

Faith and England's National Identities launch event, online, 4th February 2026: responses to the keynote speaker, Professor Linda Woodhead, from Ibrahim Mogra, Deesha Chadha, and George Wilkes.

1. Ibrahim Mogra.

Ibrahim is a Leicester based Imam and former Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain.

Thank you, Linda.

I'll begin my response by commenting on 'authoritarian religion'.

I think it is important to make a distinction between 'authoritarian' and 'authoritative', because Islam denounces 'authoritarian' as oppression ('Zulm') but endorses 'authoritative' as a 'safety valve' against this, because it is embedded in scholarly approaches and a system of checks and balances where scholars engage, debate and dissent in opinions in order to arrive at an approximation of 'truth'. This is not 'absolute' truth, but truth as in the outcome of human endeavour; contextual, time bound, and evolving. In Islam, humility in the exercise of agency is always the scholar's conclusion 'And Allah knows best'. It is a reminder that all human endeavour is subject to human frailty - ego, greed, vanity, etc.

On authoritarian religion in Islamic history, I would say that it is not new. There are periods in Islam's history – particularly modern history – when religion has been instrumentalised to serve the interests of the state. In this regard, states have tried to usurp the moral legitimacy offered by religion to mask immoral practices such as restrictions to democratic freedoms, inciting sectarian violence or denying women their full rights. Authoritarian states usually have much more in common in their outlook and actions than the religious distinctions that separate them. This is to say that authoritarian religion can happen anywhere where the rights of the faithful to speak truth to power is undermined.

And now coming to Christian nationalism. Muslims are perhaps only too keenly aware of the 'British Christian Right' that Professor Francis Davis writes about in his piece on this website. The evangelical current in the movement has long been a bugbear of British Muslim communities because of the way in which Muslims have been demonised, derided as 'disloyal', and pushed further to the margins by efforts to promote exclusivist politics.

Let us look at some examples:

1. The 'incitement to religious hatred' legislation which John Denham will recall was a Bill promised by the Blair governments of 1997, 2001 and 2005. The Bill was subjected to ferocious criticism and scrutiny by evangelical organisations like the Christian Institute. Such organisations are now at the forefront of challenging the adoption of a definition of Islamophobia by the Government.

2. The 2019 report on ‘Countering Hateful Extremism’ by the Commission for Countering Extremism: although not fully elaborated in the report itself, it identifies that a third of respondents to the survey were ‘Christians’ who took aim at ‘Islamists’ in their responses, and that the responses had the hallmarks of an orchestrated campaign.

3. The interconnected network of church, media, politics and civil society organisations that drive an anti-Muslim discourse on our public life – something that Baroness Sayeeda Warsi discusses in her recent book, *Muslims Don't Matter*.¹

Christian nationalism, particularly its authoritarian tendencies, is keenly felt by Muslim communities, and it is heartening to know that Christians are alert to the dangers these authoritarian tendencies present, not just to their own faith tradition but to minorities too.

And now some thoughts and reflections on Englishness.

- Muslims have a checkered record on this front because of the ‘nationalist’ and ‘ethnic’ bias that is often projected onto the idea of Englishness. In the 2001 census, Muslims were more likely to consider themselves British than English. But in the 2021 census, this is not so much the case.

- one could argue that the usurpation of Englishness as a ‘white ethnic’ identity is being challenged by Muslims who are keen to assert their own attachment to their home; the majority of British Muslims live in England. It is probable that in years to come the regional identities that exist across England – from Muslim Yorkshiremen to Muslim Brummies – will find more comfortable expression in their Englishness than Britishness.

- devolution, and the presence of regional government in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, means that Islam has taken on parochial identities in other parts of the UK: for example, Scottish Muslim identity, Welsh Muslim identity, and Northern Irish Muslim identity. The absence of an English parliament, and the fact that the Westminster parliament is a UK-wide representative body, means that Muslims in England don't have the advantage of shaping their identity around a regional government. Though in contrast, other political formations – such as Metro Mayors, Combined Authorities, and Police and Crime Commissioners – are providing opportunities for Muslims to evince identities that are localised and connected to spatial boundaries.

In conclusion, Muslims have the youngest age profile of all religious groups in the UK. Their identities are evolving and adjusting to their social and spatial environments.

