

## **Submission for the National Consultation by the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life**

The Cambridge Inter-faith Programme (CIP) pursues academic research into Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and their interactions with each other and with the wider secular and religious world, as well as providing and facilitating high quality public education in this area.

Partnerships of difference and a pursuit of deeper understandings within and between traditions are central to the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme's ethos, and we bring this to bear in this submission. We have responded below to specific questions posed by the consultation in relation to dialogue and engagement; education and training; and the media.

### **DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT**

#### **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?**

First of all, effective dialogue must be underpinned by more and high quality religious literacy. Contrary to widespread post-enlightenment expectation, religion has not been swept away in the great tide of secularism. Billions of people around the world identify with a religion, and its importance has been highlighted by global events and confirmed by research. Yet there is a paucity of debate and a lamentable quality of conversation about religion when we need it most. Migration and globalization put us all in to everyday encounter with the full range of religions, beliefs and non-beliefs. Improved religious literacy therefore needs to take place at all levels- in education, continuing professional development, and in the public and private sphere.<sup>i</sup>

Secondly, effective dialogue between people of faith and no faith must be underpinned by the need to understand and appreciate difference. Whilst shared norms and values are an important part of dialogue, it is often the issue of how we discuss and manage difference which causes social friction. Current processes often fail on this count, though there are examples of where this has been achieved and implemented. The use of Scriptural Reasoning- whereby people of different faiths read and reflect on their scriptures together- is an example of a tool which allows for a quality of dialogue that brings many benefits, including a deeper understanding of one's own faith; a better understanding of other faiths; a better appreciation of areas of agreement and disagreement; and a deepening of relationships, friendships and community. CIP has been involved in Scriptural Reasoning for many years now; its use has spread to schools, hospitals, prisons, universities and more, and it is practised globally as a tool for inter-faith dialogue and learning.

Coexist House<sup>ii</sup> is an example of a vision which exemplifies the above. The joint endeavour of CIP and the Coexist Foundation and supported by The City of London Corporation, The Inner Temple, and The Victoria and Albert Museum, the vision is of a new London centre which will celebrate the diversity of the world's faiths and build understanding and respect across divides. Its activities would be primarily geared towards religious literacy and would be designed as much for secular audiences as religious audiences. It would provide opportunities for experiential encounters with religion and religious people and there would also be opportunities for inter-faith dialogue through various activities including Scriptural Reasoning. The feasibility study for Coexist House showed us that there is demonstrable public demand from people with and without faith as well as the geo-political imperative for such a project.

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Finally, it is important to note that a national (and indeed global) policy focus on the relationship between religion and violence means that policy-makers have paid insufficient attention to the potential for religion in peace-making. Efforts being made by religious groups in this field are not given the attention that they deserve, particularly when contrasted to the policy and media spotlight on religion and its relationship with violence and conflict. The Rose Castle Foundation, which will transform Rose Castle in Cumbria into a centre for peace and reconciliation, is an example of a new project which will work in the realm of religious dialogue. With the support of trained mediators and using powerful tools for dialogue such as Scriptural Reasoning, the centre will work on reconciliation within and between faith communities as well as across the religious/secular divide, bringing together young and emerging leaders who rarely meet in their own context because of fear, misunderstanding and prejudice.

### **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?**

While a very wide spectrum of training and capacity-building support is available to faith leaders (whether or not they are aware of, or access it), there appear to be very few long term initiatives that cut across gender, different age groups and professions, that concentrate on the explicit development of leadership for lay and clerical faith leaders. National leadership programmes that incorporate an inter-faith awareness of the distinctive resources of differing faith traditions are fewer still. Existing programmes fall into four overlapping categories:

