

FAITH, CITIZENSHIP AND SHARED LIFE IN BRITAIN TODAY: A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

Introduction

1. This discussion paper has been developed by the Inter Faith Network's Executive Committee to address fundamental questions which have increasingly been under discussion about the place of faith communities within our society, the nature of citizenship and of 'Britishness' and the different ways in which people belong to, and help shape, our shared life in Britain today.

2. While the paper has gone through a process of consultation and also draws on points made in Network meetings held as part of its current 'Faith and Citizenship' project, it does not purport to offer an agreed Network view. Rather, it is hoped that it will help to stimulate reflection and conversation about the themes which it addresses.

The changing character of Britain's population - continuity and diversity

3. An important part of the context for this paper is the increasing diversity of British society over the last few decades in terms both of ethnicity and religious affiliation. The extent of ethnic and religious diversity differs markedly from one geographical area to another. London is, even in global terms, a uniquely diverse and cosmopolitan city. Across the UK as a whole, some local authority areas are very diverse whereas others are not.¹ However, the importance of this diversity being handled in appropriate ways within our national society is, of course, in the interest of everyone, regardless of how diverse the area is in which they themselves live.

4. Christianity has been a major factor in shaping our society's religious, cultural and legal heritage, although throughout past centuries some people of other faiths have also been present in these islands. For example, the Jewish community has had a longstanding presence. In contemporary British society there are now, alongside Christians and Jews, also substantial numbers of British Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims

¹ The 2001 Census recorded 7.9% of the UK population as coming from minority ethnic groups. On the basis of the age structures of different groups this proportion can be expected to have increased by the time of the Census in 2011 and to continue to do so. In response to a question in the 2001 Census 76.8% of people in the UK indicated that they had a particular religious identity. 71.6% identified themselves as Christians and 5.2% identified themselves as being of other faiths. 42 million people identified themselves as Christians, 1.6 million as Muslims, .56 million as Hindus, .37 million as Sikhs, .27 million as Jews, .15 million as Buddhists and .18 million described their faith as 'Other'. Diversity is at its greatest in cities such as Birmingham, Glasgow, Leicester and London. For example, 45% of the ethnic minority population of the UK recorded in the 2001 Census lived in Greater London, where around 30% of the total population came from minority ethnic groups, and 17.35% identified themselves as belonging to minority faith groups. The local authority area in Britain with the highest proportion of its population from ethnic minorities was the London Borough of Newham with 60.6%. The London Borough of Harrow was the local authority area in Britain with the highest proportion from minority faiths, with 47.71% identifying themselves as Christian and 34.2% as being of other faiths. In England and Wales, out of 376 local authorities, ethnic minorities constituted 1% or less of the population in 56 of these, and in 62 of them 80% or more of the population identified themselves as Christian.

and Sikhs, along with significant smaller religious groups, such as Baha'is, Jains and Zoroastrians, and many other religious movements too. As well as people with a religious faith there are many who are not committed to any religious tradition. These include people who would define themselves as being entirely secular or as atheist, but also those who might describe themselves as not being formally 'religious' but would nonetheless see life as having a spiritual dimension.

5. The terms 'faith communities' and 'people of faith' are sometimes used (as they are in this paper) as convenient shorthand collective terms to refer to the totality of people who follow or practise particular religious traditions. This can, though, convey the misleading impression that they form, taken together, some kind of single homogenous entity. This would not do justice to the distinctiveness of different religions. Moreover, there is also considerable diversity within many individual faiths and the use of 'faith community' to describe the totality of the people who follow one particular religious tradition does not appropriately convey the richness of the variety to be found within it.

6. The fact that the composition of Britain's population has altered quite significantly over the last few decades has required its public institutions to review their policies and practices to respond appropriately to this. It has also had a major impact on the way in which people understand this society and see themselves as part of it. The sense of substantial change has no doubt been heightened by the fact that it has come about over a relatively short period of time and has been accompanied both by an increase in population mobility within the UK and by the consequences for this country's economy and culture of the impact of globalisation.

