

Interfaith in the public and the private sphere

*Inter Faith Week started yesterday in the UK and up and down the country local interfaith organisations will be organising initiatives aimed to strengthen inter-faith relations and increase understanding. Here **Eleanor Nesbitt** explores how interfaith conversations carry on all year round in the public realm and how an increasing number of 'mixed' families means that Britain is increasingly 'interfaith' in the private sphere too.*



Image: Mazur/catholicchurch.org.uk

Inter Faith Week has just started in the UK. Each year has a designated Inter Faith Week in mid to late November where local interfaith organisations host public lectures and other initiatives – which can involve getting one's hands dirty in a local community project. Invited speakers from a variety of backgrounds, including non-religious groups such as the British Humanist Association, give presentations and engage in friendly discussion.

This year Inter Faith Week began on Remembrance Day where up and down the UK, representatives of several faiths honoured the war-dead. Well before Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities were established in Britain, **many thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs** were killed and wounded serving in the British Indian army in two World Wars.

Less obvious to the general public is the ongoing collaborative activity of members of different religions, and people who identify with no faith. Of course Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, Buddhists – and adherents to other faiths too – co-operate daily as colleagues, fellow students, clients and practitioners, employers and employees. However in the school and workplace they are not usually acting primarily as spokespeople for their particular faith communities.

In an increasing number of settings individuals are indeed engaged as spokespeople for their faith constituencies. Multi-faith chaplaincies in hospitals, prisons, universities and airports are an example. Setting these up usually involves painstaking conversation between representatives of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities and the Church of England has played a **facilitating role**. Multi-faith accommodation and spaces for reflection (for those of **all** faiths

and none) are available in an increasing number of premises – I most recently spotted a room set apart in this way in my local library. Local interfaith/ multi-faith groups may well be consulted about, for example, what books to provide in hospital chapels.

Interfaith and multi-faith organisations are **flourishing** all over the UK. Interfaith groups tend to emphasise discussion and the exchange of ideas, experiences and beliefs. The multi-faith focus is more on collaboration between members of different communities e.g. in mounting exhibitions or organising walks to local places of worship. In practice there is no sharp distinction.

In my city, Coventry, the Multi-Faith Forum has organised a '**Peace Walk**' for many years. Walkers proceed from a church to a mosque, then on to a Hindu temple and a (Sikh) gurdwara. Faith members field questions and the gurdwara provides *langar* (the free vegetarian hospitality that Sikhs everywhere provide daily). Events like this walk happen all over the country.

It was in acknowledgement of burgeoning activity of this sort that the **Inter Faith Network** for the UK was founded in 1987 to link national faith community representative bodies, interfaith bodies (whether local, regional or national) and relevant academic and educational bodies. The Inter Faith Network works to build good relations between people of differing faiths and beliefs and promotes mutual respect and understanding. In 2009 the Inter Faith Network for the UK, in partnership with the then government, launched Inter Faith Week as an annual feature.

Interfaith conversations carry on, under various auspices, all year, however. In the UK religious education, a subject on the school curriculum, is statutory and it is both multi-faith and non-confessional. In each Local Authority an Agreed Syllabus Conference draws up the local Agreed Syllabus in close consultation with the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). SACREs are made up of representatives of the Local Authority, the **Church of England**, teachers and representatives of other faith groups and other Christian groups, as well as, increasingly, **humanists** and other interested non-religious groups. SACREs meet regularly to deliberate on matters relating to religious education and 'collective worship' in schools.

Apart from the public arena of chaplaincies, interfaith and multi-faith organisations and school syllabuses, the fabric of British society is itself 'interfaith'. 'Mixed' families are the fastest growing sector of the UK population. The census category of ethnically mixed families substantially overlaps with 'mixed-faith' families. The 2011 census recorded that nearly one person in ten, who was living in a couple, was in an **interethnic relationship**. Marriages between individuals of diverse backgrounds are becoming more frequent, as I see when I attend marriages in my husband's local Hindu community.

Sustained negotiation – and celebration – takes place within mixed-faith families. Negotiation often starts well before the planning of the wedding itself. Later, with the arrival of children, parents may have to reach important decisions about, for example, possible circumcision or baptism. Children in a **study of mixed-faith families** that Elisabeth Arweck and I conducted said they had something extra – Diwali as well as Christmas, opportunities to enjoy a variety of foods, music and celebration. Parents hoped their children would grow up with a respect for different faiths.

Couples often discover that the differences that affect them relate more to culture (the claims of the extended family, for instance, and the number of weddings one is expected to attend) than to more specifically religious beliefs.

Sometimes mixed faith marriages **hit the headlines** – in September 2016, for instance, as Sikh protestors in Leamington prevented the marriage of a Sikh and a non-Sikh from taking place in the gurdwara. In such cases the issue is not so much opposition to 'marrying out' as deeply felt perceptions of the nature and requirements of the Sikh marriage rite itself.

Most of the time the fact that our families are increasingly interfaith remains unseen, a **tribute** to countless individual moves toward mutual understanding and accommodation. **The** faith

representatives laying wreaths and the events of Inter Faith Week are public indicators of Britain's substantial inter-ethnic and interfaith solidarity all fifty-two weeks of the year.

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