



14 March 2008

CHAIR  
Dr Samir Shah OBE

Dear Sir or Madam,

TRUSTEES  
Aaqil Ahmed  
Dr Claire Alexander  
Barbara Cohen  
Shaheed Fatima  
Dr Kate Gavron  
Farzana Hakim  
Clive Jones CBE  
Hitesh Patel  
Dr Richard Stone  
Seamus Taylor

**Re: DCLG consultation (2008) Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side: A framework for interfaith dialogue and social action.**

Please find attached a copy of Runnymede's response to the above consultation. As the consultation's questions were very broad, we have instead responded by pointing out some difficulties for the framework that the Department has adopted for thinking about cohesion, faith, race and equality. We have built upon previous Runnymede research in this area, in particular our commissioned think-piece to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, and our review of that Commission's report in the September 2007 Runnymede Bulletin (all attached).

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We are becoming increasingly concerned about a disconnect between cohesion policy and the equality agenda, particularly race equality. This concern was heightened by the presentation made by the Head of the Faith Communities Engagement Team to the Equality and Diversity Forum on 12 March 2008, where in discussion following her presentation she stated that CLG had no responsibility for race equality. She suggested, rather, that the responsibility of the department was to support communities, and didn't engage with serious and real questions about how supporting some communities may run contrary to other government aims, in particular equality. Indeed, that the department is subject to the RRAA 2000 race equality duty did not seem to figure in the discussion at all. This is not a theoretical or philosophical point, but a real one for some of the most disadvantaged people in Britain.

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As we argue in our response below, government policy is seriously hampered by a lack of precision in thinking about why and how people interact with one another. That is, the motivations for why people interact with others are not all the same: when we invite a neighbour over for tea, or cheer for our national football team, or engage in civic participation, we may not be motivated by the same considerations. While each of these forms of social interaction is valuable, they are not obviously motivated by the same considerations – neighbourliness and nationalism exist in every country, but civic engagement is limited to healthy democratic societies. For cohesion to be valuable, it should be based on citizenship ties, social justice and equality, a point that is lost when policy simply aims to strengthen communities as they exist.

This explains why and *how* Runnymede continues to support single-group funding. For some groups, that funding may be necessary to provide them with the confidence to access important social and political institutions that they would otherwise fail to engage with and so can increase civic engagement for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. We won't belabour this point here, but discuss it at further length in our review of the important document from the Women's Resource Centre, 'Why Women Only: The value and benefits of by women, for women services' (in the March 2008 Bulletin, forthcoming; we have also enclosed a manuscript of this review).

The Commission on Integration and Cohesion is to be commended for bringing such principles as shared futures, social justice, rights and mutual respect to the discussion on cohesion and integration. This allows us to appreciate how cohesive societies are not in themselves good unless the grounds for that cohesion are morally acceptable. At the same time, however, such principles are valuable above and beyond their contribution to cohesion and integration. Cohesive societies may only be *desirable* if they include such principles, but that doesn't mean social justice or rights are valuable only because they contribute to cohesion. When members of disadvantaged groups benefit from social justice policies, some members of advantaged groups may feel their society is now 'less cohesive'. Endorsing the equal rights of women will make sexists everywhere feel as if their society is disintegrating. We shouldn't stop trying to achieve social justice for black and minority ethnic people because we are scared it will disrupt the happy stability of our society. But as the CiC Report rightly recognizes, diversity is no barrier to cohesion as long as principles such as rights, justice and respect guide the actions of social institutions and the interactions of citizens.

Yours Sincerely,

Michelynn Lafleche  
Director

### Communities as the way of achieving integration

The idea that 'communities' are important for responding to race equality, good relations and indeed other goals was explicitly endorsed when the Department for Communities and Local Government was created in 2006 with responsibility for those policy areas. Prior to that, however, the term was already in currency, particularly in the Cattle Report.<sup>1</sup> This report was a response to the 'disturbances' in former mill towns in the north of England, which found that communities were living 'separate lives' and that 'community cohesion' was a necessary and appropriate way to bring people together, a view that gained currency following the July 7 bombings in London. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion, reviewed in the September 2007 Runnymede Bulletin, took this analysis forward.

Current government reports and policies aim to ensure that various communities are thriving and show support for their members. There are, however, a variety of interpretations of the meaning of a 'community', including local communities of place, communities based on shared political interests, minority ethnic communities facing discrimination, or religious communities. With all these interpretations, two key questions emerge. First, how do different sorts of communities interact *with each other*; and, second, how do such communities interact with wider society.