- *Initiatives that develop an understanding of religious leadership based on the wisdom of one religion:* The Susi Bradfield Women's Educational Leadership Programme, The CARE Leadership Programme, The Markfield Certificate in Chaplaincy and the Adam Science Foundation Leadership Programme are examples of this.
- *Courses aimed at younger people or women in order to enable participants to know each other as current or future leaders and prepare them for the challenges and opportunities of a world in flux:* Faith in Leadership, the Adam Science Foundation Leadership Programme and the Susi Bradfield Women's Educational Leadership Programme are examples of this.
- *'Show and tell' offerings where participants are given an awareness of issues affecting faith communities from experts or are trained for a specific role:* Such programmes foster leadership in an implicit way by broadening participants' personal networks or by deepening their ability to fulfil vocational roles that require leadership abilities. The Chaplaincy training programme at Markfield and the CARE Leadership Programme fall into this category.
- *Programmes that develop explicit leadership and inter-faith understanding for existing lay and clerical leaders by encouraging the practice of Scriptural Reasoning and by fostering skill sets such as effective communication, negotiation, public speaking, facilitating meetings, etc.:* Faith in Leadership, and the Cambridge Coexist Leadership Programme are examples of this.

We recommend an approach towards leadership training programmes that does not prescribe theories or centralized solutions to local problems or the creation of a neutral middle-ground. Rather, we advocate training that builds practical capacity in contexts of change, where local decision-makers are taken through an experiential process that

develops self-esteem, skills and partnerships of difference. Such programmes would be spaces where participants from different faith traditions can learn to collaborate as well as disagree more fruitfully and intelligently.

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

- The establishment of Coexist House in London as a space for religious literacy and inter-faith dialogue to build understanding and respect across divides.
- Inter-faith dialogue which takes people deeper into religion; encourages people to respect difference; improves communication skills; and enhances cross-faith encounters, such as Scriptural Reasoning.
- An approach to leadership and inter-faith dialogue that draws on existing networks to identify local decision-makers in different neighbourhoods and offers them quality leadership training, combined with a programme of Scriptural Reasoning, to add value to existing provision.
- Residential based training for religious decision makers where they can learn to lead in a way that enables them to live and work together, to eat and talk together, to laugh and argue well together and to share silence.
- More investment in mediation and peace-making and support and training for religious individuals and groups in their efforts to be involved in peace-making at the local, national and global level.

## **EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

### **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?**

There is a plethora of syllabuses in existence which has not always been to the benefit of a clear direction in Religious Education. Currently, all Local Authorities must produce (or share) an agreed syllabus. Academies, Free schools and Voluntary Aided Schools can create their own. There is a (non-statutory) national framework, but expectations are diverse. The law sets minimum expectations about the number of religions to be studied, with some syllabuses requiring more to be studied.

By the nature of the syllabuses – drawn up by committees, and for a diverse population – there is a focus on what is shared between religions, rather than what is distinctive about them. So, festivals and their meanings are a focus, as well as places of worship, rituals, pilgrimages and answers to ‘big questions’ in life.

What is missing therefore, is an understanding of the distinctiveness of each religion. There is little thoroughgoing understanding of the place of sacred texts as influencing, inspiring and underpinning people’s faith. There is insufficient examination of the ‘truth claims’ made by religions, or indeed of how religions with overlapping narratives might learn from reading these together. Equally, the effect of text upon the believer is not considered in sufficient depth, and the outworking of their faith is underplayed. It is arguable that religions are

straightjacketed into a structure of comparability, no doubt with the best of intentions. However, each religion is distinctive, and for the followers of that faith, defining of their being.

With this in mind, religious education in schools would be improved by studying fewer religions at school, particularly at primary level, but with a greater degree of depth. More attention should also be given to the place of narrative within Christianity in particular, as well as in Islam and Judaism. That is not to say that these three religions should be studied in the same way, as each of these religions has a distinctive and different relationship with sacred texts, but these narratives enable these three religions in particular to define and contextualise what is meant by truth, God and faith. Coexist House's religious literacy programming would provide opportunities to explore religious narratives in the Abrahamic faiths and beyond, as well as enhancing Religious Education in the National Curriculum more broadly by reaching out to school children and teachers.

### **In continuing professional development in a range of occupations, what general principles should guide coverage of matters of religion and belief?**

As we have noted, religion is a strong motivator for billions of people, yet ignorance and misunderstanding lead many to view religion with suspicion and mistrust. Encounters with religion and religious persons are frequent and a great many of those encounters take place in professional and governance settings, for example between business and clients, professional service providers and service users, and between politicians and citizens. You can no longer 'not do God' in our globalized society, yet our religious illiteracy leaves us ill-equipped to handle religious issues and under-confident when we encounter religion in the work place and the world of business.

