

**RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION OF THE  
COMMISSION ON RELIGION AND BELIEF IN BRITISH PUBLIC LIFE  
ON BEHALF OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK**

*The Inter Faith Network for the UK*

The Inter Faith Network for the UK was founded in 1987 to advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions and practices of the different faith communities in Britain and to promote good relations between people of different faiths in this country.

Our vision is “...of a society where there is understanding of the diversity and richness of the faith communities in the UK and the contribution that they make; and where we live and work together with mutual respect and shared commitment to the common good.”

Our Mission is: “Working with faith communities, inter faith organisations, educators and others to increase understanding and cooperation between people of different faiths and to widen public awareness of the distinctive religious traditions in the UK. Working to achieve this through: supporting and encouraging inter faith initiatives and sharing good practice between these; helping create opportunities for mutual learning and tackling prejudice; and offering opportunity for engagement between faith communities and Government and other public agencies on relevant issues.”

*The nature of this response to the Commission’s consultation*

IFN links in membership a wide range of national faith community representative bodies; national, regional and local inter faith organisations; and educational and academic bodies with a focus on inter faith or multi faith issues <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/members/list-of-all-members> It speaks or respond to consultations on member bodies’ behalf only where there is a clear basis for doing so. Accordingly, the Executive Committee [the Trustees of IFN] offer a response to a number of the general questions, and to some ‘special topic’ questions, but not all, within the parameters of IFN’s charitable objectives, existing policy and discussion at meetings held by it. To respond to all of the questions, or to go into greater detail on some covered, would have necessitated an extended period of consultation with member bodies and in many cases no unified view would have been likely to result. Such consultation was therefore not undertaken, and the response is therefore from the Trustees on the basis explained. However, IFN has actively encouraged its member bodies, through a number of channels across the time since the consultation was issued, to respond directly.

The response is offered on the basis that it may be quoted from on an attributed basis.

## GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR CONSULTATION

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

The Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN) links a wide range of organisations and between these – and indeed within them – there will be varying views on this question. However, we offer some general observations:

IFN came into existence in 1987 as a direct result of the increasing religious diversity of Britain. While never downplaying the complexity and challenges of a more diverse society, IFN has always affirmed the opportunities for mutual enrichment that this offers as well as the contribution which faith communities make to the wellbeing of society, singly and together.

There are many aspects of diversity which are positive – and in general terms we would, as noted above, see diverse and different religions as enriching society, and dialogue and cooperation between their members as enriching to both individuals and society at large.

At the same time, there can be aspects of diversity with which some would not feel at ease: for example, manifestations of religious or non-religious belief in which teachings are distorted in ways which fuel prejudice or hatred. That applies to all forms of belief, including political views.

Whether or not people ‘feel at ease’ with diversity is not just related to the sheer fact of diversity in terms of religions and beliefs. It is affected by the ways in which adherents are influenced by their beliefs to act and such factors as what arrangements are needed to ensure that they are able to live in accordance with their beliefs; to express these, within the law; and to live well with others, negotiating difference respectfully and tolerantly.

One of the challenges of engaging together well is to ensure that there can be unity as well as diversity, and that the structures of our common life can be developed in ways which respect – so far as possible – the integrity of belief and practice of people of different faiths and beliefs while never losing sight of the importance of discerning, affirming and living according to shared values.

These themes, and others relevant to this consultation, are picked up strongly in three IFN documents: [\*Building Good Relations Between People of Different Faiths and Beliefs\*](#), a statement of principles developed in 1993 to which all IFN members subscribe; [\*Statement on Inter Religious Relations in Britain\*](#) a statement issued by the member bodies of IFN in 1991 and re-printed in 2006; and [\*Faith, Citizenship and Shared Life in Britain Today\*](#) and [http://www.interfaith.org.uk/faith\\_identity\\_belonging](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/faith_identity_belonging) a discussion paper produced by IFN’s Trustees in 2007.

We would add that:

- the extent of ethnic and religious diversity differs markedly from one geographical area to another and that this conditions people's experience of it;
- it is important that there is accurate data about diversity, including religious diversity, and the question of how this is handled in the Census (and, if the Census is replaced by a different data gathering mechanism or mechanisms, how it is handled in these) is very important; and
- many people feel part not just of the UK but of Europe, the Commonwealth, and the wider world and questions of ease and unease in relation both to patterns of diversity and also many other aspects of multi faith existence are important in these wider contexts as well as in relation to the UK (it is of course recognised that the focus of the Commission is the UK). There may also be different responses in different nations within the UK.

