

Commission response from Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha

General comments:

- Several important reports have already been published about religion and belief in British public life – please kindly see the following links:
 - <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/thefaitcollection>
 - <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&pageid=38452>
- Ultimately, one should be looking at the quality of religion and belief in public life – not necessarily its magnitude
- Grass roots projects which already run in Birmingham effectively promote faith literacy such as the Faith Encounter Programme. The Gurudwara (Sikh place of worship) welcomes of hundreds of school children annually for guided tours
- Birmingham City Council has also produced a Faith Covenant between the Council and the Faith Communities. Please see <http://www.faihandsociety.org/covenant/launch/>
- The essential purpose and role of religion and belief in public life is to nurture and produce good human beings who will be equipped with the values of love, compassion, contentment and humility. They will then play positive roles in all spheres of civic life (i.e. politics, education, law etc.) Faith provides human beings with a code of practice and a set of values which can be applied in all scenarios.
- There is a lack of religious literacy but there is also a lack of understanding about how Government works on the other hand.

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?

One feels at ease with diversity within British society (e.g. Birmingham is described as a super diverse City). Genuine respect for diversity needs to be improved. There are still issues with mistaken identity. There is very simple reason for this: lack of faith literacy amongst civil society and in the public arena.

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?

We do not know of any shortfalls with the current civil and criminal law in relation to issues of religion and belief. The law is interpreted and applied by Judges who are influenced by the submissions of the solicitor/barrister who will address the Judge during a case. So whilst one may argue that further Judicial training about religion and belief is required this is arguable given that usually the advocates will hold the religion and/or belief themselves so they will be well versed in how they wish to persuade the Judge to make a decision in their favour. The civil law is embodied in the Human Rights Act and Equality Act and this is supported by criminal law offences such as common assault which can be penalised with a severe sentence if the crime is motivated on the grounds of a protected characteristic such as race and ethnicity. So the laws do overlap with the protection provided to individuals. We feel that more training is needed for the Police and Crown Prosecution Service with their ability to identify and then successfully bring criminal prosecutions for crimes on grounds of a protected characteristic; they need to improve or change their method of collecting sufficient evidence and presenting the case. It may be noted that law requires one to refrain from breaking the law. It does not necessarily require you to be a good human being, which religion does!

3. Do the media accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief?

Rarely. There is not enough positive coverage about the work of faith groups or faith in the media. Only bad news is covered. It wouldn't be too difficult to get coverage of positive events happening in the UK on the mainstream media if the knowledge and will was there.

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?

No, we do not believe that the UK education system has caught up with the level of diversity that is in the British classroom today. If this is not tackled we could end up with serious problems in the future.

5. Should faith-based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent?

Faith is inseparable from politics and vice versa. Faith-based organisations tend to fill gaps in Government provision; it is faith based organisations that step up and fill the gap. As a Sikh organisation it is our moral duty to respond to ensure the welfare of all – as our Chairman says ‘if we don’t see God in all we don’t see God at all’. Social and political spheres require the right sort of leadership. When leaders operate by subscribing to a higher moral code, they become accountable not only to the communities that they serve, but also to the divine power. Trust and credibility are essential prerequisites to being able to build and unleash the potential inherent in the communities that leaders serve. Faith leaders are inherently aware that they are responsible ultimately to God and have to be particularly vigilant about governance and accountability. They carry out their work with considerable zeal and passion, which gives them credibility and the capacity to demonstrate, through practice, the ideas and ideals to which they are committed.

FBOs work at the grassroots and ensure that their work engages those that are furthest from the current service provisions; engaging those who are disengaged by barriers is a core precept. FBOs give a voice to the voiceless and enable those who may not belong to a clear-cut grouping come together and unite under a cohesive banner. FBOs make a massive positive impact on people’s lives

As far as ‘should faith based organisations be involved in social and political action and if so in what ways and to what extent?’, there is a strong role for faith based organisations to play in social and political action. FBO’s are motivated by a deeper sense of duty and it is not the desire to convert or the act of proselytising. Faith values tend to promote a sense of justice, fairness, compassion, humility, the welfare of all, truth, cohesion, unity and a shared sense of responsibility. We focus on the greater good as opposed to the individual good.

Sikhs are driven by their faith ethos to participate in social and political action since they are advised not to stand by or see the other suffer. They cannot just walk by without being good neighbours. The institution of Langar (serving of free vegetarian food from the Sikh Guru’s Kitchen) is a prime example. Guru’s Langar started as a means of promoting equality, togetherness and unity; and a sense of shared responsibility for feeding the needy. The simple but profound act of providing and partaking of Langar brings many principles in to play. It keeps in balance the practice of simran (meditative

remembrance) and sewa (selfless service to humanity) – done together it promotes spiritual progress whilst neutralising one's pride. Serving others is an integral part of Langar - it is also a mechanism that creates a spirit of interdependence and cohesion while decreasing the divide between givers and receivers. Langar is also an opportunity for strangers to feed strangers and in doing so, to realise that there really are no strangers in the House of God or the Guru's abode.