Faith and public life

Freedom to practise our faith

7. Everyone in the UK has "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion"; and "freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance". While the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is absolute, the right to manifest a religion or belief is a qualified one.² Nevertheless, these freedoms ensure that all British citizens can play an active role in contributing to the common good and helping shape our shared public life, motivated by their particular convictions and bringing to bear the perspectives of different faiths and beliefs. The experience of recent years suggests that this diversity, while aspects of it

³ This is guaranteed under Article 9(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights, incorporated into UK law through the Human Rights Act 1998. However, Article 9(2) says that "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others". These rights are also subject to Article 29 which says that everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible; in the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society; these rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

present real challenges, does not need to be a barrier to sharing together fruitfully in our common social life and indeed can be a positive strength.

Faith and the public sphere

8. The role of religious faith in our society will no doubt continue to evolve and, quite properly, to be the subject of continuing debate. There are some who would prefer to relegate religion to the purely private sphere. Yet British society has never been, and is not now, a wholly secular one, in the sense of excluding religious faith from the public domain. Rather, there has always been a dynamic relationship between public life and religious faith. This has been exemplified in the historic establishment of the Church of England and the status of the Church of Scotland as Scotland's national Church. There is no 'national' Church in either Wales (following the disestablishment in 1920 of the Church of Wales) or in Northern Ireland. This variety reflects the different histories of engagement between religion and the state within the UK. Today, not only the Christian Churches, but also communities of other faiths engage in the 'public square', and with its largely secular social and political institutions. This evolving relationship is reflected, for example, in the longstanding inclusion of Religious Education in the school curriculum and the important changes in the content of this over recent years to reflect the UK's greater religious diversity.

9. Most religious traditions have both a personal and a public dimension and invite their believers to follow a way of life which shapes not only their personal lives and relationships but also the way they contribute to wider society. In a few cases, members of a religious group will believe that it is inconsistent with their spiritual practice to become involved in the political process. Their viewpoint needs to be respected. But most people of faith want to engage, alongside others, in the activities of the 'public square'. For some this will take the form of direct involvement in the political process, while for others 'active citizenship' will be expressed mainly through voluntary service to the community. But all of them will bring their personal faith to bear in varying ways in their contribution to public life.

10. In recent years there has been an increased recognition of the contribution which the various faith communities make to our shared public life. The leaders of faith communities have generally welcomed the increased engagement which has developed with Government, both central and local, and with other public institutions. Faith communities have an important and legitimate role to play within society through contributing to the formation and implementation of public policy, and in providing services both to their own members and to the community more generally. They have been playing a significant part in the regeneration of socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

Contribution to society can only thrive in the absence of barriers of discrimination and inequality

11. To make a positive contribution to society, people of different faiths and cultures need to feel safe and secure. Too many people still suffer discrimination, harassment and even physical assault simply because of their perceived racial or religious identity. People also need to feel valued as members of a just society where their contribution is appreciated and actively sought and where account is taken, as far as

possible, of their needs and aspirations in a way which goes beyond grudging tokenism. Those barriers of discrimination and inequality which prevent full participation in the affairs of society need to be tackled with a greater sense of urgency. The recent enactment of legislation to prohibit discrimination on grounds of religion or belief in the employment field and in the delivery of goods and services is a potentially helpful contribution towards this goal.

12. There can, of course, be difficult and sometimes controversial issues involved where religious practices, or cultural practices linked with religions, may come into conflict with equality requirements relating to other areas of discrimination. These cases always need to be handled with great sensitivity and there can be a difficult balance of argument involved. For example, exemptions from legal requirements relating to discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation have been made for religious organisations in their internal organisational life in terms of their employment practices and in relation to the supply of goods and services. However, they do not currently have similar exemptions in situations where they receive public funding for the supply of goods and services to the wider community. This can mean that faith based organisations will withdraw from providing these services if they consider that they are being asked to act in their delivery in a way contrary to the religious tradition which motivates them. Whether exemptions should be available in these circumstances in order to maintain the delivery of these services is, inevitably, a political decision. But when issues of this kind arise the balance of advantage to society of finding ways to accommodate the deeply held beliefs of religious groups needs to be carefully weighed.

The transformative power of religious traditions

13. While the practical contributions of faith communities to society are of considerable value, the most significant contribution which they have to offer, both to individuals and to wider society, is the transformative power of the religious traditions which have shaped these communities, continue to inspire them and are the source of the values by which many people in this society live. Any society needs to have a framework of public morality and religious traditions have had a crucially important role in helping to shape an understanding of the common good.