**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?**

This is not a question on which it is possible to respond in general terms. The Commission will no doubt receive responses directly from faith community organisations and specialist bodies who will offer detailed comment on the legal framework as it relates to 'race/ ethnicity' and 'religion/ belief'.

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

IFN has, at various points in its history, looked at the question of coverage of religion and religious groups by the media, including holding one of the first major conferences on this (Media and a Multi Faith Society, with the Media Trust and Global Tolerance in 2004). In the words of an early IFN [Statement on Inter Religious Relations in Britain](#) (1991), "*There is .. a need for sensitivity on the part of the media in dealing with issues involving questions of religious conviction and identity. There has been serious concern about the way in which inadequate and inaccurate, and at times sensationalist, reporting has reinforced prejudice and the tensions which can arise in particular situations. By contrast, a balanced presentation of the background to unfamiliar issues can be of great value in increasing understanding of them. Our communities themselves need to play their part in helping the media to appreciate their particular concerns....*".

Based on observations at past IFN conferences, National Meetings and within the Executive Committee and Faith Communities Forum, it might be fair to say that there has been a welcome increase in multi faith broadcasting since the time that statement was issued, and particularly in the last ten years. At the same time, strong concerns continue to be voiced by individual communities or members of these about issues such as the following:

- at times inaccurate portrayal of beliefs and practices, with press, broadcast and on line media coverage of religious issues varying considerably in terms of accuracy;

- lack of coverage of particular traditions or perceived over coverage of some traditions (relative to their size in the UK and/or globally);
- giving of air time to extreme and combative opponents and omission or underrepresentation of mainstream and often quieter voices, leading to a distortion of the image of community being covered;
- a linked tendency to opt for gladiatorial styles of encounter between representatives of different faiths (often at far ends of the spectrum of a faith) rather than more rounded dialogues on the basis that it provides more lively tv or radio and keeps audiences interested (this can, we note, also be a problem suffered by those of non-religious beliefs: some of the most unfruitful and unhelpful debate between ultra secularists and religious people have seen the most extreme voices given disproportionate air time);
- the combative style of some television and radio programmes can put more mainstream or low key members off from participating;
- curious pictures of belief and practice sometimes coming through entertainment media, through shows where faith is a key theme or some of the characters are people of faith;
- simplistic conflation at times of religion and ethnicity and sometimes also inappropriate conflation of particular political positions and even criminal actions with a faith community or its teachings (even where this use – or misuse – of that tradition’s teaching has been widely disavowed as invalid and even completely wrong by principal leaders and most followers of that religion); and
- abuse of ‘new media’ by groups who use it to attack particular religions or their followers, or use it to promote extremist ideologies in the name of religion.

The question has perhaps in mind the general media. We would note that the religious and community media are also important in this discussion. There has, across recent years, been greater coverage about other traditions in single community papers – particularly through coverage of inter faith issues. The increase has been gradual, but has seen an increase in the last two or three years – particularly around the time of Inter Faith Week. For example, the Jewish News launched, in the course of that Week in 2014, a dedicated inter faith channel.

The Commission uses the term ‘helpful’ in its question. If the question is about helpfulness to society and its overall good functioning, it might be said that accuracy is generally helpful (and difficult stories should be covered) but so too is avoiding feeding unpleasant stereotypes and inflaming tensions through choices about how and when stories are run. Particularly during times of tension, or when particular communities feel anxious for their safety, stories and portrayals in the media can fuel prejudice and negativity. However, the media also has the power to share positive stories and help foster calm and measured engagement.

The media has a wide degree of freedom and this is rightly prized; at the same time, it is important that media operate with a sense of responsibility. The old adage, you do not go into a theatre and shout ‘Fire’ remains true.

Some journalists and bloggers, of course, do not set out in the first place to “accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief”. They may intentionally set out to lampoon or otherwise attack religious groups and their followers. They may do so across the board or may attack particular religious traditions. This is, within the bounds of law, permissible. There are, of course, significant issues about freedom of expression and the balance of rights and responsibilities in a society with citizens of many different faiths and non-religious beliefs. It is, no doubt, an area at which the Commission will be looking.

A related issue for consideration is that advertising can also be a source of disquiet to faith communities. There has been discussion over the years at both the Executive Committee and the Faith Communities Forum about use of sacred images by advertisers in ways that faith communities affected have found offensive. Sometimes this may be inappropriate use of images or holy names, particularly on footwear or underwear; at other times, it is the use of religious images distorted for what the advertisers see as humour.