To us as a FBO, action is more important than hollow rhetoric. We make a difference by serving ie doing what needs to be done whilst trying to engage local authorities and government to influence policy. Faith communities should do politics but they must be politics with values; we cannot compromise our values and forget why we enter or do politics. FBOs are able not just to engage, mobilise and serve at the grassroots, they can also influence, strategise, and affect change.

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?

Disagreements between traditions must be dealt with through dialogue/collaboration between all parties. We live in the UK together and it is in the interest of all parties to work together to ensure that we all have a peaceful country.

Groups and people with a proven track record for propagating peace should work together, they should be supported by the government to ensure that they are constantly able to send out positive messaging to all communities.

Specific topics for consultation

Social Change

Context

People's sense of being British and of belonging in Britain changes with social, political and economic trends, as does the place of religion and belief in public life. Significant trends in recent years include a decline in religious practice, belief and identity, and growth in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities; the growth of religions other than Christianity as a consequence of migration patterns; the increasing impact of globalisation in its various forms (political, economic, cultural, ecological, and so forth); and a greater sense of multiple loyalties and identities.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

1. What would you say are the most significant social and economic changes as they affect the place of religion and belief in British public life and people's sense of being British or belonging in Britain?

Non-discriminatory equality legislation and the welfare state are the most significant social and economic changes. There have been many developments that have eroded the sanctity of religion and we have seen this play out on a global scale. As local is global and global is local, we see an ever shrinking world. It used to be the case in management terms that when the America economy sneezed the UK economy would almost certainly catch cold in 6 months' time – this is no longer the case. The cause and effect, the action and reaction cycles of global events is almost instantaneous and immediate.

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

Whilst freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is guaranteed by many human rights treaties (eg under the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), this freedom – set out in Article 18 – is one that cannot be derogated from, even in times of public emergency) we must ask ourselves how this plays out in our communities. Far too often, now more evident than ever, we are seeing 'parallel lives' being lived, where those from different religious backgrounds are living in the same space but are completely independent from each other.

Respect is a key factor that is important to both believers and non-believers; it is the desire of every human being to be treated with respect.

We must also be weary of phobia language, eg "Islamophobia" or "Christianophobia", as we see banded about in international fora. This emphasises "feelings" rather than "actions", whether or not a human right has actually been violated. Human rights allow restrictions on inciting hatred against religious (or non-religious) believers, but it also requires a proper balance to be struck to safeguard freedom of expression. It is therefore important to ensure that freedom of religion or belief itself, not feelings about it, remains the primary focus of concern.

The media needs to take a more responsible position when sensationalising catastrophes and heinous acts of crime in the name of faith. These are not crimes committed by humble, compassionate, God-centred, creation loving human beings. These are misguided, misaligned individuals with morally repulsive extreme ideologies that purport to people of God.

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?

As we are living in a liberal democratic society it must stand up to the rigors and tests of such ideologies. Our institutions should reflect the changing dynamics of the population. We must enable freedom of choice to get involved in such systems. Where there are institutions of the host nation in place these should be respected and honoured. The protection and preservation of heritage and identity should be considered equally important to all. Integration should be a positive ie gaining an addition to one's own culture, beliefs and heritage not a substitute or replacement.

When we look at 3rd / 4th generation immigrant descendants where religious beliefs are not strong, we see tensions in families because those core beliefs are being diluted and replaced rather than complemented and enriched.

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?

It is crucial there is mutual respect for each other's religions and beliefs. There must be genuine opportunity to engage and involve these people in the decision making process. The dynamics of public life are changing but the systems and processes are not evolving at the same pace.

People of faith offer solutions to many of society's challenges; they can reach the parts and sustain momentum when public agencies cannot. A few mindless people have hijacked faith and as a result faith seems to stir up negative emotions in many people. For so many people what they see on the news about extremist behaviour is all they will see about other people.

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

- Government should identify genuine faith practitioners as opposed to faith activists to productively engage in policy making for social change
- Religious groups should be given a 'level playing field' with other organisations when contributing to policy making for social change

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Law

Context

Under the Human Rights Act 1998 everyone in Britain has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. We are free to change our religion or belief if we

wish and to express our religion or belief, alone or in a wider community, subject to the rights and freedoms of others. Under the Equality Act 2010, religion or belief is a protected characteristic similar in its legal status to age, disability, gender, race and sexual orientation. Case law has recognised Jews and Sikhs as ethnic groups. The criminal justice system now defines incitement to religious hatred as a crime and does not accept that there is any religious justification for acts of terrorism.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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?
 1. The Human Rights Act 1998 has been beneficial in the context of setting out a clear right for religions to exist whether a minority or majority religion. The Equality Act 2010 builds upon the Human Rights Act by recognising that communities have cultures and identifies and affording them protection as well as protecting those who are of a different religion or of no religion and from a different culture.
 2. The application of these Acts has not always respected Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights 1953 (adopted 1950 and came into force in 1953). This Article is incorporated into English Law by the Human Rights Act 1998 which gives one the Article 9 right of -

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion

- 1 Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
- 2 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.

For example, the case where a couple could not foster children because they are Christian and do not believe in homosexual relationships; see article

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/british-court-says-christian-couple-cant-adopt-due-to-beliefs/>

The emphasis was on the Christian beliefs as opposed to the paramount welfare of the child to have love and attention from a couple and protection from abuse and violence which is why the child requires fostering in the first place.

