

The Bloom Review one year on: multi-faith perspectives

Faith in public life

POLICYMAKERS, academics and practitioners worldwide have been increasingly paying more attention to the role of religion and faith communities within their countries and transnationally. The process of “paying more attention” reflects the growing realisation and recognition that faith communities make an important contribution to society, having resources that can assist in building inclusive and diverse societies.

In the UK, governments have implemented some initiatives during the past two decades to connect more with our faith communities.

For example, the coalition government of David Cameron (2010-2016) appointed a Minister of Faith with a specific remit of promoting religious tolerance and a special envoy for religious freedom. In 2021, Boris Johnson’s government launched a pilot project, “The Faith New Deal Pilot Fund”, a competitive grant programme designed to support the development of partnerships between local councils, schools and faith organisations to build stronger communities.

The Bloom Review

The latest government initiative has been an independent review which began in 2019 and in 2023 resulted in the publication of “The Bloom Review: Does Government Do God?”

This initiative emerged from the Government’s de-



Wesley House
by Pauline Kollontai

cision in 2019 to appoint an Independent Faith Engagement Adviser who would recommend to the Secretary of State for Communities how the Government should engage with faith groups in England. In producing this review a call for evidence was issued and more than 21,000 responses were received from people of all faiths and none.

They were asked questions about how they perceived government engagement with faith communities and their organisations.

The review made 22 recommendations to strengthen and enhance government relations with faith communities. It identified the need for a better understanding of the role of faith in society, covering a range of topics from faith literacy, education, marriage, chaplaincy and extremism.

The author of the review, Colin Bloom, said: “Under-scoring all these recommendations, however, is one constant theme: government needs to be bolder, more discerning and more open to faith engagement ... and it needs to raise its game on understanding faith, interfaith and intrafaith issues.”

Since it was published in spring last year, the review

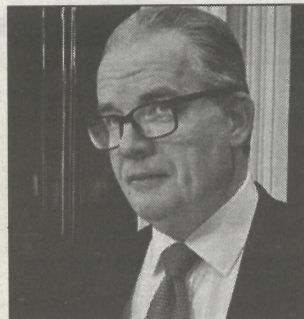


and its recommendations are being considered by a committee of civil servants, Members of Parliament and other experts who will recommend to the Government how to move forward.

Multi-faith conference in Cambridge

A day conference on the Bloom Review was recently organised by the Centre for Faith in Public Life at Wesley House and the Woolf Institute in Cambridge entitled “The Bloom Review One Year On: Multi-Faith Perspectives”. The conference organisers designed the event to “critically scrutinise the review by bringing together key experts in faith and public life representing a variety of faith communities and equipped to address the diverse sectors engaged with by the review and to identify what is missing from it and where we are a year later”.

Since the publication of the review, there have been mixed responses to it. Many people, of faith and none, have welcomed the call for increased understanding of and attention by government to the role of faith communities in their localities and other areas of wider public life. Many have criticised the review for some of the uninformed descriptions of faith communities, their beliefs and practices and its concentration more on the dangers of religion than on religions’ positive contributions to society.



Colin Bloom.

These positive and negative responses were reflected at the Cambridge conference and here are some highlights to illustrate this.

Faith literacy needed

Overall, speakers and participants saw the Bloom Review as an important initiative that served as a starting point for further discussion and dialogue between government and faith communities. To some extent, the review was considered to acknowledge the ‘invaluable’ contribution faith communities and their institutions can make to society, both at the local and national levels. However, concerns were raised that there was a lack of acknowledgment and understanding about the contribution that faith communities make in addressing such things as the structural causes of poverty, social injustices, discrimination and prejudice. Speakers commended the fact that religious education in schools was identified as needing increased government support.

Also welcomed was the review’s recognition that religious/faith literacy was seriously lacking in government, the civil service and public sector agencies including the NHS, the police, prisons and probation service and armed forces and it highlighted the need for urgent government action to address this situation.

Prejudices needing challenge

Speakers were encouraged that certain government policies such as the Prevent strategy were identified in the review as having led to unnecessary and further discrimination and prejudice against Muslims and the review recommended that government should continue to find ways to redress this situation.

However, despite this advice to the Government to take greater care in designing policies that can result adversely on faith communities, some sections of the review were said by our speakers to continue to overgeneralise about Muslims and Islam negatively and also wrongly conflate Islam and Islamism.

So, having advised government on the dangers of fuelling indiscriminate prejudice, hostility and fear towards a particular faith community, the review’s section on “Faith-Based Extremism” unfortunately continues to do exactly this towards Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu communities in England.

This section was particu-

larly singled out for criticism at the Cambridge conference with statements such as: “The Bloom Review had done a lot of damage to non-Christian minority faith communities” and especially to the Sikh community.

The narrative presented in the review about the Sikh community was described as “biased and offensive” and said to be a total misrepresentation of the nature of British Sikh criticism of the Indian Government’s treatment of Sikhs and the campaign by UK Sikh organisations in support of creating an independent Sikh homeland in part of India.

Sadly, running through the Bloom Review report there is a tendency to identify Christianity and its followers as inherently less problematic to other faith communities.

What next?

So, there is still much to be done in navigating the complex, sensitive and difficult terrain of getting government to recognise the importance and value of working with faith communities.

There are three essential aspects of putting this into practice.

First, having a consistent level of religious literacy in government, the civil service and across the public sector to understand the diversity of beliefs, values and practices of these multi-faceted communities is essential and not an option. Second, the conditions whereby these communities feel welcome as equal partners in working alongside government, state authorities and public sector institutions must be created, nurtured and made sustainable.

Third, developing, enhancing and maximising opportunities for government and faith communities to work together is dependent on government ensuring that it is not the purveyor of misunderstanding, discrimination and prejudice towards any of our faith communities.

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The section in the Bloom report on other religions, including Buddhism, was criticised.

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