Citizenship, identity and belonging

Being a 'citizen'

14. There is at present much discussion about what is involved in being a 'citizen' and about related questions of 'identity' and 'belonging'. To be a 'citizen' is to be a member of a particular society with the right to political participation in it. British citizens are co-owners of our society and share the responsibility for shaping its future, working together for the common good. Importantly, in Britain there are democratic institutions which give expression to this shared responsibility and through which its citizens can influence the evolving framework of law and can contribute to the forming and implementation of public policy. The institutions of the state may not always operate in an ideal way and will need to be adapted from time to time to reflect changing circumstances in appropriate ways in order to maintain the loyalty of its citizens. But it is important for citizens to support and protect the

democratic character of these institutions against those who seek to undermine them, whether from without or within.

15. Engagement with the political process enables citizens to join together in the task of charting the way forward for this society, both locally and nationally, and in helping to solve the difficult and complex problems it faces. This involves a constant process of interaction and renegotiation as the road ahead unfolds. This process of engagement needs to be open to all and to provide room for robust and passionate argument where members of society feel able to express their feelings, concerns and fears.

Citizenship is not about enforced conformity

16. It is clear from recent public debate that the term 'citizenship' can have negative overtones for some people because they understand it as demanding an exclusive loyalty of a narrow, conformist and nationalistic kind. There is indeed a potential tension involved in being a 'good citizen' when a government enacts legislation or pursues policies which are experienced as being in conflict with an individual's strongly held moral convictions. But loyalty as a citizen to one's society, and commitment to its flourishing, does not require political conformity. Indeed, it involves a willingness to be critical when necessary and religious people, like others, may well feel called to offer a critique of the society in which they live and of its public institutions.

The place of dissent and prophetic critique

17. There is a strong and important tradition in this country of dissent, and indeed of civil disobedience, which should be respected, while recognising that society, through its governmental institutions, needs to place appropriate limits on the actions through which this dissent may be lawfully expressed. People of many faiths have in the past been associated with these movements of dissent and will no doubt continue to be so. While they can be expected to acknowledge the authority of a democratic government, they will inevitably have a prior commitment, rooted in their particular religious tradition, to the pursuit of compassion, justice and truth, as they try to live out with integrity the values which they derive from their religious faith.

Dissent and robust engagement are very different from extremism and violent opposition

18. There is, however, a world of difference between, on the one hand, the legitimate expression of dissent through political channels and on the other hand, coercion and violence within a democratic society, justified, whether cynically or out of conviction, in the name of religious or political beliefs. The linking of religion and violence has been experienced all too often over the centuries in many societies. This has happened particularly when political ideologies have become intertwined with religious interpretations which make use of un-contextualised religious texts, imagery and symbols to assert that a religious tradition gives its followers a divine mandate for destructive actions.

19. Across different religious traditions the task of dealing with a violent minority who make selective and distorted use of the religious tradition in question, and of its scriptures, has always presented a difficult challenge for the much larger numbers of religious believers in that tradition who reject these shallow and distorted interpretations. It is important to offer support and encouragement to those who face challenges of this kind today, particularly, at the present time, those in the Muslim communities of this country. It is crucially important for politicians, the media, people of faith and those of no religious persuasion to avoid stigmatising a whole community because of the actions of a small number whose actions the great majority of followers of that faith deplore and over whom they have little direct control. It is also important to recognise that other religious traditions have their extremist followers too, as do political and social movements which are not attached to religious traditions.

The need to work to counter misrepresentations of traditions' teachings

20. Most people, whatever their differences, share a common aspiration to live fruitful and fulfilled lives, to be able to live at peace with one another and to bring up their children and grandchildren in a better and more just world. This is why, ultimately, violence and coercive tactics will command only limited support. The signs are that British society has the strengths it needs to resist these, no matter from what quarter. However, appropriate security measures which respect human rights and command public support will not in themselves be enough.