**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?**

IFN's statement of 1991 said *“The ability to inquire and reflect, and the opportunity to acquire accurate knowledge about one another's religious traditions, concerns and values are important in the development of constructive inter-religious relations. The education system has an important role in challenging prejudice and providing accurate information. We affirm the special part which religious education and religious studies, at all levels, can play in this.”* This remains its position.

The Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC); the National Association of SACREs and the Welsh Association of SACREs are member bodies of the Inter Faith Network and are best placed to comment on the question. IFN has, throughout its history consistently underlined the importance of high quality RE. The availability of sufficient and well trained teachers and accurate and appropriate classroom resources are also vital and the REC (and the equivalents in Northern Ireland and Scotland) will have information which the Commission can consider.

We would add that the issue of Collective Worship and how this is handled in schools needs further consideration. We draw the Commission's attention to [http://www.cstg.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/culham\\_cw\\_reviewed.pdf](http://www.cstg.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/culham_cw_reviewed.pdf), the Report of the 1997 Consultation. (Produced by the RE Council of England and Wales, the National Association of SACREs and the Inter Faith Network for the UK.) This is the last such report on Collective Worship and the issue is one which calls for further discussion.

Academic institutions, such as Woolf Institute and the Cambridge Inter Faith Programme, and special focus educational institutions such as the Institute of Jainology, Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter and Islamic Foundation have an important role to play.

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

IFN's 1991 Statement includes the following: "Our religious traditions offer values and insights of great worth to society, and provide a framework of meaning within which individuals can interpret their experience..... We hold in common ideals of compassion, service, justice, peace, and concern for the environment. ... Both within and between our communities there are significant differences in the ways in which we translate these values and ideals into ethical judgements concerning specific personal and social issues. But a recognition of the extent to which we share a range of common values and ideals can contribute to a wider sense of community in our society."

There are different theologies, philosophies and traditions of engagement with the state; however, teachings about social justice and compassion within all faith communities underpin a strong commitment to service and to engage with society around them in pursuit of this.

IFN plays a role, through the Faith Communities Forum, in helping national faith community bodies share good practice and discuss issues of common interest and concern. Its most recent meeting, for example, included Items on integration policy and multi faith health care chaplaincy. This is also a forum through which Government consults faith communities. Locally, a number of local inter faith organisations include a similar function within their activity.

Other bodies, such as the Faith Based Regeneration Network and FaithAction also play a role at national level and two Government supported programmes in England, the Near Neighbours Programme (of the Church of England and the Church Urban Fund) and the Together in Service Programme (administered by Faith Action) are, alongside initiatives such as Mitzvah Day and Sewa Day, encouraging cross-community engagement in social action.

We would emphasise the importance of partnership between secular agencies and faith groups on social action – as well as dialogue and faith engagement with civic life more broadly. IFN has encouraged this since its inception, including through its Faith and Public Life programme and the work of its Faith Communities Forum as well as through publications with the Local Government Association such as *Partnership for the Common Good: Inter Faith Structures and Local Government* [http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/all-publications/doc\\_view/23-partnership-for-the-common-good-inter-faith-structures-and-local-government?tmpl=component&format=raw](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/all-publications/doc_view/23-partnership-for-the-common-good-inter-faith-structures-and-local-government?tmpl=component&format=raw) (2003) and *Local Authority Engagement with Faith Groups and Inter Faith Organisations* [http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/all-publications/doc\\_view/105-local-authority-engagement-with-faith-groups-and-inter-faith-organisations?tmpl=component&format=raw](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/all-publications/doc_view/105-local-authority-engagement-with-faith-groups-and-inter-faith-organisations?tmpl=component&format=raw) and its contribution to the material on partnership working in *Face to Face and Side by Side: A Framework for Partnership in our Multi Faith Society* (DCLG 2008). We also draw the Commission's attention to a document produced in 2004 by the Government, *Working Together: Cooperation between Government and Faith Communities* (which can be found by

pasting the following link into a web browser <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/151393.pdf>.)

While published some while ago, its principles of engagement contain much that remain relevant and it reflects the concern of faith communities, as regularly expressed within IFN's Faith Communities Forum, that faith groups and central and local government and other public agencies engage well and productively.

## **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?**

A prior question might perhaps be about how commonalities and shared values may be discerned and built on.

