

**Effective Community Policing: Negotiating Changing Religious Identities**

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[Download the full report](https://web.archive.org/web/20111230182512/http%3A/www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/assets/files/Effective%20Community%20Policing.pdf)

**Executive Summary**

This Report gives the results of interviews with members of the Metropolitan Police Service’s territorial policing teams in the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Barking & Dagenham. The research set out to establish the place that awareness of religion and of (changing) religious identities occupy in the operational policing environment. More specifically, it sought to identify the extent to which operational officers engage faith communities and recognise religion as significant in their work, how they do so, and in what contexts they do so. The intention of the research was to identify good practice and make suggestions whereby this work could be best developed and supported. Our goal is to help police develop the ways in which they understand and navigate the complex social geography of their local communities in order to enhance an effective and responsive policing service by forming appropriate, positive relations with local religious communities and to navigate issues of belief, faith and religion as they arise in the operational and institutional environments of British policing.

It should be read by those who seek to understand police engagement with faith communities, with religion and belief, and who wish to help develop practice and performance in relation to:

* neighbourhood policing, especially
	+ community engagement,
	+ community accountability,
	+ ‘big society’ initiatives, such as community involvement in criminal justice,
	+ the extension and expansion of other community involvement structures, such as the special constabulary and volunteers in policing;
* faith-hate and religious aggravation;
* diversity as an internal and external agenda;
* critical incident evaluation where religion may be a factor; and
* religiously-based counter-terrorist work.

The significance of police engagement with faith communities receives little public acknowledgment and has correspondingly received next-to-no academic attention as an area which might be deserving of scholarly study or, indeed, of academic support. The one exception has been the engagement of police with Islam and with Muslim communities in the context of counter-terrorism. Important as that sphere of active engagement unquestionably is, this research set out from the assumption that its primacy should not be taken-for-granted. This report therefore sets the research project into a set of broader contexts in which the significance of religion has achieved increasing acknowledgment in British public life, the field of policy-making generally, and in British policing in particular. The research itself has been conducted on the assumption that police engagement with religion and with faith communities is far broader than the counter-terrorism agenda, and, moreover, that the engagement with faith communities undertaken under the auspices of that agenda is best understood within that broader context. The researchers make this case more extensively in a separately published, related article.

For that reason, this report sets the research in the context of these broader currents whereby religion is ‘placed’ in British public life more broadly and British policing in particular, just as the research itself was designed in part to explore the ‘place’ that religion holds in the routine policing practices of officers not primarily concerned with counter-terrorist work.

This research thus attempts to report the ‘place’ of religion in contemporary policing practice. One of its findings is that other dynamics within policing prove to be far more significant in determining religion’s ‘place’ than the counter-terrorism agenda. These include, primarily:

* The move towards an intelligence-led model of Neighbourhood Policing;
* The explicit extension of hate-crime legislation to incorporate reference to faith-hate and a corresponding extension of potentially aggravating factors in some crime types to include religion;
* The high potency attaching to the diversity agenda within the police service (both inward- and outward-facing), now similarly extended to include reference to belief, faith and religion as factors in individual and communal identities.

The political and policy context within which these developments in British policing have taken place is undoubtedly set to undergo significant changes, consequent both on a new government being elected and the emergence of a new economic context since the research was undertaken (mid-2010). The direction and the language of policy in relation to both policing and terrorism is set to change as this report is being written (late 2010), as are some of the institutions which in the recent past have provided coordinating activity at the national level, as well as supported research, reflection, development and training in the service. Whilst the future and its relationship with the past are uncertain, we are convinced that police engagement with faith communities will continue to be an area of immense significance as the framing language changes from ‘social cohesion’ to the ‘big society’. We hope that the research findings presented here, rather than prove already outdated, might rather play some useful role in helping policy-makers and those in the service develop understanding and practice in this area into a future where declining resource is likely to meet increasing expectation and demand in relation to public responsiveness, accountability, engagement, satisfaction and confidence in a context where the distinctiveness and knit-togetherness of identities in society is likely to remain a significant and challenging aspect of all public service provision – a challenge which achieves a special importance and shape in relation to the police service.

