

Statement on Inter-Religious Relations in Britain



© The Inter Faith Network for the UK, 1991

First published March 1991

Reprinted 2006

ISBN 0 9517432 0 1 X

Prepared for publication by Kavita Graphics

The Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom was established in 1987. It links over 110 organisations and encourages and supports dialogue at all levels between the different faith communities in Britain with the aim of increasing mutual understanding. It provides a central point for information and advice which can be used by anyone with an interest in inter faith relations.

Statement on
Inter-Religious Relations
in Britain

Note

This statement was first published by the Inter Faith Network for the UK in 1991, four years after it was founded. The statement was developed and endorsed at that time by all the organisations then in Network membership. The document has been out of print for some time. It is being made available again now because of its relevance to the current debate on the place of faith in British society and the relationship between citizenship and religious commitment.

However, the text of the statement has not been formally considered afresh or endorsed by all the present member bodies of the Network, many of whom were not in membership in 1991.

April 2006

Introduction

We live in challenging times, with new opportunities for the development of inter-religious relations in the United Kingdom. At the level of local communities, in education, and through the dedicated work of committed organisations and individuals, an extensive pattern of positive inter-religious activity has developed within our society.

This statement is one outcome of that activity. It represents what we, as organisations affiliated to The Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, are now able to affirm together.

A statement of this kind cannot fully reflect the complex realities of our situation, and it points to the need for further work in building mutual understanding between our different communities. However, we offer this statement as the fruit of our experience so far and as an encouragement and a challenge, both to ourselves and to others.

1 The United Kingdom is a religiously diverse society:

We believe that it is only when we recognise and accept our diversity that positive inter-religious relations can be built. Christianity has been rooted in Britain for many centuries and has been the religious tradition which has principally shaped the country's legal and cultural heritage. In the past, it was often assumed that to be British was to be Christian. However, the Jewish community has had a longstanding presence in our national life and there have always been individuals here from other religious traditions. In contemporary Britain, along with British Christians and Jews, there are now significant numbers of British Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, along with Baha'is, Jains and others. Within every major tradition there is also a considerable degree of diversity of belief and practice. In addition, there are people who live by values which do not involve commitment to a religious tradition.

Such wide diversity need not be a barrier to our sharing together in common social and political life. It does represent a challenge but one which offers our society and our religious communities exciting opportunities for mutual enrichment.

2 Differences in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and language also affect our inter religious relationships, as do the bonds of history, religion and kinship between communities here and overseas:

Our religious affiliation may be the determining factor in our self-understanding. But our identities are complex and derive from many other factors which also have a bearing upon relationships within and between our religious communities. Our ethnic background can mean that we encounter racism. Our difficulties in communicating with confidence across language barriers may create or reinforce misunderstandings. Our social class will influence our priorities and perspectives. Our gender will affect the roles we can play within our communities and in inter-religious relations. Nevertheless, when one or more of these factors are shared by people of different religious traditions then they can also become bridges of understanding. As a society we are not insulated from events beyond our national boundaries. In varying ways, all our communities in Britain have overseas links. Situations abroad can as a result have a significant, and sometimes disruptive, effect on inter-religious relationships here. But in the context of a growing awareness of our global interdependence these links can also be a source of greater understanding of the wider world in which we live.

3 We need to find ways of more adequately reflecting our common citizenship in the full range of our national life:

The social and political context shapes the content and development of our inter-religious relations in significant ways. By contrast with the position in some countries of the European Community, in the United Kingdom the majority of members of our different faith communities share a common citizenship. This contributes a basic legal and psychological security which is important for the development of good inter-religious relations. However, racism and religious discrimination create a gap between this formal position and the actual experience of minority religious communities. In addition, the historical position of Christianity means that the rhythm of daily and weekly life and the calendar by which our society is regulated reflect only the observances and festivals of the Christian religion. Moreover, the traditional Churches have degrees of access to many of our social and political institutions which are not available on comparable terms to representatives of other religious traditions. As our life together develops, we need to examine how our religious diversity can be more fully expressed in the framework of our society.

