the people who are not able to speak English adequately.'
(Nabil, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, country of origin, Iran)



In a *case* provided by Faith to Faithless, a claimant has faced difficulty articulating their testimony due to limited capacity, their claim was rejected because: 'You provided inconsistent evidence without reasonable explanation, as well as a lack of detail' (Home Office, rejection letter).

Expecting applicants to provide precise timelines or explain abstract moral reasoning imposes unrealistic standards that misrepresent the lived realities of apostasy and non-religion. These expectations disproportionately affect people who are not highly educated, literate, or accustomed to articulating abstract ideas.

3 Perceived culture of disbelief

The heightened evidential threshold contributes to what commentators describe as a *'culture of disbelief'*. In this context, decision-makers may interpret uncertainty and a lack of

detailed evidence as indicators of fabrication, rather than as natural consequences of the suppression of non-religious expression, fear, or trauma (see page 39).

Because non-religious identities often leave little material evidence, applicants must rely primarily on oral testimony to establish their claims. This reliance is problematic in an environment where scepticism towards people seeking asylum is already prevalent. When testimony alone is scrutinised through a lens of suspicion, non-religious claimants face an additional disadvantage.

4 Visibility and behaviour-on-return requirements

Under Home Office credibility guidance post-NABA, decision-makers must evaluate whether a claimant would:

...on return to [Country-of-Origin], avoid behaviour which would attract persecution then you must ask why that would be so. If a material reason (and not necessarily the only reason) for avoiding such behaviour would be the fear of persecution, it is likely that they would qualify for refugee status. If they would avoid that behaviour for reasons other than a fear of persecution – for example because of established cultural norms or social pressures – it is unlikely they will qualify for refugee status. (API: Assessing Credibility, V.11, p.59)

Even when an applicant's apostasy is accepted as genuine, under these changes, claimants must demonstrate that persecuting authorities or communities would know or discover their beliefs upon return and whether they would avoid certain behaviour that might 'attract persecution'.

This requirement for 'behaviour on return' is particularly problematic for apostates, especially in contexts where religious conformity is both a cultural and social pressure. In such settings, it is difficult to distinguish between behaviour shaped by social or cultural pressures and behaviour motivated by a genuine fear of persecution.

Many apostates fled precisely to avoid exposure, or developed their non-religious beliefs later in life, giving rise to 'sur place' claims.

5 Risky behaviour created by evidential expectations

The evidential burden may inadvertently pressure claimants to take potentially risky actions to substantiate their claims. For example, some might feel compelled to publicly declare non-religious beliefs or engage in provocative acts, such as posting blasphemous content or symbolic gestures like burning religious texts, to provide 'proof' of apostasy. Such behaviours can expose claimants to real-world harm, highlighting the tension between meeting evidentiary expectations and maintaining personal safety.

This risk was highlighted by an advocate:

A lot of people in these countries, when they're thinking of claiming asylum, are actually putting themselves in even more danger, because in order to meet that threshold, they take the risk of openly blaspheming... to get some kind of tangible evidence that their life is under threat. (Rania, activist)

This is echoed in research on apostate asylum claims in Europe. Laws explains that the difficulty of meeting the evidentiary burden, combined with a prevailing 'culture of suspicion', has made increasingly extreme forms of evidence production more likely.

SUMMARY

Apostate and non-religious claimants face a distinct evidential burden: they must not only demonstrate the sincerity of their non-religion but also show that persecuting actors in their country of origin would likely discover or infer their apostasy. This requires claimants to evidence both their internal convictions and the external risk of exposure, an expectation that is often unrealistic in contexts where non-religious expression is concealed for safety or where claims arise sur place. As a result, individuals who have deliberately hidden their apostasy to avoid harm may struggle to meet evidential thresholds designed for more public or codified forms of religious identity. These findings reinforce calls to lower the standard of proof required for asylum claims to pre National and Borders Act 2022 levels from 'a balance of probabilities' back to 'a reasonable degree of likelihood'.

5. INTERPRETER ACCURACY AND BIAS

Interpreters play an important role in asylum adjudication processes as they aid with articulating asylum narratives. While their formal task is to translate accurately and neutrally, *academic research* shows that interpreters often take on a more involved role, at times filtering, shaping, or even guiding the narrative as it unfolds. Reports of issues working with interpreters during asylum interviews are widespread across asylum literature and have been noted as a specific issue for *religion-based claims*.

