

This submission has been coordinated and prepared by Jo Backus on behalf of the Network of Buddhist Organisations. The author notes that many media representations of religion and belief do not take account of internal differences within a particular tradition. As one respondent importantly noted, Buddhism in mainstream media, is mostly represented by white converts. She emphasises the point that media plays an important role in educating the public about religion and belief, and that more accurate and positive coverage of religion and spirituality is needed. This submission also discusses social change, law, education, social action and dialogue.

NATIONAL CONSULTATION

Background and purpose

The purpose of this consultation is to invite your thoughts, ideas and proposals.

- **Terms of reference**

The Commission's formal terms of reference are as follows:

- to consider the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain, and the significance of emerging trends and identities
- to examine how ideas of Britishness and national identity may be inclusive of a range of religions and beliefs, and may in turn influence people's self-understanding
- to explore how *shared understandings* of the common good may contribute to greater levels of mutual trust and collective action, and to a more harmonious society
- to make recommendations for public life and policy

*Please note that responses to this questionnaire are made on behalf of the executive of the Network of Buddhist Organisations (NBO) by Jo Backus-Co-chair.
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For some topics the responses to the general questions and those of discreet areas have been merged.

General Comments

*Although it is not usual to comment on the **terms of reference** in a questionnaire the following points were felt to be sufficiently important to mention at the outset:*

This survey is timely, given a resurgence of interest in the place of religion and spirituality in the public domain. Buddhism and British Buddhists from all communities have a great deal to play in such debates.

The usefulness of the term 'Britishness' was a focus of critical comment by members of the executive. For all of us, 'Britishness' was a controversial term (a point supported by academic literature on the subject as well as public debate). So, the definition, relevance, accuracy and applicability of the term were challenged. As might be expected there was a spectrum of responses from the Buddhist executive members. All felt that the term has to be considered with care, noting its historical and contextual 'baggage' when applied to various themes or controversies. Others indicated support for the idea that Britishness covered a wide range of ways of being-therefore it was both relevant and very important.

Equally controversial is the idea of 'the common good'. This can be defined in a number of important ways – teleological, material, psychological, political. These understandings may overlap and, while some may be shared by people from very different backgrounds, there will also be differences which come from various contexts, traditions and so forth.

General questions for consultation

The commission would like to know your views on the following general questions:

1. Do you feel at ease with the diversity of *modern* British society in terms of religion and belief? *See Later comments.*
2. Are the current systems of civil and criminal law in the UK satisfactory in relation to issues of religion and belief, and to the overlap between these and issues of race and ethnicity? ***See later comments.***
3. Do the media accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief? ***See later comments .***

4 are issues of religion and belief well handled in the curricula of the UK's systems of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and in relevant systems of training and continuing development?

5. Should faith-based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent?
 - *One short response to this would be why not? It is however, important to avoid party political bias.*
 - *Religious traditions including Buddhism have and continue to contribute to the spiritual and social fabric of society.*
 - *Religions have traditionally challenged the ethical and social norms and model ethics of the societies in which they dwell. Buddhist Action Month is a great, if still embryonic, example of this.*
 - *From a Buddhist perspective all such organised action should be undertaken with wisdom, compassion and gratitude.*
 - *Further, a recent helpful development has been the Covenant for Engagement promoted by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, the first of which have now been signed by various local authorities and corresponding multi-faith organisations.*

6. How should disagreements be handled between and within different traditions and communities, and between these and other interests in public life and wider society?

As no two examples will require exactly the same treatment, a general view would be that all disagreements should be handled with critical openness, sensitivity, compassion and wisdom.

Citizenship education can play an important role here especially in the development of mature discussion of not just religious but of political, cultural and economic difference, all of which contribute to the well-being and progress of society.

Notes on terminology

The phrase **religion and belief** in this document has the same meaning as in legislation. It refers to broad religious traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism; to denominations within such traditions; to non-religious approaches to life such as humanism; and to outlooks which may not be systematic but which are genuinely and sincerely held, and worthy of respect in a democratic society. It includes all the dimensions of belief, practice and identity that may be involved in a religious or non-religious approach to life.