When some Sikhs applied for fostering the agency was not pleased that they would not serve meat or fish or allow the child to consume the same. They were told that this would prevent them from being eligible for fostering unless a solution could be found.

3. As a person of faith, it heartens me that law and religion come together during Annual Justice Services at the beginning of the legal year at Westminster Abbey and in Birmingham at Birmingham Cathedral. The service dates back to the middle ages when judges prayed for guidance at the start of the legal term; and which is what they still do each year. The service includes prayers, hymns, psalms and anthems plus readings. At the service, all the participants pray for the participants, who in their several calling, discharge the duty entrusted to them for all in our communities and neighbourhoods, that to no-one may justice be denied or delayed. They are expected to clothe themselves with love, compassion, kindness, humility, forgiveness, meekness and patience. It provides a visual reminder of the formal link between church and state. It has been customary for judges to seek 'divine guidance' for judicial decisions – 'even a fool can give good wise counsel.' Furthermore, a Christian prayer is said at the start of Parliament every day.

However, when you are interviewed for a judicial job, whether you are joining the judiciary as a Judge or HM Courts & Tribunal Service to provide administrative support you have to demonstrate at application, assessment and interview stage that you are able to put aside your religious beliefs to be able to do the job. So in a civil job or public position the legislation does not allow you to freely exercise your Article 9 of the European convention of human rights mentioned above – one may argue that this is a safeguard to protect against prejudice and discrimination.

4. The legislation has been applied to the detriment of some employees in civil service and it will take education for employers to apply the legislation in a way that can balance the rights of all employees with religious beliefs; see articles -

<http://archbishop-cranmer.blogspot.co.uk/2009/12/christian-registrar-loses-appeal-over.html>

<http://www.christianconcern.com/our-concerns/religious-freedom/victory-for-christian-registrar-dismissed-for-refusing-to-conduct-sam>

2. What is the appropriate relationship between minority religious tribunals, for example Sharia and Beth Din courts, and mainstream legal systems?
 1. One believes that the only legal system is the court and tribunal system of England and Wales. That the Sharia tribunals and Beth Din courts are religious courts and tribunals and they do not strictly have a place in the legal system.
 2. The Sharia tribunals and Beth Din courts have jurisdiction based on religious law and they should remain religious legal systems for the benefit of the individuals which they serve. If they are allowed to influence or interfere with the legal system then it will mean that the

Sharia and Jewish law which is recognised by religion will become legal and that cannot be allowed unless the people of England and Wales are consulted and Parliament legislate upon the matter.

3. It is with concern that Sharia law has already made progress into the work of solicitors, barristers and bankers; see articles below. There has been no consultation by the Government or regulatory bodies about the introduction of Sharia law into matters such as the work of lawyers or banks – it has just appeared.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10787553/High-street-lawyers-to-get-formal-training-in-Islamic-Sharia-law.html>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/help-to-buy-extended-to-include-islamic-mortgages>

<http://www.lloydsbank.com/current-accounts/islamic-account.asp>

4. In divorce cases it has been found that clients obtain the talaq certificate from the Sharia tribunal and accept this as allowing them to be free to remarry even though the divorce certificate has not been issued by the Family court. The clients struggle to follow and accept the Family court system because it costs them and is not always a quick procedure. Further, under the Family court the client has to convince the court of the reason for the divorce and the client is reluctant to do so because the talaq is already valid and binding. It has created a reluctance of the client to accept the jurisdiction of the Family court.
5. The understanding is that with Jewish law a person is not redeemed by becoming bankrupt and the Jewish law states that the debt will remain repayable until it is repaid in full. The Jewish people do not insist upon the Jewish law being accepted by the civil and criminal legal system so why is Sharia law being given more importance above Jewish and the laws of other religions? The Jewish law and that of other religions is allowed to exist for the religions of those who hold that religion but the law of the State can only be that of the Church.

3. What have been the benefits of anti-terrorism legislation and preventative action? Have there been negative effects, and if so how could these be minimised or removed?

1. There have been some benefits of anti-terrorism legislation and preventative action.
2. However, in London when the IRA bombings were a regular occurrence people got on with their lives without extreme legislative measures; although the extended right to detain for interview comes to mind. We do not recall substantial anti-terrorism legislation or public funding allocated to engage with the Protestants or Catholics to find the root of the violence and prevent it.

3. We believe the anti-terrorism response has created a culture of appeasement and fear. It has seen an effort to try and avoid upsetting the Muslim fraternity for fear of reprisal. The steps have forced others to accommodate Muslim practices and ways.

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?
 1. The Equality Act 2010 consolidated approximately 116 legislations such as the Race Relations Act 1975, Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to provide one legalisation for protected characteristics.
 2. Racial discrimination is concerned with one's action and the effect of that person's actions and not their opinion or belief. You do not have to prove that the other person intended to discriminate against you; you only have to show that you received less favourable treatment as a result of what they did. Racial grounds include race, colour, nationality or ethnic or national origins.
 3. Discrimination on grounds of religion or belief is where one is treated less favourably than another because of your religion, philosophical belief or lack of religion or belief.
 4. There is a difference between the two because one may be from a national origin but not have a religion.