Inaccurate or misleading translations

For non-religious and apostate applicants, these challenges are compounded by the risk of bias or hostility from interpreters who may hold strong personal views about apostasy or blasphemy. Claimants may also experience fear or mistrust when assigned interpreters from the same national, ethnic, or religious background, which can inhibit disclosure and undermine the quality of their testimony.

The *UNHCR Handbook* requires that all asylum applicants be provided with 'the necessary facilities, including the services of a competent interpreter', to ensure they can present their case effectively. This standard is also reflected in the UK's Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs), the guidance emphasises that, 'You must ensure that the interpreter can translate the concepts and terminology of religious or non-religious groups in the country of origin' and:

It is important to note that, sometimes, a claimant raises issues of blasphemy or apostasy, and they may not want to speak the words deemed to be 'blasphemous' in front of an interpreter or interviewer perceived to be of a particular faith, out of deference to their feelings. In these circumstances you may wish to explain to the claimant that the interpreter will not allow their personal religious or other beliefs to influence their professional attitude, so they should feel free to say what they want to say without worrying about upsetting the interpreter or the interviewing officer. (API: Asylum Interviews, v9, p.49)

Despite these requirements, bias in interpreter accuracy remains a significant concern. For claimants from countries where 'atheist' or 'non-religious' are not commonly used or carry different meanings, language barriers add another layer of difficulty. Interpreters must therefore be able to accurately translate not only language but also the concepts and experiences relevant to religious and non-religious identity.



There is no available data on how many asylum decisions are affected by interpretation errors, but [evidence submitted](#) to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for the International Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Asylum Advocacy Group (AAG) in 2016 highlighted persistent issues. In the report, stakeholders reported that interpretation errors frequently lead to ‘inconsistencies’ in an applicant’s account, which the Home Office may then use as grounds for refusal.

A former director of the APPG for FoRB explained this issue in a research interview:

If you had someone who does not share your beliefs and that often might be the only interpreter that the Home Office can get, they were not sensitive to how religious persecution works or personal views work... This person disagrees with why the applicant is applying for asylum. They might even think they've committed blasphemy, and they'll give a really bad interpretation. (Laura)

Mistrust of interpreters

In this research, several participants with a refugee background described deep mistrust in working with interpreters. As a result, some chose to rely solely on their own language abilities during asylum interviews, a strategy that can significantly disadvantage those with limited proficiency. Youssef, for example, declined the offer of an interpreter because he believed the interpreter belonged to, or was sympathetic with, the same group that had persecuted him:

He was a Pakistani guy and he looked at me up and down, and I thought there's no way, I don't need an interpreter. There's no way I'm saying all that stuff in front of him here. He might know people here and that way I'm putting myself here in danger. (Zahid, date of asylum 2018, country of origin: Pakistan)

The APPG recommended that all caseworkers, interpreters, and decision-makers receive training on different forms of religious persecution and the right to freedom of religion or belief. This includes understanding specific religious and non-religious terminology, as well as the cultural contexts of applicants, particularly where the claimant belongs to a group considered ‘heretical’ by others from the same faith background. Such understanding is vital to ensure that an applicant’s words are accurately interpreted and that neither cultural misunderstanding nor personal bias distorts the record.

In response to the evidence submitted to the [APPG on FoRB](#), the [Home Office](#) stated in 2017 that it would produce an information document for interpreters to raise awareness of these issues, reinforce professional standards, and encourage ongoing professional development. To date, there is no publicly available Home Office policy or guidance titled or described as an information document on these specific interpreter awareness issues from 2017 or subsequently.

SUMMARY

Interpreter-related issues present significant challenges for non-religious and apostate asylum applicants. While interpreters are intended to act as neutral facilitators, research shows that bias, cultural assumptions, and fears can distort the accuracy of applicants’ testimony. Claimants may withhold information, modify their narratives, or forgo interpretation altogether due to mistrust, particularly when interpreters come from the same religious or national background. Linguistic and conceptual barriers around non-religious terminology further compound these problems. The APPG FoRB has therefore emphasised the need for specialised training to ensure interpreters understand the cultural, doctrinal, and belief contexts relevant to asylum claims, so that testimony is recorded without interference.