Religious literacy is therefore a pressing issue for our times. An example of an initiative which counters such ignorance and illiteracy is the Religious Literacy Leadership Programme (RLLP)<sup>iii</sup> delivered to businesses, governmental organisations, the public and private sectors. Offered by CIP and the Coexist Foundation in partnership with Professor Adam Dinham of Goldsmiths College, its aim is to support and promote a much better quality of conversation about religion, rooted in having the knowledge and skills to recognize religious faith as a legitimate and important area for public attention, a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions, and an awareness of and ability to find out about others.

The programme's purpose in business is to improve management, efficiency and to give that crucial competitive advantage. It will also help staff attraction and retention in, and relations with, clients and stakeholders. But its brief goes beyond the commercial sector into the public domain, the NHS, the police, education etc. It enables graduates of our training in all fields to avoid stereotyping as well as respect and learn from others, and build good relations across difference. In a context that is largely suspicious and anxious about religion, it is a civic endeavour that seeks to support a strong, cohesive, multi-faith business environment, which is respectful and inclusive of people from all faith traditions and none. In short, we regard the project as being not about more religion but about better accommodation of religion in the world of business, giving managers and other staff the confidence to engage with religion well. With a proper regard for religion and respect for those who take it seriously, our aim is to reposition religion as a public asset rather than a liability.

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

- Studying fewer religions at school, particularly at primary level, but with a greater degree of depth.
- A greater emphasis on the place of narrative within the three Abrahamic faiths in primary and secondary education.
- The establishment of Coexist House in London as a space for religious literacy with school children and teachers specifically in mind.
- Better training for teachers to give them the knowledge and skills they need to deliver Religious Education in primary and secondary schools.
- Strengthening theology and religious studies at all levels of education.
- Support religious literacy training- such as the aforementioned RLLP- as part of continuing professional development across a range of occupations in order to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills to deal confidently with religion and religious persons.

## **THE MEDIA**

### **If improvements are desirable, what are they and how should they be promoted?**

Broadcast and print media have been downgrading the importance of religious coverage for many years. Expertise is limited in the journalistic and media professions at a time when we need the most nuanced and careful coverage. For example in broadcast media, ITV has cut religious programming<sup>iv</sup> and the BBC has put it very much in the margins. In the print media, tabloids cover religion only when it is a problem and the broadsheets have all but got rid of their religious correspondents. As a result, we are often reduced to consuming poor reporting with lazy shortcuts, stereotyping and misrepresentation. In dramas, documentaries and soaps too, there is often ill-informed characterisation and predictable plot lines where a religious person is depicted as a terrorist, madman or evil manipulator.

A Religion Media Centre modelled on the work of the Science Media Centre<sup>v</sup>- which is highly respected and copied around the world- will be a significant step towards remedying the lack of religious expertise in the media. The vision is of a centre of religious excellence, which will provide informed comment, research, and vetted, briefed experts across a range of views with no editorial line. This would be a one-stop-shop for journalists to help them cover stories on religion more accurately and effectively. It will not be there to promote religion but to improve the nation's understanding of it. It will also be there to advise drama and documentary makers to enable a balanced and informed representation of religious issues and characters. Plans for a Religion Media Centre already have outstanding support from stakeholders and religion and media professionals, and work has begun with CIP and the Coexist Foundation in partnership with Goldsmiths College's Media department to begin to prepare materials for journalists through a new website. It is hoped that with appropriate funding, a director will be appointed in 2015 with a view to establishing a self-sustaining centre on the same basis as the Science Media Centre. It is also envisaged that the Religion Media Centre will become a part of Coexist House and its work.

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

- More coverage of religion and the broad range of religious issues (not just where religion causes problems), across the media spectrum.
- The establishment of a Religion Media Centre in the UK to provide British media with informed material and advice on religious content.

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<sup>i</sup> We deal with this point in more detail under 'Education and Training'

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.coexisthouse.org.uk/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.religiousliteracy.org/>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/feb/25/ofcom.ITV>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/>