

All Party Parliamentary Group: Faith and Society
Minutes of meeting: 7 March 2016
Discussion on the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life
with the All Party Parliamentary Interfaith Group

Panel: Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP (chair)
The Rt. Rev. the Lord Harries of Pentregarth
Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, Assistant Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain
Dr Ed Kessler MBE, Director, the Woolf Institute

Attending: Fiona Bruce MP
The Lord Bhatia OBE
The Rt Hon. the Baroness Butler-Sloss GBE
The Lord Gordon of Strathblane CBE
Other Members of Parliament

Members of the public, including:

Mandy Godfree, Christian Police Association UK
Tony Lobl, Christian Science Committees on Publication
Rajinder Nijjhar, retired lecturer
Simon Rocker, Jewish Chronicle
Padideh Sabeti, Bahá'í Community of the United Kingdom
Ian Sansbury, Oasis Charitable Trust
Katharine Thane, APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief
Marini Thorne, NPC

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction
Rodie Garland, FaithAction (minutes)

Minutes (summary of discussion)

1. **The Rt Hon. Stephen Timms MP** welcomed everyone and thanked FaithAction for providing the secretariat to the APPG on Faith and Society.

He introduced the report *Living with Difference* published in December by the Commission on Religion and Belief (CORAB), chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss. The report discusses a wide range of pressing issues and draws a number of conclusions, some widely accepted and others contested.

Stephen expressed gratitude to the report's authors for mentioning the Covenant, developed by the APPG to promote engagement between local authorities and faith groups (www.faithandsociety.org/covenant). He noted that the report also includes a call for greater literacy on religion and belief, and the controversial recommendation that faith schools reduce their selection of pupils on the grounds of religion.

Stephen thanked the Woolf Institute for their support for the meeting, and introduced the three commissioners on the panel.

2. **The Rt. Rev. the Lord Harries of Pentregarth** explained that the Woolf Institute was founded to foster study between Christians, Jews and Muslims.

As part of CORAB, the commissioners met to study each theme, beginning with informed papers by experts. They heard representation by all major faiths and beliefs, including humanists.

The first chapter of the report is concerned with religious demographic changes over recent years, including the significant rise in the number of people who declare themselves to have no religion. It also looks at the gradually changing perceptions of religion, which has recently become much more agitative, and a major player in current events, whether we love it or hate it.

The Commission considered a vision for the kind of society we want. Its aim is to achieve a national narrative which is inclusive: religion and belief have always been part of our national story, and will continue to be a positive part of that story. The idea of Britain as a positive nation was achieved, or created, at a particular point in history, and therefore the idea of what Britain is can also be changed now, in the direction of a pluralist society with an inclusive national narrative. In doing this, it is desirable to take our Christian legacy into account, rather than starting from a secular blueprint.

The Commission heard strong arguments in favour of disestablishment, but concluded that establishment is like a cord, in that it is possible to cut some threads without cutting others. Her Majesty the Queen said in 2012 that the establishment of the Church of England has helped the integration of non-Christian perspectives in British society and enabled them to make their voice heard in the public sphere.

The Commission recommends a national conversation to try to identify, highlight and champion the values we all ascribe to. It looks to faith leaders to get this going, but wants the conversation to take place at all levels of society. It finds the Government's association of being British with its counter-terrorism strategy to be unhelpful.

2. **Ed Kessler** thanked Baroness Butler-Sloss for chairing the Commission. He highlighted the report's key recommendation throughout as the need to increase levels of religion and belief literacy. It is therefore pleasing that the Religious Education Council of England and Wales has begun a review of the religious education (RE) curriculum across the land. The commissioners were particularly concerned about misunderstandings and stereotyping as a result of ignorance.

The desired national debate began within hours of the report's publication, with two million retweets in two days, and 60 national newspaper articles – although some critics should have read the report before commenting. The report does call for an end to the prescribed act of collective Christian worship in schools, but also calls for an act of inclusive worship along the lines recommended by the Scottish Church and humanists.

