

Working session 3

British Humanist Association

Social Cohesion and Inclusion of the Non-Religious

The British Humanist Association is firmly committed to human rights (including the rights of the religious), to equality, and to social cohesion, although we specifically represent the interests of humanists, i.e. people who seek to lead ethical lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.

In this presentation I want to focus on social cohesion and good relations, and I should start by commending the UK government on the efforts it has been making on equality, integration and cohesion and to address social exclusion, hatred and violence. There has been a lot of progress in recent years, not least with the creation of a short-term Commission on Integration and Cohesion, which reported recently, and the brand new Commission on Equality and Human Rights, which opens its doors for the first time next Monday.

We have been pleased to be involved in some of that work, but I want to raise a particular issue in the UK's approach; an issue that seems to some extent to be mirrored in the work of the OSCE, and in many other countries, namely the focus on faith, and faith communities, and faith leaders (who are rarely truly representative of the people they claim to represent), and on interfaith and multifaith work. The notes for this afternoon's session refer to "a positive portrayal of the diverse multifaith and multicultural communities that make up today's pluralist societies".

Well, I am sorry, but we do not have a multifaith society in the UK, or indeed anywhere in the world. We certainly have a multicultural society, and a pluralist society, but our society does not only include a variety of different faiths, but also a large number of people with non-religious beliefs. And of course people with non-religious beliefs such as Humanism and atheism have exactly the same protection under the European Convention on Human Rights as people with religious beliefs.

If we wish to work on social cohesion and address exclusion, hatred and hate crime, we need to involve the whole community, not just the religious.

I fully accept that in most societies there will be more hatred and hate crime directed at various religious minorities than there is against the non-religious, and clearly that hatred against any religious group or individual needs to be addressed. But we must not forget that hatred is sometimes also directed against the non-religious. In most circumstances, the various religions tend to treat each other with at least a degree of respect, sometimes to the extent that the message is "all religions good; no religion bad". And if you consider the rhetoric of faith groups, and sometimes also of governments, it seems to me that the group most likely to be stigmatised are not the religious, but atheists.

Look for example at the rhetoric of some Muslim groups: it is not difficult to find atheists, and particularly apostates, being vilified, and death threats against apostates are by no means rare. In the UK where a new Council of Ex-Muslims has recently been established, as in some other European Countries, many of its members are genuinely afraid to identify themselves for fear of attack.

Look too at the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

And look too at all the well-respected and moderate religious leaders who regularly declare that there can be no morality without religion, or who link atheism with Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot.

If religious organisations denigrated each other in the way they denigrate the non-religious, some would certainly be accused of hate-mongering.

When government and others focus their work on human rights, equality and social cohesion on faith and interfaith and multifaith work, and those faiths combine to denigrate the non-religious, as so often happens, we are in danger of creating a new division in society, with all the faiths on one side of the divide, and the non-religious on the other. That needs to be addressed, and it needs to be addressed before it leads to even more prejudice, stigmatisation and vilification, and eventually to hate crimes.

So I call on the OSCE, and on governments, and on everyone working on human rights, equality and social cohesion, to include the non-religious in all their interfaith and multifaith dialogue and activities, and to use the inclusive language of the European Convention on Human Rights, i.e. “religion or belief” (where “belief” includes Humanism, atheism and all non-religious beliefs or lifestances), not “religion” or “faith”.

Thank you.