

Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life Consultation

Response from [REDACTED]

Dear Commission,

Thank you for your request for my response to the consultation. I draw my comments from my research concerning interfaith dialogue in British public life, and tangentially material drawn from a study concerning policing.

I have highlighted below the specific questions to which I feel I can offer a response. I have focussed on my primary research interest which is the local, neighbourhood level interactions between people of different religions or beliefs, and have drawn on my extensive doctoral fieldwork study of a Leeds interfaith project.

What are the principles underlying effective dialogue within and between different religious and nonreligious individuals and groups? Are present structures and processes for engagement adequate for promoting this dialogue?

The first part of this question raises a further question:

How is 'effective' dialogue measured?

In my doctoral research (see [REDACTED] itemised below) it was clear that efficacy in dialogue is contextually and personally specific. It may be that dialogue is considered effective when:

1. it supports co-working on a social justice project
2. it secures funding for projects
3. it provides effective community representation in civil society
4. it supports community organising in response to trauma or threat
5. it leads to personal religious/spiritual growth
6. it leads to shared worship or syncretic beliefs and/or practises
7. it leads to religious conversion
8. it supports the development of more cohesive communities
9. it leads to a reduction in prejudice, racism or discrimination

All of these can be claims for efficacy, and all of these were evidenced to some extent in one small scale community based project. I would therefore suggest that the principles underlying effective dialogue need to be established in terms of both context and of expected outcome. There may be an extent to which this is driven by funding and policy agendas, and sensitivity to this is required. An example from my research was the way in which a group established itself in such a way that it could identify itself as either single faith or multi-faith depending on the funding it was applying for to support the core community work.

Principles underlying effective dialogue might then include mutual respect, social justice, religious inclusivism or pluralism, or some shared theological or other philosophical framework (including concepts of love, truth and justice), but these will vary depending on the context and expected outcomes.

The second part of the question (*Are present structures and processes for engagement adequate for promoting this dialogue?*) also raises a significant further question:

Which structures and processes are currently deemed to be promoting dialogue, even if inadequately?

In my doctoral research I drew a distinction between ‘formal’ dialogue and ‘informal’ dialogue. This is related to the previous set of observations. Formal dialogue initiatives such as interfaith forums, fellowships or councils, are themselves engagement opportunities which may lead to ‘effective’ dialogue (as in, dialogue with an ‘effective’ outcome). However, informal dialogue is based on engagement which is outside the usual ‘dialogue’ context. I use examples in my studies of people coming into contact with one another at the school gates, in community groups and meetings and in neighbourhood activities. These opportunities may be supported by formal dialogue activities, and they may lead to ‘effective’ dialogue, but there is a more complex relationship than the question suggests. Dialogue activities are often based on formal meetings, with formal outcomes, and formal ‘representation’ however, if we look to literature from intercultural studies it is clear that facilitating positive informal relationships may lead to more positive outcomes in terms of, for instance, cohesive neighbourhoods or reduction in prejudice. We can only then judge what are appropriate structures and processes if we first identify the context-dependent goals and principles for dialogue. The present question presumes a particular model of interfaith dialogue and engagement, where it might instead challenge these constructs and look at the ways in which effective informal dialogue can be facilitated.

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

In my research I have largely engaged with individuals and groups who are predisposed to positive appraisals of the other. However, I can identify from this some key factors which impact on individual’s perceptions of the roots of their positive attitudes. These include:

- Positive experiences of diversity
- Good understanding of own beliefs and of the nature of belief (not necessarily the content of the beliefs of others)
- Forming strong relationships with people from different backgrounds

We can therefore assume that where these are lacking then intolerance may be fostered. It is also worth noting how young Muslims involved in a dialogue meeting cited the influence of YouTube videos by Ahmad Deedat and Zakir Naik on *da’wah*. Their views and engagement were tolerant and positive, but they were formed by material which saw dialogue as a route to *da’wah*. This challenges a straightforward understanding of dialogue as currently based on shared understanding of the purpose of the activity.

It was notable that in the study on policing it was unclear to participants where the line was drawn between hate crime based on religion and that based on ethnicity. I also consider this significant here. Religious identity, and intolerance towards or between members of religions, may be confused, masked or complicated by other issues such as culture and ethnicity which are not easily disentangled in community life.

Lastly, it is useful to note a case in my research on interfaith where an atheist objected to a community vigil outside a mosque after the Danish cartoon controversy. His objection was voiced carefully and considerately but it was also important to uncover the tension that can arise in neighbourhoods where religious identity is assumed to be the norm and to be valorised by community activity.

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?

Based on my research, I would suggest that skills of facilitation are important in order to develop and support safe spaces of and for *informal* dialogue in religiously diverse neighbourhoods. This not only improves the quality of engagement in the social and political space of the neighbourhood but also leads to more developed engagement in formal dialogue activities.

Most *formal* dialogue groups (fellowships, forums, councils) in towns and cities are primarily made up of those who already have positive attitudes towards dialogue, have at least perceived leadership and representative status, and are often noted to be older and male. This stands in interesting contrast to faith based organisations operating as social enterprises or working in social justice which often have more varied representation of the communities they seek to serve. It has been particularly interesting to see how the Three Faiths Forum has developed in this regard, and I think this organisation provides an interesting example of the way formal dialogue activities are evolving in response to the need for practical action. There is clearly recognition, in the way organisations are evolving, that facilitated activity rather than traditional models of ‘dialogue’ are vital for effective leadership in engaging with diversity.

Lastly, as will be clear from recent debates in the IFNUK about membership, interfaith dialogue bodies can be seen as means of validating religions in public – approving religions through allowing their membership. This needs to be discussed and understood as part of leadership roles. Public recognition of religious and non-religious beliefs is contested and has an added legal dimension because of charity and discrimination regulations. Leadership needs to be able to recognise and engage with the motivations of all partners in dialogue and engagement including newer, smaller and often marginalised communities.

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

In the context of my research it was clear that commitment to a neighbourhood and a community, *belonging*, was important to those who were actively involved in their local community and in dialogue and other engagement activities. Shared values may have emerged as a result of this foundation in *belonging*, which was facilitated and supported by community activities and provision. Certainly those I worked with were likely to articulate respect, pride in the locality, care and trust as some of the values that were important to their activity.

Recommendations relating to dialogue and engagement

From reflection on these questions and the short context statement in the consultation document I would suggest the following:

1. Clarity of purpose about the role, function and membership of dialogue groups
2. Greater facilitation and leadership of informal neighbourhood engagement between people of different religions and of no religion
3. Clarity about the impact of funding agendas on interfaith activity

I hope these brief comments are useful.