For any one individual, so far as the law is concerned, belonging to a religion does not necessarily involve holding certain distinctively religious beliefs or taking part in certain distinctive religious activities such as attendance at public worship.

Rather, it may be to do with identifying oneself with a broad cultural tradition, or with being seen by others to be identified with a broad tradition.

One point that is missing here is that Humanism has both religious and non-religious forms and this distinction is important . For example, SGI (Soka Gakki International) describes its approach as Buddhist Humanism, while Fo Guang Shan (branches in London and Manchester) describes their approach as Humanistic Buddhism. Common cause has been made between NBO and the British Humanist Association in the past, thus straddling the faith/belief divide.

Many communities - Buddhist included - would not necessarily see the function of religion as based solely in culture. But there is often an important interdependence between how a religious community understands and presents its key truths and ethical way of being, and the cultural and temporal context in which it exists. Asian communities, will lay emphasis on the heritage of their ethnic background.

On another level Buddhist teaching critically deconstructs ideas of identity and this will apply to all Buddhist communities.

The term **public life** in the Commission's terms of reference is similar in meaning to phrases such as public sphere, public square and public space. It refers to areas of society where people from different backgrounds and affiliations meet and work together to legislate, organise and discuss with each other without needing to agree on fundamental religious or philosophical beliefs. Such areas include the legal, political and education systems, social action of various kinds, and the media.

Specific topics for consultation

Social Change

Do you feel at ease with the diversity of *modern* British society in terms of religion and belief?

British society has always reflected some diversity although not as much as today.

The overwhelming response to the question was, in fact one of feeling at ease with that diversity and with the complexity that comes with it.

We raised the following issues related to the assumptions in the context material:

- *The suggestion that religious practice is declining is problematic. It may be true of some traditions but not all.*
- *Some Buddhists will contend that a British identity is more to do with the secular than the religious. Others raised concern about religious and British identities being taken together-and see them as separate aspects of the person.*

- *One respondent noted that ‘English secularity and custom is having a decreasing effect on those of Asian culture. As a consequence it would appear that discrimination against differences of race, caste, region and even continent of origin is presently growing’,*
- *Another made a wider but associated comment that ‘Jains in Birmingham are few but still divide along linguistic lines. There is a gurdwara that caters to Sikhs of Kenyan origin to which few from Asia will go. Sikh dating sites and they invariably mention to which caste they belong.*

Consequently, we felt It is important to be mindful of generalisations and an example from one of our members is illuminative: “I’m always interested to see that in school groups I teach at the Buddhist Centre, it’s the white kids who have no religion. The minority ethnic kids mostly do have some faith background, and often the Chinese kid is not Buddhist but Christian. Beware of generalisations, or, again, of conflation of ethnicity with religious identity.”

Questions for consultation

What would you say are the most significant social and economic changes as they affect

1. The place of religion and belief in British public life and people's sense of being British or belonging in Britain?

Potentially, the rise of radical movements.

An example here is the emergence of ‘far right’ movements such as the EDL. Their appropriation of Christian symbols such as the flag of St. George seemingly provides disaffected young people with a strong yet problematic sense of ‘British identity’, one which lacks an understanding of the nature of diversity and plurality. This has led to aggressive behaviour towards ethnic minorities and all those who disagree with their values.

Equally, this analysis can be applied to the emergence of radical Islamic movements.

2. Does Britain show equal respect for religious and non-religious beliefs and identities?

One answer to this is that it depends. There is a mixed picture. On the one hand there have been cases of work place discrimination on grounds of wearing religious symbols. Perhaps this would be better described as a position of equal disrespect!

Idealised perceptions of traditions can also lead to skewed understandings about them and their adherents. An example of this can be seen to some extent in the differential ways Muslims and Buddhists are treated in the media.

On the other hand, the development of interfaith movements (where there is healthy Buddhist representation) and the work they undertake to promote mutual understanding . has led to some level of respect for the various faiths in the UK. It s difficult to generalise on how much impact this has had on the wider community.