See Case of - **BBC v Souster [2001] IRLR 150**

In this case on the question of whether the English and Scots are part of a 'racial group', the Court followed the House of Lords' ruling in an earlier case (*Mandla v Dowell-Lee*, 1983 IRLR 209), to the effect that '...it is possible for a person to fall into a particular racial group either by birth or by adherence'. The Court said that, if the way the discriminator treats someone is based on his perception of that person's national or ethnic origins, then their actual origins, let alone their passport nationality, are irrelevant.

This definition of racial grounds clearly takes into account the complex reality of national identity, where a person may change their nationality by marriage or geographical migration or indeed simply by association, as well as the complexity of racial prejudice, where a person who discriminates may do so in complete ignorance of the victim's actual nationality or national background. Race does not mean that one belongs to a religion.

5. One could argue that one's religion and race are entwined and that there are similarities between the two forms of discrimination which could both apply. The protection afforded will depend on the interpretation of the legislation by the Courts and those in the public sector.

6. One may believe that legislation is drafted reactively as opposed to proactively and that the legal framework reflects the diversity of the population of England and Wales. The legal framework has evolved to reflect the needs to the population.
5. What recommendations relating to the law should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?
 1. The Commission must challenge the introduction of Sharia law into the legal system because we feel it has been introduced into the work of solicitors, barristers and banks due to fears of reprisals from Muslims. The Government must consult the people of England and Wales if it wants to introduce Sharia Law.
 2. The legal system of England and Wales must remain the only system and the Sharia tribunals and Beth Din court must remain religious tribunals and courts.
 3. The introduction of Sharia law or Jewish law is creating segregation which has not happened in the law before because the legal system of England and Wales has to date provided law for all people of the State no matter what your origins or religion.
 4. All religions must respect the religion and legal system of England and Wales. This does not prevent a Muslim from following Sharia law which is a personal decision for the individual but it should not be imposed upon others.

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The Media

Context

Most people are influenced not only by their personal experience, or by the views expressed directly to them each day by their friends, families and colleagues, but also by what they see, read and hear in the media - newspapers and magazines, radio and TV, websites and blogs, the social media - and in culture more generally, including film, theatre, music, fiction and art.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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?

On the whole, we believe that this is not satisfactory. This is mainly due to the fact that there is not enough equal coverage of faith in the media. When there is coverage, it is mostly about the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Islam and the Jewish faith) – there is definitely not enough coverage or programmes on other faiths aimed to educate British audiences about these faiths and their traditions.

2. If improvements are desirable, what are they and how should they be promoted?

The improvements fall into 3 main areas:

1. More faith based programmes during key / prime time television (not at 11pm!).
 2. More inclusion of Dharmic faiths such as the Hindu Dharam, Sikh Dharam, Jain Dharam, Zoroastrian faith and the Buddhist Dharam.
 3. Programmes need to be developed for children about their specific faiths.
3. 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?

Learning from faith as opposed to learning about faith

Faith literacy training should be promoted and provided as mandatory for all responsible media professionals.

Journalists and media producers should be lovingly informed and educated about the 'common core values' that are prevalent through all of the faith traditions and be trained how to articulate these appropriately through their media presentations.

Information dissemination and training should start at an early age in nursery and primary education and continue throughout up to University level and the workplace.

It is also important that journalists have the time and opportunity to meet with faith practitioners to learn first-hand what their faith really means to them.

4. 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?

Some of the criterion should include:

- Do they use correct / sensitive language – has a word been used in any derogatory context? (ie the word Gurudwara should be used for a Sikh place of worship etc.)
- Have images eg of places of worship been used in an accurate context?
- Faith content should be, as far as possible, also be approved by that particular faith community.
- Prominent distinguished organisations with a track record could be approached in the absence of hierarchy within particular faiths.
- Has the viewpoint of the faith community been included and have they been given a chance to make their own voice heard?
- Does this piece of media incite religious hatred or as required, does it promote peace?

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

Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life should recommend that 'faith literacy' training be provided to media professionals. This will equip them with the knowledge and skills to correctly articulate points on faith and culture to the masses.

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Education and Training

Context

Throughout the UK there are requirements relating to religious education and worship in schools, and also to the teaching of history and of citizenship. All faith communities organise educational activities for their own members, ranging from award-bearing courses for their leaders and potential leaders to a wide range of more informal events, including talks, discussions, study groups and sermons. Amongst all citizens there seems to be an increasing need for 'religious literacy' - knowledge and understanding of Britain's diversity of religion and belief.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

1. 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?

TERMINOLOGY AND PHRASING OF QUESTION:

We think it's important that key aspects of the above context and the question are unpacked and fully understood before responding to the question.

The context helpfully starts with the 'requirements relating to religious education and worship in schools' and rather unhelpfully includes the 'teaching of history and of citizenship' and continues in this vein with the current need for 'religious literacy'. All requirements for all three are very different and not related.