4 Society is impoverished when religious perspectives on life are excluded or marginalised:

Our religious traditions offer values and insights of great worth to society, and provide a framework of meaning within which individuals can interpret their experience. Our traditions make different claims about the sources of their values and ethical principles. But in their varied ways they all point to the value of human, animal and natural life, and to a Reality which infinitely transcends all that we can see, touch, smell, taste, and hear. We hold in common ideals of compassion, service, justice, peace, and concern for the environment. We also believe that popularity, money and power should never be

accepted as the sole determining factors in individual or social life. We acknowledge that many of those who are without a religious commitment also uphold these ideals. Both within and between our communities there are significant differences in the ways in which we translate these values and ideals into ethical judgements concerning specific personal and social issues. But a recognition of the extent to which we share a range of common values and ideals can contribute to a wider sense of community in our society.

5 Religious people have too often brought suffering, discord and distrust to one another and to the wider community:

At the centre of all our traditions is a concern for the establishment of peace. However, we cannot honestly affirm the positive potential of inter-religious relations without at the same time recognising the pain and conflict which our religious communities have brought, and sometimes still bring, to each other and to the wider world.

Sometimes these conflicts result from the distortion and manipulation of religion in the service of a political ideology or the pursuit of personal power. In some cases, however, conflicts have also been caused by the actions of sincere members of our communities. Such conflicts have damaged our communities and the relationships between and within them. They have also contributed to a cynicism in the wider world about religious belief and practice.

6 Constructive inter-religious relations are vitally important to the well-being of our society:

Some religious people are hesitant to enter consciously into inter-religious relations. However, many come into contact with people of other traditions in their neighbourhoods, at work, or in school. On these occasions little thought may be given to any religious

dimension. Nevertheless, these encounters are part of the fabric of much contemporary British life. Even for those who live in areas which do not have a wide religious diversity, the increasing mobility of modern life makes such contacts more likely. Superficial encounters may sometimes lead to the reinforcement of existing prejudices. But they can also provide opportunities for learning about one another. Shared human events such as birth, marriage and death can provide a context for the development of deeper relationships.

7 In overcoming religious prejudice and stereotypes the education system, the media, and our own communities all have important responsibilities:

The ability to inquire and reflect, and the opportunity to acquire accurate knowledge about one another's religious traditions, concerns and values are important in the development of constructive inter-religious relations. The education system has an important role in challenging prejudice and providing accurate information. We affirm the special part which religious education and religious studies, at all levels, can play in this. There is also a need for sensitivity on the part of the media in dealing with issues involving questions of religious conviction and identity. There has been serious concern about the way in which inadequate and inaccurate, and at times sensationalist, reporting has reinforced prejudice and the tensions which can arise in particular situations. By contrast, a balanced presentation of the background to unfamiliar issues can be of great value in increasing understanding of them. Our communities themselves need to play their part in helping the media to appreciate their particular concerns.

We also recognise our own important responsibilities to represent accurately the traditions of others in the teaching, practice and publications of our communities.

8 Meeting together is essential for building relationships of trust through mutual understanding:

It is only by meeting with those who live another religious tradition and by listening to their beliefs, stories, insights, and experiences that we can learn from others as well as about them. We need to meet in a variety of ways: both formally and informally; in structured discussion and in shared social occasions; among neighbours and friends; and through community representatives meeting at local and national gatherings. Although some issues are common to all and need to be explored together, there are others which are of special concern in the relationship between particular religions.

9 Our sense of community is deepened when we take common action towards agreed social goals:

Whilst affirming the value of meeting and listening, it is also our belief that common action, grounded in our religious commitments, adds a valuable dimension to our relationships. The process of seeking agreement about which issues to tackle and how to proceed may well reveal a wide diversity of perspectives. Truly common action therefore requires sensitive consultation at all stages and needs to be planned, undertaken and reviewed together.

10 We cannot demand that others engage in inter-religious relations only on our own terms:

In human relations a variety of motivations will always be at work. Some will see the impulse towards inter-religious relations as springing from the imperatives of their religion; some understand these relations primarily as a means towards social harmony; some as a route for securing greater social and religious acceptance; some as a means through which they can share their faith; and some in

order to gain a better understanding and appreciation of another religious tradition. On particular occasions we can expect that mutually agreed ground rules about the purpose of an event will be respected by all involved. But in general we have to be ready to deal with a diversity of motivation as an unavoidable element in our meeting with others as they really are.

