Thinking faith
THE ONLINE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH JESUITS

Dialogue and Social Cohesion

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The British Government's approach to faith communities and inter-faith relations was set out earlier this year by Hazel Blears, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, in a 'framework for partnership in our multi faith society'. Michael Barnes SJ examines what contribution this document makes to the work of inter-faith dialogue and what it reveals about government attitudes to faith.

Introduction: Government and the 'social capital' of religion

For the last decade or so government has been seriously interested in religion. Some reasons are obvious – the debates about immigration, multiculturalism and community cohesion, as well as the security threat after 9/11 and the bombings in London in July 2005. There's also the perception that faith communities are an important element in the voluntary sector, releasing sources of energy and creativity which contribute to the common good. In a secular, pluralist society, religion can be problematic, but it can also play a positive role in the public arena.

Photo: De Nobili Dialogue Centre,Southall

None of this is straightforward. Hence the number of government reports and papers which in recent years have struggled with the public face of religion. The latest – *Face to Face and Side by Side: a framework for partnership in our multi faith society*[1] – published by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), is a response to a consultation held earlier in the year. Faith communities and inter-faith organisations were asked to contribute to a process which would focus on 'the development of a framework for partnership which will support increased inter faith dialogue and social action'.[2] As Hazel Blears, the Secretary of State puts it in her foreword, 'Today, as they have for many generations, people of faith make a huge contribution to our society: to the economy, arts and culture, politics. And I believe faith has the potential to be an immense force for good in all our communities.'[3]

As far as it goes this is all good stuff. Despite the grating jargon of 'empowerment', 'partnership' and 'choice' and a style which reduces complex issues to bland bullet points, the basic sentiments are admirable. The various 'building blocks' which the document outlines provide practical guidelines for co-operation between government, funding agencies and local faith communities. And the introduction at regular intervals of examples of good practice stops the whole thing sinking to the level of vague aspiration.

But what does all this say about public and more specifically government perceptions of the role of *faith* in today's society? The title comes from a distinction made by the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks. Face-to-face dialogue, we are told, 'leads to people developing a better understanding of one another, including celebrating the values held in common as well as acknowledging distinctiveness'. *Side by side* refers to 'collaborative social action which involves people working together to achieve real and positive change within their local community'.[4] In other words, learning about the other and working with the other must go together.

That may seem obvious. But it begs an important question. The framework document uses the language of 'social capital', made popular (at least in government circles) through the work of the American sociologist Robert Putnam.[5] Putnam's aim is to analyse networks of common interest, voluntary groups and neighbourhood organisations, in the USA.

The problem is that membership of these groups is breaking down; people are not joining them in the way they used to. If Americans are not to end up 'bowling alone', warns Putnam, they need to learn how to 'reconnect with each other'.

But how well does the language of 'bonding' and 'bridging' and 'linking' – the different types of social capital which the framework document uses – transfer from voluntary organisations, such as the bowling club which gives Putnam his title, to much more traditional forms of *religious* community which make up the major faith traditions in Britain today? The not so hidden assumption is that religions are made up of groups of like-minded people who have made a conscious decision to join. In fact, of course, there are any number of reasons why people belong to communities of faith. For every one who joins out of intellectual conviction there are thousands for whom faith is bound up with cultural inheritance. No doubt faith helps people to 'bond' – to develop structures which ease relations within the community. The issue of 'bridging', however, is a lot more complex. How can religious communities – some of them, let us remember, separated by historical traumas which have bred years of suspicion – be encouraged to look beyond their own partisan interests and work with others for the sake of the common good?

In addressing that question, policy-makers face a dilemma. Does the well-intentioned support of 'religious partners' and 'stakeholders' risk alienating those who like their religion – if they like it at all – confined safely to the private arena of personal beliefs and feelings? More subtly, does not the 'bureaucratising' of religion, the co-opting of religious communities into acting as partners in service delivery, turn faith into another useful commodity of the consumer culture (albeit one packaged in the plausible jargon of 'social capital')? In short, how should the state pay attention to issues of *religious* difference and plurality?

In response to such questions, I want briefly to do three things – firstly, to note a couple of aspects of the now well-established Catholic tradition of inter-faith dialogue; secondly, to make some more theoretical reflections on the nature of dialogue itself; thirdly, in the light of these remarks, to return to the DCLG document and suggest that a closer examination of the experience of faith communities in dealing with the key issue of difference and particularity has something to teach wider society as well as the crafters of government directives.

Inter-faith dialogue and the Catholic tradition

That 'face-to-face' and 'side-by-side' distinction is not exactly new. It was noted in *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican II document on other religions. Way back in 1965 Christians were told to 'enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions'.[6] That word 'discussion' in the text is actually *colloquia* – 'conversations' which has a deliberately informal feel to it. Conversation and collaboration: face-to-face and side-by-side. It may have become something of an inter-faith cliché, but the document makes the point that dialogue is about *people* meeting each other. People do not settle down to produce some final communiqué with which all parties agree. Conversations are based in and emerge from a context. They are set alongside action, doing things together. Agreement – such as it is – is to be found not in verbal formulae but in commitment to projects which serve the common good, in a particular area or more broadly at national or international level.