'The requirements relating to religious education and worship in schools' are significantly a legal requirement for all children, but which can differ depending on the type of school (whether 'designated faith character' or non-faith). It can also vary with the local authority in which the school is based. The law is also very clear about the process by which a school chooses a syllabus. The teaching of history and of citizenship, and religious literacy are not such a legal requirement nor are they as varied as the content of RE. Hence, any response needs to be clearly set in these three different contexts.

Similarly there are difficulties in characterising RE syllabuses as "being about religions and belief". The difficulties are two-fold: The first relating to "about" and the second relating 'of belief'.

Regarding the first difficulty, to think that RE syllabuses are merely 'about' religions is also to misconceive what religious education means. It is not merely sharing information or knowledge about religions, there is the expectation that children will also 'learn from' their studies i.e. see religion as a fundamental challenge to how they will live and be.

In respect of the second, whilst the enquiry has tried to define "religion and belief" as 'approaches' and as an 'outlook', these two terms are inadequate as a characterisation of religious life, as if the emphasis is primarily on what people adopt or choose to do whereas most religious people perceive their existence to be in the presence of God or the transcendent that commands or requires them to live in a certain way. To describe this as an 'approach' or an 'outlook' is to trivialise what is at stake in religious life. The basic orientation therefore is different from so-called 'non-religious worldviews', the latter term is in any case too imprecise and could embrace 'approaches' and 'outlooks' that are wholly unacceptable to British political and social life e.g. Fascism.

As well as the above misinterpretations, current perceived short comings, ineffectiveness or poor quality of religious education arise not from the syllabuses but rather from the poor education, training and support of teachers, or poor resources, or status of RE. The guidance for religious education (whether these be the 'Non-statutory guidance – 2010', or local guidance as prepared by the relevant SACRE, or a syllabus chosen by a specific faith school) all tend to very comprehensive and allow for the deeper purposes of RE.

Many people speak of 'Religion and Belief' which indirectly conveys the impression that the essence of religion is to hold 'beliefs'. They may go on to suggest that some beliefs are of a particular character and that other people may hold different beliefs or alternatively hold beliefs of a different character. This is, however, a very superficial understanding of religion and of the essential difference between religious

people and those who supposedly subscribe to a 'non-religious worldview'. It would be more accurate to describe religion as a form of practice or as a way of life. This involves a 'knowing how' as much as, or more so than, a 'knowing that'.¹ A 'knowing how' requires the development of practical reason more than theoretical reason. In addition to practical reason, a way of life requires the appropriate feelings and will to act, in effect it demands the development of the whole character of a person, including their relationship to others. People can fail to understand because they lack the appropriate feelings and will to understand.

The critical question is: how can a curriculum and an examination reflect this understanding of the nature of religious life.

First, it must be said that practical reason is as intellectually demanding as theoretical reason.

Secondly, there can be no development of 'knowing how' without some actual doing. It would be like learning about music without ever allowing for the possibility of playing an instrument.

To give some scope to developing practical and personal skills and capacities, i.e. to making an impact on pupils' character development, as well as reflecting any adequate appreciation of (a) religion(s) as (a) way(s) of life, the inclusion of an option to do a practical project (e.g. working for n hours in a religiously sponsored food bank) would be more than highly desirable but essential. Such projects written up, and backed by, the appropriate rationale, (with reference to theological thinking, social analysis, historical evidence and textual authorities etc.) and evaluations are examinable and may lead to far deeper learning on the part of pupils. I would strongly recommend that the inclusion of practical projects be considered, at least as an option. These practical projects are no doubt more demanding to organise, supervise and ultimately to evaluate and examine than the more narrowly academic learning de-contextualised from life so that most schools will no doubt avoid them. However, examination criteria should not exclude these possibilities if the goal is to develop a deeper understanding of religious life and to develop the SMSC character of pupils and society as required by law. Many Faith based schools may welcome such an option.

UNDERSTANDING THE REQUIREMENTS OF RE

Hence, when deciding whether a response is valid and whether the solution offered is appropriate we need to ensure that the respondent actually understands the requirements for RE, as well as ensuring that the respondent has identified the real causes of the problems. Or is the respondent using the current poor status of RE as a reason to have it removed from the Statute or replace it with an entirely new subject content called 'world views' or 'beliefs'. To do anything else risks throwing

¹ It is noted that the APPG on Faith and Society seeks to promote the social contribution of Faith communities supported by Faith Action. This recognises an important feature of religious life and religious institutions. Young people should be able to explore this aspect of religion actively and be examined on it appropriately.

'the baby' (in this case excellent Statute) out with the 'bath water' (in this poor teaching of RE).

There are continued debates about the purpose of RE in England, based in part on our evolution as a pre-war and post-war society and new contexts of being part of a global village.

In a world of different philosophical, cultural, social and political outlooks and movements, RE offers the chance to look closely at the distinct role of religious heritage in people's lives and societies at large.

The 21st century context requires us to think beyond approaches to RE that fit an outdated model of studying the beliefs and rituals of a given 'tribe'.

People varyingly draw upon religious heritages to shape their identities, their life perspectives and life values, ways of living and of interacting with others. RE offers an opportunity to look closely at the values-frameworks, evolving traditions of practice and new forms of application of these heritages.

In this way it provides essential knowledge about our world and also about ourselves, since religions are intimately linked with the personal/social values we espouse and endeavour to live by as good humans.