Disagreements take different forms, for example disagreement over how needs are met or, more broadly, differing views on wider social questions. On the first of these, it may be helpful to distinguish between 'potentially 'conflicting needs' and 'disagreements'. Different needs may lead to calls for provision which need to be carefully and fairly handled – for example relating to dietary provision. These are not disagreements. However, where needs are apparently incompatible, principles such as fairness, proportionality and reasonable accommodation come into play. Good handling requires:

- careful listening to the groups involved;
- sensitive handling;
- legislation and subsequent guidance framed with care; and
- gradual development of case law.

Very important also is that faith communities (and where relevant non-religious belief groups) discuss such issues themselves and, even where they may not agree on all aspects, seek at least to articulate some general principles which they believe are helpful for handling of these within society. One example of a document which we think offers good examples of faith communities thinking through some general issues of principle is *Wearing of religious dress and symbols*. Another is *Faith and Dietary Practice*. These can be found at <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/all-publications/briefing-notes>

More broadly, there can be disagreements between sections of faith communities; between faith communities; or between these and other groups in society. In all cases, making space for sensible discussion and debate and working is vital, as is courteous engagement and good listening; and availability of mediation and conflict resolution where necessary and helpful.

## SPECIFIC TOPICS FOR CONSULTATION

We have opted to respond only to a number of these.

### SOCIAL CHANGE

*[The Commission's preamble to this question: 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

- 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?**

This question is, perhaps, two separate questions.

- 1) What are the most significant social and economic changes as they affect the place of religion and belief in British public life;
- 2) What are the most significant social and economic changes as they affect people's sense of being British or belonging in Britain.

On the first question, 'religion and belief' is an amalgam created in the context of the development of equalities discourse and legislation. Members of religious traditions vary in the degree to which they see themselves as part of a combined entity in this way. In considering this question, we start by talking simply about 'religion'.

Religion has to some extent 'come in from the cold' this last fifteen years. From being treated in public discourse from the late 70s to late 90s as generally marginal to society - and even by some as though its demise were inevitable - it has become increasingly a focus of attention. The *Faith in the City* report and then, some years later, the Rushdie Affair, were contributing factors to reminding society of the continuing significance of religious belief and identity in the lives of many citizens. In the case of the latter, it was also a reminder that religious identity was important to some more newly settled groups which society had to that point categorised principally in terms of ethnicity.

We note that some of the reasons that religion and belief have gained a more prominent place in public life have not been welcome ones. Socially disruptive – and sometimes criminal – actions have at times been allied by their perpetrators or others to religious beliefs. This has been true of the terrorist attacks of 2001 in the USA and 2005 in London

and of many other events. This is one factor that has led to religion being seen as more central but also being problematised. It is significant that the growth of Government interest in faith and inter faith issues, and the initiation of the first major relevant grant programme (the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund), came in the years following disturbances in some Northern cities in 2001 and after the terror attacks in the US. The 'Face to Face and Side by Side Policy' and the Faith in Action Programme was part of the then Government's response to the report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion which was set up after the London bombings of 2005.

There are, of course, other and more positive social and economic reasons that religion and belief has developed a stronger profile. There has, for example, been a growing awareness of the contribution which faith communities can – and do – make to society through their engagement, singly and together, on social issues.

The fact that many of the newer religious communities in the UK, such as those with links to South Asia, are making a growing and very visible economic contribution to the UK and have significant and important global links, gives them additional visibility in UK life alongside Christians and the longstanding Jewish community. One has only to look at the recent proliferation of new faith community specific All Party Parliamentary Groups and the high profile festival events at the Houses of Parliament and in London and other cities. It is also reflected in the rise of more visible places of worship – some like the recently built temples and mosques – on a large scale and with ornate and much publicised architecture. It is likewise reflected in many other areas of life: more media coverage; greater visibility in the City; chaplaincy; education; sport and so on. The greater percentage of people of different faiths – and the above average educational achievement levels of some groups – creates both higher visibility and commands more public attention.

The greater prominence ascribed to religion in public life in the 90s and early 2000s was followed by an increasingly vocal secularist critique of over privileging of religion by the state in contexts such as awarding contracts to deliver public services. This was perceived as retrograde and biased. Similarly, the state was criticised for funding of inter faith initiatives (nationally and locally) which did not, or do not, have membership policies which include non-religious belief groups. Non-religious belief groups now felt 'out in the cold' in some contexts and continue to argue strongly the case for a limiting of the voice of religious groups in the public sphere and for particular steps such as a narrowing or removal of their exemptions from some requirements of employment discrimination law.

