A Short History of Interfaith in the UK

Reproduced with permission from http://www.onreligion.co.uk/interfaith-in-the-uk-a-short-history/

16 February 2015

The last fifteen years have seen a burgeoning of interfaith organisations – **Abdul-Azim Ahmed** traces the roots of the movement in the UK.

It's said the (in)famous Mughal Emperor, Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, was a keen proponent of interfaith dialogue. He would invite Christians, Jains, Hindus and the great philosophers and thinkers of India to his court to debate with Muslim theologians, seeking answers to the perennial questions: What is truth? What is divine? And how do we recognise it? Akbar also used these interfaith encounters to manage his multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural empire, and to present himself as an enlightened ruler who would treat Hindu and Mussalman (the word more often used for Muslims in the subcontinent) as equal.

Examples like Akbar are not as rare as you might imagine. Diversity, rather than uniformity, was the staple of many societies throughout history. Thus you would find interfaith in Mughal India, Nasrid Spain or Abbasid Baghdad. At times of conflict, this diversity can be exploited to create boundaries and divisions. But in other instances, it presents opportunities for dialogue and exchange of ideas which can enrich a society with infinite variety. The purpose of interfaith, many proponents are keen to point out, is not religious syncretism but dialogue and engagement – to ensure that religious identities are sources of strength rather than means of division.

Interfaith in Britain does not stretch back as far as Akbar's courts however. For manifold reasons, throughout most of Europe's history most areas of it rarely had the diversity needed for interfaith encounters (Sarajevo being one notable exception, a city called the 'Jerusalem of Europe' for it's Muslim, Jewish and Christian places of worship and communities). The picture today however could not be more different.

Continental Europe and Britain are home to almost all of the world's major religions. London, a city of seven million, is perhaps one of the most diverse places on the globe.

Today, there are hundreds of interfaith organisations in Britain – bringing together the religious and sometimes also those with non-religious beliefs to share encounters with one another, to build relationships, and often take communal action on issues of common ground. From being a minority movement, interfaith has burgeoned to become a familiar aspect of religious life in Britain. The origins of interfaith initiatives in the UK date back a century, and they have accompanied Britain as it wrestled with one of the most turbulent eras of history. Interfaith has lived through two World Wars, the tail end of the British Empire, the resulting changes to Britain itself, The Troubles and the terror attacks of 7/7, and it is now poised to continue its growth in the coming years as a unique moral force and voice in society.

Beginnings

In May 1901, London hosted a congress that brought together 21 religions under the banner of the 'International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers'. It is one of the first recorded examples of an interfaith organisation on British shores, and the organisation still operates today as the International Association of Religious Freedom (IARF British Chapter).

A small number of less grand examples of interfaith can also be found in the same era. Abdullah Quilliam, a Victorian lawyer and convert to Islam (the only Muslim to hold the title 'Shaykh ul-Islam of the British Isles'), commonly travelled across the country sharing a platform with priests and rabbis and speaking on topics of religion. These encounters were sometimes more debate than interfaith, though not always, such as the notable event held in Cardiff in 1908 with Jewish academics on the shared history of Muslims and Jews.

Other organisations also came to life in the early part of the twentieth century, such as the London Society of Jews and Christians in 1927, the World Congress of Faiths in 1936, followed shortly by the Council of Christians and Jews in 1942 during the Second World War. The latter was founded in the backdrop of European anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and is a reminder that often interfaith is most relevant, and most valuable, at times of crisis.

In 1924, a conference sponsored by several partners, including the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) titled 'Religions of Empire' explored the multiplicity of faiths under British dominion. It was unique in that it heralded the growth of religious studies as a field, while also gathering together not only those who studied the religions of empire (often missionaries, sometimes sociologists) but also those who professed and practiced the faiths in question.

These early examples of interfaith endeavours are telling about the direction it would take in the years to follow. Notably the importance of crisis as a stimulus and the role the British Empire played in shaping the context of engagement.