The distinction between 'learning about' and 'learning from' in RE pedagogy is therefore a useful one - it highlights purposes 'inform' pupils and also 'inspire' them in their own personal/social/spiritual development.

We would suggest that good RE involves:

- the fostering of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development by introducing pupils to religiously-inspired ways of living as 'case studies' to reflect and learn from
- advancing skills in interpreting and reading different traditions (by developing understanding of how humans communicate, conserve and perpetuate meaning through different traditions of practice) which are crucially needed in a more interconnected globe with the criss-crossing of different identities
- shedding light on contemporary challenges and opportunities presented by people's embrace of religion (issues of misinterpretation, exploitation, manipulation, influence of media and politics, religions informing social action, added-value of faith-inspired social action)
- valuing religions as sources of enduring practical wisdom (more so than an assortment of strange or unfamiliar beliefs) that can be drawn on to address real-life personal and social challenge
- better quality of insight into religious life, more genuine and informed respect, better informed rather than ill-informed critical viewpoints

CURRENT LEGISLATION

One of the advantages of current legislation in religious education is that it mandates local agreement on its content in schools. This is an important example of local democracy in action and it also provides the possibility of local initiatives in relation to curriculum content and development. For these reasons the implicit demand for the centralisation of religious education and the imposition of a national RE curriculum should be resisted. Local diversity in the nature and provision of religious education is consistent with a plural, religiously diverse citizenry.

TEACHING OF RE

In a similar approach the teaching and resourcing of RE must be strengthened. As a model of good practice where both of the above have been achieved is the Birmingham RE syllabus which understands Religious Education as an exercise in cultivating key dispositions in children using the resources of diverse religious traditions. We also commend the process set out in law which enables Local Authorities to adopt a syllabus that has been agreed and supported by all the main religious traditions. It boasts the strong support of all the major Faith leaders and cross-party political support. The difference between Birmingham and many other Local Authorities is that the City has actively sought to support its SACRE and Agreed Syllabus Conference. The process of agreement has been a positive influence on inter-religious relations and trust.

There needs to be an allocation of on-going resources to deliver the syllabus that is pedagogically engaging with appropriate CPD and teaching materials.

RE: the Pressure to include Secular Humanism and non-religious worldviews

The strong pressure from the REC and others to include Secular Humanism (and other non-religious worldviews) in its own right rather than as critiques of religion must be resisted. The reason for this is not only to ensure legality (if RE is to be seen as being bound by RE law) but also for theological and pedagogical reasons. Educationally it is difficult to justify a place for RE on the school curriculum unless religious life is itself perceived to be something of value and as something which contributes positively to personal and social life. Nor is it easy to teach a subject unless one believes the object of study has this intrinsic merit. The inclusion of non-religious worldviews pressurises teachers to treat the subject matter entirely neutrally or voyeuristically rather than as something of value, something worthy of being studied and understood. Theologically, intellectual engagement with religious life demands an existential response requiring inter alia serious moral commitment. One cannot deliver moral education or teach 'British values' neutrally, one attempts to show the meaning of these values and the claim they make on one. This presumption and approach is true of other subjects also, especially of other subjects such as citizenship education. In the school context the inclusion of non-religious

world views is subversive of RE and may open the door to many undesirable possibilities, but ultimately it may also be subversive of religious life itself.

2. With regard to matters of religion and belief, what general principles should guide the teaching of history and citizenship education in schools, and the teaching of literature and the other arts?

It is imperative that the teaching of these and other subjects is seen an opportunity to develop the whole child. Hence, alongside including the basic skills and knowledge about the subject, the curriculum must move onto affecting the child's attitude and dispositions as well as leading the child to find the knowledge for themselves.

The teaching of history should seek to be honest and accurate, and as far possible should take account of the children in the school and in the classroom to ensure that their roots are not ignored, or worse, denigrated in any unwarranted fashion. Similar principles should apply to literature and the arts, whilst all children must be aware of the literature etc. of mainstream culture, they must also be aware of the diversity and creativity of others. Particular efforts should be made to ensure that the roots of children from other heritage traditions are not allowed to languish with a shallow appreciation of the heritage from which they come. The allocation of time and resources should to an important degree reflect wider society but also the particular traditions and communities that any particular school serves. What is at stake is the balance and there is no reason to think that this balance must be uniform across all schools.

3. What should be the role of religion and belief organisations in relation to the running of state school systems? Should the state education system be permitted to select pupils and staff on grounds of religion or belief?

The right to educate the young is neither the inalienable right of the state nor of other social or business organisations. Parents have the primary responsibility and they must have the choice to select the school that best serves the well-being and development of their offspring. There is every reason why they might have an appropriate confidence in religious institutions to be the primary sponsors and governors of schools. The state has an over-riding responsibility to serve the common good. As it happens the state has a disproportionate power by virtue of its access to resources by way of taxation but this does not give it the right to control all aspects of schooling. Fortunately the British system is diverse and flexible in its approach to schooling and therefore offers many people in urban areas real choice. Furthermore, the right and responsibility of the parent is enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, ARTICLE 2:

“No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the

right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions”.