The report's recommendation about selection in faith schools is perhaps its most controversial point. This is not about a desire to remove churches or any faith communities from the running of schools: the Commission recognises that some of our best schools are faith schools. However, if there is no encounter between children of different faiths, how can this be a good thing? The big question is what makes an open, inclusive and welcoming faith school.

The Commission was very concerned both about faith communities' lack of experience in dealing with media, and about the media's lack of understanding of religion and belief and its inability to explain complicated ideas in a limited number of words. It welcomes the idea of the

Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) producing guidance on the portrayal of religion and belief.

The Commission is concerned about some minority faith tribunals, which are perhaps not operating under civil law. It has called for the Ministry of Justice to issue guidance on this matter.

As regards the impact of the report, in the three months since its publication, there have been formal responses and public debate, and the Government has formally welcomed the report. A meeting about its implementation is due to take place at the Department for Communities and Local Government, and various universities are due to review the progress.

3. **Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra** said that the exercise of the Commission had been a real eye-opener personally, and especially as member of the Muslim faith in the UK. Despite what might be the perception in many non-faith communities, Muslims by and large, he believes, are happy with idea that Britain is still a Christian country. Many of the Commissioners felt in their deliberations that they would rather have a faith reflected in our country than none whatsoever. The Muslim Council of Britain is very content for the Church of England to be the established church, and for Her Majesty the Queen to be both Sovereign and Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

The process of the Commission was not about faith 'ganging up' against non-faith views, but rather, recognising that as people of faith we have something in common which should be celebrated.

Shaykh Ibrahim mentioned that he had recently been reviewing some RE textbooks from reputable publishers, which contained shocking errors about Islam.

Beyond this, central to increasing knowledge about the different religions within our country is the opportunity for people to encounter those of different faiths. Enabling children to encounter and have dialogue with children of other faiths is vital. The area of Leicester in which Shaykh Ibrahim lives is a very Muslim area, and the local state school is made up of 95% Muslim children. Our children should be exposed to more: we need to enable both young and old to experience the diversity of faiths within our country.

This leads to the question of attitudes and a spirit of appreciation among faith leaders towards other faiths and non-faith views. Shaykh Ibrahim recognises that when he preaches sermons, what he says is crucial with regard to the importance of inter-faith and inter-religious encounter, and the potential to live together in harmony. If he promotes this, it is very likely that worshippers will be encouraged to do follow his teaching. Therefore we need to enable faith leaders to have appropriate training so that when they share information about other faiths, they have a good level of knowledge and also encourage worshippers to participate in dialogue. When the Commissioners talked with people in local communities, they found that people took delight in opportunities for dialogue.

Shaykh Ibrahim is pleased with the Commission's recommendation that faith institutions should stage open days and welcome visits. His own mosque's open day was a great hit and this kind of activity is the only way forward.

One of the key stumbling blocks for the Commissioners was that they were conscious that many of their deliberations focused on avoiding portraying the Muslim community as 'the problem community'. This is not a good position to be in. Shaykh Ibrahim remarked that if this

is his feeling, with all his experience, he wonders what young Muslims on the street must be feeling, under microscope as they are, blamed for actions of the few and seen as the enemy within. He is grateful to Baroness Butler-Sloss and the Commissioners that the report did not 'home in' on the Muslim communities.

4. **Stephen Timms** invited Baroness Butler-Sloss to comment. **The Rt Hon. the Baroness Butler-Sloss GBE** said that the Commission had been a life-changer for her. She referred to a helpful point made by a Sikh person in Leeds who said, 'When you walk out of your church, or mosque, look over the wall and see who is there on the other side.' This is very good and underlines that we should be listening, not just talking. We should tolerate people rather than merely be tolerant, understand people with whom we profoundly disagree without getting angry, and engage in dialogue with people with whom we might not have much in common.