3 Should public ceremonies and institutions, for example Remembrance Day and the House of Lords, reflect the changed pattern of religion and belief in British society, and if so how?

We noted that changes are underway to ensure a more diverse representation of peers – for example through the making of ‘people’s lords’ among others.

It is acknowledged that some peers have raised important challenges to equality issues, including social and religious injustice. Their motivation to do so coming from the religious backgrounds they have.

However, further actions could be undertaken such as:

- Increased Buddhist representation.*
- Amendment to the Queen’s title of Defender of Faith*
- A radical change was suggested by way of disestablishing the Church of England and replacing it with a second House populated in some different and more equitable way. This it was suggested might be of benefit for the Church of England whereby it could develop its spiritual practices free from too much association with aspects of temporal power.*

4 What should be done to help people of all religions and beliefs feel their perspectives and organisations can play a part in shaping public

life?

This question ultimately requires a response of very broad scope. At least three main threads occur here. The first would be to listen to community responses to this question. The second would be to support anything which fosters a wider more accurate understanding of the nature of faith communities in the UK , and the third to identify groups or initiatives which require funding because they are working to enable community engagement.

Education is seen as an important element in these strands and is dealt with in the section devoted to university and school education.

The following responses target funding issues and we suggest:

- *that the Government should identify appropriate funding to those organisations which seek to promote engagement. For example the Interfaith Network of the UK and local movements such as Faiths Together in Lambeth.*
- *Government support though funding should look more carefully at the following problems:*
 - *Funding skewing the work of grass roots organisations through time consuming procedures and processes-which severely detrimental to those organisations.*
 - *Funding has frequently ignored the mismatch between its own agendas for funding and what is needed 'on the ground'.*
 - *Proper enquiries with religious communities have rarely been carried out in order to seek out exactly what they need for their creative projects.*
 - *Funding has rarely been provided for the continuance of important projects. An example of this is the 'Together in Service'. Buddhist Action Month was part of the project and was provided initial funding, but was unsuccessful in the second year due to a change of funding criteria. This meant that valuable continuity, good will, energy and momentum was lost.*
- *Religious Organisations are rarely businesses therefore the business model used to allocate funding to 'pump-prime' initiatives can be problematic.*

The government should seek to support both national and local organisations in their initiatives as mentioned in the Interfaith Strategy of 2008 ('Face to Face and Side by Side') and the Near Neighbours Programme. These are important ways forward.

4. What recommendations relating to social change should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

In general, support education which can help in the understanding of the ambiguous nature of religion today and which enables greater understanding of the religions and religious communities which form the complex faith map of the UK.

Support interfaith initiatives and organisations which lead to greater critical engagement with and contribution to society.

4 What should be done to help people of all religions and beliefs feel their perspectives and organisations can play a part in shaping public life?

This question ultimately requires a response of very broad scope. A number of threads occur here. The first would be to listen to community responses to this question and act upon them. The second would be to support anything (for example education and the media) which fosters or has the potential to foster a wider more accurate understanding of the nature of faith communities in the UK, identify groups or initiatives which require funding because they are working to enable community engagement and encourage further religious literacy amongst politicians.

- *Listening to the community*
Listen further to community groups and be mindful of their actual needs.
- *Education (See commentary on Education and RE)*
Encourage knowledge about and respect for all Faiths and Beliefs including diversity amongst religious groups and atheist. Support programmes and conferences that enable people to come together and learn from each other.

- *The Media (see commentary on the media)*

- *Funding*

The following responses target funding issues and we suggest: The government should seek to support both national and local organisations in their initiatives as mentioned in the Interfaith Strategy of 2008 ('Face to Face and Side by Side') and the Near Neighbours Programme. These are important ways forward.

Religious Literacy and politicians

While it is true that some politicians show a great deal of understanding about the nature of religion and belief in the UK and religious communities, there is still a need for others to show leadership by becoming more religiously literate.

By this is meant:

demonstrating a knowledge and understanding of the subtleties and complexities of faith traditions, their social engagement and interaction. For example, avoiding the conflation of 'religion' to 'Christianity', or assuming that Christianity sets 'the' model for all religions and that the diverse traditions of Buddhism can fit into that without detriment.

