The Inter Faith Network for the UK – written evidence (CCE0250)

Context

The Inter Faith Network for the UK has been concerned with aspects of citizenship since it was first established in 1987.

This is reflected in its publications such as Faith, Identity And Belonging: Educating For Shared Citizenship (2006) which explored the issue of Citizenship Education in England’s schools and Faith, Citizenship and Shared Life in Britain Today: A Discussion Document (2007), discussed further below, which looked at the issue of Citizenship more broadly.

This short response focuses on just some of the questions in the consultation.

8. What are the values that all of us who live in Britain should share and support?

We do not submit a list for consideration but the Select Committee may be interested to be aware of IFN’s work on values.

a) “IFN’s vision and values”

IFN’s 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.”

The values which we aspire to reflect in all our work are:

- Service to others
- Integrity
- Accountability
- Trust
- Consultative and cooperative working
- Valuing diversity
- Inclusiveness
- Listening and openness
- Courtesy
- Mutual respect
- Respecting dissent and people's right to express this

The question of values and their part in our society has been at the heart of IFN’s work from early days – from the publication of The Quest for Common Values back in the 90s, through working to support the faith communities in the development of the Millennium Act of Commitment, to more recent exploration of what might be called the ‘procedural values’ of how we engage positively and effectively with each other within society – even, and perhaps especially, where we differ.
Relevant are such IFN documents as *Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs* which contains principles fundamental to positive interaction between people in a diverse society. This is annexed.

The Millennium Act of Commitment, mentioned above, remains widely used today – particularly in civic contexts:

> In a world scarred by the evils of war, 
> racism, injustice and poverty, 
> we offer this joint Act of Commitment as we 
> look to our shared future.

We commit ourselves, 
as people of many faiths, 
to work together 
for the common good, 
uniting to build a better society, 
grounded in values and ideals we share:

- community,
- personal integrity,
- a sense of right and wrong,
- learning, wisdom and love of truth,
- care and compassion,
- justice and peace,
- respect for one another,
- for the earth and its creatures.

We commit ourselves, 
in a spirit of friendship and co-operation, 
to work together 
alongside all who share our values and ideals, 
to help bring about a better world 
now and for generations to come.

b) Faith, Citizenship and Shared Life in Britain Today: A Discussion Document

This discussion paper mentioned at the outset of this response recognises some of the issues that the Lords Select Committee is exploring.

*Active Citizenship*

The Discussion document states:
“Most religious traditions have both a personal and a public dimension and invite their believers to follow a way of life which shapes not only their personal lives and relationships but also the way they contribute to wider society. In a few cases, members of a religious group will believe that it is inconsistent with their spiritual practice to become involved in the political process. Their viewpoint needs to be respected. But most people of faith want to engage, alongside others, in the activities of the ‘public square’. For some this will take the form of direct involvement in the political process, while for others ‘active citizenship’ will be expressed mainly through voluntary service to the community. But all of them will bring their personal faith to bear in varying ways in their contribution to public life. (9)

In recent years there has been an increased recognition of the contribution which the various faith communities make to our shared public life. The leaders of faith communities have generally welcomed the increased engagement which has developed with Government, both central and local, and with other public institutions. Faith communities have an important and legitimate role to play within society through contributing to the formation and implementation of public policy, and in providing services both to their own members and to the community more generally. They have been playing a significant part in the regeneration of socially and economically disadvantaged communities.” (10)

Examples of this are abundant, especially the way that religious traditions work together to mobilise their communities, and others, to work together to respond to social need, as can be seen from the report *Public Faith and Finance* published by the University of Bristol in 2016. As Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth noted at IFN’s National Meeting in 2016:

> “Across the country, people from different faiths are working hard in countless churches, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, synagogues and elsewhere, and in charities and community groups, to make their communities better places.”

But it also recognises that this can only occur in a context where there is an absence of barriers of discrimination and inequality.

*Shared Values*

IFN recognises that people of faith derive their values, in part, from their traditions that are passed on through scriptures and loved traditions. It also recognises that whilst values may come from different sources there is much agreement on the values needed to live and support a modern democratic society. This at times includes values that are not necessarily valued themselves by states, such as dissent. The Discussion document notes:

> “There is a strong and important tradition in this country of dissent, and indeed of civil disobedience, which should be respected, while recognising that society, through its governmental institutions, needs to place appropriate limits on the actions through which this dissent may be lawfully expressed. People of many faiths have in the past been associated with these movements of dissent and will no doubt continue to be so.
While they can be expected to acknowledge the authority of a democratic government, they will inevitably have a prior commitment, rooted in their particular religious tradition, to the pursuit of compassion, justice and truth, as they try to live out with integrity the values which they derive from their religious faith.” (17)

But also recognises that dissent and robust engagement are very different from extremism and violent opposition.

Integration not assimilation

Sharing values, though, does not mean assimilating oneself to a larger or dominant culture; as the Paper notes:

“The process of integration requires mutual engagement and involves change which affects everyone, but can enlarge the understanding and experience of us all.” (49)

Hence, integration within a nation has to be based on a model which does not merely tolerate difference but respects difference and, at times, celebrates it. As the Paper recognises:

“Britain today is our society, the one of which we, as British citizens, have co-ownership.” (31)

What matters is the way we build mutual respect and underpin that by laws that allow for personal and communal flourishing.

9. Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

On this, we would wish to note that religious identity can be a cause of being ‘left behind’ if a person encounters discrimination or social exclusion because of this. Vital to shared citizenship in our society is enabling full and positive engagement of people of all faiths within the workplaces, education and all other contexts.

IFN has been pleased to play an active role in enable the guidance materials provided by a number of bodies which assist towards this end, most recently those of the Equality and Human Rights Commission for employers about religion in the workplace.

