

## RELIGION AND BELIEF IN BRITISH PUBLIC LIFE

### Background

██████████ is ██████████ interfaith organisation operating in Scotland. ██████████ provides a forum for people from different religions and beliefs to dialogue with one another on matters of religious, national and civic importance. ██████████ runs dialogue events for young people, women, faith communities, religious leaders, members of ██████████ and local interfaith groups. ██████████ facilitates interfaith workshops in schools and produces interfaith publications and resources. ██████████ also provides ongoing support to local interfaith groups and gives public presentations, seminars and training on interfaith and faith awareness, and ██████████ promotes and encourages participation in Scottish Interfaith Week.

The submission below emerged from an ██████████ Members Dialogue event held on 20<sup>th</sup> April in Stirling. There were **41 people** present and the following faith communities were represented at the event;

### Full Members

Baha'i  
Buddhist  
Christian (including Catholic, Methodist, Quaker, United Reform, Iona Community)  
Jewish  
Muslim (including Shi'a and Sunni)  
Sikh  
Council of Christians and Jews

### Associate Members

Brahma Kumaris  
Universal Peace Federation  
Pagan  
Representatives of the local interfaith groups of Inverness, Dundee, Glasgow and Edinburgh

It was agreed that those present were only qualified to speak directly to the questions regarding dialogue and engagement, however all present were asked to encourage their respective faith communities to respond directly via the website of the Commission to the further questions proposed by the Commission.

Mr. Brian Pearce OBE attended the event and set a context for the work of the Commission and the timeframe for engagement.

## Questions on Dialogue and Engagement from the Commission

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) The Principles underlying effective dialogue

- Having empathy for others and an openness to learn about each other's beliefs
- Sincere acknowledgement that we are living in a multi faith society
- Mutual respect is important and it is a particularly important principal in dialogue and engagement that there are no attempts to proselytise (attempts to convert)

- Tolerance and acceptance of others' rights
- A key principle is that those engaging in dialogue recognise that we are one humanity and this whole process is about learning to live together and understand our diverse religions and cultures
- Think of others before yourself
- It is important that there are agreed ground rules for engagement that include fair structures and boundaries
- Find Common areas: look at positive qualities and build on them (if we make ground rules too complex it may generate negativity - keep them simple)
- Tolerate and accept those who are different
- A desire to dialogue
- A respect for the other and an openness to their tradition
- Conversation rather than conversion
- At the beginning of dialogue, an agreement of shared and common purpose
- Mutual hospitality –warmth and openness to others, seeing the good in others
- Really listening to what others say
- Intention for dialogue rather than confrontation

Note: There are differences in emphasis in the dialogue between religious groups and the dialogue between religious and non-religious groups e.g. mention of God may not be appropriate for the latter. A common interest and a respect for diversity of belief are needed.

#### **Additional thoughts;**

It was generally agreed that feeling secure, either in your faith or belief means that you do not feel threatened by the other. At the same time, a willingness to explore and appreciate others without having a set belief system yourself is also effective. Most of those present felt that a desire to relate to fellow human beings, being friendly, harmonious and having love for one another, i.e. the human touch was very important.

A willingness to learn about others faiths and put aside prejudice (e.g. from the media) was central to dialogue and engagement and that this stems from the twin desire to be understood and to understand others. In order to really engage effectively it was felt that there needed to be trust and understanding and safe spaces for dialogue. It was felt that it was equally important to acknowledge the sacredness of all human life. Further summary notes include;

- Sincere curiosity
- Accepting **self**-definition of religious and belief groups
- To be aware of the damages of stereotyping and prejudice
- To celebrate common values and diversity
- Not to be too quick to take offence
- Ensure world conflicts don't impact negatively on dialogue in UK

#### **b) Are present structures and processes for engagement adequate for promoting this dialogue?**

There was concern that people who engage at the moment are a minority in their own communities and that further work is needed to engage the vast majority of the grassroots faith communities in interfaith dialogue. It was acknowledged that others do engage in and promote interfaith dialogue including, the NHS, Police Scotland, Colleges, Universities and Schools.

It was recognised that **education** has a major role to play in promoting interfaith dialogue and engagement and that the current structures only allow this to happen intermittently (ie need for more trained individuals to engage with schools). There was agreement that the current schools work of [REDACTED] was very effective as was their interfaith training programmes but that there was scope for much more of this sort of work to be undertaken (and a need for resources to do so). Some local interfaith groups do/or could undertake training.

Primary children could learn about engagement and dialogue and again more resources are needed for this. Public bodies and religious leaders are working hard to unite us – the structures and processes are there and Scotland is a progressive nation with the potential to do so much more.