On the question about Britishness, the degree to which people have a sense of being British or belonging in Britain may be affected by many factors. Some that have been noted in previous IFN discussions include:

- A sense of what 'Britain' is
- A sense of what citizenship is and entails
- Whether or not people feel 'ownership'
- Whether or not people feel fairly treated
- Sense of connection through place of birth or later settlement

- Degree of sense of belonging to separate nations within the UK over against Britain overall
- A feeling of stronger connection with another country

Social factors also have an impact, with some potentially contributing to a sense of alienation and lack of connectedness with wider society. Broader social and economic changes of this kind might include: income inequality; unemployment; absence of youth service or schools provision; and housing policies. Then there are other types of factor such as changing patterns of communication; devolution; and transnational connections which affect sense of identity and connection.

The discussion document produced by the Trustees, [\*Faith, Citizenship and Shared Life in Britain Today\*](#) mentioned earlier has great relevance, as has the report of a seminar held by IFN with the Citizenship Foundation on *Faith, Identity and Belonging*: [http://www.interfaith.org.uk/faith\\_identity\\_belonging](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/faith_identity_belonging).

We note that there is no question directly addressing manifestations of religious hatred. While this may not fit under 'disagreements' we choose to comment at this point. The sharp spike in anti Semitic and anti Muslim attacks, (and the attacks on people from other backgrounds, for example members of the Sikh community, mistakenly identified as Muslim by haters of the latter tradition), are completely unacceptable in a civilised society. Hatred and violence linked to religious identity are toxic and every way to work to counteract and educate needs to be found.

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

Respect is shown in different ways such as through ensuring fair treatment under law; equal courtesy and dignity in public contexts. It seems to us that the Commission's other questions tease out this issue.

**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?**

Yes, they should. However in each case the history and context of an institution or event and the practicalities of numbers and space need to be taken into account. There is no set formula. IFN has been involved across the years in discussion about many such events and assisted Government and other agencies in developing multi faith dimensions to some events. At times, the answer has been to hold an additional event, for example the Millennium Act of Reflection and Commitment at the House of Lords as part of the official Millennium celebrations, organised by IFN with the Department for Culture Media and Sport.

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

This is part of a broader question of what makes people feel active and engaged as citizens. Genuine opportunities to help shape policy locally and nationally are needed as well as ensuring that people have the skills to engage effectively. There remains a significant issue linked to resourcing with some groups more able to engage, for example because of having paid staff or more working knowledge of structures of governance nationally and locally.

Sharing of knowledge between faith communities can help. Mechanisms for consultation can also be helpful. Standing forums do have their drawbacks and representative councils or forums likewise. However, the Faith Communities Consultative Council of DCLG, which was discontinued in May 2011, was a useful institution to enable direct face to face engagement between faith groups and Ministers. A similar forum still exists within the Welsh Government and is seen as valuable by the Welsh Government and faith communities.

Within IFN, as noted above, there is the Faith Communities Forum, which brings together the national faith community representative bodies in IFN membership to discuss issues of common interest and concern. From time to time the FCF has invited Government ministers and officials to present to it, or to consult through it. This is not, however, its sole or primary function.

## **THE MEDIA**

*[The Commission's preamble for this question: 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.]*

We have given reflections on media in response the general question above but add some supplementary reflections below.

**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?**

This is not a question on which there is likely to be consensus within IFN. Some faith communities may feel under represented in the media at any given time; some may feel well portrayed and others poorly portrayed. This will vary from instance to instance and person to person.

In terms of religious literacy, there do not appear to be many television programmes which are designed primarily to educate about religions and beliefs; however, this may be down to the nature of the medium rather than any particular failing on the part of those who commission. We note that the BBC has extensive pages on its website about different faiths

and beliefs in the UK which are drawn on by many as a learning resource. There are also numerous publications specifically established for these purposes.

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

Good portrayals or coverage of religion usually reflect careful consultation with the faith/ belief community/ies to be covered/ portrayed. A benefit of wide ranging consultation is the ability to present a more varied and nuanced view of a particular faith – there are few, if any, faith or belief communities where there is total agreement about any issue.

**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?**

In terms of basic principles, we would expect these to be the same as for any other area of inquiry, and include principles such as integrity, honesty and diligence.

**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?**

It is not clear whether this question is asking how people of faith/ belief should respond to pieces of work in the media/ culture, or how the media should respond to pieces of work by people of religion or belief.

## **DIALOGUE AND ENGAGEMENT**

*[The Commission's preamble for this question: 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.]*

**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?**

*Principles*

[Building Good Relations Between People of Different Faiths and Beliefs](#) outlines some fundamental principles for engagement between people of different faiths. This is a document which was agreed by all IFN member bodies when it was first published (1991) and which all new IFN member bodies also sign up to when entering membership. The

document has been translated into multiple languages, and tens of thousands of printed copies have been distributed since 1991. It has also been used by inter faith initiatives in other countries.