The Church, inspired by years of practice and experience, has learned a certain wisdom about that obscure word 'dialogue'. In the years since the Council, four types or four levels have emerged: the dialogues of common life, common action, religious experience and theological exchange. The distinction is now fairly standard among Christian practitioners and theologians and reflects something of the complexity and many-levelled diversity of inter-faith relations at the present time.

It originates (as far as I am aware) in a 1984 document from what was then the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians and is repeated in the much longer document *Dialogue and Proclamation (DP),* a joint statement from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Propaganda Fide in 1991.[7] The structure of this document witnesses to the unresolved dichotomy between the 'traditional' practice of proclamation and the 'new' way of dialogue. The original intention of *DP* was to integrate different perspectives on mission into a single theology. The dichotomy, however, remains –

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and in some sense may be irreconcilable. On the one hand, dialogue is recognised as an integral part of the single evangelising mission of the Church with a value in itself; in this respect *DP* is an advance on *Nostra Aetate*. On the other, *DP* tends to subordinate dialogue to proclamation, thus losing any sense that dialogue, as the personal relationship with the other, has any particular value in its own right.

There are, however, many important dimensions to the text - not least the introduction which seeks to clarify the language used of mission. The key section, 14-32, develops a 'Christian Approach to Religious Traditions' and comes close to achieving some sort of 'official' theology of dialogue. The mission which Jesus receives from the Father becomes universal through his Resurrection from the dead establishing a 'new sanctuary' for all people (21). This theme of the single mystery of salvation in which all people of faith can be said to share, makes it clear that, while salvation is always offered in Christ, in practice salvation comes to people through the sincere practice of their own traditions *and* through following their conscience (29). According to Dupuis, this is probably the single most important section in the document – if only because it gives theological attention to the validity of other religious traditions as means of salvation.[8]

The second part of *DP* sets proclamation within the full extent of the Church's mission, namely Jesus's own mission expressed in words and works which are signs of the Kingdom. It is, however, the Spirit who brings people to Christ (65). The Church needs always to remember that others have already been touched by God's Spirit. *DP* raises a question: what has to be done to co-operate with the Spirit's work of making Christ known? So much of mission, certainly in a pluralist and secular context, is concerned not with direct evangelisation, in the traditional sense of proclaiming the gospel, but with some form of pre-evangelisation, with a more remote preparation for people to receive the Good News. The Church's mission is, strictly speaking, *God's* mission - with which the Church seeks to co-operate. To make the Kingdom a reality Christians must welcome the 'seeds of the Word', signs of a continuity between what is known in Christ and what is discerned elsewhere to be of God. This work of *learning* is what dialogue seeks to achieve.

The nature of dialogue

The typology of the 'fourfold dialogue' makes it clear that this is a complex issue. 'Side-by-side' dialogue (common life and common action) cannot be separated from 'Face-to-face' (religious experience and theological exchange). Why? Because, for communities seeking to practise their traditions with integrity, this latter more inter-personal engagement inevitably raises questions about *truth*. This, however, is precisely *not* to reduce 'dialogue' to an intellectualist meeting of ideas. It is rather to appreciate the broad context of the search for understanding and meaning in which the *colloquia* are set. Faith is the conviction that ultimately life makes sense, that meaning is to be found within the manifold experiences, relationships and encounters which make up human life itself. Perhaps what the inter-faith experience brings out is the significance of that world 'ultimately'. The present moment allows only for the generous conviction that it is in the meeting with the other person that meaning is somehow mediated to the self. So much of inter-faith dialogue begins with some sort of debate, however implicit, about truth-claims, proving who is right and who is wrong. But so often it relaxes, often quite quickly and easily, into a more trusting relationship with the other person which itself becomes a source of understanding.

It is this *inter-personal* dimension which seems to typify the contemporary experience of inter-faith dialogue. In the broad sense, noted above, of a variety of interdependent activities, dialogue is often justified as an end in itself by the potential understanding which the encounter enables. Putting it in terms made familiar by the personalist philosophy of Martin Buber, dialogue is an ever-renewed and never-ending process of engagement with the 'between', the space of the world where the self discovers the relationship with the other – indeed, with *the* Other, with God.[9] Encounters with people of different faiths reveal a disarming difference-in-sameness; the other, while 'not the same', is not totally other either – not an *alter ego*, a Platonic extension of the self, with whom I share some sort of common essence, but one whom Buber would call 'thou', one who calls and to whom I must respond.

Rather than being a self-sufficient 'I' confronting an equally monolithic and unmoving object, I am called

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to respond – to be responsible. To be human is to learn how to move away from the goal-oriented, self-centred, instrumentalist attitudes which regard the other as 'it' and to see in the other, albeit in a fleeting and never complete fashion, a unique partner in a creative endeavour. If the other as 'it' is regarded as an object, a tool, a means to an end, the other as 'thou' is an end in him or herself. In other words, truth is to be discerned not just in the words with which persons defend their faith but in the integrity of lives committed to discovering and living the truth.