- *Avoiding simplistic, erroneous and disparaging comments about the deeply held truths of those traditions*
- *Demonstrating an ability to hold to the principle of freedom of speech but to execute it in a mindful, wise and compassionate manner, when engaged with those deeply held truths and complexities of religious life.*

Law

Are the current systems of civil and criminal law in the UK satisfactory in relation to issues of religion and belief, and to the overlap between these and issues of race and ethnicity?

Questions for consultation

1. To what extent, and in what ways, have recent legislative changes been beneficial or detrimental?

In what ways, if any, do they or other existing laws need to be modified?

'Religion' is a complex signifier of identity. A multifaceted term which can be difficult to apply consistently in a legal context. Further research and significant case-law precedent, should be understood before this question can begin to be answered.

2. What is the appropriate relationship between minority religious tribunals, for example Sharia and Beth Din courts, and mainstream legal systems?

British law must take precedence and not allow discrimination and inequity in the operation of other systems. There should therefore be a right of appeal. On the other hand, the careful judgment in relation to wearing the veil during criminal proceedings should set the precedent for relations between the different judiciaries.

3. What have been the benefits of anti-terrorism legislation and preventative action?

Arguably, benefits would include the emergence of a critical debate about the content and scope of such legislation, in and between members of faith communities and the wider society. This would include radicalism in Buddhist communities. Part of this debate is the diverse Muslim community valiantly coming to terms with balancing their differing and deeply held faith positions with dealing with fellow Muslims who are involved in radical Islamic movements.

Key interventions to prevent actual atrocities.

Have there been negative effects, and if so how could these be minimised or removed?

- *An undue focus on Muslim communities leading to their further isolation from public life.*
- *'Heavy handed' legislation has had detrimental impact upon*

non-combatants and their families without necessarily dealing with those who are involved in radical movements.

Avoidance of negative impacts could be through:

- *Ideally any means which targets and ameliorates the cause of radical terror activity in the first place*
- *Support being given to Muslim and other groups who are attempting to prevent their young people from being radicalised.*
- *For example (FAST see above)*
- *In appropriate contexts utilising educational resources such as the REsilience Project which helps teachers and young people to engage with controversial topics.*

4. What are the overlaps, similarities and differences between racial discrimination and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, and are these adequately reflected in the current legal framework?

Even though the 1998 act tried to simplify and coalesce several separate pieces of legislation, the problems are generally too complex. To take the relatively obscure example of the Tamil community, those from South India and those from Sri Lanka will identify with each other only so far, but come apart when jealousies at organisational level arise. In Sri Lanka Tamils may be Hindu, Christian, Muslim or Buddhist, so there can be religious discrimination. Tamil Tigers had a largely Hindu and Christian leadership and so massacred not just Buddhists but also Muslims of their own ethnicity.

5. What recommendations relating to the law should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

The Media

Questions for consultation

Our general response is that:

Often there is a problematic conflation between religion and culture. Articles and news-pieces can be well informed with the required understanding of religious sensitivities and diversity. But it remains true that there is a lack of depth of understanding about the different faiths and their internal differences. In the case of Buddhism, many conceptions of the tradition do not take account of differences between traditions or the implications of different cultural and time contexts within which they exist.

In the case of Buddhism in the media (as in public life in the UK) it is mostly represented by white converts when they are in fact only about 40% of UK Buddhists. (Of those who stated their ethnicity in the 2011 census 40.24% were white).

From a Buddhist perspective media messages can be judgmental, whether they are intentionally so or not, and the result is the setting up of unskilful states of mind. These reinforce obvious and subtle stereotypes which hinder dialogue and harmonious relationships.

1. Is coverage of religion and belief in the media generally satisfactory, or should steps be taken to improve it, with a view to promoting a greater degree of religious literacy in the population as a whole?

