Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Corrected oral evidence: Faith and Civic Engagement

Wednesday 22 November 2017
11.30 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots (The Chairman); Baroness Barker; Lord Blunkett; Baroness Eaton; Lord Harries of Pentregarth; Baroness Lister of Burtersett; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Baroness Newlove; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Redfern; Lord Rowe-Beddoe.

Evidence Session No. 14 Heard in Public Questions 122 - 128

Witness

I: Rt Rev Richard Atkinson, Inter Faith Network.

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Examination of witness

Rt Rev Richard Atkinson.

Q122 The Chairman: Good morning. A list of the interests of Members relevant to the inquiry has been sent to you and is available. The session is open to the public and is being recorded for BBC Parliament. A verbatim transcript will be taken of the evidence and will be put on the Committee’s website. A few days after the session, you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check it for accuracy, and it would be most helpful if you could advise us of any corrections as quickly as possible. If, after this evidence session, you wish to clarify or amplify any points made during your evidence or have additional points you wish to make, you are welcome to submit supplementary evidence to us. Could I ask you to introduce yourself and then we will get on to the questions?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: I am Richard Atkinson and I am here in my capacity as one of the two co-chairs of the Inter Faith Network, along with Mr Jatinder Birdi. I am also, along with Baroness Eaton, a trustee of Near Neighbours, although that is not why I am here.

Q123 The Chairman: Thank you very much. The first question is a general one, to ask you to describe the current state of civic engagement in the UK. How do you see that?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: I am obviously responding on behalf of the Inter Faith Network. Just to be clear, it is a linking body with 200 members and, therefore, I will be drawing on the general comments and experience of our members.

That is a very difficult question to answer because, within the faith communities, there will be a range of answers; the opportunities and challenges vary from a body that covers everything from the Church of England through to Druids, Jains and other smaller faith communities. The Inter Faith Network would start from the point of view of people who are committed to civic engagement and to enhancing that and see faith as a positive benefit, recognising other challenges, but, like all good citizens, they would recognise many of the challenges. Our meetings cover everything from engagement of young people in civic life to how we enhance volunteering and a range of other familiar topics.

From our perspective, that there are a number of signs of health. We have just finished Inter Faith Week, covering England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with hundreds of local initiatives and people coming together for faith—everything from an inter-faith seminar in Omagh to a community justice conference in south Lanarkshire to sharing learning and building for faith with the Cornwall Faith Forum through to Young, Free and Religious in Cardiff. It has been a very healthy week in terms of faith and civic engagement. I would also point to the responses to the atrocity in Manchester and the tragedy in Grenfell Tower, where lots of people responded and, among those, were significant signs of faith communities engaging with civic need and responding as they could.
Baroness Barker: What do you think the role of faith communities is in promoting civic engagement, and what do you think those faith communities which engage in civic engagement, and not all do, are trying to achieve?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: It seems to me that the role of faith communities in promoting civic engagement comes under a number of headings, and I can expand on each if you want me to. There is an important role within faith communities, many of them drawing on their theological resources and traditions, to champion civic engagement, but it is not true of everybody—perhaps I can add the general proviso that there is always the exception to the rule within the world of faith. It is part of enhancing the contribution to the common good, part of seeking to affirm and extend participation in civic life and events; it is about supporting democratic engagement, about building a confident identity in a complex situation which gives people the confidence to contribute positively to their society, and it is about encouraging volunteering and charitable giving. So those are some of my headings.

What are they seeking to achieve? Many faith communities, including my own, would have a strong vision of a positive, cohesive, fruitful society in which each participant can contribute and play their part, and they are seeking to do that at the local level. Inter-faith groups, along with other faith groups, often play an important role in building local cohesion and responding to threat, with all parts having a big vision for our society.

The Chairman: One issue that we have been struggling with is what the red lines of behaviour are in certain faiths. For example, the treatment of women may not be as fair in some as we think it should be. What is your role in encouraging a set of values to which we can all aspire?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: That is a complex question. Our primary role is creating open and challenging conversation and debate, because we believe that we both understand each other, move forward and challenge each other in that context. The annual meeting of the Inter Faith Network two years ago took the theme of hard questions, and different people will have different red lines. Within that, the Inter Faith Network is working to understand what it is to be a citizen and a contributor to our society, taking seriously the faith context that people come from.

Baroness Lister of Burtersett: It may be that you have touched on this and I have not picked it up, but what can faith groups bring to citizenship over and above what secular groups might be able to?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: The distinctive thing they bring is their faith, the tradition and the teaching. There are other things. Most faith groups have a strong sense of community and a strong sense of concern for our neighbour, which runs through many faith traditions in similar forms. They are local and grounded and it may not sound dramatic, but concern for neighbour and community is a strong stimulus to civic engagement.
Baroness Barker: Can you understand that some of us see a problem in that faith communities can themselves be a barrier because some of them are based on discriminatory beliefs. They do not value all people equally and they are exempt from the equalities legislation. That is a problem for the mission that you are trying to outline.

