

Islam in the UK

A briefing note summarising the difference between the personal, public and political dimensions of Islam in the UK

At a glance

Islam is not new to the United Kingdom, but its presence, politics, and prominence in public debate is growing. Christians are called to respond – to Muslims as people made in the image of God, and to political Islam, or Islamism, as an ideology that poses genuine challenges to democratic freedoms. This briefing helps Christians engage both with clarity and conviction.

1. What is the difference between personal, public, and political Islam?
2. Why is political Islam a concern for Christians – and for all who value democratic freedoms?
3. How should Christians engage with Muslims as people and Islam as a political ideology?

Working definitions

It is helpful to distinguish between three forms of Islamic expression: personal, public and political. These aren't tightly sealed categories, but they do convey distinct components of Islamic practice. The extent to which each category is present and how they overlap may vary significantly amongst individual Muslims and between different branches of Islam.

PERSONAL ISLAM

The ritual practices of an individual Muslim: faith, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and giving. This relates to a Muslim's personal effort to follow Allah and attain paradise. It also captures Islam as a cultural mark of identity, especially in contexts where Islam has not been prominent historically, like in the UK. Internationally, many Muslims are of global majority heritage and so the Islamic faith serves as a unifier for Muslims living here as a minority religion.

PUBLIC ISLAM

These personal practices manifested in the public sphere, such as communal prayer, halal catering and Islamic dress.

These expressions are more easily accommodated within the liberal democratic system which regulates public life for all in the UK.

POLITICAL ISLAM (ISLAMISM)

This encompasses ideologies which hold that faithful Islam requires the establishment of an Islamic order —a polity governed by the sharia —and calls Muslims to work towards this end. This can be done by regular political means, or in some traditions, by violence.

Political Islam is not simply Muslims engaging politically; it conveys a commitment to replacing liberal democratic structures (seen as man-made) with religious governance (seen as ordained by Allah). It also often involves a subjugation of non-Muslims, making them subservient within an Islamic framework.

Our position

The Evangelical Alliance affirms the freedom of all Muslims to practise their faith, including in public and within the political arena. We support this as an expression of our Christian faith, which we believe underpins the civic freedoms enjoyed in the UK. We resist certain expressions of political Islam in so far as these expressions undermine democratic freedoms and human dignity, including for Muslims.

We are not advocating for a privatised faith, which we reject for ourselves, but we do advocate a sober and engaged assessment of the breadth of beliefs within Islam and the aspects of this diversity which constitute a danger to our shared life within the UK.

Background: a changing landscape

The growth of Muslim presence in the UK

Muslims have been part of British society for centuries, but the post-war period saw a steady and significant increase in the Muslim population, driven by labour migration, immigration, and higher birth rates¹. Today, Muslims represent approximately 6% of the UK population (around 4 million people). Half were born in the UK. Muslims are the fastest-growing religious community in Britain, accounting for 32% of overall population growth and registering a 44% increase between the 2011 and 2021 censuses².

The Muslim population skews young³ – 46% are under 24 – and is disproportionately affected by poverty: 40% live in England's most deprived neighbourhoods⁴. Anti-Muslim hate crime is on the rise, with 4,478 offences recorded in the year to March 2025, representing a 20% increase on the previous year and nearly half of all recorded religious hate crimes⁵.

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A shifting public conversation

For two decades, the Evangelical Alliance has helped Christians in the UK recognise and respond to militant secularism: the project of marginalising religion from public life. While secularism is still around, it is undeniable that the wider social and political landscape has shifted. Militant secularism has lost cultural dominance. In its wake, new contests have emerged: over identity, immigration, national belonging, and the place of Islam in British life.

Several factors have propelled Islam into the centre of public debate: population growth and demographic change; concerns about community integration; high-profile incidents of terrorism and the grooming gang scandal; the rise of new political voices on the right; and increased media scrutiny of Muslim communities. Conversations that were previously suppressed, often on the grounds of cultural sensitivity, are now mainstream. Islam has become an unavoidable feature of British public life.

