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## **Convictions upheld for British pagans who trespassed at Stonehenge**

***Lawyers for Lisa Mead, Maryam Halcrow and Angel Grace argued the trio had a 'reasonable excuse' to enter a restricted area at the prehistoric monument, based on their religious beliefs.***

By Emily McFarlan Miller

Religion News Service (11.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bKyaEc> - Three British pagans have lost their High Court appeal to overturn their convictions for breaching protections at Stonehenge, the iconic stone monument aligned with the movements of the sun on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England.

Lawyers for Lisa Mead, Maryam Halcrow and Angel Grace argued the trio had a "reasonable excuse" to enter a restricted area at the prehistoric monument, based on their religious beliefs.

Mead, a druid, has said she needs access to the stones to "charge her crystals to work in healing," according to the Evening Standard. Halcrow, [described by the Swindon Advertiser](#) as a "solitary hedge witch," reportedly told police she was there to "worship at her temple."

Mead and Halcrow crossed a rope barrier and "no entry" sign to enter the stone circle on Feb. 4, 2018, [according to a report in the Evening Standard](#).

On a second occasion, Mead, Halcrow and Grace, who also identifies as a druid, unlawfully entered the circle on May 6, 2018.

They were convicted in November 2018, which they appealed, eventually reaching the High Court. Lawyers claimed the convictions infringed on their freedoms of religion, expression and lawful protest.

The Evening Standard reported that the High Court ruling Wednesday (March 10) acknowledged the women's "religious beliefs in paganism, druidism and 'light working.'" But, it said, unrestricted access to the site "would inevitably have an adverse effect on Stonehenge to the detriment of current and future generations."

English Heritage, which oversees Stonehenge, [describes it as](#) "a wonder of the world, a spiritual place and a source of inspiration."

During general admission hours, entry to Stonehenge is ticketed and the stone circle is off-limits. Visitors are not allowed to touch the stones.

The World Heritage Site also hosts “managed open access days” for the summer and winter solstice and autumnal and vernal equinox, and small groups can reserve access to the stone circle outside of general admission hours. Mead has objected to the “party mood” of open access days, and Grace to the “prohibitive” cost of reserving the site, according to the Swindon Advertiser.

Mead, Halcrow and Grace were given conditional discharges following their initial convictions, [according to the BBC](#).

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## **APPG launches commentary on the current state of FoRB**

APPG (01.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3qcO6TC> - The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief has today published its latest **Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief** (FoRB). This coincides with the current meeting of the UN Human Rights Council – the Commentary is partly intended to inform UK policy on FoRB as articulated at the HRC.

There is a particular emphasis on the impact that the global pandemic has had on FoRB. The Foreword, written by three eminent authorities on FoRB, states *“The Commentary recalls the UN Secretary General’s observation that there has been a ‘tsunami of hate and xenophobia’. Religion and belief communities have been blamed for the virus; made scapegoat for the outbreaks; castigated as irresponsible ‘super-spreaders’; accused of being resistant to implement public health measures, of peddling ‘phoney’ remedies, of opposing vaccinations – etc, etc. Whilst freedom of conscience must of course be respected, many of these attacks, which have made some religion or belief groups the target of conspiracy theories and of hate speech have amounted to little more than self-serving attempts to deflect attention from the failure of the authorities in relation to these matters.”*

There is also a focus on the issue of gender and FoRB – *“This year in particular, in which the UN Special Rapporteur has placed a special focus on the impact of gender on the enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief, it is shocking to note the extent to which issues concerning gender discriminations have once again risen to the fore. The longstanding impacts of gender-based discrimination continue to be damningly negative, exacerbating the dehumanisation, inequalities and violations which were already being suffered.”*

In July 2020, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) published the 2019 Human Rights and Democracy Report. The report *“provided an assessment of the global human rights situation, and set out the UK Government’s thematic, consular, and programme work to advance human rights throughout the world. It focused on 30 countries where we are particularly concerned about human rights issues, and where we consider that the UK can make a real difference.”*

This APPG commentary is primarily intended to offer the staff at the newly-reorganised Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) the reliable, detailed, evidence-based monitoring and analysis of FoRB violations that is essential for formulating, implementing and evaluating realistic policies and actions to address FoRB and interlinked human rights violations. The Commentary includes 24 profiles of countries with significant FoRB violations.

The Commentary offers recommendations for action at the FCDO – including the proposals ***“That the FCDO continues to affirm FoRB as a priority concern within its human rights agenda, and ensures that it is actively recognised as a key***

***dimension of COVID-19 pandemic responses, and maintains its focus on gender and sexual violence in conflict; that at a time of reorganisation, and serious budget cuts, the FCDO takes every care to maximise the potential opportunities of its reorganisation by mainstreaming FoRB considerations into its new processes at every level.”***

Photo : unsplash.com

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## **A step in the right direction for free speech on campus**

ADF International (16.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3qHsG28> - Today, the Department for Education released a report titled “[Higher Education: Free Speech and Academic Freedom](#)”, which recognises the harmful effects of censorship at UK universities, and lays out new proposals to tackle the problem.

ADF International, the human rights group which has been running [a nationwide campaign](#) calling for better speech protections on campus, welcomed the report as an encouraging development towards restoring a diverse and inclusive environment on UK campuses.

Ryan Christopher, Director of ADF International in the UK, said:

“We welcome the report issued today, which marks important progress towards the goal of protecting free speech at universities. Our recent polling highlights the importance of this issue. The report recommends the creation of a right of redress in law for students and individuals who have suffered the negative consequences of censorship in the academic sphere. The recognition of the harm caused by ‘cancel-culture’ will be meaningful to Julia Rynkiewicz, who we supported after she was suspended from her midwifery training at Nottingham University on account of her views. We hope that the proposals will open up access to justice for other students who, like Julia, may fall victim to discriminatory measures.”