The Inter Faith Network for the UK has in membership a very wide range of organisations including many whose primary work is the facilitation of dialogue and engagement between different faiths – and in some cases also non-religious belief groups. All of these organisations have different approaches and structures, and the range of contexts within which they work is also varied.

National faith communities have their own considerable resources with the Churches and a number of other communities having developed an extensive literature on principles of engagement.

Some IFN member inter faith bodies, such as the St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, have developed programmes particularly focussed on principles and practice of dialogue and a number of the academic and educational bodies have explored this topic.

#### *Structures and processes*

There are now a large number of structures and processes which assist the process of promoting dialogue. The Inter Faith Network for the UK links many of these and works to share good practice and add value to their work and advocate for it. A short description of IFN's work can be found at [www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk) Information, advice, advocacy and leading on support for national Inter Faith Week in England, Northern Ireland and Wales are also part of its role. The Commission will also wish to be in touch with Interfaith Scotland, the Inter-faith Council for Wales and the Northern Ireland Inter Faith Forum, each of which has its own programme of work and is also a member of IFN.

The last twenty years, and in particular the years since 2000, have seen the emergence and growth of many initiatives and organisations which endeavour to foster understanding and co-operation between people and organisations of different faiths. Most national faith communities have developed structures for engaging with inter religious issues. The tiny handful of pioneering inter faith groups and associations of the 1970s have now mushroomed to 240+ independent local inter faith bodies and bilateral and trilateral organisations – most of which came into being after 2000 - as well as the 33 branches of CCJ and a number of local groups linked to the Women's Interfaith Network and 3FF and an increasing number of inter faith associations on university campuses.

There has been significant growth, too, in the number of national and regional inter faith bodies in operation. There are increasing numbers of other organisations such as the Scout Association and Girl Guiding UK which are not faith or inter faith bodies but which now incorporate an inter faith dimension into their work. Some activities are also organised or part-organised by public agencies such as local authorities. Additionally there are many short term projects and programmes with an inter faith focus – for example the Near Neighbours and Together in Service programme. Inter faith issues are now more commonly

looked at in RE, which is inherently multi faith in its approach. Many other examples of growth of inter faith initiatives could be given.

The structures and processes for inter dialogue and engagement need continually to evolve to reflect the religious and social landscape - including changing methods of communication - and to meet changing needs. In terms of IFN, for example, a major strategic review was carried out in 2012-13 by a Strategic Review Working Group (SRWG). This made a wide range of recommendations to strengthen IFN's work. The Executive Committee has prioritised, in terms of implementation, those relating to membership policy and 2013-14 saw a new membership admissions policy agreed by member bodies which brought changes to a number of eligibility criteria, including opening national faith community membership eligibility beyond the nine faith traditions which had until that time been eligible: Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian. A copy of the SRWG's report can be made available to the Commission if desired.<sup>1</sup> Other aspects of process are currently under consideration as well, of course, as the actual work of the organisation. Interfaith Scotland has also revisited and changed its structures in recent years.

It is not easy to respond, in general terms, to a question about 'adequacy' of structures. If looking at this from a UK-wide perspective, a question might be whether there are sufficient, and sufficiently well targeted and effective, opportunities for people of different backgrounds to be in dialogue and to engage well together. There are various contexts for dialogue, not all of which are formal. For example in some cases the 'inter faith' dimension is incidental: such as where people of different faiths working together in an organisation may come to know each other well and talk about faith related issues over the years. Or the dialogue opportunity may be a secondary outcome of joint working on a social action programme, through chaplaincy or through some other non-dialogical route. In yet other cases, there will be processes and structures specifically created for dialogue as one of their key purposes, for example bodies such as the Council of Christians and Jews or the Hindu Christian Forum or the World Congress of Faiths or local inter faith organisations. There are also specially created opportunities for engagement which may be arranged by places of worship. For example, a local church or vihara inviting members of other faiths to an Inter Faith Week dialogue or a faith community hosting multi faith presentations and talks on particular issues.

It is also not easy to make a judgement about whether the overall pattern of availability of structures is 'adequate'. Across the 90s and early 2000s, IFN worked to encourage the formation of local inter faith structures where these did not exist. Its publication *The Local Inter Faith Guide* produced with the then Inner Cities Religious Council of the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions was part of this process, as were a succession of joint publications with Government and the Local Government Association (England and Wales) on the faith dimension of community cohesion and on joint working by local authorities with faith groups. The pattern of local inter faith structures is, today, a rich one. They exist in most diverse areas and in many less diverse areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This was an unpublished internal document and permission should be sought if there is a wish to cite content.