21. People of all faiths need to guard against the teachings of their religious traditions being misrepresented, both inside and outside their own communities, in ways which stir up prejudice, hatred and violence. To do so effectively they need to be knowledgeable about their own traditions and the resources within these on which they can draw to offer their members, and in particular their young people, a sound understanding of their faith which will encourage them to engage constructively with wider society. If young people are to become fully involved citizens, committed to the future well being of this country, there needs to be a high quality of engagement with them and in particular with those who are at risk of being seduced into violence, openly recognising and addressing the causes of their alienation and anger.

‘Being British’

Balancing inclusivity and diversity

22. An individual's sense of belonging is linked to their understanding of their identity, which is in turn linked to their history and family roots. Accompanying the debate on ‘citizenship’ there has been discussion on what it means to be ‘British’ and on how far diversity and a sense of unity within our society can be reconciled. The debate has focused on how we live together as diverse people and communities within one society. ‘Multiculturalism’, ‘integration’ and ‘cohesion’ are terms which are often currently used in discussing these questions. While it may be helpful to have agreed definitions of these words, what is more significant is for there to be some shared understanding of the characteristics of the kind of society which we want to have in this country.

23. Upholding and respecting the integrity of individual strands within our society and, at the same time, ensuring that there continues to be sufficient held in common within society for it not to fragment, is about striking the right balance between the pulls of unity and of diversity. It is a case of 'both/and', not 'either/or'. We need an inclusive understanding of the character of our society which, while reflecting the important place of shared values, rights and responsibilities, is not too narrowly defined and which does not require everyone to be assimilated to a pre-existing model or to be forced into a single rigid mould. We also need to recognise that the character of our society is a dynamic and evolving one.

Identity has many aspects: overlapping loyalties of place and culture

24. We all have multiple identities, derived from a variety of factors, such as faith, culture, gender, age, language or geography, or from participation in a particular group. For practical reasons, we have to use categories and classifications in a variety of contexts to give some shape to the 'map' of our society and its members. But we need to recognise that these categories cannot do full justice to the individuality of different people. Each of us, as an individual, has a unique mix of characteristics which makes us the person we are and in the light of which we engage with other people and with the wider world.

25. There is a complex constitutional geographical diversity built into the identity of a United Kingdom which embraces England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and also the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. Its history has been complex, its present form has evolved over past centuries and its constitutional unity is today politically challenged from some quarters. All geographical loyalties run deep. British citizens have particular loyalties to England, to Scotland, to Wales and to Northern Ireland as well as to the United Kingdom as a whole. They also have more local loyalties – to particular regions, counties and to cities, towns and villages.

26. Asking those people who have a strong commitment to a Northern Irish, Scottish or Welsh identity to see themselves primarily as 'British' can be an unwelcome reminder of past history, when many experienced their identity as being subordinated to a national identity dominated by the English. Indeed, some may well wish to identify themselves as belonging primarily to their individual nations within this United Kingdom, rather than seeing their civic identity primarily in terms of Britain or the United Kingdom. There are also an increasing number of people who see themselves as being 'English' rather than 'British', perhaps in part in reaction to political devolution elsewhere in the United Kingdom. So any concept of 'Britishness' will only be acceptable across the UK if it can sit comfortably alongside a strong sense of 'English', 'Scottish', 'Welsh' or 'Northern Irish' identity, and of the regional and local identities within these nations.

27. A difficulty in the discussion of 'Britishness' at this point in the history of these islands is that the current debate conflates two issues: firstly, the role of 'Britain' as the constitutional framework for our shared society; and, secondly, the attempt to define the characteristics of our society in terms of culture and shared values, in providing us with a shared sense of identity. It is the second aspect of the debate to which this document is related in exploring the implications of the greater religious diversity we now experience.

An inclusive sense of British identity

28. It is clearly important not to define the characteristics of our society in terms of 'Britishness' in a way which implies that some citizens are less legitimately 'British' than others. So, if people generally are to be comfortable with the notion of 'being British' as a core dimension of their identity, the shared understanding of 'Britishness' will have to be wide enough to reflect and accommodate the complexity of who we now are in our more diverse society. It will need to recognise that all of us have not only multiple identities but the associated loyalties to which these give rise. In terms of faith, this may mean that people choose to define themselves, for example, as 'British Hindus' or 'British Muslims' precisely as a way of expressing their commitment to the society of which they are now a part. In this context, the terminology of being 'British' is less problematic than is being 'English', which is still frequently used in a less inclusive way to denote those people who have been settled in England for generations (which is why identifying oneself as an 'English Muslim' is less common than doing so as a 'Scottish Muslim').