The publication of the report is timely. New polling commissioned by the Reclaim Party and published only days ago found that 50% of respondents believed that freedom of speech is under threat. This bolsters findings in the recent [ADF International poll](#) where 50% of students declared that they worried their peers would treat them differently if they expressed their true views about some issues important to them. Over a third were fearful to share their opinion, should it adversely impact their future careers.

The report solidifies the recent announcement that a “Free Speech Champion” will be created with powers to defend free speech and academic freedom in universities. This ‘Champion’ will be able to directly penalise colleges or student bodies which attempt to entrench cancel-culture, based on new statutory powers given to the student regulator, the Office for Students. The newly announced proposals taken together represent an important step towards tackling the cancel-culture that has limited free expression and robust academic debate in recent years.

“These announcements are timely and come as positive developments – but more must be done, particularly to ensure that university staff receive the training that they need to recognise and uphold the free speech of students and foster an inclusive and diverse learning environment. While we welcome the proposals, we will continue to advocate for these better protections to be put into practice in order to achieve

the [change promised](#) by education secretary Gavin Williamson when he identified the problem in 2020," continued Christopher.

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## **Attacks on Christians: UK MPs seek sanctions against Nigeria**

By Clifford Ndujihe

Vanguard (07.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bnH3DV> - Some members of United Kingdom House of Lords have asked the UK to take more action against Nigeria to check the rising killings of Christians by terrorists and state actors in parts of the West African country.

In a letter to Dominic Raab, MP, UK's Foreign Secretary, House of Commons, London, they lamented that the attacks led by Islamist militia continue in northern states and the Middle Belt, with almost-daily reports of killings, mayhem, rape and sexual abuse, abductions and enslavement, mass forced displacement and land-grabs.

The key signatories to the letter are David Patrick Paul Alton, the Lord Alton of Liverpool, a Liberal Democratic member of UK Parliament; Caroline Annex Cox, a cross-bench member of the UK House of Lords; and Sam Mason. They are also prominent members of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Belief as well as key members of Jubilee Campaign International, an Int'l anti-religious persecution campaign group featuring prominent world religious and political leaders including former Nigeria President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and past Archbishops of Canterbury UK All-Party Parliamentary Group For International Freedom of Religion or Belief.

They said: "We write following the publication of a new report by Nigerian human rights group, Intersociety (December 14, 2020), which raises serious concerns about the scale of human rights abuses in Nigeria and the need for an urgent response.

"Attacks led by Islamist militia continue in northern states and the Middle Belt, with almost-daily reports of killings, mayhem, rape and sexual abuse, abductions and enslavement, mass forced displacement and land-grabs. According to Intersociety, an estimated 34,400 Christians have been killed in Nigeria since 2009 – including 17,000 by Boko Haram (and its splinter groups) and 15,500 by Fulani militia.

"Reports consistently showed that in Nigeria, month after month, on average of hundreds of Christians were being killed for reasons connected with their faith. Those worst affected included Christian women and girls abducted, and forced to convert, enter forced marriages, sexual abuse and torture," they said.

"The same concerns were raised in two other recent reports: 'Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?' by the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief; and 'Nigeria's Silent Slaughter: Genocide in Nigeria and the Implications for the International Community,' by the International Committee on Nigeria and the International Organisation on Peace-building and Social Justice.

"The ICC's decade-long preliminary investigation (which concluded December 11, 2020) found that Nigerian security forces have committed crimes against humanity and war crimes, including: murder, rape, torture, and cruel treatment; enforced disappearance; forcible transfer of population; outrages upon personal dignity; intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such and against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities; unlawful imprisonment; conscripting and enlisting children under

the age of fifteen years into armed forces and using them to participate actively in hostilities; persecution on gender and political grounds; and other inhumane acts.

The ICC confirmed that domestic courts have not responded to atrocities adequately or at all and that the Nigerian government has failed in its obligations to hold those responsible to account. However, the Office of the Prosecutor faces serious resource constraints to investigating and prosecuting new situations and cases. We therefore urge HMG, as a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, to ensure any investigation is adequately resourced."

Intersociety reports that 1,400 Christians have been killed by the Nigerian army, police and air force. Nigerian army's former Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Theophilus Danjuma says the armed forces are "not neutral, they collude" in the "ethnic cleansing in riverine states" by Fulani herders. He insists that villagers must defend themselves because "depending on the armed forces" will result in them dying "one by one. The ethnic cleansing must stop."

Commending the decision by the US State Department to designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern because of FoRB violations and its recognition of escalating "religious-tinged violence," the MPs said "the lack of comparable response by the UK is both stark and alarming. If HMG continue to ignore or downplay the strong religious factor fuelling the conflict, as identified by the US State Department, resources will be wasted on the implementation of solutions based on a premise that has little-to-no impact on the violence."

### ***UK government's response***

Over £2 billion of UK bilateral aid was given to Nigeria between 2011 and 2018, an equivalent of £800,000 every day. However, we share growing concerns over how the funds are spent; and how it could be better spent – especially in relation to the protection of those most at risk of attack and the need to bring perpetrators to justice.

The UK is also one of the largest donors to the World Food Programme's emergency operation in North-east Nigeria, but it does not currently provide humanitarian assistance in the Middle Belt states, despite this being one of the worst-affected regions.

"For the UK merely to "emphasize the importance of mediation and inter-faith dialogue" trivialises the scale of persecution of Christians. It is too simplistic for the UK Government to label atrocities committed by Fulani militia as driven by desertification, climate change or competition for resources. Protracted attempts to address these (albeit important) longer-term factors will not stop the current rate of killings."