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: I completely understand and recognise that and I am not dismissing that in any way. In the Inter Faith Network, we live with people who come from a variety of positions and we think it is important that we engage with that and create the context where those are debated and discussed. We take seriously things, such as the equality agenda, and we have engaged, for instance, with the Equality and Human Rights Commission on the issues of faith in work. That was a very productive conversation and challenged some of the misconceptions out there, and it is part of a positive path within that. There is also a question, and there are limits as to how far I can go in speaking of the Inter Faith Network, in terms of the balance between faith identity and contribution and the recognition of the freedom of the individual to pursue their faith and wider equality agendas, but I am not ignoring that genuine challenge.

Q125 Lord Rowe-Beddoe: What barriers do you consider that people of faith confront and, if there are such barriers or you can identify them, how could they be removed?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: Most of my colleagues would probably start from a lack and a decreasing amount of religious literacy in our society. That has a number of impacts, including often a lack of understanding on the part of those who sometimes carry out consultation and engage with faith communities both of where they are coming from and the complexity of any one of the faith traditions, because they are not amorphous. Within each faith there are different traditions, so there is complexity. That religious literacy is not about people having PhDs in every one of the many faiths but having the basics of understanding of the place of faith in our society and its diversity, and having the tools to distinguish between what we might call “good faith” and “bad faith”, so that is one thing.

There are issues of capacity about engagement. Some of our faith communities are quite small and, whereas the Church of England, for instance, has a range of resources that allows us to engage at a number of levels, including with back-up and whatever, if you are a smaller community, the Jains or the Zoroastrians or whatever, it will be less easy to engage and there needs to be allowance for and recognition of that. There are issues which are not just for the faith community, but we are very conscious of our own need to engage women and young people and of how the voices of women in what traditionally have often been patriarchal communities are changing. There are good examples of inter-faith women’s organisations now, such as Nisa-Nashim, the Jewish-Muslim group, or the Women of Faith Network of Religions for Peace. Is it a barrier? There is work to do there. Maybe “barrier” is the wrong word.
One barrier is particular policies sometimes being badged in particular ways. There is a range of responses to the Prevent initiative, for example, but in some places the perception that it stereotypes particular communities can be a barrier. Sometimes, we feel that there is a lack of effort to engage with some of the more conservative religious groupings, such as maybe the ultra-Jewish or the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Yes, there is a range of engagement and there are questions sometimes where there is insufficient space for genuine debate and proper dissent within the boundaries of civilised society.

Lord Rowe-Beddoe: Are you actively attempting to dismantle some of the problems that you have highlighted with various faith groups, and how do you talk to people in the inter-faith groups? Is there a mechanism. If I am a member but I am not the leader, how do you talk to me?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: First, the strength of inter-faith engagement, to my mind, is local inter-faith groups and other local inter-faith activity. I am not here for Near Neighbours, but the work that it does on the ground in a number of parts of our country now is grounded in local people—not just talking but doing. Social action is a significant part of the inter-faith agenda. There are good examples where the faith communities have sought to enhance and respond to the challenge of religious literacy. I might mention the Woolf Institute, for instance, and the work that has done. I was the founder chair of the St Philip’s Centre in Leicester, for study and engagement. It is not just talking but, for instance, at the moment it is working with the military to help it in its faith literacy and new police constables will come to it as part of their training. It is putting religious literacy into public life and public service, which is building a society where there is deeper understanding. I point to some of those.

It is about working with local authorities. The Inter Faith Network over the years, through documents such as Faith and the Community: A Good Practice Guide for Local Authorities, has sought to do that. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Faith and Society has developed the faith covenant, which a number of local authorities have signed up to. In each of the areas, there is good practice, but there is never enough. I believe that Kent County Council and Cambridgeshire are looking at new ways of working with faith communities and are supported by the faith community.

The Chairman: Any specific examples would be very helpful because, as opposed to general statements of intent, we are trying to get some hard evidence.

Baroness Lister of Burtersett: You mentioned dissent, and I was very interested that we were given in our briefing a quote from your discussion paper on faith citizenship and shared life. It says, “There is a strong and important tradition in this country of dissent, and indeed of civil disobedience”. It is an important point because we can think of citizenship and it can get terribly cosy and comfortable, and there is a
notion in the literature of dissident citizenship. Where do you think the line comes between what we might think of as dissident citizenship and dissent to be respected? Where is the line and where does it go too far to be antithetical to citizenship?

