

Working session 4

British Humanist Association

Inclusion of the Non-Religious

Yesterday I spoke to you about the importance of including non-religious beliefs in good relations work that involves faith and interfaith groups. I would like to develop that further by saying something about my experience of working within a group that includes not only all the major and some of the minor religions in the UK, but also the British Humanist Association and another non-religious secularist organisation.

The background to this is that in the UK, the established church, the Church of England is privileged in many formal and informal ways, including the bishops who sit in parliament, and the way that the government consults with it on all kinds of policy areas.

Over time, some of those privileges (the less formal ones) have been extended to other Christian groups, and, not surprisingly, as the number of people with other faiths increased, the other faiths started demanding equal treatment.

Unfortunately, in my view, the UK government chose to address this inequality, not by reducing the privileges of the Christian Churches, but by giving other faiths at least some of the same privileges. The government therefore now consults with all the major faiths, but particularly Christian and Muslim groups, and with interfaith groups on all kinds of issues – and thinks that it has consulted everyone.

This situation is mirrored at the regional and local level, where local government consults with local interfaith networks, not only on issues where they have a particular faith perspective, but on just about everything else too. The non-religious are almost totally excluded from these processes.

When the government started work towards the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights, a Commission that will work on human rights and across all the areas where there is equality legislation – race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion and belief – it set up a steering group consisting of experts in all these areas, and – fortunately – and somewhat unusually – it recognised that the religion and belief equality area needed two people, one religious and one non-religious, to represent it.

So I, and a Muslim colleague with whom we had already worked on a number of issues, were both appointed to this group. We recognised that we needed to ensure that we heard the views of other faith and non-religious belief groups, so we co-founded a “Religion and Belief Consultative Group” and discussed all the issues that came up in the Steering Group with them.

Before that time there were already some meetings that involved both religious and non-religious groups, and some specialists groups, for example on religious education in schools, that were well established, but this was the first national group working across all equality and human rights issues.

The various religious organisations represented were quite wary of this new group. They were very used to meeting each other in different interfaith and multifaith forums, but found the idea of including non-religious organisations really quite threatening, not least because they assumed that we would be anti-religious and would be doing everything we could to undermine their position.

So the first meetings were a bit tense and sometimes quite uncomfortable, but that changed very quickly as we all began to understand each other a bit better, and the amount of learning that has happened within that group has been quite amazing.

I certainly understand the perspectives of the various faith groups much better than I did, and they understand us much better too, and find that it is actually much easier to collaborate and cooperate than they thought.

They also discovered that they were wrong to assume that the disagreements that arose would always be on the lines of religious versus non-religious – because they are not.

We find that there are some issues – quite a few – on which we all agree; some issues where there is a difference of opinion between the religious and the non-religious; and a very large number of issues where opinion splits in different ways, for example with the Christian groups taking one view and most of the non-religious and minority faith groups taking another. That was a very important piece of learning.

For some groups, and especially those that had little contact with the non-religious, another very important piece of learning was that the non-religious have as strong a value-based morality as they do. As one Muslim said to me “I never realised that atheists can be good people.” I don’t think one can beat that for an important piece of learning about other people.

This group, the Religion and Belief Consultative Group, which started just as a reference group for the Commission on Equality and Human Rights, has discussed all kinds of other issues. Some 3 years later it still meets on a monthly basis. Government officials attend some of its meetings, and it has organised a number of seminars and other events with government departments.

It still doesn’t have as much influence as the national Inter Faith Network (which excludes the non-religious), and it is still the only organisation of its kind, but we – the British Humanist Association – have recently received government funding for a project to help local humanists to get involved with local authorities and local equality networks alongside faith and interfaith groups, and I am hoping that – in the longer term - the national Religion and Belief Group may be mirrored in local groups across the country.

That’s important, because it would mean that the same kind of learning would happen across the country, and that has to be a good thing.

Thank you.