The fieldwork component of the research consisted of 39 structured interviews with police officers and Police Community Support Officers in the two London boroughs of Barking & Dagenham and Tower Hamlets. The research involved a unique partnership between the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, the Metropolitan Police Service and the Department of Theology & Religious Studies, University of Leeds, drawing on the expertise in ‘Community Religions’, interfaith and religion & public life at the University of Leeds; the human resources, interest and openness of the Metropolitan Police; the networking capability and innovation of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme. Dr Mel Prideaux of the University of Leeds acted as project manager, Dr Al McFadyen (a full-time academic but also a serving officer in West Yorkshire Police) acted as project consultant. Both have written this report based on the interviews conducted by Ms Katie Miller and Dr Chandra Jangbahadoor, both at the time members of MPS staff.

**Key Findings and Recommendations**

* The research found widespread evidence of a well-internalised awareness of the broad diversity agenda running through the police service, articulated in terms of a subtle emphasis on fairness in response to particularities of identity, rather than a simplistic equalities approach.
* The research found similarly widespread awareness of the way in which this agenda has broadened from a concern with race and ethnicity to incorporate religion, belief and faith (as well as gender, sexuality, etc.), though the report notes the strong gravitational pull of the categories of race and ethnicity, which explains a tendency to conflate or confuse religious with racial and ethnic identities.
* The research shows several examples of impressive local knowledge and understanding of specific faith communities, though this seems to be achieved in a way that has been relatively uncoordinated. Formal partnership work appeared to be limited mainly to the use of faith community buildings for jointly sponsored activities.
* The research also identified several examples where officers showed impressive understanding of the changing religious landscape of a specific area, by its nature more up-to-date than published handbooks or learning materials. The dynamic nature of the local community topography represents a significant challenge in terms of appropriate training, which the report notes and describes before making recommendations.
* The research also suggested that understanding of inter-religious tensions and relations were developing (though with few examples of engaging with inter-religious groups), but that knowledge and understanding of intra-religious tensions might in some cases be under-developed.
* The report highlights the importance of developing context-specific religious literacy and religious awareness as a means of understanding and engaging diverse and changing local communities and, thereby, of enhancing the delivery of an effective and responsive policing service.
* The research found a significant level of critique of some aspects of development and training related to religion and to the diversity agenda more broadly, especially where such learning was not clearly and immediately related to ‘doing the job’. There was a significant level of appreciation of some MPS materials, though a widespread disinclination to take the NCALT web-based packages seriously as learning tools.
* The perceived distance of religion (its dis-‘placing’) from the essentials of policing may in part explain a disparity suggested by the research between members of Safer Neighbourhood and response teams, where emergency responders were less likely to see religion as of potential significance to policing situations requiring an immediate or urgent response (with the exception of sudden deaths, where there was uniform, impressive sensitivity to the potential significance of religion, faith and belief.
* The report notes the difficulties presented to an institution with a dynamic workforce of retaining local understanding, knowledge and other fruits of engagement generated as fruits of the work of individual officers once they have moved on or of extending the benefits of such knowledge and engagement to the rest of a team – the retention of what we term ‘institutional memory’. The research generated several examples of the importance to operational work of the sergeant as deposit of ‘institutional memory’.

**The report recommends** all these points be addressed through the development and resourcing of patterns of learning that are specific to local characteristics (rather than general courses on Hinduism, say), that do not concentrate exclusively on the belief aspects of religion, that do not isolate learning in this area from core police practice. We therefore commend the move towards a skills- and experience-based learning model that helps officers to understand what they need to know in the immediate context of their own practice and to develop this in a planned and structured way – as they do their job – and to record the results of their engagement in a way that makes them accessible to others.

* The research threw up some unexpected results concerning the significance of the relationship to belief or non-belief of individual officers. These include the risks of sometimes inappropriate expectations of adherents holding and operationally utilising expertise faith in their tradition or community, as well as inadequate support for the demands sometimes placed on members of specific faith traditions to become the functioning experts. The research also evidenced, however, that some officers who either do not hold religious beliefs, or who hold beliefs antagonistic towards religion, experience the agenda of religion as personally challenging and sometimes as professionally questionable.

The Report commends further consideration of the best ways of managing and supporting staff engaging with religion and faith communities, having regard to their own beliefs and location in a faith community. Positive engagement with faith associations within the MPS is encouraged in this regard.

* The research found no evidence to suggest that recognition of the potential operational significance of religion, faith and belief was driven by the Prevent agenda or that engaging faith communities was seen primarily as a means for combating terrorism or radicalisation. Indeed, although there were disparities between the two boroughs, the general sense is that Counter-Terrorism was not at the forefront of the operational consciousness of most officers. However, despite this, the research found that officers showed high levels of confidence that they would appropriately identify issues worthy of reporting, and the mechanisms they would follow to do so.