FAITH IN PUBLIC LIFE: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICALITIES

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This presentation will firstly address some of the myths around the presence of faith in public life, and the way this presence can be used and abused. It will then consider how faith groups can approach the problems and opportunities on a practical level.

Recent events have put questions about the role of faith under the spotlight. Some in the church, and indeed other faith leaders have welcomed this, taking it to herald a higher level of recognition for faith as a key player. But we have to be careful what we wish for. Increased recognition (and I am not sure I would agree that we actually lacked recognition before) can mean that other public players such as politicians, pressure groups and interested bodies, want to define faith in terms of their own agenda, for their own reasons. There is always a drive to categorise, to label people as ‘friends’ or ‘enemies’, to explain them or even explain them away.

The result can be that people of faith find themselves being defined in ways that are at best unhelpful. Unhelpful because if you allow yourself to get painted into a corner – even an apparently attractive corner – your ability to act freely becomes constrained.

So let’s look at some myths that have arisen recently. First of all, though, just to clarify that at this point I am talking primarily about the Christian faith, rather than all faith traditions, because I understand that this event today is focusing on Christianity.

Firstly, the assertion that faith is about belief, and secularism is not. This sets up a false dialectic between the ‘rational’ and the ‘irrational’, with the former often being equated with science. This of course is untrue on a number of levels – ask all the great natural philosophers of the past whose Christian faith was a driver in their work, or the scientists of today who belong to the Faraday Institute.

If secularists’ main argument is that religious tenets should not be the foundation of legislation, then that is a fair point with which it is possible to agree or disagree. But we should not tacitly accept an argument that shifts the ground and portrays religion as rationally untenable. Both atheism and secularism – which are not the same thing – are not the same thing. Can the church not argue for the position that to be human is to live by beliefs whether articulated or not, in the same way that it is the human condition to dwell with doubt and imperfect knowledge?

A further issue that we have allowed to fuel the battle between religion and secularism is the notion that there is a danger of the faith voice being privileged in some way. Apart from raising the spectre of the Bishops in the House of Lords – 26 out of over 800 lords, many of whom are there on the basis of the interests they espouse – secularists have advanced no real arguments to support the concept of privilege. This need not become an unseemly wrangle, we simply need to make it quite clear that having and using a voice is not a matter of unjust privilege, but an essential component of democracy.

Another myth is that of the church being anti-business. Of course some members of the church may be, and quite vocally so, but when the question is considered holistically it is clear that the church cannot be institutionally opposed to business. With few exceptions all its members are in the widest sense part of the business world. We are employers or employees. We rely on the pensions industry thriving for any security in old age, so we are all investors in funds and industry.

If we work in the public sector we rely on public and business taxation for our pay. If we work in the private or voluntary sector we rely on the education system for our future recruits, and on the NHS for the wellbeing of our current staff. In fact, healthy communities rely on healthy businesses and vice versa. Spirituality is not in some way a counterpoint to work.

If as people of faith we feel an obligation to challenge that element of the business world which has allowed reward to become divorced from contribution, and is unable to see wealth in other than monetary terms, that’s fine: it does not give anyone permission to condemn us as anti-business unless we agree to accept the label.

Another area in which faith risks being categorised all too neatly is the aspiration of some policy makers to equate it with service delivery. All the major faith traditions have service to others at their heart, but they grow strong as recognising or validating their presence in some way. It is indeed tempting to say ‘we got there first’ or ‘Big Society Is Us’, but it is problematic if one of the natural functions of a faith group comes to be seen as its primary or defining function.

In the early days of Big Society announcements, some faith-based organisations made comments such as ‘Our time has come!’ But faith is eternal, and the nature of our electoral system ensures that, in the grand scheme of things, governments and their policies are short lived. Faith is not an instrument of government policy and it is right that the Archbishop of Canterbury took up this challenge. He welcomed the Big Society as providing an opportunity for a discussion ‘about the proper definition of wealth and well-being, about individual and communal goals, about the sort of human character that is fostered by unregulated competition and a focus on individual achievement, and about where we derive robust ideas of the common good and the social compact.’
Faiths are very good at being alongside people who are unlikely to be ‘popular causes’, and have a track record of serving those who are for example homeless, addicted, offenders. But that does not absolve government, local or national, from a duty of care, nor the church from using its prophetic voice.

The Church of England is the established church, but arguably that puts it in the position of needing to challenge authority nationally and locally, to be the grit in the establishment oyster.

One more myth before we turn to some practical ways of exercising the role of faith. This is that slightly bizarre assertion that the natural mode of faiths is to disagree with one another, somehow to be fighting heavenly turf wars here on earth. This arises partly from a confusion that equates matters such as culture, nationalism, territorialism and imperialism with faith. True, of course there are terrible conflicts in the current world where the two sides are of different faiths. It is much harder to find examples of faiths in conflict because of their different belief systems. Here in the UK there are wonderful examples of faiths working together, not despite their beliefs but because of them. We should be celebrating this, and exporting our own exemplary work, rather than importing the reverberations of overseas conflicts. This country can be about more than tolerance – just putting up with each others’ differences – it can be about actively appreciating difference.