One member of our group cited an important piece of scholarly work on this debate:

'Elaine Graham writing in the text Media, Culture and Religion (Chapter 20 Media, Culture and Religion), states that the backdrop to questions about religious literacy emerges from a public space and discourse which is " 'more differentiated but potentially more polarised , with a small but increasingly well mobilised religious minority operating alongside a majority of disaffiliated non-believers who may have little or no first hand understanding of religious belief or practice" '. This situation gives rise to a question about ' "the extent to which public authorities, indeed the population at large, should be expected to be familiar with the concepts, knowledge and vocabulary by which to talk about religion or to empathise with those of faith" ' (Graham: 228). So we arrive at questions about religious literacy.

We have already pointed out the need for politicians to be more religiously literate so they may avoid simplistic generalisations when commenting on faith matters. We have suggested that they should be listening more to faith communities in order to assist funding needs for faith community initiatives. In what has already been noted we might broadly agree with

Adam Dinham's comment below where he identifies:

*' a lamentable quality of conversation about religion just when we need it most. Equality and human rights discourse, law and policy bring this into sharp relief, making religious literacy a pressing issue for our times. It is our contention that equality, religion and belief can be best addressed within a religious literacy framework'.
<http://www.religiousliteracy.org/ehrc-dialogues>*

Where the media is concerned we would agree that the media plays an important role in educating and informing the public about religion, religious communities and issues. As Graham suggests:

'how the everyday life-world of electronic media may serve to shape us as actors , consumers and citizens in a world where the tensions and interactions between sacred and secular are more lively than ever' is significant (Graham: 235).

Yet we find media coverage is satisfactory on some occasions but it is neither consistent nor of the same quality

Steps to be taken to improve this situation:

- We feel that It is difficult to determine who would be responsible for making sure that reporting was accurate and balanced and also what if any sanctions would be available if journalists 'overstepped a mark'.*
- However, one might start with a recognition (sponsored and nourished by the media) of the need for more informed public debate about the nature of faith and belief in our (arguably)post-secular society.*
- Journalists and those who 'make programmes' about religious communities and religious affairs need to understand their role as mediators of 'truths' about those they speak and write about They need to understand the complexity of religious life in the UK and be a significant part*

of the debate about religious literacy. Accurate identification of Buddhism and Buddhists in programmes for example. Aiding this could be an understanding of relevant writings by key Buddhist scholars and thinkers as well as meeting with contemporary Buddhist groups.

- *Consumers of the media should be encouraged to become well informed and discriminating about what constitutes accurate and balanced commentary as part of an on-going move towards plural democracy.*
- *More positive coverage -reporting of contemporary debates about religion and spirituality on main stream media channels and at prime time slots would be useful. An example of this is the forthcoming lecture by Jay Lakhani- a well known theoretical physicist on 'Reincarnation - Myth or Reality? This is the second in a series entitled 'Spiritual Humanism' Sponsored by Ernst and Young. And the events of Buddhist Action Month.*

1. If improvements are desirable, what are they and how should they be promoted? *See comments above.*

2. What principles should guide the education of journalists and media producers in religious affairs and the production of codes of professional ethics for them, and how can these best be built into courses for trainee journalists?

Generally, courses should aim to aid those involved in the media to speak intelligently about religions and spiritualities.

This would include an understanding of the complexity of the subject they are dealing with.

Such an education might involve modular courses, or university degrees. It should also include working alongside the communities where possible. In this manner it might avoid the stereotyping of beliefs, individuals and events.

As far as principles go, Buddhists might argue that whatever is spoken or written about is done in a spirit of wisdom and compassion. Here Buddhist teaching on the Right Speech element of the Noble Eightfold Path may be helpful.

3. By what criteria, in relation to issues of religion and belief, should specific pieces of work in the media and culture be appreciated or critiqued?

Specific criteria will be relevant to particular topics, but general principles might be derived from the general principles above.

4. What recommendations relating to the media should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

In addition to the points made above -from a Buddhist perspective an understanding of the Buddhist teachings on Right Speech would be a sensible beginning.

Education and Training

Context

Religious Education in (State)schools

We have already commented on the importance of Citizenship Education.

Are current syllabuses for education about religions and beliefs in primary and secondary schools, including religious schools, appropriate and adequate? If not, what needs to be added or modified?

