

On 14th and 15th July 2014, representatives of Scotland's religious communities, including those from the Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh traditions, met at the Conforti Institute in Coatbridge to discuss the role they believe faith has to play in a modern Scotland. The meeting took place at the invitation of the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, with the support of Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) and Interfaith Scotland. The following statement is a distillation of their gathered thoughts and, while not a policy document, it is nonetheless a contribution that those present deem to be important and which they hope will be included in discussions concerning the future of Scotland regardless of the outcome of the referendum.

The role of religious communities in society

The faiths which people hold contribute to the formation of the human person and the communities in which they live. Properly understood they should contribute to the development of wisdom, good character, spirituality and virtue in the creation of a society rooted in compassion and justice. They contribute an understanding of being part of a beautiful, diverse, complex and mysterious world.

In Scotland we do not start from a blank slate. Historically Christianity has had a vital role in shaping the Scotland in which we now live, but, increasingly, other faiths have each come to contribute their own wisdom and perspectives to a society, which is at once a product of its heritage but also is increasingly diverse, interrelated, multicultural and multi-faith.

This is a development which we should honour but which also calls us to engage with each other and wider society as people of faith in dialogue and joint action which is both respectful and constructive. The mutual respect which this requires should be reflected in wider society and in particular where people disagree.

Faith groups need to be contributors in the public square. They have much to offer to society in practical terms, including their contribution to education, provision of social care and the building of communities, in particular in care for and sharing with the most marginalised in society. Faith communities understand that what they do must be rooted in respect for the inalienable dignity of the human person, fostering communities where the wellbeing of all is paramount. Where social and economic structures do not recognise this dignity, faith communities challenge the unfair structures which lead to that loss of dignity. Through their rich traditions of social justice faith groups recognise the need for all to be involved, including those who find themselves on the margins, in the decisions that impact all of our lives.

Thus, we see religious freedom as a key principle in the ordering of society. A mere freedom of belief, without the freedom to act on those beliefs is empty. However, that freedom to act brings with it the obligation to act responsibly. Religious freedom does not exist in isolation and may require to be balanced against other rights inherent in humanity.

How that balancing exercise is performed may ultimately be the responsibility of judges, identifying as best they can the changing norms of society. Thus, faith has a critical role to play in the public discourse which shapes those norms.

In exercising that freedom responsibly faith groups recognise that if they are to be listened to, it is not because of any privilege but because of the moral force of the outworking of compassion for all people which they express.

In a free and democratic society all citizens have the right and responsibility to exercise freedom of speech, the right to criticize, the right, consistent with democratic principles and the rights of others, to take action to live out their beliefs. Those rights and responsibilities are not to be denied to people of faith and faith communities simply because they come from a faith perspective. On the contrary that authentic perspective, informed by practical experience and collective wisdom is a critical contribution to the public discourse. In the evolving Scotland in which we live and share, we all have to embrace our responsibility as shapers of society.

Scotland's religious diversity is something to be celebrated and something to be engaged with. If Scotland is to continue to develop into a society in which all are valued, the unique contribution of people of faith must be respected and enabled to flourish.

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