This shift creates both obligation and opportunity for Christians. It is no longer adequate to engage only with secularism. Christians are called to think clearly about Islam, to speak truthfully about political Islam, and to resist the twin dangers of fear-driven hostility and naive avoidance.

Key themes of the current debate

Islam and Christianity: significantly different

Christianity and Islam can be problematically grouped together as 'Abrahamic faiths'. This hazard can imply the two are similar systems with different cultural dress. They are not. Between them lie beliefs that are not merely different but diametrically opposed.

Islam denies that Jesus is the Son of God and the Saviour of humanity. It frames the relationship between God and humans as one of submission and subordination rather than love and covenant. It is not a neutral alternative to Christianity from another part of the world; it is, as the Apostle Paul outlines a system of thought that sets itself up against the knowledge of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Navigating this requires both honesty and humility. Three factors complicate simplistic assessments:

- **Texts:** Islamic authority is more diffuse than in Christianity. The Quran, the Hadith and the Sirah are not always consistent, and they are written in Arabic, which most Muslims worldwide do not speak as a first language. It is therefore not unusual for a Muslim to be unfamiliar with core Islamic writings.
- **Teachers:** lay Muslims are heavily dependent on imams and scholars, meaning many are unaware of significant teachings within Islam. A Muslim's unfamiliarity with a doctrine does not mean Islam does not hold it.
- **Mohammed's trajectory:** there is a widely recognised distinction between Mohammed's earlier, more irenic teaching and his later, post-Medina teaching, where he established the first Islamic state and adopted more coercive and violent approaches to non-believers. Islamic jurisprudence generally holds that later sayings supersede earlier ones and so it is important to note the dates of sayings attributed to him when seeking to verify the relative authority of a teaching.

Integration, identity, and belonging

Questions about whether and how Muslims integrate into British society are among the most contested in public life. Some evidence points to robust civic engagement. Muslims are among the UK's most generous philanthropists, donating an estimated £2.2bn annually⁶. Yet a significant proportion of these donations go towards causes overseas. Surveys suggest that for many British Muslims, solidarity with the global Muslim community (the Ummah) takes precedence over local civic ties.

The 'racialisation' of Islam, the tendency of some Muslim advocacy bodies to frame Islamic identity in racial terms, creates additional complexity⁷. Ethnicity and religion are distinct categories and must be treated as such, even while acknowledging measures of overlap between them, including for Muslims. Opposition to political Islam is not racism. To treat it as such is to foreclose legitimate debate, which cannot be afforded.

Political Islam and democratic freedoms

Political Islam is not the simple phenomenon of Muslims bringing their faith to bear on political life, which is something all people of faith do, and which we affirm. It is an ideology which involves seeking the replacement of democratic governance with Islamic law and that regards non-Muslims as properly subservient within the resulting order.

This ideology is not marginal. It is present in long-standing schools of Islamic jurisprudence and shapes the legal systems of several nations, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Brunei and Afghanistan – systems characterised by the suppression of civil liberties, religious freedom, and the rights of women. The UK has not proscribed the Muslim Brotherhood as an extremist organisation; the UAE, by contrast, has restricted state scholarships for Emiratis studying in the UK on the grounds of radicalisation risk on British campuses⁸.

Political Islam also constitutes a threat to Muslims themselves – particularly to those who are moderate, reformist, or have left the faith. Christians must be clear that their resistance to political Islam is not an expression of hostility to Muslim people, but of solidarity with the democratic freedoms that protect everyone.

Key challenges for Christians

Christians seeking to engage faithfully should consider:

The breadth of Islam

Islam encompasses an enormous range of traditions, schools of thought, and lived expressions. Engaging Muslims as a monolith is both inaccurate and unfair. Yet acknowledging complexity is not the same as refusing to name genuine concerns. The rejoinder “not all Muslims” does not dispose of the challenge of political Islam; the real way to honour complexity is to name it carefully, not to avoid it.