To have structures of any kind, however, is not necessarily to say they are 'adequate'. However, how does one judge adequacy? One needs to have an agreed outcome against which to evaluate it. What might that be? Everyone in the UK respectful of different faith and beliefs and able to live together well and cooperate for the social good? One also needs to ask how far the outcome is solely the responsibility of a certain type of body – are inter faith organisations and faith groups the key providers of structure and process for inter faith harmony and cooperation? In practice, many different types of opportunity contribute to inter faith understanding and cooperation and questions of adequacy of inter faith and faith structures need therefore to be addressed in this wider context.

The work of inter faith structures varies but commonly has a blend of dimensions of: inter faith dialogue for mutual enquiry and enrichment and to address areas of difference and, sometimes, disagreement; tackling tensions; education; representivity (in some cases); engagement with the public square; cooperation; and social interaction. Judging whether it is 'adequate' requires evaluating their impact in these areas. However, evaluation is not easy in the inter faith field. There are some measurable outcomes (such as website hits, number of events held; footfall at events; or numbers of people directly assisted through a project) but, so much is about 'absence' – less hate crimes than there might have been; less prejudice than there might have been – and so forth. Dialogue impacts are in terms of greater knowledge; more openness; better trust etc on the part of individuals. This can generally only be measured through qualitative interviews and participant observation, probably over a period of decades, and the outcomes are not easy to convey.

These evaluation issues are as relevant to national or international level religious dialogue between scholars of different religions as they are for local participants in inter faith projects exploring differences and commonalities. The measures are not easy to agree. What would be the impact? Changing ones views? Distrusting people less?

As noted above, context frames what is considered adequacy and it may be helpful to explore this further. Let us say, for example, that an inter faith activity is designed to improve local relationships in a given area. Part of whether it will have this impact and prove 'adequate' depends on whether it is initially framed in such a way that this will be likely to happen. Is it open to those which will be crucial to this? Has adequate thought been given to effective outreach? In a sense, design and consideration of monitoring and evaluation need always to go hand in hand. In terms of inter faith structures and processes there can sometimes be contrary hopes or expectations. For example, a local authority might wish to support a programme of dialogue and might argue that this will only have the desired impact if all the different religions and beliefs in the neighbourhood are part of this. The organisers might, by contrast, think that greater impact would be achieved if there was a focus on the smallest (or biggest) groupings in the context of current need. Or there might be a wish to have an intergenerational involvement but it might be the view of those framing the project that this may lead to more diluted outcomes than separate projects for young people. Judgements about need and pragmatics of arrangements always require careful discussion.

Local inter faith organisations are very important to their communities and despite usually being small and usually entirely run by volunteers they often make a significant input to their local community. However, if one approached local inter faith structures with an expectation that they should, for example, be a 'one stop shop' for all dialogue and conflict mediation etc in their locality, they would fall short. The question is against what one is measuring processes.

An increasing issue for inter faith organisations is what might be termed 'over expectation'. There is a hope that somehow they can be places of resolution of many of the more challenging issues of people of different backgrounds living together but to do this with slender resourcing and sometimes without the adequate buy-in of a number of groups in their area. Local groups sometimes comment (at link meetings or in conversations with the IFN office) that they at times feel over-burdened with requests to respond to consultations – such as on equalities – or to run/ give input to civic events which may in some cases be at the cost of other work. They want to help, and see it as important, but are seriously overstretched.

At national level these dynamics can also be present: inter faith structures often have a multiple role: education; support for the overall area of activity; promotion and advocacy; and, in some cases, framework for engagement between faith communities on faith and public life issues and a context for their engagement with government and other public agencies. It is not feasible for multi faith forums for discussion of public life issues to be offered on an ongoing basis from within one faith community and so the question of where there are opportunities for it to take place is an important one.

A multi faith body offering such a space for engagement on issues, including through dialogue with Government and other public agencies, may be subject to continuing scrutiny by the faith communities which use the space: Is it suitable for purpose? Are its structures and purposes in keeping with the faith community in question's own approach? If Government support for the multi faith body has been made available, does the dialogue context allow for robust critique of Government policy where this is seen as necessary? To which one might add that another question which has sometimes arises is, "Will the other groups around the table be ones with which we can or should be publicly seen to dialogue?" When IFN widened its membership criteria it did so agreeing that wording of the following kind should be used in relevant contexts: "Membership is seen as involving a common commitment to working together for good inter faith relations which is taken forward in many ways and that it is recognised that within different traditions there are different policies and approaches to inter faith engagement. Membership does not imply a particular approach on the part of any organisation beyond that set out in IFN's guidelines Building good relations with people of different faiths and beliefs, a document to which all member bodies sign up." (IFN Membership Admission Policy).