Young children learn about different faiths at school but there is a missing generation in local parishes, older generations know less about different faiths and haven't necessarily been exposed to people of different faiths

- Informal dialogue can be very powerful (e.g. sharing stories on Facebook)
- Positive programmes on the television such as 'Ramadan diaries' giving positive and educational stories
- Community activists are engaging with many hats
- Government support is good
- Faith communities need to mainstream dialogue but how?
- Need educational structures for interfaith dialogue
- Need to increase religious literacy
- We are at the beginning of dialogue and are still finding out how to do it. We have a long way to go and it is an organic process. Each group finds out how to proceed for themselves, taking time to absorb and practise principles.
- National and local structures are good in so far as they have come but still interest of only some members of the faith communities whereas whole communities need to engage.
- Need for faith communities to have a 'committee' to educate their own community.
- RME (Religious and Moral Education) is good but limited. Important how dialogue spills into daily life.
- Onus of individual to learn about faith and belief of others – need to know who they can go to, to talk to. Find out about dialogue partners, but also good to learn from believers
- Geography affects structures, e.g. in the Highlands there are five interfaith groups and it is difficult to interact. It is important that dialogue events take place in rural areas

## **2) How clear cut is the difference between reasoned criticism on the one hand and bigoted or closed-minded opposition on the other?**

- Depends on whether it is an individual or a faith community engaging
- Reasoned criticism applies principles in question one, i.e. trust, respect and courtesy
- It is not clear – what defines it is motivation of speaker – exactly same words can mean different things
- Relationship is at the heart of it. Respect and understanding affects how statement is understood.
- Often closed-minded opposition has some hurt behind it
- Good relations cannot be started in 'bad' times – needs to be started in the good times so that strong relations are established
- 'Know the difference when I hear it' – closed-minded people are antagonistic from the outset, have no desire for knowledge and focus on stereotypes
- 'Bigoted' people do not recognise the change and development within religion

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

- Poor media reporting - particularly the portrayal of Islam. Need to remember there are also European Muslims
- The media defines our understanding of others and can lead to prejudice and intolerance
- There are a group of people who do not want to understand and engage. They grab onto sensationalist media.
- Fear leading to intolerance

- Lack of knowledge and education about other religions
- Ego/selfishness
- Ambition of Religious Leaders (power)
- Media can feed the demonising of the other leading to fanaticism
- Deep rooted threat to identity
- Economic gain – wanting resources for themselves
- The established order says that we need to ‘conform’ and fit in and we are odd if we don’t do that. People have assumptions about how others behave, dress etc. Media encourages us to put people into boxes.
- Religious Education can also focus on externals (ie customs, festivals and foods etc) and not beliefs of the diverse communities and it is beliefs that motivate people
- Insecurity about own beliefs – challenged by someone with strong faith
- Rapid social change – people are afraid and go on the defensive, particularly if they don’t understand social change
- Pride – if member of the established church or religion. Tendency to look down on others and see them as a threat. This can lead to intolerance and an unwillingness to include ‘others’.

**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 was given of the Quakers who received funding for a Scottish Parliamentary Officer which is a useful resource for the Quaker community to flag up issues of possible concern to the community, such as moral issues, and give them an opportunity to feedback on consultations and debates. [REDACTED] has also just received funding for a Parliamentary officer and is looking forward to further engaging faith communities with civic processes.

Make people aware of groups that can provide information and support such as [REDACTED], local interfaith groups, the St Mungo Museum’s educational programmes (and educational programmes hosted at other Museums and places of community learning).

Wherever possible, religious leaders in all faith traditions should have the opportunity to engage in interfaith/faith awareness training at the national and at the local level. People may only be trained in their own faith, but need international visionaries within diverse faiths to set examples of good practice in interfaith engagement.

It is important to engage other types of leaders – community leaders from faith communities as well as religious leaders.

Interfaith training essential – [REDACTED] undertakes this for volunteers and others and there are probably other organisations who also undertake this type of training at the UK level.

Find ways to reach within communities themselves and **create safe spaces and dialogue centres** (religious leaders, local interfaith groups, faith communities)

**Additional comments**

There are multiple places in society where information stalls and engagement can take place allowing training programmes to be advertised and even hosted such as;

- Melas (community festivals)
- International women’s groups (and Women’s Sharing of Faith groups).
- Interfaith events
- Museums
- Libraries
- Schools, Colleges and universities

## **Miscellaneous comments**

- Scotland as a whole is one community. We have the opportunity to be one community. Don't fear that and stand up for people as they are your neighbour.
- Support potentially needed for **isolated communities** especially in rural areas
- Involving the Chinese community –this is easier through 'cultural' rather than 'religious' engagement
- When you receive hospitality from others it is hard not to become friends/get along
- Need education at all levels including educating through social media.
- There are a committed few across the country but the mass of people at the grassroots are unaware and we need structures and support to engage them.
- Continue to support Scottish Interfaith Week across the UK and more widely
- Working together for the common good – we need to be seen as people of faith doing this – training needed on how to illicit good PR

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

4 values on Scottish mace (Integrity, wisdom, Justice and Compassion)

World's religious scriptures

The Golden Rule

Equality and diversity legislation

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

- Engage young people in every community about the importance of interfaith/intercultural dialogue
- Children should have access to positive information about religions and there should be a structure for this
- The UK and Scottish Government need to continue to support and expand support for Interfaith organisations that are delivering
- Experience of others is important and structures/safe spaces need to be identified where this engagement/experience of the other can take place
- Family learning can include diversity, belief and understanding of others
- Review religion, belief and non-belief policies
- Adequate funding for dialogue organisations is needed
- De-establish the church
- Media and wider statements/adverts as to kind of society we live in e.g. secular society that is inclusive and open to all religions and beliefs
- Education – an inclusive religious education and giving enough resources to RME
- Standing at crossroads – decide what kind of society we want – will we be tribal and separate from one another and an integrated inclusive, welcoming society
- More resources given to interfaith work so that it can develop and be used as a resource
- Values on the Scottish Mace – compassion, wisdom, justice and integrity should be more valued and more visible in public life
- Less focus on Muslim community