### Concern for others: from face-to-face to ethical obligations

This second question involves a number of different concerns. Because this is our response to a government consultation, it concentrates on one particular aspect of wider society, namely the role and nature of civic or public commitment. According to government policy documents, showing special consideration for members in our community or our neighbourhood is a good proxy or building block for getting people to care about their fellow citizens more broadly. So the government focuses on 'neighbourliness' and strong local communities partly in order to enhance integration but also to increase civic participation.

However, it isn't clear that concern for a family member or neighbour is motivated or justified by the same sets of considerations as fulfilling our obligations to our fellow citizens. When we care about family members or neighbours, it is often based on our personal relationships with them – or *partiality*. Partiality is justified or legitimate when the relationship in question has objectively meaningful features, such as friendship and family. Illegitimate partiality is the unfortunately common human tendency to elevate morally irrelevant relationships to a principle of human interaction, perhaps best exemplified in the case of *racism*. The key point is that we need to be clear about the particular reasons and motivations that people care about others, and to admit that these reasons and motivations are neither all the same nor that they are all motivated by ethical principles.

In contrast to the idea of partiality, citizenship involves a relationship in which we *don't know* most of our co-members, and in which we instead (ought to) express *impartial* ties to every other citizen. For example, while it is obviously acceptable to spend time reading bedtime stories to our own children and not to others, we shouldn't be less concerned about a rights violation simply because we don't know or identify with the person whose rights have been violated.

While it is therefore clear that the *justifications* for caring about other people vary, so too do our motivations. Caring about family members and friends is motivated by strong ties and emotions that are arguably lacking in the case of citizenship. This doesn't mean, however, the citizenship ties are poorly motivated; on the contrary, they are motivated by the ethical ideal of impartially treating every human being as an equal. Citizenship is a particular status in which everyone's rights should be protected, and we are motivated to defend those rights not in virtue of a personal connection, but on grounds of justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Home Office (2003). Cattle Report.

Consider a real world example. Are those who are most likely to visit their neighbour for a cup of tea more likely to engage in civic behaviour, show respect for their fellow citizens, or agree to redistributing resources fairly among others? Such behaviour is of course commendable, but we need to be clearer about *why* people invite neighbours into their homes. While some may do so based on a wider sentiment of fellow-feeling for all citizens, it is more likely that we invite close friends based on personal relationships. Again, there is nothing at all wrong with these sorts of neighbourly sentiments, but they aren't based on the same motivations that cause us to care about all of our fellow citizens. After all, we can't invite everyone over for a cup of tea, but we still ought to care about the well-being of all citizens. On the government's view, neighbourliness is a good proxy for community cohesion and civic engagement, but this doesn't seem right. The reasons that we care about other people vary, and civic responsibilities are not really analogous to our partial – but important – ties to friends, families and neighbours.

#### Inter-community relations: religious and non-religious groups

Among inter-community relations, the question of different religious (or 'faith') groups is perhaps the most difficult. In fact, the role of religion in British life has in the past few years become a much more prominent question. While issues related to British Muslims – from Shariah law to cartoon controversies to perceptions of terrorism – are perhaps the most controversial, the issue extends to other religious groups, including Christians. In particular, there is a growing divide between people who think that religious concerns are sweeping into areas where they ought to be excluded, and those who think that secular intolerance is marginalizing religious believers. Both groups are prone to cast themselves in the position of a victim, excluded by more powerful trends in social and political institutions. But concern on this question is not simply due to 'squeamishness'.

In this context we'd like to comment on one sort of comparison that has been made between faith and race (and indeed other equality strands). Some have argued that equality organizations have inconsistently failed to recognize the importance of equality of religious belief, and compared this to racism or sexism or homophobia. This is a mistake, but not because religion is 'chosen' while race, gender or sexuality is not. Rather, religion makes truth claims about the best sort of life we all should live. No one sensible who is fighting for race equality thinks that being a member of an ethnic minority group makes one a better person, nor is that the case with gender, sexuality, disability or age. Religion alone claims that a certain way of life is the best one, and judges others for their correspondence with their religious values. And sometimes religious truth claims – say regarding homosexuality or gender – are simply contrary to principles of equality, and make moral judgments about the badness of other people, a claim that Runnymede would only ever apply to the small minority of actual racists. There is of course a way in which these other 'strands' do make truth claims, namely that we all share equal moral worth, but it is hopefully clear enough why that is less controversial than various religious views.

#### Religion and the public: understanding the background

The role of religion in Britain somewhat curiously begins with the establishment of the Anglican Church. This is 'curious' because few Britons reflect deeply on this status, and in reality British public life and debate is considerably more secularized than that in states with no established religion, from the United States to India.<sup>2</sup> Part of this may be explained by the ecumenical liberality of Anglicanism, but part of it is also down to the liberal strain in the development of British democracy.