6. PERCEIVED CULTURE OF DISBELIEF AND SCEPTICISM

A ‘culture of disbelief’ has been widely recognised as shaping asylum decision-making in the UK and across Europe. The term refers to a tendency among Home Office decision-makers in assessing claims from a position of doubt and disbelief. Disbelief arises from perceived gaps or weaknesses in evidence, logical inconsistencies in applicants’ accounts, or discrepancies between their testimony and external information, such as Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs).

The Home Office’s API on *Asylum Interviews* emphasises the importance of assessing the credibility of claimants’ accounts. Applicants are expected to provide clear and consistent narratives of their experiences, and omissions, silences, or inconsistencies may negatively affect how their credibility is judged.

At the same time, the guidance instructs interviewers to create an environment in which claimants feel at ease and able to disclose all relevant information, including sensitive details, and to give them opportunities to explain any apparent inconsistencies. While the guidance avoids explicit language of doubt or disbelief, its emphasis on consistency and credibility can, in practice, create pressures that contribute to what has been described in research and advocacy literature as a ‘culture of disbelief’.

Non-religion in a culture of disbelief

This approach shifts the focus from protection to scepticism, creating additional barriers for claimants whose experiences are already difficult to evidence, such as apostates and those with non-religious identities.

For non-religious claimants, this culture has particularly harmful effects because non-religion develops in fragmented, private, or suppressed ways, making it harder to evidence or formally

articulate. This culture of disbelief can affect both parts of the two-stage asylum test: first, in proving the genuineness of non-religious identity, and second, in demonstrating that the individual would face persecution if returned to their country of origin.

There was strong evidence gathered in this research from human rights advocates and refugees reporting a culture of disbelief:

There was that, kind of, level of dismissal... people just see us as not as much of a problem as the religious, you know? Oh, you can, you know, you really don't believe in anything. Therefore, it doesn't matter to you. And there's just not the same parallel of esteem to non-religious beliefs. (Grace, campaigner)

A lawyer echoed these concerns:

I have to say in my experience, and I'm happy to say this out loud, that the way the Home Office deals with asylum seekers, it's from a point of disbelief. They don't believe you right at the beginning. (Lina, immigration lawyer)

Another lawyer argued that decision-makers have preconceived notions on the genuineness of claims depending on their country-of-origin:

There's probably institutional racism as well. I think because there's such a high level of Iranian claims, they're less likely to be believed whereas there's a relatively low rate of Saudi claims and Saudi is traditionally seen as more conservative, so they are more likely to be believed.

(Ella, immigration lawyer)

Amira, a refugee, explained her experiences:

*So, talking to an interviewer, they have this attitude where they are sceptical about what you're saying. It's extremely triggering, and to go through very difficult things and, they take you back to your childhood and in just two hours, it was just intense. The second I left the building I just broke down crying because of the intensity just hit me. **(Amira)***

Although the Home Office has disputed the existence of a culture of disbelief, public debates continue to question the genuineness of religion-based asylum claims. In 2021, the Home Office accused some churches of converting asylum seekers to Christianity to 'game' the asylum system. In March 2024, the Home Affairs Select Committee heard from a former Anglican Reverend who described a supposed 'conveyor belt' of baptisms for asylum seekers. This framing implies opportunism or deceptiveness, although it was widely refuted by clergy and advocacy organisations, due to the lack of evidence which supported this claim. Other speakers on the panel emphasised that faith journeys are complex, diverse, and in many cases are sincere.

As a result of this ongoing scepticism towards religious and belief claims, the experiences of non-religious claimants are particularly acute.

Decision-makers expect claimants to show visible or consistent signs of being a 'credible' apostate, drawing on narrow, localised understandings of belief. In practice, this can translate into an expectation of evidence, such as attendance at humanist groups, participation in public debates, or expressions of anti-religious sentiment. While some individuals may engage in these activities, expecting this of all claimants overlooks the diverse, personal, and often private ways that non-religion is lived and experienced.

This expectation intersects directly with broader challenges around evidence and credibility. Documentation in religion-based asylum cases is frequently regarded as 'self-serving' (explained by Kate, a legal caseworker), forcing apostates to navigate a delicate balance: providing sufficient detail to satisfy credibility assessments while avoiding suspicions of exaggeration. Oral testimony, which is already highly scrutinised, may be further complicated by fear, trauma, or the need to conceal one's beliefs prior to fleeing, echoing the issues raised in sections on interpreters and visibility-on-return.

