
Humanists and Dialogue: Why the Non-religious must be Included

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Abstract: This paper was delivered at Regent's Park College, Oxford in May 2022 as part of an Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture and Dialogue Society Seminar Series on Dialogue. Humanist worldviews are characterised by a trust in science as the best method to learn about the world, hence a rejection of super-naturalism. They see humans as social animals capable of developing morality through empathy and reason, giving their own meaning and purpose to life, seeking happiness, and helping others do the same. They see secularism – understood as state neutrality; freedom of religion or belief constrained only by the rights and freedoms of others; and absence of privilege or disadvantage on that basis – as a key element of a good plural society, based on fairness, freedom, and peace. Humanists UK encourages dialogue between humanists and people of faith in order to contribute to building such a good plural society, while ensuring that Humanism is well understood, and enriching the personal development of those involved. The British religion or belief landscape has changed beyond recognition since the mid 1980s. There is a growing non-religious majority – around half with a broadly humanist worldview according to the British Social Attitudes Survey – and a religious minority, which, while remaining predominantly Christian – albeit not predominantly Anglican – features an unprecedented diversity of religion or belief identities. The potential for incomprehension, segregation, and potential hostility is significant, creating an ongoing need for dialogue. A number of objections and challenges to effective dialogue are reviewed, such as the self-selecting nature of those who choose to engage. While these are real limitations, dialogue – however limited – takes us in the direction of a peaceful, plural, and well-integrated society. Failing to include the non-religious in it – over half the population – makes little sense, and risks further widening a 'religious versus non-religious' fault line.

Keywords: Dialogue, Humanism, Secularism, Interfaith, Religion, Non-religious, Liberal, Pluralism, Christian, Muslim, Values, Diversity

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Introduction

This paper is in three parts:

- Humanism and dialogue, covering core humanist principles, and the reasons humanists engage in dialogue.
- Why the non-religious should be included in dialogue, including a review of the British religion or belief landscape and its likely future shape.
- An exploration of objections and challenges to effective dialogue.

The primary focus is on the UK.

Humanists are free thinkers. The views expressed here are those of the author.

‘Religion’ (and hence ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’) is a term used throughout this paper and in the data sources quoted. There are debates among academics about its definition. From a philosophical viewpoint, these can be approached in two ways, either by recognising the ‘family resemblance’ between phenomena such as ‘Christianity’, ‘Buddhism’, and ‘Islam’, or by applying a definition wide enough to encompass the core elements of all the cases. A useful definition, from philosopher Tim Crane, is: ‘Religion... is a systematic and practical attempt by human beings to find meaning in the world and their place in it, in terms of their relationship to something transcendent.’ (Crane 2017). This accords with William James’ view that belief in an ‘unseen order’ is characteristic of religion (James 1902, Lecture III).

More useful in the context of dialogue is the recognition that, as human social phenomena, religions – and indeed worldviews such as Humanism – can usefully be considered to have three dimensions: belief/tenets; belonging/identity/community; and behaviour/practice. The relative importance of these three varies, both on average between faith/belief groups, and between individuals within groups. For example, the British comedian, David Baddiel, is the author of ‘Jews Don’t Count’, a book about modern anti-Semitism. His Twitter profile is simply ‘Jew’. Yet he is a patron of Humanists UK, and an atheist. His identity and beliefs differ. Similarly, fewer than 30% of British Catholics share the Catholic Church’s teaching that engaging in homosexual behaviour is a sin (Clements & Bullivant 2021), and fewer than 40% of young British Catholics think God created the world and is involved in what happens in it now (van Duyvenbode 2018). Yet that does not invalidate their Catholic identity.

‘Religion’, ‘Christianity’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Islam’ etc remain useful and meaningful terms, provided this complexity is recognised and the associated information properly understood.