Religion Today in Britain

An important aspect of the religious diversity of Britain is that, naturally, not all faiths have the same history here in Britain. The most established faiths of Britain are largely Christian. The Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, and a number of Protestant Christian movements all call the United Kingdom home.

The more recently settled faith communities of Britain have only had meaningful numbers on the island in the last century (though there are often examples of exchanges of ideas, scholarship, and trade that date back millennia). The Hindu traditions, Sikhism, the Baha'i Faith, Islam and many others found a presence in the United Kingdom as a result of colonial rule abroad.

These younger religions of the British Isles often face numerous challenges. For one, they are still building their institutions, they are still generating the financial capital needed for organised religion, and they are still subject to the pressures of racism and discrimination that exist in society.

There is of course an outlier to this distinction, and that is Judaism. The youngest of the old faiths of Britain (or the oldest of the young faiths), it presents an important organisational archetype for other faiths to model themselves on. Thus the Hindu Council UK and the Muslim Council of Britain are largely shaped and inspired by the Board of Deputies of British Jews, established in 1760.

Important also in this evolving picture of religion in modern Britain is the growth of non-religious worldviews, such as Humanism, which are part of a wider movement of publicly-professed atheism in the West. Humanism and other secular movements have often been at the forefront of challenging the perceived privilege given to the religious in society.

All of these – the new faiths, the old, and those who renounce faith altogether – have been part of the evolving picture of interfaith in the United Kingdom. But geography too has shaped dialogue. "Here in the UK, we have the best laboratory there is for good interfaith" argues Stephen Shashoua, Director of Three Faiths Forum, "because of our diversity as well as our close proximity to each other, you can do in interfaith everywhere in the UK".

Local Roots

Writing in *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*, Brian Pearce, who helped establish the Inter Faith Network for the UK noted that "when the Inter Faith Network was set up in 1987, there were around 30 local inter faith organizations across the UK". These early interfaith groups were pioneers, and often incredibly local in their focus, with an aim of building relationships across churches, mosques, temples and synagogues in a given town or city.

A small number of local inter faith groups emerged in cities such as Leeds and Wolverhampton in the mid 1970s and others followed. Notably, Interfaith Wolverhampton celebrated it's 40th anniversary last year, hosting a visit from the Prince of Wales.

Another example, The Swindon Inter-Faith Group, began informally in the 1980s out of shared charity endeavours between Swindon's Central Church and local Bangladeshi restaurateurs, before being officially launched in 1993. Surrey Interfaith Friendship Group, likewise, began informally in the late seventies, growing out of projects organised by the Guildford International Council, Burpham Church, and cultural societies such as the Surrey Indian Association. York Interfaith Group was also founded during this period.

An example of a long running and very developed interfaith organisation is the Edinburgh Interfaith Association which was founded in 1989. Its projects are extensive, including organising a visit which hosted the Dalai Lama.

It was in the late 1980s that Brian Pearce, a civil servant and himself an advocate of interfaith understanding, took a sabbatical to explore the possible need for a new inter faith linking mechanism which could enable faith communities, inter faith groups and other relevant types of body to come together and make common cause. After a two year period of consultation, the Inter Faith Network for the UK was brought into being by its then 60 founder bodies in 1987. Its present Director is Harriet Crabtree who started work there in 1990 after studying and teaching in the USA where she was based at the Centre for the Study of World Religions and Harvard Divinity School.

The Inter Faith Network for the UK links a wide range of national faith community representative bodies; national, regional and local inter faith bodies and also educational and academic bodies with an inter faith interest. It was among the first such 'national' interfaith linking organisation in the world. It committed itself to furthering interfaith work in the United Kingdom, and drawing the existing faith communities into closer dialogue. It works to promote inter faith understanding and cooperation through a variety of routes, with an active faith and public life programme (including a national Faith Communities Forum); information and advice service; and advocating for and supporting inter faith activity of many kinds. One of its earliest publications was very influential in the development of local inter faith bodies: The Local Inter Faith Guide. Also significant was its partnership with the University of Derby over several years working on the

production of three editions of *Religions in the UK: A Multi Faith Directory*, edited by Professor Paul Weller. This included chapters about the UK's religious traditions, developed in dialogue with faith groups, as well as contact listings for faith groups and inter faith bodies.