All these myths, unless we challenge them, result in faiths in general, and churches in particular, getting painted into corners, in which they had never intended to become trapped. We can’t take a full role in the public square if we aren’t in the middle of it.

So how do we find ways of bringing the richness and blessings of faith activity into public life? It’s important to be clear on terminology, and for the purposes of sharing some of our experiences from the EEF, I should be clear that I’m now talking about faith groups in the sense of worshipping congregations, or organisations that bring people of faith together in structured ways such as chaplaincies, rather than about individuals of faith.

The interfaces and interactions between such groups and their wider community, including the voluntary sector, happen in a number of ways.

These include faiths being:
- A focal point for celebration, sorrow and national occasions
- Facilitation of public debate (over 90% of election hustings are organised by faith or IF groups)
- Provision of education (formally or informally)
- An employer
- A purchaser of goods and services
- A provider of community services
- Sharing of buildings and other assets
- Acting as a voice of challenge, protest and campaign

Similarly, the different ways in which faiths interact with local government are legion:
- To make their views known, either in response to consultation, or to point out an issue
- When government provides support, perhaps funding, for an activity run by a faith group for the common good
- To get advice from people in government on their plans or concerns
- Faith groups may offer their resources, for example their premises as an emergency centre
- They may be helping their own members gain access to government services
- Government may commission services that could be provided by a faith group
- Faith and the public sector often co-operate on joint civic projects, such as a major celebration

Can we, and do we need to distinguish the role of faith in public life from that of the voluntary sector? I think we do, not to diminish the value of one vis a vis the other, but because the differences need to be understood. Firstly, as we have already said, faith is about much more than service provision, campaigning, providing information and fundraising, which tend to be the areas most occupied by voluntary bodies. Charities are more likely to be focused on a single cause or related causes. The motivation of faith groups, and their often very long-term rootedness in communities, give them a unique understanding of need. Local faith groups may well aim to meet a particular need until there is an improvement, but move on to meeting a very different need as situations change.

Another very interesting role that faith plays in public life is that of what one might call ‘giving permission’ for spirituality of others and for the expression of issues not always seen as part of mundane transactions. By this I mean that we have found the very presence of faith representatives on, for example, panels dealing with public policy such as spatial planning, even if they have not themselves spoken, has made it easier for others to speak about the ethical dimension of decision-making.

We recently undertook a survey of local councillors across our region, asking them about the role of faith groups in their constituency, and we had comments such as: “People need a value system on which to make judgments. The faith communities provide this”, and: “Faith communities have a responsibility to speak out on a range of social issues”.

If the scope and range of faith input to public life is so great, and its impact so important, how can faith groups manage to make at least some of these contributions with often limited capacity, whilst also retaining their core priorities and identity?

- Be sure of your vision. It is easy to think that, being a faith group, this is obvious. Christians, for example, seek to fulfill God’s will and work towards his Kingdom on earth. But you need a vision on which you are
agreed in terms of the steps on the way. This may relate to the milestones within a project you are running or the development of your community. A clear vision is a very powerful way of explaining to others why you are doing what you are, and why your objective matters. The apparent paradox of holding true to a vision is that it gives more flexibility as to how you operate, by providing a touchstone against which you can judge each new opportunity that comes along.

- If you need external funding, make sure it is the friend of your vision, not its enemy. Don’t chase after funding even if sums are large and tempting, if accepting them means that you will be diverted from your core purpose.

- Don’t be afraid to explain your distinctiveness as a faith group, and how your beliefs may affect what you provide and what you need. This does not constitute proselytizing, or promoting your faith, it is necessary that those in the public or voluntary sector with whom you may work understand where you are coming from, just as you would wish to understand them.

- Nor should you be afraid to publicly challenge plans and policies, this can be particularly productive if you can do so without taking a radical position. The aim is to open up debate, not generate conflict.

- Accept that other groups have their own agendas. If you are cooperating with a Local Authority, for example, it will have statutory and other duties to fulfil. If you can find the points of commonality, then you are, as they say, in a win-win situation. If there are no points of common interest, then there is no incentive to pursue the partnership.

- Be prepared to be challenged, especially by statutory bodies, as to whether you or your group can actually represent your faith tradition. Be aware that there is scope for confusion here, as different people assume different meanings for ‘representation’. Not election but reflection - explain.

- Finally, faith communities and faith leaders can be door openers or gatekeepers. It’s worth looking at how you operate to make sure you haven’t become a gatekeeper without even noticing it.