Authoritarian religion does present enormous challenges to the trajectory of Muslim identities in the future, particularly in relation to rights to equality and liberty, but it also presents an opportunity to younger Muslims to pushback against attempts to characterise them as ‘migrants’ when they are born, bred, and bound to their faith and their country.

¹ Sayeeda Warsi, *Muslims Don't Matter*, London: Little, Brown, 2025.

2. Dr Deesha Chadha OBE

Deesha is a National Executive Committee member of the Hindu Forum of Britain, and co-chair of the Faiths Forum for London. In her professional role she is a Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Chemical Engineering at Imperial College London.

Thank you so much, John, and thanks to Linda and Ibrahim as well.

I want to begin by moving backwards a little before I move forwards, because my context really does shape how I understand my faith.

I was born and raised in London. I'm very proud of being a Londoner, and I'm Hindu-Punjabi by background. So, I am more cultural than religious. I came to my religion very late in life, and I'm naturally quite observant, so I'm kind of entering places of worship, Hindu Mandirs, and trying to understand what faith means. And I was in my early 30s at this time of my life, and I see authoritarianism within my faith and other things that have added to the dialogue in both constructive and less constructive ways as well.

So, when I first came into these places of worship, a lot of these institutions were very much about community building. So, when Linda spoke of this idea of Tommy Robinson going to churches, and their just being places where you meet nice people, and you are in a place where people have similar values to your own, it becomes a community, it becomes a social network held together by particular beliefs, values, principles, and so on and so forth.

I very much found that first and foremost, and that was something that wasn't part of my upbringing, because my sense of community up until that time was quite a different one. And it is rules based. It is about having a particular identity, and each temple seems to have its own identity to a degree. Well, when I first started coming into these spaces, they weren't so authoritarian as they seem today. So, over the past 20 years, I've noticed the shift, and I think this shift has come from a number of different places, and I'm going to just say a little bit about this. I think the geopolitics of the world itself hasn't helped matters, particularly in India, where we now have a right-wing Hindu government.

Things that are decidedly Indian – and thus nationalist – seem to find a way into British society. I am not okay with that. We now have a right-wing Hindu government in India, and rightly or wrongly, what happens there carries over here. The Leicester riots shook everyone. Young men carrying baggage and anger from somewhere else brought it into a nation that principally doesn't support it. There was a blame game, and what we really needed was a mature conversation about undercurrents, about where othering came from, and why people took this path. My upbringing was inclusive, diverse, multicultural. What I'm seeing now is not what I saw twenty years ago.

Authoritarian religion, as I understand it, refers to strict hierarchy, unquestioning obedience, rigid moral codes, intolerance of dissent, and a strong in-group/out-group mentality. And there are places where authoritarianism exists, and places where it does not.

One place where it does exist is in traditional structures – particularly in our places of worship. The gatekeepers are all men, and this can be problematic. Women do faith, and usually in a more compassionate way. The existence of Women’s Faith Forums – across faiths – tells us everything we need to know about how widespread the problem is. The priesthood allows for women clergy in some traditions, but the places of worship themselves remain more resistant.

Temples have increasingly become rules-based, enforcing doctrine, securing funding to keep the lights on. Some have a power all of their own – ISKCON, BAPS Swaminarayan. These places are not representative of who I am religiously, and yet they hold national sway and significance. I often feel that these organisations do not speak for me, and yet they have the ear of government or even the monarchy. That can be dangerous, depending on how that voice is exercised, especially given how diverse Hinduism actually is. We pray differently, believe differently, speak different languages, and move in and out of our faith with fluidity.

Authoritarian religion also appears in a different way. We are a Church of England nation, and there is a backlash against migrants and refugees. Union Jack flags and St George’s Cross flags have appeared on my own high street. The council refused to take them down, saying it would draw more attention if they did. It’s a ridiculous excuse. These flags are being used as a front by right-wing groups who want to ‘reclaim’ something that was never theirs to weaponize.

But there are also places where authoritarianism doesn’t seem to exist – particularly in leadership.

So, there are places where most of my work is in the interfaith space rather than in the faith space. Okay, so faith I came to a little bit later. I’m more known as someone who contributes to interfaith dialogue and community building. And there are people not from my own faith, but who I think are really good examples of where it’s not seen. One is the incoming Archbishop of Canterbury, who I think is phenomenal. I’ve done some work with her on her health inequalities work, and she is a fantastic example of a female faith leader who has a lot of small fires to put out, and some fairly large ones as well, who is actually kind of driven by trying to rebuild the church, but doing it in solidarity, in unity with other faiths as well. And she is a very active listener and a very compassionate individual, so I think she’s a good example of where I think we want to move towards.