12. Can you give examples of initiatives and role models that have helped promote a positive vision of British Citizenship within a tolerant and cohesive society?

Many national inter faith bodies contribute to a positive vision of citizenship within a tolerant and inclusive society through particular inter faith programmes and events. Just a
few examples would be the programme for refugees and asylum seekers of the Maimonides Foundation; the youth Interfaith Summit of 3FF, the projects of Mitzvah Day, Sadaqa Day and Sewa Day; the work of the St Ethelburga’s Centre on tools for dialogue and working jointly on areas such as the Environment. Many, many more could be highlighted.

Around the UK over 250 local inter faith groups in towns and cities and also rural areas carry out work which is a living demonstration of people of different backgrounds who make work together in ways which witness visibly to tolerance and respect and contrite the cohesion of their local areas. Most have strong working relationships with their local authority and, through participation in civic events, strengthen the bonds of trust and cooperation between faith groups and local government. Just a few examples would be Faith Network for Manchester, York Interfaith, Bristol Multi Faith Forum, Medway Inter Faith Action, Cornwall Faiths Forum, Warwick District Faiths Forum, Birmingham Council of Faiths and Northampton Inter Faith Forum.

At UK level, the same might be said of the Inter Faith Network for the UK which was founded in 1987 and works with its nearly 200 member bodies to promote inter faith understanding and cooperation. These members include national faith community representative bodies of different faiths; national, regional and local inter faith bodies; and educational and academic bodies with an inter faith interest. IFN works with Government and other public agencies and with many other organisations to encourage positive interaction within society through inter faith understanding and cooperation.

In Scotland, the role of Inter faith Scotland is very important, as is that of the Inter-Faith Council for Wales in Wales and of the Northern Ireland Inter Faith Forum in Northern Ireland.

A significant programme currently supported by Government is the Near Neighbours programme of the Church Urban Fund and Archbishops’ Council of the Church of England. This funds many local projects which strengthen as sense of shared citizenship and belonging.

As noted in Inter Faith Week Stories from 2016, inspiration for 2017 Inter Faith Week each November, on which IFN leads, brings faith communities together, and many choose to celebrate through practical cooperation for the common good. An array of multi faith social action events took place for the 2016 Week. Popular initiatives included helping the homeless; campaigning for environmental change; improving public spaces; and action to support refugees, migrants and asylum seekers.

A huge variety of organisations took part in 2016, including places of worship; national faith community bodies; inter faith bodies; voluntary organisations such as those working with refugees and the homeless and public agencies. Some organisations and projects, such as Near Neighbours programme (noted above), organised and encouraged events held by many others.

Mitzvah Day took place close to Inter Faith Week and some inter faith Mitzvah Day activities were held early, during the Week. Mitzvah Day is led by the Jewish community and is one of
three annual major days of faith-linked social action throughout the year, along with Sewa Day and Sadaqa Day which fall earlier in the year.

But to reduce Citizenship to social action would, of course, be an error. Citizenship is also about engaging with others, engaging in mutual learning and being enriched by what is encountered. Inter Faith Week provided a great opportunity for events showcasing the arts, culture and music of faith communities across the UK. People also used art, culture and music to remind one another of the things that unite people of different faiths, and to explore and display harmony and common ground. Members of the public experienced the art, culture and music of faith communities by visiting a place of worship or going on a faith trail. People of different faiths also came together to produce art as part of a joint social action project to raise awareness of issues such as hate crime, or the refugee crisis.

Examples of this ranged from a ‘Day of Craft for Women’ in Feltham, West London, organised by Hounslow to Friends of Faith to storytelling as part of the Jewish Museum’s Inter Faith Week ‘Inter Faith Celebration Day’ in London.

**Education for Citizenship**

Education is key not only within schools but also in the wider social context. Schools are important places not only for learning about being a citizen but also where they can experience being citizens and see good citizenship modelled, see: *Faith, Identity And Belonging: Educating For Shared Citizenship* (2006).

IFN has highlighted the work of The National Citizens Service (NCS) ([www.ncsyes.co.uk](http://www.ncsyes.co.uk)) in providing opportunities for inter faith engagement, partly through inclusion in publications such as *Inter Faith Learning, Dialogue and Cooperation: Next Steps* (2016) and its Executive Director was involved in the early conversations about its establishment, having advocated strongly for such a programme while a Commissioner on the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

**Conclusion**

IFN’s Discussion Paper in 2006 noted:

“There is at present much discussion about what is involved in being a ‘citizen’ and about related questions of ‘identity’ and ‘belonging’.” (14)

and:

“It is clear from recent public debate that the term ‘citizenship’ can have negative overtones for some people because they understand it as demanding an exclusive loyalty of a narrow, conformist and nationalistic kind.” (16)
It is important in any debate about citizenship that a narrow definition is avoided, one that becomes exclusive of legitimate difference. Since the Act of Toleration of 1689 the concept of what it is to be a citizen of these Isles has grown to encompass difference and diversity in such a way that the nation has become enriched culturally, economically and, perhaps most importantly, spiritually.

In its section on ‘Being British’ the paper noted:

“An individual’s sense of belonging is linked to their understanding of their identity, which is in turn linked to their history and family roots. Accompanying the debate on ‘citizenship’ there has been discussion on what it means to be ‘British’ and on how far diversity and a sense of unity within our society can be reconciled. The debate has focused on how we live together as diverse people and communities within one society. ‘Multiculturalism’, ‘integration’ and ‘cohesion’ are terms which are often currently used in discussing these questions. While it may be helpful to have agreed definitions of these words, what is more significant is for there to be some shared understanding of the characteristics of the kind of society which we want to have in this country.” (22)

There is still a clear need to develop a shared understanding of the language used in such a way that as many as possible can be included and as few as possible disenfranchised.

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