Humanism and Dialogue

There have been many definitions of humanism but essentially it is a non-religious worldview characterised by:

- Trust in the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works, implying questioning, looking for evidence, and a willingness to change if new evidence becomes available. Humanism is a naturalistic worldview, which rejects the varieties of ‘unseen order’ to which William James referred and has no religious practices. Humanists are therefore atheists or, in some cases, agnostics.
- The view that morality is a feature of our humanity, born out of the fact that we have evolved as social animals, and have the ability to reason. Ethical decisions can therefore be guided by empathy, reason, and imagination, and a concern for other human beings, as well as sentient animals.
- Despite well-known disagreements on issues such as LGBT rights or assisted dying, there is a large area of common ground between humanism and most religions in terms of ethics. The Golden Rule – treat others as you would wish to be treated – features in one form or another in most faiths and ethical frameworks dating back at least to Confucius. From a humanist view, that is not a coincidence, but arises from the common foundation of our humanity.
- The view that, as this is the one life we have, and there is no discernible purpose to the universe, humans give their own lives meaning and purpose, seeking happiness and fulfilment through their relationships and activities, and helping others do the same. Hence, we should make a positive contribution to building a better society, with an emphasis on human rights and equality.

Humanists see secularism as a key element of that ‘better society’ on the basis of fairness, freedom, and peace. By ‘secularism’, British humanists generally do not mean ‘atheism’, ‘Humanism’ or ‘non-religion’ – the sense in which it is sometimes used in the US – but rather a political concept which is particularly relevant in the ordering of plural societies. Andrew Copson (2017) refers to the French contemporary scholar of secularism, Jean Baubérot, who has identified three key elements: the

state should be neutral in matters of religion and belief; everyone should have freedom of religion or belief – including the freedom to change their religion or belief – provided the rights of others are not eroded; and no one should be privileged or disadvantaged because of their religion or belief. In practice, secularism in those countries which claim to adhere to it can fall some way short of this ideal, and invariably reflects their particular histories. The UK, with its Established Church (at least in England), and bishops in parliament, is not a secular state. However, in other respects, notably in terms of freedom of religion or belief, it is in practice closer to this ideal of open secularism than some others. This is explored further in ‘What do secularists mean by secularism?’ (Rodell, 2019).

When Humanists UK launched its 2021–2025 strategy, it included this statement of values:

- engaging in dialogue and debate rationally, intelligently, and with evidence;
- recognising the dignity of individuals and treating them with fairness and respect;
- respecting and promoting freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law;
- taking opportunities to combat all forms of prejudice and unfair discrimination;
- cooperating with others for the common good, including those of different beliefs;
- celebrating human achievement, progress, and potential;
- accepting that human beings are part of a wider natural world which must be treated sustainably for the sake of current and future generations.

It defines dialogue as ‘engagement between people with different approaches to life to build mutual understanding, identify common ground and, where it makes sense, engage in shared action.’ Humanising ‘The Other’ is a key objective. (Humanists UK, 2022)

Humanism has always sought an ‘open society’ in which people of different views co-operate for the common good. Harold Blackham, the President of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK) in the 1960s, was a strong believer in the role of dialogue and cooperation, helping to create – and chairing for many years

– the Social Morality Council, which brought together Christians, Jews, and humanists in the discussion of moral issues.

More recently, Humanists UK has been running a training course for humanists interested in dialogue. Attendees agree to a Code of Conduct based on the Inter Faith Network for the UK's document 'Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs' (IFN UK 2017), with minor changes to make the language more inclusive of the non-religious. Those who successfully complete the training become members of a national 'Dialogue Network'.

This approach prompted some self-examination about why Humanists UK wishes to encourage dialogue. We identified three principal reasons:

- To help ensure that Humanism is well understood by religious people.
- To make a positive contribution to 'building a world where everyone lives cooperatively on the basis of shared human values, respect for human rights, and concern for future generations.'
- For those involved to enjoy it, and to enrich their personal development.

We believe most of our religious interlocutors would recognise the equivalent motivations.

The definition of dialogue here is very broad. It may take traditional forms, such as 'interfaith' forums, public events, and small group discussions, but also encompasses shared social action (for example on climate issues), informal exchanges (for example, between humanists and religious colleagues in pastoral care in hospitals and prisons), and academic exploration. Some forms of dialogue are, however, less likely to be of interest to humanists because they have less to contribute, for example, comparative exploration of rituals and practices, or 'scriptural reasoning'.

The term 'interfaith' – which, unlike terms such as 'inter-convictional', is widely used in Britain for dialogue activity, as reflected in the official 'Inter Faith Network for the UK' – is problematic for humanists. Taken literally, it excludes those of no faith. In practice, humanists are widely involved in 'interfaith' activity, prioritising action over arguing about terminology, while seeking to ensure inclusive language is used wherever possible. The writer is Vice Chair of a local Inter Faith Forum for example. But 'dialogue' is a more inclusive term which is also widely recognised, and humanists prefer to use it, and to seek the use of inclusive language wherever possible.