Liberalism endorses the capacity of individuals to decide for themselves what matters in their life, including whatever religious or non-religious principles they choose to guide them. Such a stance,

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<sup>2</sup> Compare Alasdair Campbell's claim that 'we don't do God' to George W. Bush's persistent use of religious language to explain his motivations and decision-making.

however, necessarily implies that a liberal society will have multiple and diverse – and sometimes competing – sets of beliefs. In fact, the institutionalization of secularism and its defence by liberal philosophers gained steam in the context of just such diversity and antagonism in 17th century Europe. The damages wrought by the principle that rulers and people must share one universal church led British thinkers such as Locke<sup>3</sup> to endorse a secular public space so that religious claims wouldn't lead to state-sponsored or widespread violence.

### Religion and the public today

Today, however, few would argue that we are in danger of witnessing religious groups violently take up arms against each other across Britain. Nevertheless, an increasing number of religious and non-religious people have become interested in the role of religion in public life. Whether we are inspired by Christopher Hitchens<sup>4</sup> and Richard Dawkins<sup>5</sup>, or agree with The Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster's endorsement of allowing more scope for faith in public life<sup>6</sup>, more of us are now engaged in this seemingly academic dispute.

To understand this debate, we need to clarify an obvious but poorly understood point – why should (or do) we have a secular public space? The answer derives from the status of religious belief, namely its claim to have identified the best way for all individuals everywhere to live their lives. Everyone – religious and non-religious – believes that there are better and worse ways of living one's life, but according to secular liberals, we should bracket those concerns and try to engage with others in public life without reference to those views. This is because such views are not only diverse, but also potentially in conflict. Furthermore, whatever beliefs a person holds, they ought to be respected by democratic government, and such protection is based on public commitments that are universal.

On the other hand, in a democracy we also expect people to engage on the basis of ethical commitments. To exclude religious beliefs then seems to block important considerations from being heard in public debate. The liberal response is that while religious believers can of course advance their principles in public, they can't expect others – either the non-religious or believers in other religions – to understand why those religious beliefs should induce *them* to agree with a religiously-justified position. For example, if an evangelical Christian tells us that we should prohibit homosexuality because his interpretation of the Bible requires him to do so, he can't expect others to accept that as a reason to support him (unless we too are an evangelical). Or, alternatively, if some Muslims argue for banning the Satanic Verses or indeed particular cartoons because the Quran prohibits insulting or portraying Muhammad, they shouldn't expect others in society to see that as a reason for them to agree.<sup>7</sup>

These are fairly extreme examples. But the general point is that political debate is usually about convincing others, and to do so we need to advance reasons that they can understand and support. In fact, many religious beliefs can be easily translated into non-religious language, and justified to others on those grounds. Liberals often argue that flourishing democracies require a particular sort of public sphere in which citizens try to defend their view based on reasons that we can all accept.<sup>8</sup> More idealistically, it requires citizens to be *motivated* by public concerns.

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<sup>3</sup> See his Letter on Toleration (1689).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hitchens (2007) *God is Not Great: the case against religion*. Atlantic Books..

<sup>5</sup> Dawkins (2006) *The God Delusion*. Bantam Press.

<sup>6</sup> See their foreword to Nick Spencer (2006) *“Doing God”: A Future for Faith in the Public Square*. London: Theos.

<sup>7</sup> Here it is relevant that the reasons British newspapers refused to print the cartoons was not because of a shared beliefs in the correctness of the Quran, but rather to limit community conflict. This serves as a good example of how religious believers can convince others without relying on a theological or religious argument.

<sup>8</sup> John Rawls (1999) 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited' in *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

### Differentiating group-based ties: the case of religious groups

This government consultation on interfaith dialogue and social action fudges this distinction. According to the DCLG consultation document, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, and the government's response to that Commission's report, religious communities have a central role to play not only in ensuring community cohesion, but in furthering participation in public life. The consultation adopts the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' concept of 'side-by-side' interaction to explain this participation as

'collaborative social action (including participation in local democracy) involving different faith communities and wider civil society, which brings about positive and concrete change within local communities.' (p. 8)

This turn of phrase is slightly ambiguous on an important question: is 'collaborative social action' geared towards interacting in public institutions, or is it limited to cooperation in civil society? On the one hand, the above citation affirms that collaboration is to take place in 'wider civil society' and so seems to suggest that it doesn't involve public institutions. However, the parenthetical reference to 'participation in local democracy' suggests that religious groups can and should engage in changing public institutions. It seems to us that some parts of the DCLG haven't understood the importance of this distinction.