29. One of the best aspects of contemporary Britain has been the emphasis on the value of our diversity and on the importance of a sense of unity, underpinned by public recognition and celebration of the contributions which different communities, groups and individuals within the UK make to the well being of our society as a whole. Many people will want this to be characteristic of their society whatever the outcome of the debate on the future of Britain in political and constitutional terms.

An evolving sense of Britishness

30. A viable modern concept of 'Britishness' cannot be knit up with the negative aspects of past colonial history, nor rooted in a partisan and chauvinistic kind of nationalism. It needs to be in continuity with the past, with appreciation of the good aspects of Britain's past history, but open to the future. What will constitute 'Britishness' in the future is being shaped here and now through the practical realities of the 'conversation' in encounter and exchange between those who live together in this society. This 'conversation' has to include those with cultural and faith traditions which are relatively new to this society as well as those whose family histories have been interwoven with the history of these islands for centuries past. 'Britishness' will constantly evolve in the light of this conversation. It is not, and never has been, a fixed identity.

Distinctiveness of society in Britain and common loyalty and commitment

31. Yet there is also a need for the citizens of any country to have some sense of the distinctiveness of the society which they share. Britain today is our society, the one of which we, as British citizens, have co-ownership. We need to value it, to appreciate its strengths and work together to remedy its faults, seeking the common good and rejecting any attempts by those, of any persuasion, who try to sow division between us or advance their arguments through coercive or violent means.

32. There certainly are aspects of our society, both institutional and personal, and in both public and private behaviour, which are shaped by greed and self interest at the

expense of others and fall well short of what is desirable. But there is, as well, much to celebrate in our national life and, wherever our family roots may lie, we can acknowledge and celebrate much that is good in the heritage and current life of this country.

33. A common loyalty and commitment to our national society, based on a shared sense among its citizens of a joint belonging to it and a love of the land in which we all live, are vital if we and that society are to flourish.

Wider horizons

34. Love of the land in which we live does not mean that British identity should be parochial and focused just on these islands and their needs. Nearly everyone in Britain has overseas connections of one kind or another in their family's history. Those who have more recent family roots here and have ties to other countries and their cultures, will rightly want to affirm the importance to them, as part of their 'multiple identities', of these links, alongside their identity as citizens of the UK. Indeed, in some cases people will see themselves as having a 'transnational' identity, expressed in dual citizenship of the UK and of an overseas country.

35. These overseas links can enhance the openness of our society to the world and be a source of strength, not a weakness, in British society providing they do not undercut the commitment to the health of this society of those who have made their home here. These links can help us all to understand world events better; to develop a more internationally compassionate spirit; and to seek out the root causes of the problems we face in a complex world. They can alert us to the dangers of simplistic pictures of the world in which we live, (such as the dangerously dualistic notion of an inevitable clash of civilisations), which sweep to one side the reality of the genuine complexity of the international scene.

36. Furthermore, these world wide links serve as a daily reminder to us all in the UK that we are in some sense 'global citizens' - citizens of the world as well as of our own individual countries (and of Europe). History warns us of the dangers of a narrow nationalism. Today's extensive and immediate communications systems, the possibilities of global travel and intertwined economic and social life mean that it is impossible for us to live in isolation from one another. The almost instant awareness of dramatic developments elsewhere in the world now has a major impact on every country, including our own, and is heightened by the overseas links of people who live here.

37. We should all have some sense of a common loyalty to our shared global humanity, increasingly aware of the interconnectedness and interdependence of human life on this fragile planet and the challenges we face in sustaining it. But we need to work to ensure that the process of globalisation can be directed into positive and fruitful developments rather than being a threat to our distinctive identities and the rich variety of our cultures. People of faith are well aware that lasting peace within the world will not be secured without political, social and economic justice. Its attainment will require national governments and the international community to respond to justified grievances and to work towards a fairer distribution of the world's resources.

Values and a shared society

38. Unity among diverse people living within a single society is forged through joint participation, shared lives and experiences and through developing common understandings of a shared journey. It also needs to be underpinned by values held in common. It is important for the members of any society to feel that there is a sufficient consensus on its basic values to provide an adequately coherent foundation for their life together.