A significant example of academic dialogue began with a collection of essays by leading figures in the field titled 'Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide', co-edited by (humanist) Professor Richard Norman, and (Christian) Anthony Carroll (Carroll, Norman, 2017). The collection is prefaced by a dialogue between Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and Raymond Tallis, physician, neuroscientist, and humanist philosopher. Follow-up discussions involving Christian theologians and humanist philosophers continue to take place.

Why include the non-religious in dialogue? The religion or belief landscape

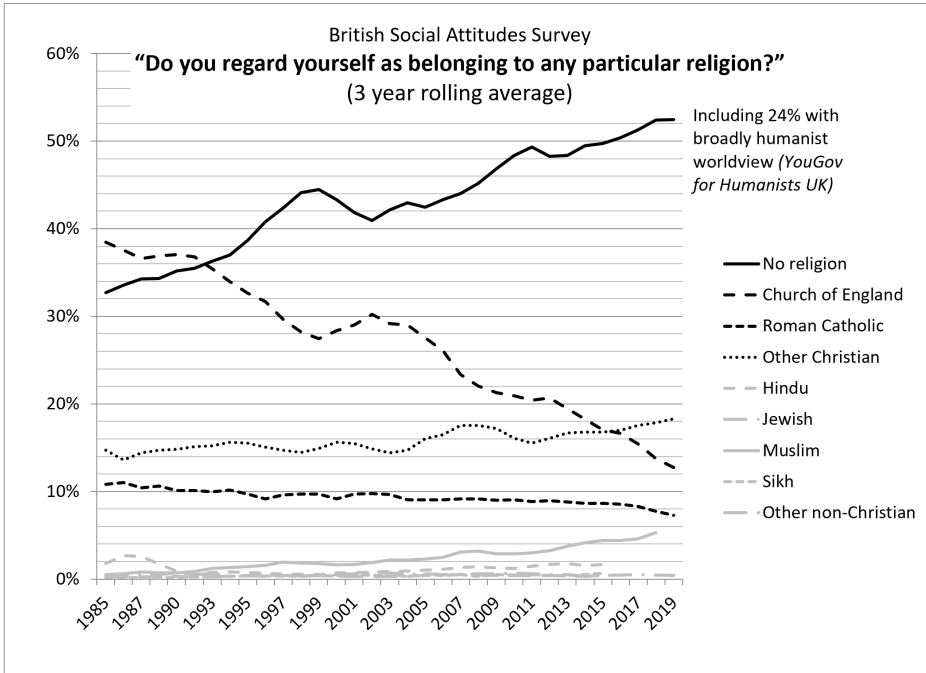
Annually since 1983, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has asked the question, 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to a particular religion?' with a 'Which one?' follow-up for those answering positively. In relation to the three dimensions of religion or belief, the question is therefore about belonging/identity, not about belief or practice, although those are also explored in their ten-yearly in-depth studies on religion, the most recent of which was published in 2019. This provides the best set of data we have on the topic. The official census also included a question on religion in 2001, 2011 and 2021. (The 2021 result was not available at the time of writing this text.) Unfortunately, it uses the 'leading' question, 'What is your religion?' implying that the respondent ought to have one, with a resulting over-statement of 'Christian'. It also provides no analysis of Christian denominations. Its strength is the lack of sampling errors and the ability to drill down to local level.

The BSA data show that the religion or belief landscape in Britain has changed radically over the past half-century. Since 1983, the number of British people who do not identify with any religion has grown from around a third to over half. The proportion identifying as Christian has fallen from two thirds to just over a third. At the same time, non-Christian religions have grown from 3% to around 10%, with Islam – in all its diversity – at 5%.

This decline in religious identity is not mainly because of adult individuals losing their faith, but because of differences across the generations. As the sociologists David Voas and Steve Bruce put it in their commentary for the 2019 BSA report: 'two nonreligious parents successfully transmit their lack of religion; two religious parents have a 50/50 chance of passing on the faith; one religious parent does only half as well as two'.