And the other example, I think, is that of the Mayor of London. Again, I work with him and his team on London resilience, and he works quite hard on understanding his own Muslim identity, but ensuring that London thrives by the building of community and making sure that no one’s left behind. So, he starts off from a very grassroots place, and I think it’s seen, and it’s acknowledged by those that work closely with him, and for the good of London as well.

And the other thing that I would mention, following in the same vein, is that when Rishi Sunak became the Prime Minister of Great Britain, his faith almost became the last thing you noticed about him, because he was driven mostly by this idea of strong governance and wanting to lead, and he didn’t use his faith in any particular way as a label or as a sword or as a shield. He just kind of got on with the job of governing.

I also see that there are pushbacks. So, from my own faith, there are two examples that come to mind of a younger generation who have seen what I have seen, in the sense that faith is becoming more authoritarian and that there is scope and there is a need, and there is a willingness to step away from those things.

For example, Surya Community Energy, of which I am a founding director, is initially working with Hindu temples in Leicester to convert traditional energy sources to solar, and use the savings to create a community fund. It's about using Hindu principles and values to do something worthwhile. And it's on that basis that we're driving this project forward. Okay, we were doing our service to society, but there's no supporting institutional foundation other than we're coming together because we have the same belief system.

Similarly, the Bhajan Bop Project in Leicester, run by a friend of mine, teaches children about Hindu deities through music and religious songs. It's not affiliated with any place of worship because that became too limiting. They wanted to be expansive, to create space for anyone who wanted to join. They've hired a community hall – it's not aligned to any place of worship *per se*.

Recognising spaces of authoritarian religion, whether they come from within or without, and trying to understand that narrative, expose it, or work around it takes vision, courage, and compassion.

There are spaces of hope, and there are places of concern. But there is movement, and there is momentum. And that gives me faith – both in people and in the possibility of something better. Thank you.

3. Dr George R Wilkes

George is Director, Project on Religion and Ethics in the Making of War and Peace at the University of Birmingham, and an Honorary Fellow of the Edward Cadbury Centre. He is also a former board member of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

I want to thank John Denham and the other organizers of this programme. They have opened up a space for scholarship and public engagement on Faith and England's National Identities which encourages openness, critical reflection, and a willingness to engage across sensitive divides, qualities which are not always seen as the normal English response to divisions, whether political or religious. I argue here that they should be.

I also want to thank Deesha and Ibrahim: it is an honour to follow you.

I want to start my appreciation of Professor Woodhead's lecture by noting how much it is characterized by a forthright, yet sensitive, argument, and by a multidisciplinary engagement, spanning the academic study of politics, sociology and religion. The legacy of her engagement for this scholarly programme should be an encouragement to more such robust and open reflection.

My response reflects first and foremost my own disciplinary background. I speak as a historian – a modern historian – and as a scholar of religion whose research has taken historical, philosophical, and sociological approaches. You will also notice that I am a Jew. You will observe that I am a liberal, attached to English liberalism as a tradition of thought and as a marker of public habit. And you will also see that I am an engaged interfaith activist, believing in the transformative power of dialogue and social encounters, and associating the impact of interfaith activity with increasing empathy and sensitivity to the real value of pluralism.

These different commitments combine for me, so I hope that you hear that I am not separately historian, scholar of religion, English, Jewish, liberal, and interfaith enthusiast – rather, these parts of me interact. For instance, I recognise that it is much easier to be Jewish in the multifaith England that we have become, or are becoming, notwithstanding the persistent levels of antisemitism currently troubling our public sphere.

I should add, I live in Edinburgh, in Scotland, where a multifaith reality has also been developing, alongside a recognition of growing secularization, and where it feels comfortable in my experience to affirm a sense of Englishness, to join the vibrantly cross-cultural society which is affirmed in different ways as a part of local public discourse. Like many people, I think of Englishness as a product of the experience of these different parts of me working at the same time, sometimes interacting, sometimes being more a matter of feeling than of clear understandings, and being a sense of being part of a historical process which I may also recognize in other English people with very different backgrounds and convictions. I also recognize that there are distinct boundaries to the ease with which diversity is received as an important source of public value, and as a feature of the lives of much of our society about which there is pride but also sensitivity and real vulnerability.