As the UK grows ever more religiously diverse it may become challenging to reflect this in consultative structures in ways with which all agree. The pattern of reflection or representation will no longer command the same degree of agreement and so adequacy will be variously judged.

### *A note on resourcing*

We note that there are growing expectations of grassroots local groups at a time when funding is in shorter supply.

During the period of the last Government administration, two successive grants programmes made funding available for local inter faith activities. The present Government has also made funding available. This has been through two programmes (Together in Service) for social action focused activities and, through the Near Neighbours Programme, in some areas of England for activities which help people of different backgrounds engage together in something which helps their local community. Small scale grants can be very important to local groups. They are, however, rarely renewed. For many local groups, also, the demise of regional faith forms in most of the former English regions has been a sad loss. Through these (funded centrally by Government between 2008-11), a valuable additional layer of support and advice was available. Although the Regions have gone, we think that some sort of additional support between the national and local levels in England is desirable.

At UK, national and regional level, as well as at local level, inter faith structures have resourcing challenges which can affect their adequacy. Funding is not easy to find for this work. Faith communities are supportive but have their own financial challenges; many Trusts are wary of funding projects and programmes related to religion (even on an inter faith and non-denominational basis) and those that do fund are rarely able to do so on an ongoing basis; inter religious projects are not a natural for most companies to support (unless packed as cohesion or intercultural); and Lottery funding is not acceptable to many inter faith bodies because of the in principle objection on the part of some communities to funds from gambling. In combination with the growing expectations of what can or should be achieved this unpredictable and often inadequate level of resourcing can lead to a falling short of what groups and organisations would like to achieve and believe needs to be achieved. Use of volunteers is helpful, as are gifts in kind and partnership working. But these are not a substitute for necessary resourcing.

### *Other*

We affirm very strongly the different contributions which all our member bodies (and others) make to dialogue – bilateral, trilateral and multilateral – in many contexts. The different patterns and approaches all contributed to an overall pattern of processes which make a major contribution to UK society.

We note the growing importance of dialogue between those of religious and non-religious beliefs.

Adequacy calls for the involvement of women in dialogue processes and structures at all levels. Involvement of young people is also very important.

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

It is an accepted part of inter faith dialogue that there will always be disagreements, and sometimes these will be profound. The difference between 'reasoned criticism' and 'bigoted or closed-minded opposition' is something which will vary depending on each particular context. In general, we would suggest that speaking out of respect and friendship, with sensitivity and in the context of a pre-existing relationship are things which would generally characterise 'reasoned criticism'. However, speaking from a feeling of superiority or hatred, or without having taken the time to build a relationship of trust, where the intention is to silence or destroy rather than to nurture and grow, such approaches might characterise closed-minded opposition.

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

Sometimes factors such as ignorance, fear and defensiveness. However, this will vary hugely from individual to individual and group to group. Many academic studies have been carried out on these questions, and we cannot add to them in a short survey response.

Intolerance sometimes has little to do with beliefs and more to do with culture, background, ethnicity and other factors. It can be opposition to religious practices (or practices culturally associated with some religions groups), rather than the beliefs that underpin them, which is felt most strongly.

**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?**

We are not clear what this question is asking about. Comparative religions courses? Guide to denominations?

Faith communities have varying methods of training for clergy and in their programmes it will be helpful to have modules about engaging with different faith communities and helping members of their tradition to take part in inter faith dialogue and projects in way which respects the integrity of their own tradition. Many communities already have these, to differing degrees.

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

This was the subject of a 1996 IFN seminar, and a report on it, *The Quest for Common Values* can be downloaded [from here](#).

The discussion document produced by the Trustees, [Faith, Citizenship and Shared Life in Britain Today](#) is relevant again here, as is the report of a seminar held by IFN with the

Citizenship Foundation on *Faith, Identity and Belonging*:  
[http://www.interfaith.org.uk/faith\\_identity\\_belonging](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/faith_identity_belonging).

All contain discussions of this issue. There has been debate and discussion on and off for the last fifteen years about 'British values' and what, if these exist, they may be and this is also addressed in the last two of these publications.

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