SUMMARY

Addressing the culture of disbelief requires structural reform and a sustained investment in training and knowledge-sharing within the Home Office. Decision-makers must develop confidence and cultural competence in assessing complex belief-related claims, including apostasy and non-religion. This should include engagement with academic experts, faith and non-faith organisations, and lived-experience groups to ensure decisions are grounded in understanding rather than suspicion. Without such changes, the culture of disbelief will continue to produce unjust outcomes, particularly for apostates, who are expected to prove what they have spent their lives learning to hide.

7. TRAINING AND KNOWLEDGE GAPS

In 2019, the *FoRB training*, developed in collaboration with the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for FoRB, was designed to help Home Office officials make fairer decisions in religion-based asylum cases. Drawing on evidence from faith and civil society organisations, it sought to address long-standing interpretative and structural issues in the assessment of such claims. A key goal of the *training* was to move away from knowledge-based questioning of specific religious practices or doctrines, an approach that has often disadvantaged claimants from informal, non-traditional, or non-religious backgrounds.

A former director of the APPG for FoRB, who played a central role in advocating for the training, shared her perspective on its design and implementation, which included a handbook and a full-day training session:

*I thought it was really good. It was a whole day of training. I sat with other Home Office case workers who all came out really almost emotional, like grateful because they were like "we just didn't know what we were doing". They came out and they were like "I feel a lot more confident". **(Laura)***

A missed opportunity for systemic change

While the introduction of the *FoRB training* represented a positive step, and also described as 'pioneering' by the former director of the APPG for FoRB, there is little indication that this training has been expanded, institutionalised, or updated since, reflected in the persistence of challenges for assessing asylum claims. At the time of writing, Humanists UK, who worked with the Home Office to develop and deliver the training course for decision-makers, have made multiple attempts to re-engage with the department to continue the training, but to no avail.

In practice, asylum interviews continue to rely on knowledge-based questioning, such as testing an applicant's familiarity with religious texts or moral codes, rather than exploring their personal journey, emotional reasoning, or lived experience of leaving religion. This approach risks reinforcing misunderstanding and disbelief in cases where belief change is internal, fragmented, or shaped by trauma.

In 2025, the Home Office has made plans to recruit an additional 1,000 decision-makers with the aim of speeding up asylum decisions. While this may help address the existing backlog, prioritising efficiency over accuracy risks further disadvantageous complex cases like those involving apostasy, where claims require careful, nuanced, and contextually informed consideration.

Building on the foundation of the 2019 FoRB initiative, training should incorporate updated content, real case studies, and engagement with academic experts, humanist and non-religious organisations, and lived-experience groups. Doing so would strengthen institutional understanding, promote consistency, and improve the fairness and credibility of decision-making across the asylum process.

CONCLUSION

It's beyond sad that people who are horrendously persecuted are treated so badly. And yet we can help – because with the Ukrainians we opened our arms... We showed we could do it, and the public was on board. But you can see why: they are seen as real victims. (Ella, Immigration lawyer, 2023)

This qualitative research, conducted in collaboration with the human rights organisation, Humanists UK, has explored the barriers of receiving asylum protection for non-religious individuals. It has assessed the adequacy of existing Home Office guidance for protecting the non-religious, and has explored how these policies play out in practice through the lived experiences of refugees and advocates supporting them. The findings outlined in this report have shown there are structural barriers embedded within current asylum procedures, policies, and evidential frameworks, for apostate asylum claims.

Immigration, and asylum in particular, remains consistently ranked by the public as one of the most pressing issues facing the UK, and therefore one of the most critical areas for effective government management. This report offers evidence-based recommendations aimed at strengthening Home Office policy and practice in asylum decision-making. A robust and fair asylum system is in the shared interest of the public, people seeking protection, and the civil and public servants tasked with its administration. To fulfil its legal obligations under the Refugee Convention, it is essential that the Home Office's assessment procedures adequately reflect the diversity of contemporary asylum claims, including those based on freedom of religion or belief.

The British asylum system continues to undergo major reform, from the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) 2022 to the now largely repealed Illegal Migration Act 2023, which underpinned proposals for offshore asylum processing, including the Rwanda scheme legislated for in the Safety of Rwanda, (Asylum and Immigration Act, 2024) More recent developments by the former Conservative government and the subsequent Labour government, have included the *criminalisation of small boat crossings*, restrictions on family reunification, and the extension of the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain

from five to ten years. The UK has also made bilateral agreements through its 'one-in-one-out' arrangement with France.