The second Millennium Development Goal concerns the achievement of universal primary education. Education provided by the mother for nine months while we are unborn, is also crucial. Furthermore, Nursery education is not emphasised as much as it should be, thus the need to strengthen families where values are first learnt within the home environment.

The question about state education is confusing as it presumably includes all maintained schools, including voluntary aided and controlled schools. For voluntary schools to serve their vision of education there must be significant freedom to select their teachers and pupils to create the relevant ethos, so long as it does not create a ghetto. There must clearly be safeguards in place against the sectarianism which seeks to denigrate those who think and live differently, although they embrace the broad values of our society.

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?

Firstly, religious groups should be allowed to meet, discuss and indeed to worship on campus. More to the point the British Education system must ensure that the major religious traditions all have the opportunity to pursue the study and reflections generated by their traditions in some cities. It would be a failure if there were not some universities which allowed e.g. Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists to study their traditions in the way Christianity is able to pursue studies at the level of Higher Education. It was notably short sighted of the University of Birmingham to close its Islamic Studies degree some years ago when the City has a major Muslim population. All communities need to be served by an educated leadership.

All professions dealing with a diverse population must have a proper grounding in the background of the people they serve.

5. What recommendations relating to education and training should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?
 1. Give all communities the opportunity to be served by voluntary aided schools.
 2. Ensure there are proper teaching resources available to teach a broad range of traditions.
 3. Encourage schools of diverse traditions to interact.
 4. Amend the Academies Act 2010 requiring all schools without a religious foundation to teach RE according to an Agreed Syllabus.
 5. Ensure any changes to the teaching of RE and the curriculum are implemented after due consultation and not misled by people who are effective lobbyist or have access to clever marketing (such as the Humanist Society).

Top

Social Action

Context

Many organisations defined by a religion or belief engage in social action locally and nationally. Together with other civil society organisations, they engage in social action not only of their own accord but also often at the request and on behalf of government, and in partnership with government.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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?

Social action is the bedrock of many religious organisations which are compelled to help those in need and serve humanity. Faith based organisations offer real and positive change within their local community and in wider society. Faith based organisations and charities have a long history of social action and we see this particularly in the most deprived areas. We see faith based organisations act as a catalyst highlighting a difficulty, pioneering an approach and then bringing others together to act on it. If we look at the history of education and health care in this country provide rich examples.

Faith based organisations act as community anchor organisations and offer service across a range of local needs.

Advantages

- Longevity – time frames for solutions are always future focused.
- Modus operandi – rationale for doing something is to help ease pain and suffering not a tick box or “just doing a job”.
- Are locally rooted and local people work with local people to develop local solutions
- Help build social cohesion
- Passion.
- Provide resources, buildings and volunteers to communities
- Commitment
- Provide services that are usually not cost effective in a commercial sense
- Support the underrepresented and disenfranchised

- Help build skills and confidence for participation in society
- Provide culturally accepted services that communities trust and use
- Offer innovative and creative responses to social problems
- Focus activity in much needed deprived areas.
- Development of mutual respect and understanding
- Engagement is values led

Disadvantages

- Lack of coordinated response
- Lack of legitimacy of who represents whom
- Due to being so small there is a genuine struggle to capitalise on collective bargaining powers
- Bad press causes animosity with non-faith groups
- Perception amongst authorities not knowing who to talk to
- Not always strategically focused – more about grass-root activities.

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

Absolutely not - third sector, faith based organisations and the voluntary sector are usually consulted extensively but the perception is that they are not listened to nor are their views taken in to consideration. Community organisations are not considered equal partners during partnership discussions.

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?

Authorities are sometimes guilty of speaking and engaging with the 'usual suspects' – this tends to disengage many and polarise communities further.

When consulting with the voluntary sector it is important to understand cultural nuances and bear in mind that the way these organisation work and engage with the clients varies considerably to the way Government and local authorities work.

Faith-based providers tend to see little success when bidding for services and are often overlooked due to local authorities' fears that they might discriminate or proselytise to service users. Local authorities would benefit both financially and through improved community relations if religious groups were used in service delivery. Local authorities should not see commissioning as just an economic decision and consider the added 'social value' that many faith providers offer.

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?

The underlying principles of successful social action are underpinned by the values of compassion, humility, preservation and restoration of human dignity, creating community cohesion and being an anchor organisation to provide a solid base, creating and promoting peace and reconciliation and sharing values with others during every day interactions. A fundamental requisite to the respect of all people as equals and ensuring enmity to none – “to see God at all, we must see God in all”. When one talks about leadership in a faith setting, it must be said that first and foremost the secular world could do with learning from spiritual/faith leaders on how to lead.

To lead with humility, compassion, and conviction requires skills, attributes and humility that cannot be taught at business school. We must learn to serve before we can lead others. Service in a faith context is paramount and also a great training arena to prepare people for the rigors of life’s challenges. In the Sikh dharam (faith) we have the concept of ‘sangat’ – this is the blessed company that we keep – in management we would say, ‘birds of a feather flock together’. In the Sikh dharam we believe that not only do birds of a feather flock together, the collective spiritual energy of a group is magnified and the collective benefit is attained individually – therefore the learning, serving, spiritual development and life per se is made easier by keeping the right blessed company. We also reap what we sow – it is crucial that one entertains the right thoughts, conducts the right actions and nurtures the right deeds. The majority of training in a spiritual context regarding leadership is on job creating and mentoring, learning by doing and participating in sewa (service). We need to appreciate cultural nuances and ensure that any training that is developed is “done with the recipients” not “done to them” – we need to make the recipients the architects of the training development not the victims of it.