However, that generalisation masks a more complex picture. The primary driver of the decline is a dramatic reduction in identification with the Church of England, from around 40% to around 13%. Catholics have declined more slowly, largely as a

result of immigration, to around 8%, while other Christians – including independent African and other evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and Orthodox Christians – have grown to around 18%, well exceeding the Established Church, and reflecting the growth of religious immigrant communities.

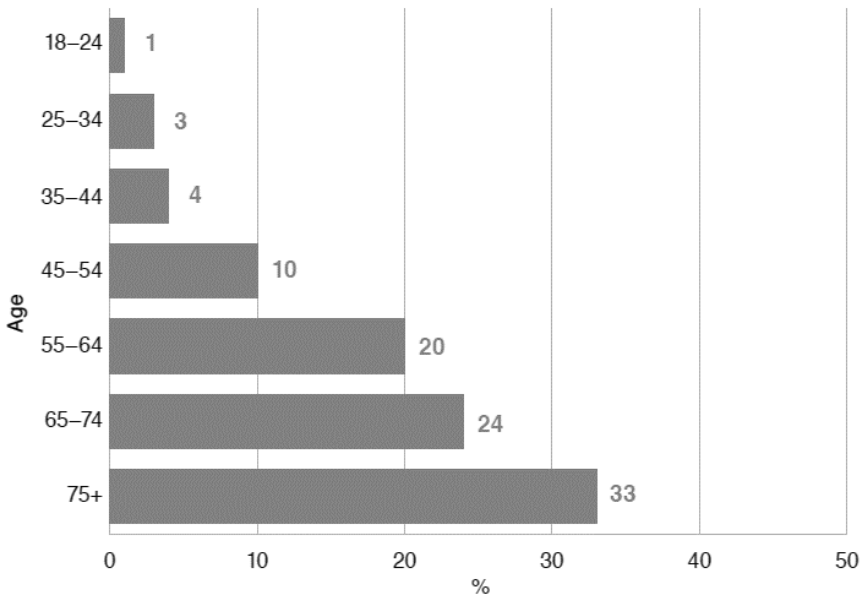


The non-religious population is diverse and includes many who would not fit any definition of humanism. But YouGov polling for Humanists UK indicates that about 24% – around half the non-religious – share a broadly humanist worldview. Although the 7% of the population who refer to themselves as ‘humanists’ is comparable with the number who identify as Muslims, most people who have a broadly humanist worldview are either unaware that ‘humanism’ is the term for what they think – the writer was in that position for many years – or choose not to use the ‘humanist’ label. Whether or not they use the label, there are probably more people with a broadly humanist worldview than there who identify as Anglicans and Catholics combined.

The demographic data indicate that the decline in the Church of England will continue. The BSA report published in 2019 showed that only 1% of 18–24 year olds

identified as Anglicans, compared to 33% of 75 and over.

Figure 1 Church of England/Anglican affiliation, by age



British Social Attitudes 36 'Religion – Identity, behaviour and belief over two decades' (2019)

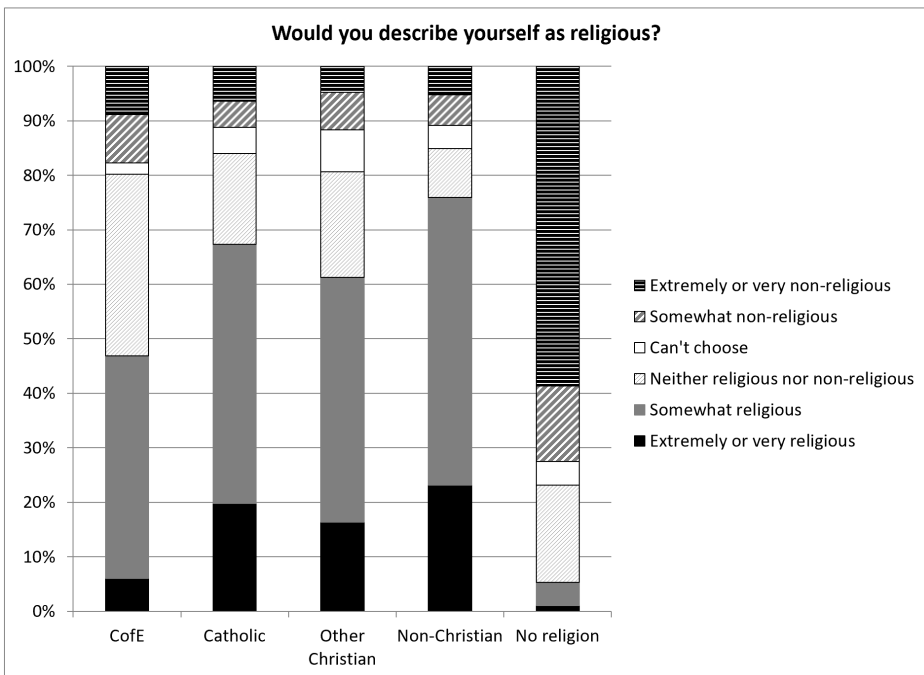
Extrapolating to 2040, it seems likely that around 60% of the population will by then be non-religious, and 30% Christian, with Anglicans perhaps down to around 5–7%, with nearly 15% from other faiths, including Muslims who, at nearly 10%, are likely to exceed both Anglicans and Catholics.