Linda has offered to us a rich, an engaged, and a multi-faceted analysis. Her lecture focused on what authoritarian religion is; how it relates to our process of identity formation as individuals, as communities and as a nation; what we should be anxious about; what is not authoritarian and therefore not a cause for anxiety; and what we can feel better about, or more optimistic about. She has suggested that a faith-friendly English identity may be healthy, moderate, rights-affirming, diverse and inclusive.

At the same time, as observers of English politics, religion and society today, we would be unwise to overlook the extent to which there are extremists who adopt religion as a mobilizing tool, who use means to promote their positions which are authoritarian, and whose ends are authoritarian. Linda's reflections encourage us not to be overly generous about authoritarian habits out of a sense that we English enjoy a collective protection from authoritarianism – in one set of common views because we have internalized a set of pragmatic, or liberal, or conservative lessons based on English history, or, looking at English history from another perspective, based on the fortunate avoidance of the extremes experienced in the modern history of other European countries.

We cannot dismiss authoritarianism as marginal in our religious history and in our religious communities today. Moreover, in England, and across Britain, authoritarian actors can rely on

allies and institutions in the mainstream of our religious landscape to accommodate them. That is also the argument made by Professor Francis Davis in his essay on the Christian Right on this website, to which Linda refers. As Francis shows, tolerance for an un-Christian nationalism has been enabled to the extent that leaders of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches avoid spelling out the grounds on which authoritarian approaches to religion diverge from Christian teaching, and do so in ways that promise to cause harm to believers and to the larger public.

Both Linda and Francis focus on the difficulties of articulating a religious response grounded in political realities. In response to that, I will add my reflections on one of the conditions for redressing this: a self-aware civil society seeks to ensure that dogma does not block evidence-based and inclusive policy making. I want to suggest that this reflects an English tradition of reflection on ‘civil and religious freedom’, and on the flourishing of a civil society, which can be clearly seen in the political and religious thought of John Locke (1632-1704), and thereafter of religious and secular thinkers of the widest variety of denominations, beliefs and political inclinations. My contention is, moreover, that there is something even quintessentially English about the notion of a civil society that does not pit different parts of society, religious or not religious, against each other, but which insists on something better.

Insofar as it is true that we have reasons for anxiety, this resonates with the idea that we – in England, and across the United Kingdom – do not deal well with conflict. It may be seen that this is closely related to the ways in which we do not deal well with difference, religious as well as political. We are familiar with this sense of conflict-aversion in the story we tell of our collective response at the end of the civil wars of the seventeenth century: in England, we focus especially on the English Civil War, and in Scottish schools, this is presented with especial attention to the events of the Scottish (rather than only the English) Civil War, and as a part of the War of the Three Kingdoms. These were wars which had bitterly divided the leaders of public institutions and of communities across the British Isles, and which divided families.

At war’s end, we tell ourselves, the legacy of the antipathies which caused the war encouraged an agreement not to address the causes of religious and political division in public: amnesty, and amnesia. And certainly not at the dinner-tables of the well-to-do, nor of those aspiring to the membership of a good society. As a result, England's post-Civil War settlement promises a certain kind of pragmatic, live-and-let-live tolerance. Nevertheless, our modern history has also been marked by anxiety: over national identity, over religion, over the meaning of equality and the common good. These anxieties are not necessarily the same as the divisions of the seventeenth century – every age brings new sources of anxiety, over differences which may be as small as they may be large.

For instance, English anxiety over small differences of ‘class’ flourished in the nineteenth century. It may be seen that this anxiety was fed by a disinclination to talk openly about the causes or the deeper nature of social differences. Through evasion or through repression of public reflection, we can hope to retain our own sense of balance, of equanimity, of order. A habit of reaching for a generalizing and rosy discourse about what is common to the English

is also a reflection of this evasion of difference: happily bold about normative expectations, but quiet about the very present vulnerabilities of different parts of society.

