

# **Christianophobia and state sponsored advocacy of the imposition of LGBTI ideology on evangelical Christians in the Global South:**

Analysis of a report by Wilton Park (an executive agency of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office) which urges the reinterpretation of scripture to make it compatible with LGBTI ideology and the teaching of LGBTI beliefs in Sunday schools and Queer Theology in theological seminaries. This analysis includes recommendations at the end.

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## **Main Concerns**

*The Wilton Park report makes a large number of recommendations, some of which are directed at LGBTI organisations, some at government and some at churches. The major concerns that arise in respect of these recommendation include:*

- a) A number of recommendations directly advocate actions which would very significantly reverse freedom of religion in countries where they were implemented.*
- b) It is the fact that Wilton Park is an Executive Agency of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office that raises serious concerns about a number of these recommendations. As such, unless disowned by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the publication of these recommendations by Wilton Park are in effect state sponsored advocacy of imposing serious restrictions on freedom of religion around the world. The Wilton Park report therefore represents a significant attack on the human rights of Christians around the world.*

## **Introduction: The Wilton Park meeting and subsequent published report**

Wilton Park convened a meeting 7-9 September 2016 on *Opportunities and Challenges: the intersection of faith and human rights of LGBTI+ persons*.<sup>1</sup>

Wilton Park have not published any list of those attending or the basis on which they were invited. The report asserts that the aim of the meeting was to promote “both” the human rights of LGBTI persons “and” the right to freedom of religion or belief. Despite this claim the ensuing report i) contains absolutely nothing that promotes freedom of religion or belief; and ii) a number of recommendations which if implemented would very significantly undermine it.

### **1. Redefinition of tolerance**

Underpinning the Wilton Park report is a redefinition of tolerance. The Chambers Dictionary defines tolerate as:

*To endure especially with patience, especially with patience or forbearance, to put up with; to treat fairly, to accept (a person with different religious, political, etc beliefs or opinions).*

The essential elements here are i) allowing opinions or behaviour of others to be expressed ii) despite dislike or disagreement with those behaviours or opinions. The second is clearly an essential element – as one only needs to tolerate opinions or behaviours one disagrees with as tolerance is not required for opinions and behaviours one agrees with. However, underpinning the Wilton Park report is a wholly different definition of tolerance. Tolerance is in effect redefined to mean:

Requiring people to agree with the ethical beliefs and ideological agenda of LGBTI activists, with anyone who does not do so branded as “intolerant” and even disseminators of “hate”.

This redefinition is itself intolerant because it requires all individuals and organisations, including churches, publicly to assent to a particular belief system, which is in significant respects contrary to their own deeply held beliefs. Far from being “tolerance” this is an homogenisation of belief.

### **2. Prejudicial language**

The report repeatedly uses language about evangelical Christians which is high prejudicial. For example:

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<sup>1</sup> Wilton Park *Report Opportunities and challenges: the intersection of faith and human rights of LGBTI persons* Wednesday 7-Friday 9 September 2016 | WP1488 <<https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WP1488-Report.pdf>> [accessed 29 June 2017].

### 2.1 Missionaries are described as:

- “spreading prejudiced views” (p1); Contributing “to the context in which these attitudes and behaviour have flourished” (p2) and People “‘who bought the trust of the people’ and entrenched hateful attitudes towards homosexuality, transgender and intersexuality.” (p2)

### 2.2 Evangelical Christians are described as:

- Having “intensified hatred, disseminating it in parts of the world which had previously exercised greater tolerance.” (p2)

### 2.3 Biblical Christian theology is described as:

- Reflecting “the heteropatriarchy of Christianity brought by western missionaries” (p3).

It is also suggested that churches who take a different view of homosexual acts from LGBTI ideology are acting immorally – and it is implied that the state should discriminate against them:

In situations when the state abdicates responsibility to provide services such as education or health, it also diminishes the ability to exercise moral authority against churches which are providing them. (p4)

## **3. Institutional racism: portrayal of the African church**

### 3.1 Portrayal of the Church in the Global South

The report portrays the church in the Global South, by which it appears primarily to mean Africa, in starkly negative terms. For example, p2 states:

In recent years, the spread of Islamisation and the growth of US based Protestant Evangelical churches have intensified hatred, disseminating it in parts of the world which had previously exercised greater tolerance. To some extent, evangelicals and Islamic states have made common cause in international fora to inhibit LGBTI human rights.