11 We recognise the need to respect the integrity of each other's inherited and chosen religious identities, beliefs and practices:

Committed people of all religious traditions treasure the vision by which they live. Many of us also desire to share this with others. For some this entails inviting others to accept a belief or practice as their own. To be able to live by our traditions, share our convictions, and act according to our consciences are freedoms which we all affirm and which we wish the framework of our society to uphold. But these freedoms must never be abused in order to pressurise others into changing their religious identities, beliefs or practices. In this context we are especially sensitive to the concerns which exist within our communities about the particular vulnerabilities of the young, the elderly, the ill and the isolated. We also recognise the damage which has been done to inter-religious relations in the past by forced conversions and the use of unfair inducements to change religion, and we acknowledge the pain which this has caused.

12 Openness to one another and honest self-criticism are essential to a maturing of inter-religious relations:

We live with the wounds of history and we need to recognise their effects on contemporary inter-religious relations. If we are to transform and enrich our relationships we need to avoid demeaning or disparaging another person's religious tradition. We must always beware of comparing the practice of another tradition with the ideals

of our own. There will, however, be occasions when we need to express convictions which differ from those of people of other religious traditions. At the same time, we need to learn what causes offence to each other and to avoid this wherever we can do so without compromising our integrity. Where criticism is offered, an invitation and an opportunity should also be given to respond. To share openly with one another can be painful and sometimes threatening, but a willingness to be self-critical, to listen carefully, and to make clear what we really feel and think is necessary if we are truly to deepen our relationships.

13 Sharing our religious traditions in an atmosphere of respect leads to mutual enrichment and transformation:

When people are secure in their own religious tradition and are able to open themselves up to “the other” and to try to “stand in the other’s shoes”, they often find that their own attitudes, perspectives and understandings are expanded. This can be a personally challenging process. But it can contribute significantly to our understanding of the depth and seriousness of the affirmations of others. It can also open our eyes to aspects of our own tradition which we had not fully appreciated. It is engaging in this process that will lead us to find ways in which we can together build a better society.

■ Summary

We, the affiliated organisations of The Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom affirm that:

- The United Kingdom is a religiously diverse society: it is only when we recognise and accept this that positive inter-religious relations can be built.
- Differences in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and language also affect our inter-religious relationships, as do the bonds of history, religion and kinship between communities here and overseas.
- We need to find ways of more adequately reflecting both our common citizenship and our religious diversity in the framework of our national life.
- Society is impoverished when religious perspectives on life are excluded or marginalized. A recognition of the extent to which we share a range of common values and ideals can contribute to a wider sense of community.
- At the centre of all our traditions is a concern for peace but religious people have too often brought suffering, discord and distrust to one another and to the wider community. Constructive inter-religious relations are vitally important to the well-being of our society.
- In overcoming religious prejudice and stereotypes the education system, the media, and our own communities all have important responsibilities. We recognise the need for us to represent accurately the traditions of others within our own religious communities.

- It is only by meeting with those who live another religious tradition and by listening to their beliefs, stories, insights, and experiences that we can learn from others as well as about them, and build relationships of trust through mutual understanding.
- Our sense of community is deepened when we take common action towards agreed social goals, with sensitive consultation at all stages.
- We cannot demand that others engage in inter-religious relations only on our own terms but have to meet with others as they really are.
- We recognise the need to respect the integrity of each other's inherited and chosen religious identities, beliefs and practices. To be able to live by our traditions, share our convictions, and act according to our consciences are freedoms which we all affirm and which we wish the framework of our society to uphold. But these freedoms must never be abused in order to pressurise others into changing their religious identities, beliefs or practices.
- Openness to one another and honest self-criticism are essential to a maturing of inter-religious relations. If we are to transform and enrich our relationships we need to avoid demeaning or disparaging another person's religious tradition. We must always beware of comparing the practice of another tradition with the ideals of our own.
- Sharing our religious traditions in an atmosphere of respect leads to mutual enrichment and transformation. It will lead us to find ways in which we can together build a better society.



For further information about the Network, and for additional copies of this publication please contact:

The Inter Faith Network for the UK
8A Lower Grosvenor Place
London
SW1W 0EN
Tel: 020 7931 7766
Email: ifnet@interfaith.org.uk