Many of the youth that we are privileged to work with start by doing sewa – voluntary services – and then progress on to take on projects or paid work. The model is tried and tested and we believe that if we serve God and his creation with a genuine desire to help them by doing “nishkam service” – serving selflessly without any reward or expectation – then our destiny will improve and we will reap the rewards. Serving community is serving God.

5. What recommendations relating to social action should the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life make in its final report?
 - Listen and make space and time to build in social values and not just economic Key Performance Indicators.

- Consider working with local service providers and capacity build them – look at long term sustainability and not just short-term contract assignment.
- Invest time and energy in relationship building
- Consider values and intangible outcomes
- Ask questions like
 - How will the project improve society?
 - How can we capacity build people to be innovative and independent whilst interdependent?
 - What social benefits can be achieved as well as deliver the service?
 - How can authorities assist more during the commissioning / tendering process?

Top

Dialogue and engagement

Context

There are theological and philosophical differences between Britain's religion and belief traditions that appear to be irreconcilable. In addition, there are significant differences within each tradition about whether and how it should be reinterpreted, and about relations with other traditions. Nonetheless, there do appear to be substantial shared values between people of different religions and beliefs in Britain.

Questions for consultation

(If appropriate, please illustrate your thoughts and ideas with references to personal experience or observation.)

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?

Genuine faith practitioners will always be drawn to doing the right thing and will also be drawn to like-minded partners to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Cultural sensitivity is a key component as is mutual respect. It would appear that just as a system / structure becomes established and embedded we find a

political regime change undoes all the good work and we go back to square one. Once the structure or partnership gets to a point where trust and confidence has been secured and earned the structure is dismantled as there is a new person in charge therefore faith groups end up treading-water most of the time. This inevitably leads to frustration and a mind-set of “here we go again”. Faith communities are future focused; it is about the long-term game not short term quick fixes for political mileage.

We must encourage officers to take the long-term view and if something is working, let's not break it simply to prove a point.

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

Whenever there is a need for “reasoned criticism” we must do it with humility and compassion – we should challenge the idea not the person. Far too often we see a whole community persecuted or tarred with the same brush when the misdemeanour was down to an individual. We should hate the sin, not the sinner who is weak.

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

EGO – Edging God Out. The ego is the human being's worst affliction for starting prejudice, hate and conflict. The human mind is either one's best friend or worst enemy. Religion provides a toolkit to tame and control the shrewd mind.

Intolerance also tends to happen where there is ignorance or a distinct lack of understanding and awareness. We need more opportunities for different faith communities and none to come together. This could be in social settings and more importantly this could be on joint community projects and collaborate for the benefit of all.

We need to increase the faith literacy of people and avoid a mentality that says let communities become insular and internally focused.

With institutions and groups like SACRE and Faith Leaders Groups in cities we should build networks that are able to unite and bring diverse communities together. There needs to be a common agenda on how we learn about and from each other's faiths. The 24 Moral and Spiritual Dispositions (see www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk) are a landmark achievement that go a long way to paving the way on how we can make faith communities more inclusive.

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?

Compassion and humility needs to be taught and practised first and foremost. It must involve realising the importance of the thought process and changing mindsets. Before we talk about changes to leadership and training this thought process is deficiency based and assumes that there is a distinct need for leadership development. We need to also understand what the challenges for faith leaders are. What faith leaders may lack by way of 'western business school skills' is complimented and augmented by a spiritual development and values based approach to life.

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

The Birmingham Faith Leaders Group in partnership with Birmingham SACRE developed the 24 Moral and Spiritual Dispositions which have been agreed by the six major faiths in the city. These values were developed and agreed in partnership and form a roadmap for moving forward. The innovative work has enormous potential to build a robust framework for faith communities and local authorities to work together; this has not be fully exploited and developed. These are all good shared values.

A further opportunity must be the Faith Covenant between Faith Communities and Birmingham City Council being launched in December if adopted and adhered to in the spirit it gets drafted, would be a major milestone on how faith is represented and engaged within the public sphere.

<http://www.faithandsociety.org/covenant/launch/>

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

The commission should avoid talking to people / groups that have always been talked to because everyone else is "too difficult to engage". There is no excuse for not engaging if there is a genuine will to do so. A fool may give wise good counsel!

The commission would do well to avoid engaging with those who talk good but are not faith practitioners or do not have a credible track record of delivery in the faith arena and area through a word of caution; we should not exclude groups because “they have never done it before”. If we look at faith communities like Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ) Birmingham UK, they are extremely resilient, innovative, grounded in grassroots activity and yet future focussed, strategically competent and internationally renowned for their work yet there are so many barriers erected when trying to deliver services or secure partnership opportunities with civil structures. It is as if public agencies shy away from faith communities and only call upon them when things go wrong – this perception needs to be altered.