The Report goes on to assert that:

A strategy is needed to tackle this serious global problem. The approach will vary from place to place, according to local traditions, cultural norms and needs, but common components include: challenging the interpretation of sacred texts.

Later on the same page it claims that the problem of churches holding views on sexual ethics that are different from those of LGBTI ideology are due to:

the activities of missionaries ‘who bought the trust of the people’ and entrenched hateful attitudes towards homosexuality, transgender and intersexuality. This influence is amplified where there is poverty and churches can provide what the state cannot: schools, hospitals and other social goods as well as a community for people, many of whom are unemployed. The churches’ position gives them a powerful influence on cultural and political attitudes, which can include negative views of LGBTI people.

### 3.2 Institutional racism

The clear implication is that:

- i) There is a serious problem because the church in the Global South holds a different view of sexual ethics from LGBTI ideology.
- ii) The problem exists because Christians in the Global South have been misled by western missionaries both in the past and increasingly in the present.
- iii) Christians in regions such as Africa are incapable of interpreting the scriptures themselves and only adopt these positions because they are reliant on and subservient to western missionaries.

This is a most extraordinary example of institutional racism. One could perhaps, just possibly envisage this sort of racism in something written in the 1940s or 50s, although even that may be stretching the imagination a little. There is absolutely no attempt to engage with how Evangelical African Christians

themselves see the situation. It is solely an outsider's (i.e. in anthropological terms *etic*) perspective and very clearly a deeply prejudiced and patronising one.

The suggestion that Evangelical Christians in the Global South have simply imbibed incorrect interpretations of scripture from western missionaries and need to be challenged to reinterpret them will be deeply offensive to a great many Christians. It will be viewed by many African Christians in the same way as they view the attempt of western churches to impose their own liberal theology on them i.e. as both a denial of the faith and a form of cultural imperialism.

#### **4. Christianophobia**

The Wilton Park report contains extensive and significant levels of Christianophobia, both in the sense of intolerance towards Christians including negative stereotyping and advocacy of discrimination and even direct action against Christians.

##### **4.1 Negative stereotyping of Christians**

Evangelical Christians are repeatedly described as "prejudiced" and evangelical missionaries as intensifying and disseminating 'hatred'. For example:

Colonialism, in particular the criminalisation of homosexuality, the role of some missionaries in spreading prejudiced views, has contributed to the context in which these attitudes and behaviour have flourished. In recent years, the spread of Islamisation and the growth of US based Protestant Evangelical churches have intensified hatred, disseminating it in parts of the world which had previously exercised greater tolerance. (p1-2)

It is important to understand the sheer scale of the negative stereotyping of evangelical Christians, particularly in the Global South. As a 2011 Pew study very conservatively observed:

Sub-Saharan Africa has both the greatest concentration of evangelical Christians (13% of sub-Saharan Africa is evangelical) and the largest share of the world's evangelicals (38%).<sup>2</sup>

##### **4.2 Advocacy of discrimination and "direct action" against Evangelical Christians**

The Wilton report also implies that Christian organisations should not be allowed to provide health, educational and other services. For example:

This influence is amplified where there is poverty and churches can provide what the state cannot: schools, hospitals and other social goods as well as a community for people, many of whom are unemployed. The churches' position gives them a powerful influence on cultural and political attitudes, which can include negative views of LGBTI people. (p2)

In situations when the state abdicates responsibility to provide services such as education or health, it also diminishes the ability to exercise moral authority against churches which are providing them. (p4)

Elsewhere the Wilton Park report urges both litigation and "direct action", against Christians. For example:

Religious leaders should be held to account for their promotion of hatred against LGBTI people, including the exporting of hate speech, which can lead to violence and death. Queer lawyers and allies are well placed to challenge hate speech through administrative law and litigation. In some cases, direct action is more effective than dialogue in order to challenge hateful religious teachings. LGBTI people need to be clear where their opponents are invested and to understand when religion is being co-opted for nefarious purposes. Mass mobilisation can be a powerful tool. (p8)

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (Washington DC, Pew Research Center, 2011):69. As Pew include Pentecostal and charismatic Christians (14.8% and 6.4% of sub-Saharan Africa) in separate categories, the actual percentage of Evangelical Christians in sub-Saharan Africa is significantly higher.