Somewhere here are the beginnings of a 'theology of dialogue' – a reflection on the experience of being in dialogue, being in relationship, with the other. As David Tracy comments, dialogue 'does not merely bear a "religious dimension". It *is* a religious experience'. [10] Various activities go under the heading of dialogue – as both government and church documents have noted. There is, however, more at stake here than a pragmatic gathering of religious expertise for the sake of the common good. What holds together such practices of *faith* (for that is precisely what they are) is that attitude of respectful openness which waits upon the word of the other – expressing a faith which recognises that the encounter between persons of faith may speak of God.

Such dialogue is itself *theological*. The irreducible relationship of free and loving interaction between human beings mirrors the inner dialogue which speaks of the very being of God. To put it in more specifically Christian, Trinitarian terms - the Word of God is spoken out of the silence of the Father and returns to the source of its being through the work of the Spirit. The Church is that people which finds itself caught up in this never-ending movement of giving and receiving – at once committed to speaking of what it knows and listening for the signs of God's love in the very otherness of our experience.

Government and the management of religion

Let me now come back down to earth and return to the DCLG document. Anyone involved in inter-faith relations, whether at the level of international academic conferences or just encouraging good neighbourly relations in the street, is in for a lot of hard graft. Despite the active encouragement of government, there is a great deal of ignorance and prejudice around; the liberal, secular world insists that religion is, at best, a sort of life-style choice which should be confined to the private arena of personal choice, while amongst people of faith themselves the legacy of history keeps open ancient wounds which are not be healed by well-meaning exhortations to openness and tolerance.

The various documents which have wafted around government circles for the last decade have such political realities very much in their sights. Quite understandably they see the problem as how to *manage* religion. It is, as the DCLG document acknowledges, fairly easy to encourage faith communities to develop their own internal structures and organisations, but a lot more difficult to get them to look outward and to be prepared to use their own strengths, or just their buildings and facilities, in order to benefit the wider community. Just how do you link together the undoubted sources of energy which make up the various religious communities in an area? The suspicion remains that the civil servants and policy-makers who produce such documents have a very limited idea of what religion is all about.

In its concern to produce a framework within which local government can work with faith and inter-faith groups not enough attention is paid to the nexus between 'face-to-face' and 'side-by-side', theological exchange and common action, or – very simply – between what people believe and what they do. Our motivations differ – because our accounts of how God, the world and human living hang together differ in significant ways. A degree of resentment can build up if the primary concern of religious people – their commitment to visions of truth – is ignored. Thus my main concern about the current DCLG document is that it fails to acknowledge that inter-faith relations are precisely about *faith* and how the integrity of faith can be maintained in a sometimes strange and hostile world.

Conclusion: Dealing with difference

I began by raising a number of political and practical questions. The not-too-hidden assumption behind a lot of the rhetoric is that differences are problematic – that we should seek out points of continuity and convergence. I suggest that this is short-sighted. The problem lies not with the religions themselves but

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with a version of the 'public space' which finds difference difficult to accommodate. In other words, the 'fragmentation' of society which the critics of multiculturalism perceive is, in fact, grounded not in the impossibility of separate communities living in a single harmonious society but in the sidelining of a significant aspect of the human condition – the relationship with whatever is taken to have ultimate or transcendent value.

The point is that differences matter – and, properly understood as providing the stability which supports lives of faith, need not work to the detriment of social cohesion. In fact very much the opposite. The issue is not how to create structures which allow religious communities to bury differences but how conditions are to be created within which sometimes very different accounts of the world of human experience can flourish together. To begin by accepting difference does not make communication impossible; just a little more time-consuming. It takes time and effort for communities of faith just to understand each other, let alone to be critically supportive of each other for the sake of the common good and the welfare of wider society.

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This article was adapted from a talk given at Living Theology at Ushaw College, Durham in July 2008.

[1] Published by the Department for Communities and Local Government, 21st July 2008; ISBN 9781409803157.
[2] 'Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side' – a framework for inter faith dialogue and social action. Consultation published by the DCLG, 17th December 2007.
[3] Framework p5.
[4] Framework, p 17.
[5] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, NY: Simon and Schuster; 2000.
[6] Translation from the Flannery edition, Dublin: Dominican Publications; 1992; section 2.
[7] See 'The attitude of the Church towards the followers of other religions' ['Dialogue and Mission'], *Bulletin* (of the Secretariat for non-Christians), 19/2; 1984; pp 126-141; and 'Dialogue and Proclamation: reflections and orientations on inter-religious dialogue and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ', *Bulletin* (of the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue) 26/2; 1991; pp 210-50. For commentary on the latter see Jacques Dupuis in 'A Theological Commentary: Dialogue and Proclamation', in *Redemption and Dialogue*, ed
William Burrows, Maryknoll: Orbis; pp 119-58.
[8] Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, NY: Orbis; 1997; pp 178-9.
[9] See Buber, *I and Thou*, ET by Ronald Gregor Smith, T and T Clark, 2nd ed; 1958. See also Buber's 'autobiographical fragments', *Meetings*, edited by Maurice Friedman, London, Routledge; 2002.
[10] David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, Louvain: Peeters; 1990; p 98.

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