British RE(Religious Education)has been regarded as world leading. It has been celebrated (and envied) in ISREV(International Seminar on Religious Education and Values). It continues-despite threats from the current government-to be deemed pioneering along with Sweden.

The Religious Education Council (REC), hosts numerous reports on its potential to make huge contributions to social cohesion, mutual understanding, and interfaith dialogue.

The All Party Parliamentary Group's Report Religious Education:

the Truth Unmasked (found on the REC website), details the ways in which government policy and lack of funding has hampered the work of Religious Educators. The report indicates a desperate need for time for RE on Teacher Training courses with appropriate funding and resources.

Currently primary ITT get about 2 hours exposure to teaching RE. Secondary ITT have had their bursaries withdrawn despite qualified teacher shortage. Continuing CPD(Continued Professional Development) offers very little for RE specifically. Closure of leading university departments of teacher education (Warwick for example should be halted and rolled back with public money invested to raise the access to academic study as the bedrock of knowledgeable and skillful teachers.

In terms of the curriculum Michael Gove's policy left the RE community in the invidious position of having to create its own curriculum review staffed by volunteers without government funding. This is a scandal. It is noteworthy that in the recent that in recent government critique of schools in dealing with issues of radicalism little attention was paid to the work done by countless academics and RE professionals in research on these issues in both theoretical and practical contexts (See the REsillience project on the REC website. This project was run with the specific aim of enabling teachers to deal with difficult and controversial topics).

Government agendas which validate the view that RE is an easy subject and lacks rigour are especially promoted by the Russell Group universities. This should be challenged

*We suggest that Religious Education (RE) in school can give young people the knowledge, understanding and critical skills which enable young people to handle the complexities of religion and belief in the modern context. **It is the only subject area which does this in any depth and which contributes significantly to religious literacy.***

1. With regard to matters of religion and belief, what general principles should guide the teaching of (**add RE/RS**) history and citizenship education in schools, and the teaching of literature and

the other arts?

- *Fund the work of the REC (Religious Education Council) in providing and developing the revised curriculum*
 - *Support the training of RE teachers-reinstate bursaries*
 - *Include RS in the EBACC.*
 - *Include RE in the list of subjects used to monitor school achievement.*

(See: A Review of Religious Education 2013 (REC) Religious Education: The Truth Unmasked (APPG All Party Parliamentary Group on RE).

- *Lobby government for increased time to explore religious matters in the classroom*
- *Lobby government to renew funding and resourcing of Religious Education in all aspects*
- *From a recent review of the teaching of Buddhism in schools:*
 - *Empower teachers to have a depth of knowledge on Buddhism*
 - *Support and empower the interaction between Buddhist communities and schools in order to enrich knowledge and understanding for the students*
 - *Ensure curriculum time so that Buddhism is not marginalised or left out of the curriculum (some traditions are left out of the curriculum due to time constraints).*

Recent research into the teaching of Buddhism supports the need for well educated and trained teachers. Of particular note is the use made of different local Buddhist groups in the enhancement of learning, most of which is not well funded.

Buddhism is very popular with the schools who study it. However, the curriculum needs to reflect diversity within the tradition, which is often sacrificed either through ignorance or through lack of time. Teaching and learning needs to be well resourced and attract teachers who themselves are religiously literate and have had opportunity for study and critical reflection.

**With regard to History, Citizenship and other arts subjects-
fund cross curricular developments and enable mutual
understanding to develop amongst professionals.**

2. What should be the role of religion and belief organisations in relation to the running of state school systems?

This is a complex issue, not least because of the historical development of faith based schools. All schools should be inspected under a common framework but with sensitivity to their ethos.

3. Should the state education system be permitted to select pupils and staff on grounds of religion or belief?

There are arguments for and against this process, particularly where religious organisations pay for school buildings and so forth.

4. What is and what should be the place of religion and belief on campuses of higher and further education? In continuing professional development (CPD) in a range of occupations, what general principles should guide coverage of matters of religion and belief?