It should be noted that throughout the Wilton Park report the use of the term “hatred” (or in this case “nefarious purposes”) relates to disagreement with LGBT ideology and beliefs which it illegitimately equates with hatred of LGBTI people.

## **5. Recommendations that significantly undermine the UK’s historic legacy of religion and promotion around the rest of the world.**

The following quotations are examples of some of the recommendations causing concern (areas of particular concern as indicated in italics):

### 5.1 State sponsored advocacy of a particular worldview and ideological belief system and funding to re-interpret the Bible to make it compatible with this:

In recent years, the spread of Islamisation and the growth of US based Protestant Evangelical churches have intensified hatred, disseminating it in parts of the world which had previously exercised greater tolerance. To some extent, evangelicals and Islamic states have made common cause in international fora to inhibit LGBTI+ human rights.

A strategy is needed to tackle this serious global problem. The approach will vary from place to place, according to local traditions, cultural norms and needs, but common components include:

- *challenging the interpretation of sacred texts* (p2 executive summary)

*Understanding of key religious texts* which appear to perpetuate discrimination *should be improved* by using well reputed scholarly texts *to challenge accepted versions* eg the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis Chapter 19. (p4 recommendation 17)

*More work is needed on theology and sexuality*, particularly with regard to traditional and indigenous religions where it is important *to challenge interpretations* of the past (p4 recommendation 18).

### 5.2 Advocacy of state funding to reinterpret the Bible to make it compatible with LGBTI ideology

Organisations need money:

- to develop strategies to challenge hatred and discrimination, for alliance building, for evidence and for campaigning
- *for research, including textual exegesis, to challenge the negative interpretations of faith leaders regarding sacred texts* (page 10 recommendation 100)

### 5.3 State sponsored advocacy of churches being required to teach LGBTI ideology in Sunday schools and theological seminaries

*Queer theology*, feminist theology and a theology of inclusion *need wider currency, particularly in seminaries*, in order to inform discussions around faith and LGBTI issues. Feminist theology can be used to challenge the anti-gender ideology of the religious right. (p4 recommendation 19)

Religious people eg teachers and *pastors should have generic human rights training so that they can understand LGBTI issues*. (p5 recommendation 29)

Encourage a child centred harm reduction approach in education. Suggest that *Sunday school teachers address sexual and reproductive health and rights*. Parents of LGBTI+ children – PFLAGs - can be helpful allies in advocacy and engage with inclusive educational materials. (page 9 recommendation. 79)

### 5.4 Advocacy of attempts to impose LGBTI ideology on Christians

*Religious leaders should be held to account* for their promotion of hatred against LGBTI people, including the exporting of hate speech, which can lead to violence and death. *Queer lawyers and allies are well placed to challenge hate speech through administrative law and litigation*.(p8 recommendation 73)

### 5.5 Advocacy of direct action against Christians

In some cases, *direct action is more effective than dialogue* in order to challenge hateful *religious teachings*. LGBTI people need to be clear where their opponents are invested and to understand when religion is being co-opted for nefarious purposes. *Mass mobilisation can be a powerful tool*. (p8-9 recommendation 73)

## **6. Implications for UK relations with countries that already restrict freedom of religion or belief**

In the light of these parallels it is a matter of profound concern that an organisation which is an executive agency of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has published a report recommending measures to enforce an ideology on religious believers, such as Evangelical Christians, in the Global South. This very substantially undermines some of the excellent work the FCO has recently undertaken in seeking to promote freedom of religion or belief (FoRoB) overseas.

Once it is accepted that any ideology can be imposed on those who hold conscientious disagreement with it, a very significant backward step has been taken both in relation to i) Freedom of Religion or Belief and ii) to humans rights generally.

That an executive agency of the FCO should publish such a set of recommendations is particularly damaging as it amounts, in effect, to a form of state sponsored advocacy.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

1. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office should immediately withdraw the Wilton Park report *Opportunities and Challenges: the intersection of faith and human rights of LGBTI+ persons*.
2. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office should immediately issue a statement stating that this report does not represent UK government policy.
3. The promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief around the world should be included as a major aim of UK foreign policy in the FCO Single Departmental Plan with all FCO departments and executive agencies required to ensure that their actions are at least compatible with this and do not in any sense undermine it.
4. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office should institute an inquiry into the operation of Wilton Park.