

Walking a Tightrope

# Relevance, Responsiveness, Rigour and Responsibility in Policy-Related Research on Religion or Belief

**Professor Paul Weller** UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

PUBLIC POLICY



'Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales: Theory, Policy and Practice (2000-2010)' was a £400,000 project led by the University of Derby, in collaboration with the Universities of Manchester and Oxford. It was funded through an AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society programme large grant.



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



The research team actively engaged with what was a high level of media interest throughout the project.

This project built directly on research conducted by the University of Derby a decade earlier, which was funded by the Home Office following an open tender call for proposals to address research terms of reference determined by the Home Office. As the research was politically sensitive in view of contemporary pressure for a law on religious discrimination, the research team was required to sign the Official Secrets Act in addition to working within contractual obligations.

The research identified policy options for addressing the nature and extent of religious discrimination, but the terms of reference precluded us from making recommendations. Nevertheless, the project's findings directly contributed to the policy-making process that led to the *Employment (Religion or Belief) Regulations, 2003*, and subsequent legislation covering religion or belief as one of a range of 'protected characteristics'. The research was commissioned only after the UK government was committed to bring in some legislation in this area to meet its obligations under the European Employment Directive 2000/78/EC.

The research team actively engaged with what was a high level of media interest throughout the project. Unfortunately, the publication of the report coincided with a major outbreak of foot and mouth disease, and our findings received limited media.

Aware of this earlier project, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) commissioned me in 2010 to carry out an initial desk review of religious discrimination in Britain (2000-10). This study formed part of the EHRC's ongoing programme of work on religion or belief. While aspects of this project's results were reflected in an EHRC press release, media coverage unfortunately focused more on comments by its Chair on the broad area of work rather than the specific findings.



The 2010 award of AHRC funding provided an opportunity to undertake a longitudinal comparison with the earlier Home Office study. We amended our previous terms of reference to take account of legal and other changes in the intervening decade and to ask questions unconstrained by

predetermined policy terms of reference

The AHRC project has resulted in a number of publications, including a 4 x A4 *Summary Findings* document to share with research respondents and participants and others; a Policy Brief document for sending to key organisations and opinion formers in the public, private, voluntary and community; religion or belief, and legal sectors. Finally, Bloomsbury will, in November 2013, publish what it is intended to be a benchmark book on *Religion and Belief: Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts*, written by the interdisciplinary research team P. Weller, N. Ghanea, K. Purdam and S. Chervallil-Contractor

The project also included five Knowledge Exchange Workshops involving 211 practitioners from public, private, voluntary and community, religion and belief, and legal sectors. Participants in the workshops responded to the project's interim findings and so contributed directly to the research. They will also be receiving copies of the finalised Summary Findings and asked to disseminate these through their networks.