During the writing of this report, in November 2025, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced and published Labour's proposed *asylum reforms*. Whilst there are no direct references to non-religious asylum claims, there are likely to be *serious implications* for these claims. The paper's core proposed reforms such as, introducing a 30-month 'core protection' status instead of the current five-year refugee grant, raising the residence requirement for permanent settlement to 20 years and stricter support rules. If applied, the non-religious will be put at a greater risk, as current policies do not recognise their distinct experiences of persecution, if placed on a temporary status, countries that are secular on paper may be deemed safe despite social hostilities towards blasphemy remaining.

Much of the government's focus has been on restricting the number of people reaching the UK rather than improving the handling of claims once they arrive. This preoccupation has left serious policy and practice gaps in how belief-related asylum cases, particularly those involving apostasy, are assessed. The majority of participants in this study were refugees 'sur place', having developed non-religious identities after arriving in the UK for



legitimate reasons such as study or employment. Their experiences underscore that deterrence-focused policies do not apply to, or protect, those whose identities change after legitimate reasons for coming to the UK.

Within this evolving landscape, the asylum process still places the burden of proof on the applicant to demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution. For non-religious individuals and apostates, this requirement poses unique challenges. These cases often involve deeply personal, internally held beliefs that are not publicly expressed or easily evidenced. This research demonstrates that credibility assessments within the Home Office are poorly equipped to recognise or evaluate such claims, relying on frameworks designed for religious identities rather than non-religious ones. As a result, apostate claimants must navigate bureaucratic processes that misrepresent or oversimplify their experiences, heightening the risk of wrongful refusals and potential breaches of the principle of non-refoulement.

Broader systemic issues, such as case backlogs, prolonged detention, and hotel accommodation, reflect the Home Office's ongoing struggles to process applications effectively. While these problems affect all asylum applicants, they pose particular risks for those with complex claims, such as apostates, whose cases require time, sensitivity, and trained officials to assess fairly.

The findings of this report highlight that the UK asylum system is currently falling short of its obligations under international law to protect individuals persecuted for their beliefs, including non-religion. Instead of investing in deterrence policies that have consistently failed to reduce irregular migration, greater emphasis should be placed on reforming the quality and fairness of asylum decision-making. This requires structural reform, better guidance, and sustained investment in training and knowledge-sharing across the Home Office. Protecting freedom of religion or belief, including parity with religion, must remain a central principle of the UK's asylum commitments, not a neglected aspect of them.

The UK government needs to address these shortcomings, and requires them to recognise the complexities of religion-based asylum assessment processes. As long as asylum assessments rely on the current policies and guidelines (at the time of writing), assessors risk making inaccurate determinations regarding apostasy claims, thereby putting individuals' lives at risk.

Following from the research findings, the following recommendations for policy and practice at the Home Office are suggested:

Recommendation area	Specific policy actions
Update asylum policies	<p>Review and update all relevant Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs) and Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) to include explicit recognition of persecution faced by non-religious individuals.</p> <p>Ensure that all asylum claims based on non-religious belief (including atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and secularism) are explicitly and fairly assessed against the full spectrum of human rights abuses, achieving parity with persecution claims based on religious belief, affiliation, and conversion.</p> <p>Create dedicated CPINs for countries where the persecution of the non-religious is a documented and severe problem. Priorities should be made for the Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE.</p>
Training for non-religion/apostasy	<p>Implement mandatory training for all Home Office staff on the revised APIs and CPINs to ensure a consistent and informed assessment of non-religious persecution claims.</p> <p>The training should equip decision-makers to recognise the iterative, non-linear nature of belief change and avoid imposing expectations of coherent or fixed narratives.</p> <p>Ensure that all asylum claims recorded on the grounds of apostasy and non-religion are accurately recorded. Ensure the asylum record has separate, specific categories: 'Persecution Ground: Religion/Belief', Sub-Category: 'Apostasy (Leaving a Religion)' and/or 'Non-Belief (Atheism/Humanism/Secularism)' to enable accurate tracking.</p>
Revise credibility assessment guidance	<p>Revise credibility assessment guidance to reflect non-religious belief systems, ensuring that credibility is not judged through tangible or religiously framed evidence.</p> <p>Improve training so that stereotyping and stereotypical expectations of non-religion do not appear in asylum interviews. Interviewers should be trained not to ask questions that test academic knowledge (e.g., 'Can you name the famous atheist writers?') or philosophical complexity. Instead, questions must focus on the personal experience and the impact of their non-religion on their life and safety.</p>
Adjust evidential burden and unrealistic expectations in testimony	<p>Revise the evidential requirements for non-religious claims so that the absence of objective evidence does not negatively affect case outcomes.</p> <p>Update guidance to promote trauma-informed, culturally sensitive questioning that accommodates memory gaps and evolving belief narratives. Interviewers should be trained to avoid overly detailed factual cross-examination if an applicant is clearly distressed, and instead focus on the core fear and the threat of persecution.</p>