The relativising of religious belief

Secularism has conditioned many in British public life to treat all religious belief as equivalent and ultimately inconsequential. Christians know this is false, and we support freedom of religion and belief (FORB) not as a concession to neutrality but as an expression of our conviction that God has endowed all human beings with dignity and conscience. This support for FORB is not shared by political Islam, which seeks to foreclose it.

The co-opting of the gospel

The gospel is being weaponised from both ends of the political spectrum. On the right, Christian language can be used to advance ethno-nationalist agendas. On the left, biblical concepts like love and justice are stretched to deny exclusive truth claims and preclude any serious critique of Islam. Both distortions dishonour Christ. Christians must be equally alert to both.

Polarisation

Public discourse around Islam is becoming increasingly fractious. Christians are not immune to partisan politics. We must resist both the scaremongering of those whose interest is in stoking fear, and the wilful blindness of those who refuse to name genuine dangers. Neither serves the truth, and neither serves the welfare of the nation.

Fear of reprisals

Critique of Islam – particularly of Mohammed – carries genuine risk. Cases in France, Sweden, Denmark, and the UK have demonstrated that public criticism can attract severe and violent responses, as does renouncing the faith, experienced by many Muslim-background believers. Christians must be honest about this pressure without being silenced by it.

The Church's response

In a polarised and anxious public climate, we are distinctively equipped to respond to both Islam and political Islam with clarity, compassion, and courage. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world (2 Corinthians 10:3–4). The wisdom that comes from Heaven is “peace-loving, considerate ... full of mercy and good fruit” (James 3:17).

01

See Muslims clearly

Muslims are people for whom Jesus died, made in the image of God. Christians must distinguish the individual from the ideology. Hostility towards Muslim people is incompatible with the gospel. Befriend Muslims, pray for them, and bear witness to Christ – whose love is the deepest answer to every human longing.

02

Name political Islam honestly

Political Islam is not simply Muslims engaging with politics; it describes ideologies which seek to replace democratic freedoms with religious governance. Christians must resist this, not out of fear, but out of conviction. This resistance is, in itself, an expression of our commitment to freedom of religion and belief for all.

03

Resist fear and tribalism

The greatest temptation is to be swept into fear-driven or partisan narratives. Christians must hold a third way: clear-eyed about the challenge of political Islam, warm towards Muslim neighbours, anchored in Jesus, and resistant to both the hostility of the right and the naïveté of the left.

Helpful resources

- Friends International (2004), Other cultures, religions and worldviews: simple guides to other worldviews and religions [[Online](#)].
- Elam Ministries (2018), Safar 121 discipleship journey [[Online](#)].
- Mahabba Network (2021), A quick guide to Islam and sharing faith with Muslims [[Online](#)].
- The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics (2021), Engaging Islam [[Online](#)].
- Bannister, A (2021) Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God? IVP Publisher
- London City Mission (2021), 10 things to know when sharing Jesus with Muslims [[Online](#)].
- Radical Revelations (2026) Why so many Muslims are turning to Jesus [[Online](#)].
- Evangelical Alliance (2026) Reflections on the government's social cohesion plan and anti-Muslim hostility definition [[Online](#)].

References

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- [2] Office for National Statistics (ONS) – *Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021* [Online]. Available at: [Religion, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics](#) (Accessed 2 July 2026)
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- [7] Muslim Council of Britain (2022), *Race, Faith and Community in Contemporary Britain* [Online] Available at: <https://mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Race-Faith-Community-in-Contemporary-Britain-PMB2022-...> (Accessed 6 July 2026)
- [8] Parker C and Woolcock N at The Times (2026), *UAE limiting students coming to UK over Muslim Brotherhood concerns* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/education/article/uae-limiting-students-coming-to-uk-over-muslim-brothe...> (Accessed 6 July 2026)