Since the report's publication, Baroness Butler-Sloss has received an enormous number of emails accusing her of wanting to end Christianity in this country and close down faith schools. What the Commission actually wants is to open faith schools to the benefit of others. She urges people to read at least the summary and recommendations from the report before accusing the Commissioners of being opposed to best things in this country!

5. **Stephen Timms** invited Fiona Bruce MP to comment. **Fiona Bruce** agreed that that improved levels of religious literacy are needed. She asked what practical steps could be taken to achieve this, aside from the period when one is in education and school visits can be arranged to faith establishments. Many people, even those in important positions in public life, lack religious literacy.

Lord Harries reported that Commissioners were planning to see Sir Alan Moses of IPSO. Ideally, they would like to find a forum in which the editors of national newspapers would come together for a discussion about how newspapers can play their role. He said that he had asked the Bishop of Leicester for the secret of the good inter-faith relations in his city. The answer was a good local newspaper, which requires a good editor. To achieve something similar at a national level, the implications would be huge.

Ed Kessler mentioned that a kitemark had been suggested, which would designate organisations whose staff showed minimum levels of understanding of religion and belief. This could be applied across different sectors.

Shaykh Ibrahim noted that while it is wonderful to have resources available for educators and learners, the quality of that literature needs to be looked at very carefully, judging by his recent experience. He argued that if he wanted to read a book about Christianity, he would not choose one written by a Muslim, since Muslims do not believe in the crucifixion, the resurrection or the Trinity. The reverse should also be the case, although he would not go so far as to say that non-Muslims cannot author books on Islam.

6. **Stephen Timms** invited further comments and questions from the floor.

Rajinder Nijihar (lecturer, retired): The Church of England is corrupt.

Simon Rucker (Jewish Chronicle): Is there any indication of any of the report's recommendations being picked up in legislation? Is anyone at the Department for Education sympathetic?

Katharine Thane (APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief): How can we promote

idea of freedom of expression while keeping in balance the need not to incite hatred or violence, especially so that young people do not feel alienated? What measures does the panel recommend for engaging with young people in schools, religious centres, unemployment centres, online or through other means?

Ed Kessler: As the report is only three months old, it is still early to talk about legislation, but the Minister of State formally welcomed the report in the House of Lords and is hosting a meeting at the Department for Communities and Local Government to talk about implementation of the report across departments, including the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice, which suggests that it is being taken seriously.

The commissioners had a long debate on freedom of expression. The attack on Charlie Hebdo and the terrorist attacks in Paris happened over the course of the Commission's work. It is a question of balance. There is a challenge relating to the right to offend: the nuance is *discretion* rather than the *right* to offend. Sensitivity of language is required and we must be careful not to be sloppy with our words – they can be unintentionally offensive, as when George W Bush called for a crusade.

Lord Harries: Schools play a key role in engaging with young people. The report does not talk about youth organisations beyond schools, but clearly there is huge scope for faith communities to facilitate conversations between young people.

Shaykh Ibrahim: We recommend that organisations engaged in social action should get the balance right when it comes to engaging with services. Many services are no longer there because of cuts. The Government needs to think through the cuts being made and their implications for young people. When we plan, we need to be proactive in thinking about young people and engage them as partners in common action with local authorities and funding bodies, to ensure that targeted funding is available.

Mandy Godfree (Christian Police Association UK): I am interested in the literacy side of the report and welcome the proposed changes to RE. Regarding policing, education in religion and belief is very important to the service and to delivery, and I think that at the moment the police do not have it. Are there any recommendations for training the staff in services such as the police, prisons, social work, teaching etc.?

Padideh Sabeti (Bahá'í Community of the United Kingdom): Thank you for this wonderful piece of work. It gives us snapshot of reality, but there is also a touching sense of fairness in it. Will there be a 'CORAB II' to follow up this work? For us it inspired many thoughts and ideas to take forward into action, particularly on religious literacy. We have a lot of experience internationally – for example, the Bahá'í community faces persecution in Iran – and we have realised that we need to teach our children to counteract prejudice against Muslims, which could arise as a result of such persecution. We have many ideas we would like to share.