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: It is an important question.

The Chairman: And a difficult one.

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: Thank you, my Lord.

The Chairman: That let you off the hook.

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: I would approach it from two ends. On the one hand, there are some occasions—some are misconceptions that need to be challenged—when it seems that things such as conservatism within a religious tradition get confused with extremism. The word “radical” gets used in very broad terms and it often disturbs people who are just passionate about what they believe in, and there is an important distinction there. I do not think my colleagues are much different from most ordinary British people who would say that dissent goes too far when it begins to damage, trample on and oppress other people. That is probably about as far as I can go.

Baroness Eaton: I declare an interest in Near Neighbours. It is not the only one, but it is an organisation that is practical in getting people to look at the things that make them the same and not different and uniting them in activity, which is a benefit to all, so that is much more of a community base. A lot of subjects around inter-faith are about talking, but we need surely to look also at evaluating projects and to see what works on the ground, what is just a theory and what might be attractive to academics. We have to look at the outcomes and it is important that we do not lose sight of evaluating projects to see their benefit.

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: I would agree with that, and it is true that Near Neighbours has a very good track record of evaluating its work, and we need to extend that. I did not want to begin with a long list, but under the headings I gave at the beginning, I wonder whether I can pick up one or two of them because they are concrete examples that ground this. Under championing civic engagement, which is again related to Near Neighbours, there is the Catalyst programme, working with young people. Its programme has work on leadership and on identity in our society, working with young people of faith and others.

On the contribution to the common good, there is the Leicester night shelter which is opening up—there are seven different faith traditions, using churches, a Muslim community centre, a mosque and a temple over the winter period. There is the Wakefield Inter Faith Network, as part of the Inter Faith Network, which also includes Baha’i and pagans, and there is planting trees, which is environmental. If anybody wants further details, they should go to the Inter Faith Week site where there is a map of the several hundred events.
On participation in civic life and events, we have just had Remembrance Sunday and there is a growing involvement of faith communities in that, and it is how we tell the story of other ethnic and faith communities who contributed in both the world wars on behalf of our nation.

On democratic engagement, quite often things such as hustings locally will be done by other faith groups or inter-faith, and they are not the only people but it is just one sign, so those are just a few.

Baroness Barker: I am an ambassador for the Albert Kennedy Trust, which is the LGBT youth homelessness charity. Twenty-five per cent of all young people who are homeless are LGBT, so that is a higher incidence than in the rest of the population. In some 40% of the cases that the AK team deals with, religion, and not one religion but religion, is a factor in the cause of the homelessness of the young person. In trying to evaluate your list, does the Inter Faith Network deal with some of the harms caused by some faith community actions? It seems to me that you are telling us that faith communities have a unique role in civic engagement, or perhaps they are the only forum that can address those issues which secular organisations cannot.

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: We have a particular role. There is a legacy there and I am not disputing your observation at all. As I say, we are on a journey of enabling people to have harder conversations, of which sexuality is one. It takes time to draw these conversations out. At a recent local inter-faith meeting, there was a session on that and we touched on some things, but, to be fair, there has not been a recent conversation there and I hear what you say.

Baroness Barker: That is one instance. I grew up in Scotland where religious division was a terrible blight on society and it has taken a lot of time to work out.

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson: The more obvious question is reflecting on the relationship between religion and violence and the tradition. People are very conscious of that, because around the Inter Faith Network table are people who are committed to well-being and safeguarding you. That is a complex conversation, but we are seeking to have it, just as Near Neighbours is seeking to build a series of local conversations—they are happening in Luton and the Black Country at the moment—to enable people to go deeper and tackle the things that really matter. I cover Luton as a bishop, where child sexual exploitation is a particular thing. I am encouraged that members of both the Christian church and the Islamic community have come together to begin to respond to that, alongside other people.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth: Would you say that, as well as encouraging dialogue on these difficult issues, the Inter Faith Network could communicate a message to its members that, although they may have different views on this issue within their own communities, and we all know which ones do, nevertheless there is a civic duty on all of us as citizens to treat with respect people who are different and to accord them
all their proper rights? Therefore, a very clear distinction has to be made, particularly with the faith communities, between the respective roles of what might be their religious teaching and their civic duty to fellow citizens, which, hopefully, would be strengthened by good motivation from their religion to treat people with respect.

**Rt Revd Richard Atkinson:** Treating people with respect is something we would take very seriously and would be conveyed through the organisation. What that means and how that relates to modern civic teaching is, as you will know, my Lord, a complex area and I hear the challenge.