The Jewish community in England, for instance, has from the seventeenth century adopted a defensiveness or a caution about sharing its vulnerabilities, instead seeking protection in the assertion of common values and loyalties, as has been underlined in the works of Tony Kushner² and other historians writing across the last twenty years. In thinking about the need for clear reflection where we confront differences in the public sphere, we may still witness that there are ways in which our political system carries elements of the solution adopted by our seventeenth-century forebears. Yet this is not just a marker of something distinctive to the English. Linda helpfully compares our challenge with the observations of Charles Liebman, an Israeli sociologist of religion writing in the 1980s about the rise of religious extremism in Israel, who observed the frailty of Israeli civil religion when faced with uncivil challengers. Institutionalised forms of religion need not be antique in order to foster behaviour which is criticized as evasive, cautious, fragile, or insufficiently creative.

By contrast with this first, more troubling dimension of our discussion of faith and English identities, there are also some very excellent essays on this website which do something that I suggest is equally English: they focus on normative expectations, that are widely held, of a robust English multiculturalism, and they critically evaluate this by comparisons with other English-speaking societies. That framing is also very English.

To my mind, we ought also to compare ourselves with other societies, across Europe and on the other side of Europe: with post-Ottoman societies, for instance, or with the successor states to Catholic and Orthodox Christian empires, where there is no necessary consensus over civil religion or secularism, societies which remain publicly unsettled, anxious, conflict avoidant, but public about difference.

We English, or we Brits, can be very much like those societies as well. Societies where religious and secular political totems are used to mobilize conflict narratives. Where partisans of unsettlement hitch themselves to religion and often receive a better hearing than moderate establishment voices. My work on 'Religion and Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina',³ pursued in partnership with colleagues in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia, has dug into the complexities which appear when the relationships between religion, politics and social cohesion are examined at multiple levels, or at different scales, locally, and looking at different parts of the population in all their variety, instead of taking generalisations about the nature of political conflict and religious difference from the narrow range of sources which are most recognizable in a public sphere dominated by the leaders of the largest political parties.

Expectations of the other are quite different in local conversations, or in surveys of popular opinion, from caricatures set by the public interventions of party political leaders. Similarly, in the results of surveys and focus groups, the most widely preferred role models are selected

² e.g. Tony Kushner, ed., *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness*, 1992.

³ A selection of project publications will be found at <https://www.ceir.co.rs/index.php?strana=pages/ed1.php>.

for their distance from the conflict narratives that are familiar from the media and election season. And we can expect comparable dynamics to be at play here, even if the conditions in which social, political and religious opinion formation differs. In East and West, we can all do better at addressing the vulnerabilities that lie behind the grievances which are used to divide us today. Social media gives the merchants of division a huge head start over the defenders of compromise and reflection. This is a global problem, a European-wide problem, and also a very local English problem.

There are also grounds for a degree of confidence about English pluralism. The champions of a careful embrace of diversity in England have made the running in our history, and purists ignore this to their detriment – although in some cases their game may rely on ignoring this, even there it will impact on their success.

I am thinking of the transformations in English life brought about thanks to the evangelical Anglican-led Clapham sect, embracing such figures as Henry Thornton (1760-1815), William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the Scottish statistician Zachary Macaulay (1768-1838), and his English son, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859). Through a balance of principle and pragmatism, and working with a wide range of Christians and Jews, they helped to abolish slavery and the slave trade. The success with which they steered a plethora of social and constitutional reforms through Parliament reflected a combination of faith and energetic networking across the diverse constituencies which could be engaged for their causes inside and outside Westminster. They established a dynamic network which was also central to the campaign which eventually extended civil and political rights to Jews, though they remained of the belief that Christianity would prove to be right for Jews as well as Christians. They were passionate evangelicals who also insisted that a thriving civil society must be constituted at one remove from particular group identities, and that Christians should be faithful and optimistic enough to trust in the results of a shared charity, a shared politics.

The speech on Jewish emancipation delivered by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1833 is an eloquent reflection of this faith.⁴ While theirs is not my doctrine, when I am watching any champion of such a confident English embrace of civil and religious diversity – whether it be offered by a Muslim, by a Sikh, or by an atheist – it feels easy to be grateful, and it feels necessary to be responsive. Theirs is the faith in a vibrant civil society that does not pit different parts of society, religious or not religious, against each other, but which insists on something better.

⁴ www.commentary.org/articles/lord-macaulay/cedars-of-lebanon-a-speech-on-jewish-emancipation/