

# Submission of the Catholic Union of Great Britain to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

## Introduction

1. The Catholic Union was established in 1870 as the leading Roman Catholic lay association in the United Kingdom. One of its purposes, which was informed by then recent historical experience, was to ensure that the interests of Catholics were properly protected in the law of the land.

2. We wish to respond to Question 8:

“What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support? Can you identify any threats to these values, which affect the citizenship of, for instance, women or various minority groups? If so, how can their citizenship be strengthened? “

## Response

3. One of the values we should share and support is religious freedom, which, in addition to being a fundamental human right (see Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the first amendment to the United States Constitution), is an essential element in a healthy pluralism.

4. There are potential threats to this value due to an apparently increasing lack of understanding of the nature of religion by those in public life and the media. This has manifested itself, in part, in the increased use of the label ‘extremism’ to describe views which are merely honestly held differences of opinion.

5. We also sense that there is an increasing lack of understanding of the importance of religious freedom to the liberal tradition that underpins our culture.

6. This is a potentially serious threat to our democracy where a significant proportion of the population regularly practises a religion.

7. We make clear that our support is for religious freedom as a political and social principle and that it must be religious freedom for all religions.

8. As good a description of the nature of religion as any is the one given by the Second Vatican Council in its document on religious freedom (the document was called: ‘On the Dignity of the Human Person’):

*It is in accordance with their dignity as persons—that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility—that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these*

*obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature... the exercise of this right is not to be impeded, provided that just public order be observed.*

9. This passage explains why it follows from the nature of religion that its protection from laws that might impinge upon its freedom is essential to the dignity of all people.
10. That is also clear from the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which provides that:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances*

11. It is significant that the founding fathers grouped religious freedom with freedom of speech, of the press and of assembly. All of them are concerned with an essential aspect of human nature which is to form and express opinions that others may disagree with (even strongly) and to act on those opinions in the public sphere.

### **Conclusion**

12. Human beings are both spiritual and material, they are also moral beings whose nature impels them to search for truth by reason and experience. All cultures worth the name admire and protect those who act according to their honest conscience no matter who might disagree. Religion has social, familial and community aspects which imprint themselves on the very identity of individuals. There are therefore a wide variety of rights and freedoms that are affected once freedom of religion is denied or reduced. It should be recognized as an important British value.

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