39. In the context of the present debates about our own society, the term ‘British values’ is sometimes used in a way which implies, wrongly, that the values which underpin our society are not shared by people within other societies too, when they clearly are. What we need to uphold are not values which are in themselves uniquely ‘British’, but rather the particular set of values to which, by consensus, this society is committed and which it aspires to embody.

Common values

40. The work of the Inter Faith Network over the last two decades suggests that our different faiths do all affirm a number of profound values, which are also shared by many who do not define themselves as ‘religious’: personal integrity and a sense of right and wrong; care and compassion; justice and peace; respect for one another, for the earth and its creatures; the pursuit of learning and wisdom and the love of truth. These are the values which were affirmed collectively by leaders of the UK’s different faith communities in the Shared Act of Reflection and Commitment, organised with the Network’s assistance, in the Houses of Parliament on 3 January 2000 as part of the official celebrations at the turn of the Millennium.³

41. There will inevitably be differences of view, sometimes intense, about the proper application of these basic values to different issues in different contexts. A complex world requires us, in seeking to address its problems, to practise discernment and wise judgement and to be willing to uncover and tackle their underlying causes. It is, nonetheless, a reassuring source of unity to recognise that there is a broad consensus on a shared set of basic values which underpin the aspirations of our society, even if all of us, including people of faith, too often fall short of them.

Engaging with each other: interaction, openness and negotiating differences

42. It is arguably the ‘procedural values’, or the ethics of how we relate to one another and which underpin the essential process of mutual engagement, which are of particular importance in making a reality of shared citizenship in an increasingly plural society: acceptance of the rule of law, support for the democratic process and a willingness of all people of goodwill to work together for the common good. We also need to value the virtues of courtesy and good neighbourliness and the shared norms of public behaviour which are crucial for promoting a positive encounter between people on a day to day basis. But the tradition of tolerance as a fundamental value of our society is also important – a tolerance which sets some limits on what constitutes

³ To be found on the Network’s website at www.interfaith.org.uk/rcommit.htm

acceptable behaviour, but is also ready to accept differences in practice and behaviour which are clearly not harmful or deeply offensive to others.

43. Tolerance by itself is, of course, not enough. We need to go beyond it to constructive engagement with one another on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It is in this engagement that the boundaries of mutual tolerance are themselves renegotiated in a continuing process.

44. Engagement requires the opportunity for positive encounter between individuals and communities. While recognising and appreciating the legitimate desire of people to live and socialise principally with others of similar background, it is important to encourage much greater interaction between different groups within British society as part of the vital process of promoting greater mutual understanding and cooperation between them. This applies not only to relations between different faith communities but to relations within them and with wider society.

Establishing mutual understanding and trust

45. Mutual understanding is vital to the trust between one another on which society's flourishing depends. Achieving this requires a willingness to engage in an open encounter, with a genuine desire to understand the causes of another's anxiety, pain or anger as well as a readiness to express honestly our own concerns. This calls both for a degree of humility, demonstrated in a readiness to be self-critical, and respect for the way the other person understands their own experience. Learning from the experience and understanding which others have gained in their lives is always a potential source of enrichment for us. We need to be ready to be changed ourselves by the encounter with others and to recognise the change that it can bring about in others.

46. There can be a natural inclination to keep one's views on difficult issues private in case they are attacked or condemned as unacceptable. But as our trust in one another grows we shall feel more able to take some risks and to be more open about our views, while always needing to express them carefully and sensitively. Without straightforward conversation about matters which are of concern to us we cannot make progress together in dealing with them. This is particularly the case with debate about contentious social issues. Engaged and open debate between the different viewpoints within our society can help to determine how far there is a consensus on the right way forward.

47. However, there is a need to balance freedom of expression, which is rightly cherished as a hallmark of our society, with restraint in the way in which we portray, and comment on, matters which are of deep significance for others. It is clearly unacceptable to do so in ways which can create prejudice or stir up hatred and even violence. At the same time, it is in the self interest of individual communities, as well as for the good of society, for them to respond with understanding and patience to the genuine concerns of others, even where these may seem misplaced or disproportionate. It can be helpful in this context to be open about differences of view within communities on an issue under public debate.