The debate about religious literacy has been taken up by university professionals who deem the role of higher education as contributing to the wellbeing of a harmonious, complex plural society.

We consider the situation to be that despite challenges from secularists and some Humanists, religion and spirituality remain a primary focus for a significant part of people's lives nationally and globally. The emergence and development of Buddhist communities from all traditions supports this assumption as do the offer wide ranges of programmes and courses on offer (amongst traditional teachings) aimed at the well being of all.

Yet, the story of recent years is the successive closure of Religious Studies and Theology departments, the downgrading of subject knowledge strands in PGCE and other teaching courses and their host departments - even those of international standing (e.g. that

of Warwick University). Many of these departments have been at the forefront of Buddhist study and teaching.

As David F. Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, intimates, these moves are foolish. Universities and religions have at their heart a search for truths mediated through education. In both transformative experience is common overseen by leading scholarship.

Academic Religious Studies and Theology departments and departments who have some academic interest in the impact of religion in their fields of study, are essential to religious literacy.

Without these departments, it is clear that the academic study of, for example, Buddhism will be marginalised. Opportunities to learn from such wisdom and be taught by leading critical thinkers who are 'outsiders', 'insiders' and those who 'straddle both' will be lost to society.

Courses in inter-faith and intra-religious encounter where students have an opportunity to explore the most challenging issues of the modern world are unlikely to be reborn in other departments if their main 'academic homes' are closed.

4. What recommendations relating to education and training should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

Prevent the further erosion of academic departments and courses. Instead foster research and dialogue between universities and religions.

Consider the ideas in the following extract from David Ford's paper: 'How might Universities Best engage with the Religions', which provides an illuminating background.

'The first essential is for universities themselves, as leading players in civil society, to be models of best practice in dealing with the religions. This has three main interrelated requirements:

To recognise the importance of 'academically-mediated religion', creating settings where the religions can be engaged with thoughtfully and rigorously through many disciplines;

*To be 'religiously literate' as institutions, dealing well with issues of belief and practice, tolerance and coexistence, equality and human rights, and modelling the sort of 'complexly secular and religious community' that can help the flourishing of our plural world;
To take seriously intelligently religious contributions to the
Shaping of a university's policy, strategy, values, ethics and ethos.*

*The second essential is to fulfil responsibilities to the rest of society, regionally, nationally and internationally, including:
Improving the quality of education and understanding within and between the religious communities;*

- *Raising the level of general religious literacy in society;
Participating in 'stabilising', peacemaking and peace building in
The many situations of conflict where religion is a factor.'*

Therefore there is a need to:

- *Encourage university education to promote religious literacy through relevant departments.*
- *Halt recent university department closures in both RS and Theology*
- *Halt, PGCE RE course closure*
- *Improve and enhance with funding CPD.*

Social Action

1. What do you see as the benefits and disadvantages of social action by organisations defined by a religion or belief, both locally and nationally?

We consider the benefits to be:

- *Religious Communities can provide challenges to those issues in society which create disharmony. They can hold to account those actions which lead to inequalities. An example of this is the recent Archbishop of Canterbury's involvement in commentary on food banks and poverty.*
- *They can show leadership in responding to environmental issues such as Buddhist Action Month(BAM).*

- *They can utilise the wisdom of their traditions to improve the well being of people generally through specific courses for example at Jamyang Buddhist Centre London:*
- *'Conquering Stress and Anxiety Mindfulness' courses.*
- *They form the bedrock of communities engaged in inter and intra religious dialogue about religion and society as can be seen in and through numerous interfaith groups. Usually meetings can provide opportunities for the development of knowledge and understanding about each group participating.*

2. Are processes of consultation, collaboration and partnership between government and community organisations satisfactory?

This Varies hugely around the country. In many boroughs practically no help is given and there is little consultation. However in Islington and in some boroughs there are good partnerships. There is a large benefit to the community as a whole.

3. If not, how should they be improved, and what are the respective responsibilities in the public and voluntary sectors for the making of such improvements?

A small portion of local government funding should be allocated to Faiths forums who can support and co-ordinate the excellent work done by many faith based and secular organisations.