Recommendation area	Specific policy actions
Improve interpreter practices	<p>Strengthen interpreter vetting and training, provide applicants with full interview transcripts, and introduce a grace period for corrections without adverse credibility implications.</p> <p>Introduce specialised training for interpreters on the nuances of faith terminology. Ensure the interpreter understands how to translate 'atheist' or 'humanist' accurately, and not defaulting to potentially derogatory or loaded terms like 'infidel' which can bias the decision-maker or lead to an inaccurate record.</p> <p>Produce an information document for all interpreters to raise awareness of these issues, reinforce professional standards, and encourage ongoing professional development.</p>
Embed fair and consistent decision-making	<p>Embed empathy and reduce bias in decision-making through regular training and anonymised peer review of decisions across teams. Implement alongside other recommended reforms to ensure a fair, consistent system.</p> <p>Integrate modules on Cognitive Bias Recognition into all decision-making training. Training should cover biases such as the 'confirmation bias' (seeking information that confirms a stereotype about a non-believer). This moves the goal from simply 'being fair' to actively addressing the mechanisms of unfairness.</p>
Strengthen training and knowledge	<p>Establish a structured, continuous learning framework to be rolled out for all Home Office staff who have contact with asylum claims and assessments. This includes all asylum caseworkers, interviewing officers, and decision-makers. Mandate a minimum number of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) hours per year specifically focused on Human Rights, CPIN updates, and emerging persecution trends.</p> <p>The training must address and actively counteract stereotypical expectations regarding the behaviour, language, and knowledge of non-religious individuals (e.g., the assumption that all atheists possess a deep knowledge of philosophical texts or can articulate a complex doctrinal rejection of religion) and use realistic, diverse case examples in training.</p> <p>Maintain active engagement with civil society and expert-led initiatives on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). With careful ethical consideration, involve people with lived experience (e.g. former asylum claimants, non-religious) in training design or delivery.</p>

Building on this research, a practical toolkit and best-practice guide will be produced in 2026 to promote fair, ethical, and consistent decision-making, and to serve as a foundation for ongoing training, policy development, and practitioner support.

Appendix: Asylum Policy documents and versions

Document title and type	Issuing authority	Version	Publication/ effective date	Date of access/ analysis
Asylum Policy Instruction (API) 'Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims lodged before 28 June 2022' (Home Office, 2022a)	Home Office, UK Gov	Version 10.0	June 2022	May 2023
	Source	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62bb17ed8fa8f5720dbef445/Assessing_credibility_and_refugee_status_pre_28_June_2022.pdf		
Asylum Policy Instruction (API) 'Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims lodged on or after 28 June 2022' (Home Office, 2022b)	Home Office, UK Gov	Version 11.0	September 2023	October 2023
	Source	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/650c698227d43b0014375b40/Assessing+credibility+and+refugee+status+post+28+June+2022.pdf		
Asylum Policy Instruction (API) 'Asylum interviews'	Home Office, UK Gov	Version 9.0	June 2022	May 2023
	Source	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68ef732a8427701993d5e0c9/Asylum+interview.pdf		
Country Policy and Information Note Bangladesh: Religious minorities and atheists	Home Office, UK Gov	Version 3.0	March 2022	May 2023
	Source	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bangladesh-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-religious-minorities-and-atheists-bangladesh-june-2025		
Country Policy and Information Note Iraq: Religious Minorities	Home Office, UK Gov	Version 3.0	July 2021	April 2023
	Source	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66e42d72e47cfc6de429d6a3/IRQ+CPIN+Religious+minorities.pdf		
Country Policy and Information Note Pakistan: Christians and Christian converts	Home Office, UK Gov	Version 4.0	February 2021	June 2023
	Source	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/663b68f474933dccbbb6c3d5/PAK+CPIN+Christians+and+Christian+converts.pdf		



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