Integration, not assimilation

48. The processes of encounter and mutual understanding and negotiating how we relate to one another in our shared 'public space' do not have to flatten out society into a featureless, characterless, 'politically correct' world in which we are all the same. It is important while engaging with one another to respect and maintain the integrity and distinctiveness of different groups within British society. This is why most people accept that the goal for our diverse society should be one of 'integration', not 'assimilation'. 'Assimilation' is a one way process, in which newer, minority communities are expected to merge their identities with the pre-existing culture of the majority, losing their own distinctiveness in the process. 'Integration' is a two way process which enables different identities to be mutually accommodated within the overarching framework of a single society.

49. The process of integration requires mutual engagement and involves change which affects everyone, but can enlarge the understanding and experience of us all. The barrier to mutual understanding and respect is often not only a common human preoccupation with our own self interest, whether as an individual or a group, but fear of the 'other', as constituting in some way a challenge to our own personal identity. This can lead to suspicion, or even hatred, because of our lack of knowledge of another's culture or faith and can only be overcome through constructive encounter with one another. It is when we reach out and engage with others that we can dispel fears and anxieties on either side that are based on a lack of understanding.

Education and the media

50. Education, at all ages, is vital, so that we know and understand more about one another and do not fall prey, as a result of our ignorance, to false judgements and outworn stereotypes. We all have a role to play in combating stereotyping, whether of our own communities and traditions or those of others. Education in schools needs to promote encounter and awareness about different cultures and faiths. Likewise the media needs to provide balanced and non-sensationalist reporting and to avoid promoting myths and stereotypes which can feed unfounded fears and misrepresent reality in ways which serve to exacerbate tensions and divisions. As one aspect of this, the media should do more to educate people about the various faiths in the UK and to highlight positive inter faith relations in different areas of the country – not always focusing on negative stories.

The role of faith communities

51. Faith communities also have a responsibility to build and maintain good relations with each other. On the whole, inter faith relations in this country are good. Indeed, they are more highly developed than elsewhere in Europe or in many other countries further afield. Within the UK, there is now in place a wide range of inter faith organisations at UK wide, national, regional and local level, although more work still needs to be done to increase their effectiveness and to make more resources available to help in this.

52. Inevitably, difficult issues can arise from time to time between different communities as a result, for example, of conflicts overseas; aggressive proselytising;

or situations where there is competition between different groups for limited economic resources. Sensitive issues of this kind can be tackled more effectively where good working relationships have already been put in place. These good relations always need to be constantly sustained through continuing engagement.

53. All people of different faiths and beliefs have an important role to play in engaging actively with one another to build bridges of mutual understanding and trust within our society. But engagement and dialogue is needed not only between people of different faiths, but also between those who have a religious commitment and those who do not. Too often exchanges between them sound more like a heated argument than a constructive dialogue. Dialogue between people of different religious traditions both theistic and non-theistic has established areas of common ground, alongside the distinctive beliefs which they hold. Similarly, there is reason to hope that a more respectful dialogue between those who have a religious faith and those who do not see themselves as religious could help to create a firmer foundation for our shared society, through the recognition of values which are held in common, even though these values will be derived from varied sources of authority and will have different rationales. On this basis, we could then more easily work together, with greater confidence and mutual understanding, for the common good of our society.

Conclusion

54. The Inter Faith Network, along with its member organisations, is committed to helping shape a Britain where all can live and practise their faith with integrity. It is also committed to encouraging and supporting the development of better understanding not only both between Britain's faith communities but also between them and wider society. We need to work together with energy, honesty and openness for the flourishing of this society and of our wider world. The future of our country will in part be shaped by its past but will not be determined by it. Its future is in the hands of all of us who make our home here.

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The Inter Faith Network for the UK
8A Lower Grosvenor Place
London
SW1W 0EN

Tel: 020 7931 7766
Fax: 020 7931 7722
Email: ifnet@interfaith.org.uk
Web: www.interfaith.org.uk

The Inter Faith Network for the UK closed in 2024, with outward facing operations ceasing in April.

In order to ensure that the material in IFN's publications remained available to the public, to inter faith practitioners, and to scholars after IFN's closure, the copyright status of publications has been changed.

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