Q127 **Lord Blunkett:** My question follows on from that and what Baroness Lister and the Chair were raising earlier about red lines. In the evidence, you touch on values. I appreciate that you cannot speak for everybody and are trying to reflect a broad consensus in the Inter Faith Network, but we have been struggling with whether there are unique British values or universal values, given that they are certainly not universally applied. Would you like to say a bit more about the value question that we have in the written evidence? I then have a follow-up question which is slightly more practical.

**Rt Revd Richard Atkinson:** You will have seen that we have laid out the values in the IFN member code: service to others, integrity, accountability, trust, consultative and co-operative working, valuing diversity, inclusiveness, listening and openness, courtesy, mutual respect, and respecting dissent and people’s right to express this. There is an overlap with the Government’s fundamental British values, but there is also a difference. I think that many of our members, which is the best I can say, would see the values that we seek to work to as more fundamental values that go beyond Britain, coming out of faith traditions. There is an emphasis on the way that we live together and relationships, and people find those easier to engage with than maybe with the way that fundamental British values have been done. Equally, the Inter Faith Network and our colleagues recognise that they work in a country where democracy and the rule of law, which may be second-order values, are significant and, indeed, allow the flourishing of inter-faith life within this nation, which is not the case in many parts of our world.

**Lord Blunkett:** Some time ago, when I visited Chicago, there was an enormous amount of work being done by the black churches in the most deprived areas, setting up training and employment programmes, but with considerable suspicion from others that these were exclusive rather than inclusive. When the Government recently, in 2014, did away with the half-GCSE, they also did away with a lot of youngsters, tens of thousands, who were taking half a GCSE in religious studies and half a GCSE in citizenship and looking at and challenging them both. You may want to come back to us on this, if the IFN has thoughts on this in December and gets it back in time, but do you have a reflection on the interplay between the inclusivity and the exclusivity and citizenship and being part of a faith community? It is the combined community of faith versus wider citizenship and whether some people see some of the work
of the faith communities as being about recruitment and encapsulating people.

**Rt Revd Richard Atkinson:** There is a long-standing debate about the extent to which particularly public authorities respond in some instances to faith communities and their contribution. We have moved on a long way over the 30 years or so I have been in ministry, but there are still the responses, such as, “We can’t work with them because they’re religious”, or whatever. Faith groups which engage in the public sphere, not all of them but many of them, are doing it because there is a genuine concern for people in need. One of the structures is the tradition of having days in the different faith communities for volunteering and community action, whether it is Sewa Day, Sadaqa Day, Mitzvah Day or maybe the Buddhist Action Month. The emphasis there is very much on living out one’s faith but doing it as a citizen of a country—they hang together—but it is another huge issue.

**Lord Blunkett:** I think I am talking about proselytising, am I not?

**Rt Revd Richard Atkinson:** I appreciate that. There will be some for whom it is a proselytising issue. Most faith traditions have much more experience at recognising the distinction between when they engage publicly to serve the community and when they are acting as a faith community seeking to build their own.

**Baroness Redfern:** Do you think that our lack of knowledge of other cultures and faiths can lead to suspicion and, possibly, hatred in the community? Therefore, what is the role of faith communities in enabling integration, and how can the Government ensure that integration is a process of mutual engagement?

**Rt Revd Richard Atkinson:** At the heart of many fractures in our society and some of the more substantial fractures is often a fear of the other, and at the heart of that is both a lack of engagement and understanding in the broad sense. Going back to values, people often use the word “tolerance”. I think my colleagues would question the use of “tolerance” as the right value because it does not go far enough. We need to live in a society where sometimes the words are “hospitalable” or “a genuine love of our neighbour” or whatever the right words are, but it is more than “tolerance”. Faith communities, when they play their part well, have a significant role, alongside others, in enabling that. That is part of the integration agenda. The Inter Faith Network at its last faith communities forum, which is when the national faith groups come together to look particularly at the wider questions and some of the more difficult questions, had the deputy director of integration strategy from DCLG there, so it is on the agenda. It is a start.

There is a real concern about what we mean by “integration”. There is a positive response to integration where it is about cohesion, affirming diversity and valuing contribution within building a common narrative for our nation, but there is a real concern when it becomes assimilation, a perceived loss of identity and maybe the dominance of particular cultures.
over others. With integration, we are back to some very basic things. Sometimes, there is a tendency to devalue that fairly low-level, but significant, creation of opportunity for people to meet each other across ethnicity, culture and gender, and that is quite a lot of what our inter-faith groups do. It is about the things I have already said about opportunity to build literacy and it is why engagement with RE in schools is significant—the Religious Education Council is part of the Inter Faith Network—and we take that as a serious part of our agenda. That is a start in responding to your question.

**The Chairman:** Bishop, thank you very much indeed. It has been a reflective session and it has been good for us to stand back a bit from the day-to-day stuff. Thank you very much indeed.