Baroness Butler-Sloss: I have had an interesting invitation to Warwickshire organised by the Police and Crime Commissioner for the county. A seminar is being held to discuss the report and I have been invited to open it. The police force is an important area, so it is good that at least one person wants to take what we have said on board.

Stephen Timms: Is there police training on religion and belief?

Mandy Godfree: It varies from force to force. Open days are a superb idea – I have had the pleasure of attending one in Luton where I work, and it definitely helps to break down barriers.

Ed Kessler: the Woolf Institute ran training for the Metropolitan Police before the Olympics. There was a real openness. But training is often the first thing to be cut. There is a desire for more.

On the question of a 'sequel' – we have not yet digested CORAB I. We need to see what impact the report has: we will look at what *has* been taken up as a result, and see where the gaps are. Do we try to fill them? Or do we hold a second commission? We have been approached by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to talk about a European commission, and also by people in the US. We welcome ideas – please contact us.

The Lord Bhatia OBE: We listened very carefully to this in the House of Lords. People should also be aware of Lord Sacks' writing. There is a need for a change in the vocabulary about religion. The media have not reported widely on how many people attended open days at mosques in Leicester. As a Muslim, when I hear about somebody maligning Christ, Moses or Abraham, I feel equally hurt, as any Muslim would. All of the prophets are sacred to us. Anyone who attacks them hurts every Muslim. The press and media is a walking disaster in my view. They report the smallest misbehaviour of any person of faith, especially Muslims. There is a crisis of ignorance and we really need to make the press and media more aware of what faith is. They need to be trained and given more information and a new vocabulary.

Ian Sansbury (Oasis Charitable Trust): Oasis runs 47 very diverse schools. Ed talked about the need to reach a point where faith schools that are open, inclusive and pluralist. What are the next steps to take?

Marini Thorne (NPC): The panel mentioned the need for a national conversation about faith. How do they feel about the Lobbying Act [Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014]?

Tony Lobl (Christian Science Committees on Publication): There is a huge amount of truth in the statement that the media do not report well, but religions also need to take seriously their role in interacting with the media. We live in a different era from the one when we had only national newspapers. We need to do a better job of engaging with the media in proactive ways. Do people want to hear good news?

Lord Harries: We did not say much about lobbying as it was not directly in our purview, but it is something I am very involved in. The latest developments are disgraceful, I think. Charities are feeling constricted about what they can do. [See recommendation 29 of the report.]

Ed Kessler: Since our recommendation about faith schools generated a lot of debate, I approached the Church of England to see if they would host a meeting on that question. This has not been taken up. I would welcome a conversation if a suitable organisation could host one as this is very important question.

Baroness Butler-Sloss: I think that a lot of Christians and some influential Jews have misunderstood us. Our point was seen as being entirely negative, but we wanted to create a discussion that included the fact that there are first class faith schools. If anyone here can take forward the message that we would like to have a discussion on the very good schools and what they do, and why others that are more introspective don't do well, that would be wonderful.

Stephen Timms: I think some of the schools would argue that maintaining their faith ethos

requires a degree of selection.

Ed Kessler: We mean reducing, not eliminating, selection by faith. We would welcome the conversation. I completely agree that faith schools need to be a lot better at managing the media.

Shaykh Ibrahim: Leicester now has the first Sikh school and it is open to everybody. But we need to be aware that if we go down that road, how many non-Muslim families would choose to send their child to a Muslim school when they could opt for a different one, and when the demand from the Muslim community is so high?

7. **Stephen Timms** concluded the meeting by drawing attention to the next meeting of the APPG, which will focus on faith and extremism, and the worry that if people are religious they are more likely to be extremist. This will be held at 3pm on Tues 22 March in the Jubilee Room. Stephen thanked everybody for attending and Lord Harries thanked him for chairing the meeting.

Date of next meeting: *Tuesday 22 March 2016, 3pm, Jubilee Room, House of Commons*