Further clarity with regard to the criteria for funding bids would be helpful as well as follow up funding to support successful projects.

4. What are the principles underlying successful social action by organisations defined by a religion or belief, and what kinds of training activity are most effective in developing leadership skills and qualities?

Draw on the skilled organisations in the locality to learn from them and access suitable training. Some have offered courses in mental health first aid for faith, BME and refugee groups. Also courses on how to access different kinds of help, conferences on mental health and poverty, trafficking, suicide etc.

5. What recommendations relating to social action should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

Take consideration of the points and examples given above and the following:

Local councils need to support Interfaith forums in sharing experience, information and ways of working with local challenges. The government needs to support Interfaith Network UK in its sharing of knowledge and encouragement of the different faiths and local and regional interfaith groups in working together for the benefit of all.

Dialogue and engagement

1. What are the principles underlying effective dialogue within and between different religious and non-religious individuals and groups?

Are present structures and processes for engagement adequate for promoting this dialogue?

A difficult series of questions but a beginning would be to consider the principles laid out in the Interfaith Network Documentation.

Principles should include:

- *Mutual respect.*
- *Critical friendship and an openness to disagreement as well as agreement and the dealing with difficult topics such as radicalism and the religious sponsoring of terrorism etc. Being able to take organisational stances against extremist appropriations of religious traditions.*

More funding is required for interfaith movements given their importance in fostering religious literacy. Specific conferences should be funded for example on the tackling of difficult issues. (Not enough is given to the IFN UK to enable conferences as well as the annual national and regional meetings it already hosts as well being the main contact point in the UK.)

2. How clearcut is the difference between reasoned criticism on the one hand and bigoted or closed-minded opposition on the other?

It is not clear cut as much depends on tone of voice and physical stance. Also context and above all the purpose for things being said. Lack of knowledge and understanding lies behind some opposite opinions. Also how 'safe' the people feel when engaged in dialogue.

It is important to consider the view that Liberal tolerance can be as bigoted and closed minded as any other major view.

3. What are the factors which lead an individual or group to be intolerant of beliefs which are different from their own?

- *Very often fear is the key here. Historical factors imported into this country, upbringing that installs a belief system.*
- *Lack of knowledge experience and understanding of different groups one may meet which can cause tensions between different groups of one religious tradition and across different religious traditions.*
- *Power structures in the host community that might disenfranchise minorities.*
- *Lack of social mobility despite the rhetoric.*
- *Racism.*

4. What changes need to be introduced into the leadership training programmes of faith communities, in order to take account of differences both within and between traditions?

An example cited by one of the executive may be helpful in response to this question:

'I remember an Interfaith meeting of Faith leaders where Lord Sachs and archbishop Rowan Williams were saying that as faith leaders we have very good relationships; however the real challenge is how to percolate this relationship of understanding and happy co-existence to our parishioners. Once again

conferences on various themes for both faith leaders and parishioners, educators etc., would allow sharing of experience and room to discuss our problems.'

In line with the promotion of religious literacy government funding would be important for providing training in dialogue. Following Buddhist teachings on avoidance of judgmental states of mind would be a help.

What are the foundations for shared values and what might some of those shared values be?

This is a difficult question to respond to without trivialising matters.

Mutual understanding of where values come from ie they are mostly related to key truths of each tradition

Understanding that sharing values may only be possible at certain levels- once the different foundations of each tradition are in play the grounds for sharing may disappear.

Possibly:

- *Mutual respect*
- *Respect for life*
- *Respect for the common good despite difficulties in defining it!*
- *The development of compassion and wisdom*
- *The necessity of unselfish action for the welfare of all appears to be a shared basic across the faiths.*

As one respondent put it 'Personally I would stress action based on this as the bringer of cohesion, from which mutual understanding and respect will grow'.

5. What recommendations relating to dialogue and engagement should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?

Alongside the comments above, *It should revisit earlier recommendations from the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (Our Shared Future, 2007) and in the Interfaith Strategy (Face to Face and Side by Side, 2008). No need to reinvent wheels!*