Other characteristics of British Christianity are also changing. According to Bishop Mike Royal, General Secretary of Churches Together in England (Religion Media Centre Briefing 2022), 60% of churchgoers on a typical Sunday in London are black; urban Anglican churches depend on a backbone of black worshippers; and the fastest growing denomination in the country is the Nigerian-based 'Redeemed Christian Church of God', with 700 to 800 churches. At the same time, the centre of gravity of the global Anglican communion is shifting away from the UK, towards Africa.

This trend is in line with a broader emerging ethnic divide. The great majority (95%) of the non-religious are of 'white origin' although we know anecdotally from the work of 'Faith to Faithless' – a section of Humanists UK which supports people experiencing difficulties leaving 'high control' religions – that the number of such non-

white people is growing. Around 40% of white-origin Britons identify with a religion. But the figure for non-whites is around 80%. As the proportion of Christians from ethnic minorities is increasing, while the Church of England shrinks, and as most members of non-Christian religions are also from ethnic minorities, the overall ethnic minority proportion among the religious will go up.

At the same time, typical levels of religiosity among those identifying with a religion are likely to increase. This is because the principal decline in the religious population is among older, white Anglicans, whose religiosity – measured by a self-description as ‘extremely or very’, or even ‘somewhat’, religious – is significantly lower than for others.



Data from British Social Attitudes 36

Meanwhile, the proportion with no religious affiliation is not only increasing, but within that total, the number who say they are ‘very or extremely’ non-religious has also increased to a substantial majority.

In summary, we have a growing – predominantly white – mainly ‘very or extremely’ non-religious majority, half with a broadly humanist worldview, and a predom-

antly Christian religious minority, which is increasingly non-white and, on average, displays increasing religiosity. There is an unprecedented diversity of religion or belief identities, as well as great diversity within almost every category.

This is an utterly different landscape to the one prevailing in the early days of 'interfaith' dialogue: the first 'Parliament of World Religions' in Chicago in 1893, the 'Religions of Empire Conference' in London in 1924, leading to the foundation of the World Congress of Faiths in 1936. It is very different even to the landscape in 1987, when, under the Thatcher government, the Inter Faith Network for the UK was founded, which has been backed by British governments ever since, and has supported the development of 'interfaith' forums and other bodies throughout the country.

No previous society has had to cope with such large-scale change, diversity, and complexity. Although Britain is an essentially liberal, tolerant, and inclusive society, the potential for incomprehension, segregation, and potential hostility is significant. The need for dialogue, a key mitigating tool, will go up. Failing to include the non-religious in it – over half the population – makes little sense.

Objections and challenges to effective dialogue

1. 'Interfaith dialogue is, by definition, for people of faith. Why should our 'interfaith forum' include humanists and atheists, who are inherently hostile to religion?'
2. 'How can I talk, and listen calmly, to people who are actively campaigning against things I think are important?'
3. 'It's just talk. Where's the action? What's the objective?'
4. 'Dialogue is too often male-dominated.'
5. 'I can't respect beliefs I think are wrong, or even malign.'
6. 'Some people are just not that interested. Some are positively opposed.'
7. 'You only get to talk to the liberals. What about the others?'
8. 'The groups and individuals who engage in dialogue are self-selecting and therefore not representative.'
9. 'Is religion or belief the most important dimension for dialogue? Wouldn't it be better to put energy into a more potent division?'