The question then arises: is the rationale for why religious institutions provide public services or indeed increase participation based on public or civic reasons? Even if it is true that religious (and other) organizations are filling a vacuum left by inadequate state provision, does the religious believer's concern for other individuals spring from an impartial commitment to defend the rights of all citizens, or from a narrower consideration to benefit co-members?

These are not only difficult, but also extremely controversial questions. We're not saying that religious organizations can never be motivated by public considerations, nor are we suggesting that they are the only bodies that may fall afoul of such a standard. For example, many independent schools resist the requirement to show that they provide some public benefit, a benefit which explains their tax rebate. The deeper point is that we need to distinguish more clearly both the justifications for and the motivations behind different sorts of group-based ties. If we don't, we have no way of differentiating valid interpersonal connections (such as citizenship) from invalid ones (such as racism), nor can we understand that some ties of partiality can come into conflict with our universal obligations to all.

Religious groups are not unaware of this difficulty. As mentioned above, religious affiliations are not questions of blood ties, but based on a definite and clear commitment to a particular ethical tradition. Especially in their internal organization, but also in terms of their relationship to outsiders, religious groups have reasons to exclude those who mock or contravene principles they find important. But to the extent that religious organizations deliver public services, or are funded through public taxation, those religious precepts do not really apply. This explains why some religious organizations have been wary of further provision of public goods and services. To the extent that religious groups need to maintain their own distinctive practices, and elaborate their own aims and standards, public scrutiny may not be in their best interests. Again, this is not to say that religions can never pass that standard, nor that other groups don't fall afoul of this principle as well, but given the prominence of truth-and moral claims at the heart of all religions, they may find it more challenging to base their activities on public standards that may not match their own beliefs.

### Inter-faith dialogue

Before concluding, we need to address the important and difficult question of how different communities – especially those with competing aims and motivations – can cohabit civilly and effectively. The

DCLG's concern here is extremely admirable. Interfaith work is now well-developed in Britain, and we commend those organizations that have worked hard to make sure that genuine differences don't lead to misunderstandings and conflict. We're sure that they will respond positively and meaningfully to that aspect of the consultation.

Interestingly, the government recognizes that they have a limited capacity to further interfaith dialogue. In their consultation, the DCLG admits that it can't force different religious groups to interact, and that much interfaith work must take place in civil society. While it is of course important that people get along at a fundamental level, and the community organizations are fostered, public institutions – and indeed organizations that are publicly funded – have to meet a different standard.

### Conclusion

The reasons that people care about the well-being of others vary. Some ties are based on our legitimate sense that some people matter more to us than others. A parent or friend who failed to recognize the objective reasons that we should care more deeply about their own child or friend would be considered a bad parent or a bad friend. But citizenship obligations aren't of that sort. Civic engagement and participation is (or should be) motivated by a particular kind of consideration for others that isn't based on our personal or face-to-face ties. A good example is the right to a fair trial. We should be upset when any citizen has this right abridged, whether or not they are our neighbour, a fellow believer or indeed a member of our ethnic group.

At the same time, however, religious groups in particular seem to be criticized more than others for failing to recognize the obligations they owe to all citizens. While this may be understandable where faith schools function as de-facto public institutions, this isolation of religious groups is unfair on two grounds. First, not all faith activities receive public funding. Where faith groups don't receive such funding, they have very wide leeway to organize their internal institutions and deploy their resources in whatever way they see fit (as long, of course, as they don't violate principles of human rights).

Second, religious groups are not the only or even the most prominent source for obscuring the reasons why civic participation matters. Rather, the government have done so in two ways. First, they have adopted an underspecified notion of 'community' and failed to differentiate the motivations and justifications for why people care about others. Second, they have introduced private sector involvement in the delivery of goods and services without requiring those companies to meet adequate standards of public justification.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, the government has emphasized the importance of choice and efficiency, but perhaps not adequately defended the principle that all citizens should be treated as equals in the provision of goods and services. If we are experiencing a democratic deficit, we would do better to buttress public institutions and measures rather than hope that voluntary and community organizations – institutions that must meet no public benefit test<sup>10</sup> – will fill in that gap.

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<sup>9</sup> See their Discrimination Law Review Green Paper, and Runnymede's response to it (in the September 2007 Bulletin). In the DLR Green Paper, the government suggested that race equality duties needn't apply in the case of public procurement, a position we find untenable.

<sup>10</sup> Unless they are registered charities. Unregistered organisations, of which a great number of local, community based voluntary organisations are, are not bound by the public benefit test.