The Noughties to Now

For a variety of reasons, the noughties was a decade that saw an acceleration on local inter faith group formation and also the formation of some of the largest and most significant interfaith organisations in Britain. "The growth in local interfaith activity in recent years has been very rapid" writes Brian Pearce, "from around 30 in 1987, the number of local inter faith bodies rose to just under 100 in 2000, and in 2010 reached around 240".

Much like the formation of the Council of Christians and Jews in 1942, interfaith in Britain took on a particular focus due to a series of crises. The first of these was the 'race riots' in the north of England during the summer of 2001, followed shortly by the terror attacks of 9/11. *Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey* by the Inter Faith Network in 2003 gives an insight into the rapid acceleration of local activity after 2001. The War on Terror also shaped the next few years drastically, with British involvement in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Finally, the July bombings of 2005 in London which saw 52 victims killed, highlighted significantly the need for greater social cohesion. Significant were the extensive recommendations relating to faith groups and inter faith engagement made by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion which was set up after the bombings.

These events created a particular context for interfaith relations. Yet for many, it provided a reminder of the importance of creating relationships and breaking down boundaries between faith groups.

St Ethelburga's Centre was one such organisation that was formed partly in response to crisis. In 1993, a bomb placed in a tipper truck was parked in London's Square Mile, directly outside an ancient medieval church, Saint Ethelburga's. The bombs detonated, killing one and injuring 40 while almost entirely destroying the church. It would however find new life, and reopen in 2002 as St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. Its self-professed aim is 'to help people build bridges across divisions of conflict, culture and religion'. Speaking to us in 2013, the Centre's Programme Director, Justine Huxley, explained

one of their projects, 'Reimagining the Sacred'. "This is an attempt to try and see if we can find what is sacred about human life regardless of religion or lack of religion. Is there a shared sense of what is sacred on earth? And how might we join hands to protect that?" Other events planned in the coming year include a workshop asking 'After Islamic State, can religious freedom survive?' St Ethelburga's is an example of an interfaith project that is focused on creating shared space for faith groups and non-religious groups to interact.

The Nations

Scotland has a national church (the Presbyterian Church). During the run up to the vote on Scottish independence in 2014 however, a conference was convened which argued that all religions should be recognised in Scotland and any constitution that was drafted in the process, a joint statement issued by the conference stated that "representatives of Scotland's diverse faith traditions were united in the view that the contribution of faith to Scottish society should be properly recognised whatever the future holds."

In Wales, where the Church in Wales was long disestablished, the National Assembly had no established church relationship, providing opportunities for a new arrangement. Following 9/11, the then First Minister of Wales, Rhodri Morgan, convened the Faith Communities Forum. This provided a new way for government to engage and interact with faith communities. Rather than privileging a single faith group, the Welsh Assembly sought to work with all faiths of Wales. This was significant because it provided a legislated basis, recognised by the government, for interfaith. The model has proven successful, with the Senedd in Cardiff inviting representatives of all faiths to key functions throughout the year. It works in parallel with the separate Inter Faith Council for Wales.

National Interfaith

In England, a number of national bodies also took responsibility for introducing a new paradigm for religions to engage with each other. "The Three Faiths Forum was founded in 1997 by Sir Sigmund Sternberg, Zaki Badawi and Dr Marcus Braybrooke" explains Stephen Shashoua, the Director of the organisation. "They worked on a similar model to the Council of Christians and Jews", an organisation founded during the Second World War, which had "a focus on local groups and high level dialogue". Since then, the organisation has expanded significantly, with longstanding mentoring and educational projects, as well as activities abroad – bringing their successes at interfaith to a wider audience.

