

Rejecting Asylum Claim, U.K. Quotes Bible to Say Christianity Is Not 'Peaceful'

By Anna Schaverien

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LONDON — Britain’s immigration department has been condemned for citing violent Bible passages as the basis to reject an asylum claim by an Iranian national who said he had converted to Christianity because it was a “peaceful” religion.

The Home Office — which is responsible for handling immigration, security and law and order — used verses from the books of Leviticus, Exodus and Revelation in an attempt to argue that Christianity was hardly “peaceful.” The asylum seeker’s application was denied on Tuesday, according to the man’s legal representative, who shared details on social media.

The case drew a rebuke from the Church of England, and immigration advocates denounced the decision as another example of the Home Office’s harsh methods.

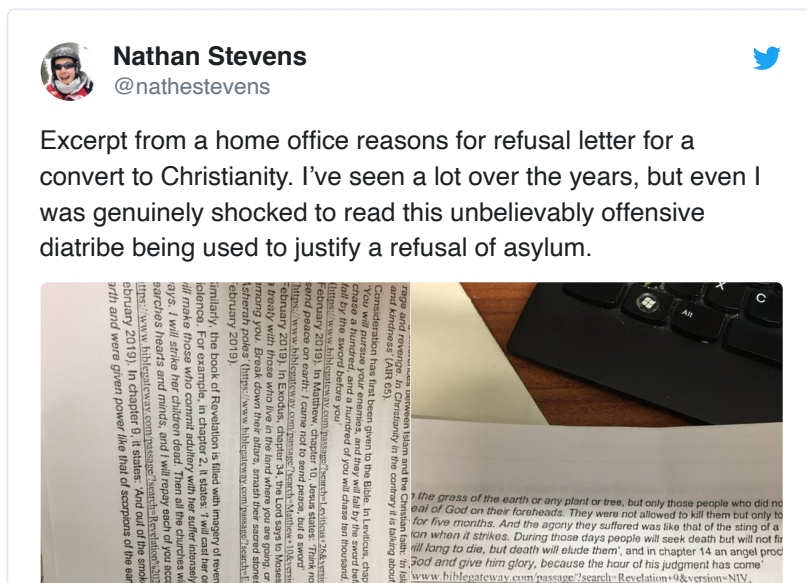
The man, who has not been identified and had converted from Islam, filed the claim in 2016, the immigration caseworker and legal representative, Nathan Stevens, wrote on Twitter. It was not clear whether the man had made his conversion a basis for his claim.

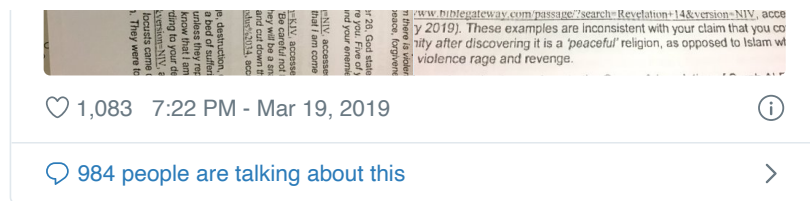
But the Home Office used extensive quotes from the Bible, such as “You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you,” from Leviticus, as evidence against the asylum seeker’s claim about Christianity.

“These examples are inconsistent with your claim that you converted to Christianity after discovering it is a ‘peaceful’ religion, as opposed to Islam which contains violence, rage and revenge,” read a rejection letter Mr. Stevens shared excerpts from online.

The immigration caseworker said he was stunned by the contents of the letter.

“I’ve seen a lot over the years, but even I was genuinely shocked to read this unbelievably offensive diatribe being used to justify a refusal of asylum,” Mr. Stevens wrote on Twitter.





He could not be reached for comment on Thursday. No further details about the asylum seeker were available.

As outrage grew on social media, the Home Office distanced itself from the decision, though it confirmed the letter was authentic.

“This letter is not in accordance with our policy approach to claims based on religious persecution, including conversions to a particular faith,” a spokesman for the department said in an emailed statement.

Asylum cases based on religious persecution and involving religious conversion require a great deal of expertise to assess, said Colin Yeo, a lawyer specializing in immigration at Garden Court Chambers.

“It is very hard to tell if the person is telling the truth and you need to think about what the person’s motivations are,” Mr. Yeo, who is also the editor of the asylum and immigration information website Free Movement, said in a phone interview.

“But to go as far as to dig out specific verses to try and justify a claim seems extremely bizarre,” Mr. Yeo added. “I have seen quite a lot of cases where the Home Office does not believe that the person has not converted from Islam to Christianity, but I have never seen anything quite like this one.”

The Home Office’s approach even prompted the Church of England to issue a response.

“I am extremely concerned that a government department could determine the future of another human being based on such a profound misunderstanding of the texts and practices of faith communities,” Bishop Paul Butler of Durham said in a statement.

“To use extracts from the Book of Revelation to argue that Christianity is a violent religion is like arguing that a government report on the impact of climate change is advocating drought and flooding,” he added.

Cynthia Orchard, a legal adviser at the charity Asylum Aid, called the document “an appalling decision letter,” but said it was just one of “many other examples of the Home Office making terribly unfair decisions on asylum and other matters.”

In 2018, the Home Office found itself under scrutiny after many longtime legal residents of West Indian and Caribbean descent were wrongly declared undocumented immigrants, and some were detained and subjected to threats of deportation.

The public backlash at the way the government addressed many of the “Windrush generation” cases grew to the point that Home Secretary Amber Rudd resigned from her position and Prime Minister Theresa May issued an apology for the treatment of the residents.

Last year, the number of people granted asylum in Britain dropped by 26 percent, compared with the previous 12 months. However, 39 percent of the appeals lodged against the Home Office’s decisions were successful.

Mr. Stevens, the Iranian national’s caseworker, said he, too, planned to appeal the decision, and would file a formal complaint.