Government & Faith; a Civil Servant Writes

Warwick Hawkins, Head of faith engagement at Department of Communities and Local Government

There was a time when civil servants were expected to be backroom boys and girls and not to contribute articles for public consumption, but this rule has been relaxed somewhat and I am pleased, as a Fellow of the Unit, now to give readers an insight into the Coalition Government’s approach to faith.

The first priority is defending the value of religious belief to individuals and society. As part of this Baroness Warsi was appointed as the first ever Cabinet Minister with a brief to defend religious interests. She doubles up as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, with the brief to defend freedom of belief abroad.

My Department has legislated to ensure Councils can hold prayers as part of formal business, and our politicians have defended the right of employees to express their faith at work through the wearing of religious clothing and symbols. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has tackled fraudulent travel operators targeting Hajj pilgrims; the Department for International Development enjoys close working relationships with faith based aid agencies; Churches are involved in offender rehabilitation programmes with the Ministry of Justice… and there are many other examples.

My own team offers expertise and facilitation to colleagues across Whitehall, enabling engagement between faith representatives and civil servants on policy areas as diverse as airport security and meat contamination.
The next limb of policy is promoting the practical contribution that faith groups make to local communities. For instance our Near Neighbours collaboration with the Church of England has supported around 500 local projects that bring together people of different faiths to build understanding and improve neighbourhoods. Last year hundreds of faith-based volunteering projects took place under our ‘A Year of Service’ programme to mark the Diamond Jubilee. We fund the excellent work of the Inter Faith Network and the Faith based Regeneration Network.

Finally, the Government is committed to tackling religious hate crime. Working groups are addressing anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred and we are encouraging increased reporting of hate crime through the Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks project. We continue to support Holocaust Memorial Day and other projects that enable young people and others to learn lessons from history.

While there is much good news to report, it is probably true (as Adam often reminds us) that pockets of poor ‘religious literacy’ still exist in central Government and in some local authorities. My team is helping to address this, including by hosting conferences later this year and in early 2014 at Goldsmiths – details to follow.

I am sometimes asked, and not just by Americans, why on earth a Government employee is involved in policy on faith. I’m not sure I have a definitive answer, but I can point to the good things that this Government is doing to promote the role of faith in the public square and to protect the rights of people of faith. I do so with some pride that I have personally been involved in them.