Archbishop Rowan Williams convened the Christian Muslim Forum in 2006, led by Julian Bond as Director, born out of work started by the previous Archbishop Carey. It sought to 'develop strong and committed relationships' between Muslims and Christians, while also hoping to draw on both traditions for peace and conflict resolution. "Our faith encourages us to work together and we are committed to pluralism; our outlook on our society is pluralistic" explains Julian Bond. The Forum has had a number of achievements, including a significant set of guidelines to help couples in Christian-Muslim marriages. However, Julian Bond considers one of the most significant achievements of the Forum is to respond to national narratives about religion. "The biggest effect of our work had been the positive response to and media interest in our 'Religious Festivals' statement (first issued in 2006). This arose out of secular concerns in the UK that celebrating, or even referring to, Christmas could be offensive to people of other faiths. Our statement responded to these concerns and generated a huge media interest, including outside the UK. The statement's impact continues each year at Christmas-time and it has begun to change attitudes."

In December 2014, the Christian Muslim Forum announced it would no longer continue in its current form, undergoing a 'restructure'. Julian however is confident in what the Forum has meant for interfaith in Britain; "In recent years we have seen increasing cooperation between churches and mosques encouraged by the Forum but also by our partners at the Islamic Society of Britain, Muslim Council of Britain and the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board."

Campaigning

'A rose by any other name' goes the old saying, and it is true of interfaith also. Across Britain, a new type of lobbying is beginning to be seen. 'Community organising' as it is often called, is an American import into the UK, and espouses the values of communal action on politics and policy, often using the social capital and pull of churches, mosques, temples, unions and universities to put pressure on local councils, governments and businesses to better serve the public. When I asked Jonathan Cox, Organiser of Citizens Cardiff, a local branch of one of the UK's most prominent community organising groups, whether he considered the Citizens movement to be an interfaith one, he responded confidently "no, we're a broad-based organisation", stressing it was open to organisations with a faith background as well as those with no religious affiliations at all. He noted how this was in contrast to community organising in America, which is much more vocal about its religious identity, but considered it a reflection of British society in general: "faith is much more dominant as an actor in civil States than it is here".

Nonetheless, Citizens brings together a large range of religious groups, as Jonathon describes, "we did an event to celebrate the cap on payday loans in London where we had Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders go to Wonga, all wearing caps – that was the joke – and asking Wonga and other payday lenders to respect the cap." This success however came from prior work these faith leaders had done together explains Jonathan, "because those participants had come to a better understanding of each other's faith, through crafting a position on payday loans which was respectful of each other's religious teachings but also had a clear political stance."

"Citizens provides a space and a mechanism by which people can do interfaith work together but within the context of a broad-based organisation, our primary purpose isn't to do interfaith work, it just happens to be quite a good vehicle for doing interfaith work."

Citizens and community organising represent a dimension of interfaith that is not vocally about religious identity or dialogue, but nonetheless brings together faith communities and builds relationships between them.

Post-Interfaith

So what does the future hold for interfaith?

"I think the interfaith movement, to go forward, must be more inclusive to non-religious beliefs" argues Stephen Shashoua, "it must also recognise there are problems with every community, and let go of any focus on Muslim communities, which is not helpful or right. It's important to recognise these are societal problems, not one group's problem with society".

Julian Bond of the Christian Muslim Forum believes "the challenge for interfaith is prophetic – to disrupt the norm and urge us to practice our faith by changing society and creating harmony". He goes on to say that "an important part of our work is to persuade people to engage with 'the other'". This is something Stephen agrees with, "we must start looking at 'post-interfaith' and towards personalised inter-world view dialogue".

Looking back at the 'Religions of the Empire' conference in London, it is possible to see how far things have come. Interfaith encounters no longer take place 'out there' in the colonies, but right here on the British Isles. Faith groups have shown a remarkable ability to come together of their own accord, united only by their commitment to the ideals of their religion, and work to strengthen their communities.

It is impossible to tell what the next few decades will bring, but undoubtedly interfaith will be an important part of the journey Britain takes.

About Abdul-Azim Ahmed

A graduate of Religion and Theology BA and a Masters in Islam in Contemporary Britain. Abdul-Azim is currently completing a PhD on Islam in Wales.