Effective dialogue faces a number of challenges and constraints which are important to acknowledge and mitigate where appropriate. Some apply primarily to humanists,

others to both humanist and religious players. Among the principal objections are these:

‘Interfaith dialogue is, by definition, for people of faith. Why should our ‘interfaith forum’ include humanists and atheists, who are inherently hostile to religion?’

This has been a common objection. It is perfectly reasonable for a forum to exclude someone who is hostile to its aims or behaves disruptively. But to assume that that applies to any humanist seeking to contribute to what is essentially a dialogue group – despite the unfortunate ‘interfaith’ terminology – is a misapprehension, and borders on prejudice. In practice, humanist members of interfaith forums become colleagues, and are judged – as others are – by the degree to which they make a constructive contribution.

But this objection is closely allied to another:

‘How can I talk, and listen calmly, to people who are actively campaigning against things I think are important?’

On the face of it, this could be a more significant challenge for some religious people engaging with humanists, and vice versa. Although there is wide agreement on issues such as the need for good quality education about religions and worldviews, and on many human rights issues, there is no doubt that the theme running through much of the history of humanism, and the causes with which it has been associated – such as women’s and LGBT rights, freedom of expression, and the abolition of blasphemy laws – has been the fight for human rights and equality, and against religious power and privilege. That applies today to a range of issues. As well as supporting educational and community activities, Humanists UK is well-known as a campaigning organisation on issues such as state-funded faith schools and faith-based selection, mandatory collective worship in schools, assisted dying, abortion rights, bishops in the House of Lords, and attempts to limit free speech deemed ‘blasphemous’.

In the UK at least, with a well-developed tradition of dialogue, this is less of an issue in practice. There are probably more disagreements on campaigning issues between humanists and Catholics than most other faith groups, yet there has been significant Catholic/humanist dialogue.

This liberal environment arguably reflects the fact that Britain (not Northern Ireland) is not a deeply religious country. Despite the Establishment of the Church of England, religious bodies – although still enjoying significant privileges – have con-

siderably less power than in the past. And the government encourages mutual respect and tolerance.

Other environments can be more challenging. Respectful relationships between humanists and the Catholic Church, for example, are unlikely to develop in highly religious South American countries, where the Church retains considerable power, and feels no need to develop relationships with humanists, while local humanists feel they are in an ongoing battle against its influence, especially on issues such as abortion and LGBT rights.

That applies to an even greater degree in a number of Islamic countries. For a humanist to state her or his beliefs can be considered blasphemy and, if they come from a Muslim family, apostasy. According to the latest Freedom of Thought Report (Humanists International 2021), at least 83 countries have laws against blasphemy, and in six (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Mauritania) it is in principle punishable by death. Saudi Arabia passed a law in 2014 which categorises anyone who ‘calls for atheist thought in any form, or calls into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based’ as a terrorist (International Business Times 2014). In April 2022, after two years’ detention, and a series of irregularities, the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was condemned to 24 years in prison in Kano State after a Muslim group filed a petition accusing him of posting uncomplimentary messages about Islam on social media (BBC News 2022).

Extra-judicial violence is also a risk, especially in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where a number of so-called ‘atheist bloggers’ have been murdered in the streets by mobs of fanatics (Washington Post 2016). And in May 2022 a female student in Northwest Nigeria was beaten to death and set on fire by fellow students who accused her of posting ‘blasphemous’ statements in response to an Islamic student on WhatsApp (Guardian 2022).

The attempted murder of Salman Rushdie (a Humanists UK Patron) in New York in 2022, for alleged blasphemy in a magic realist novel written in 1988, is a reminder that religiously motivated extra-judicial violence is not limited by geography.

But it seems that pre-requisites for dialogue to flourish are freedom of belief; freedom of expression; limited institutional religious power; and a dominant culture in which respect and tolerance are seen as virtues.

‘It’s just talk. Where’s the action? What’s the objective?’

Dialogue is indeed talk. And sometimes it can appear superficial. Yet even a ‘tea and samosas’ dialogue in which no serious issues are tackled, or an informal exchange with work colleagues, or a dialogue between people from different religion or belief backgrounds about a shared issue which is nothing to do with religion or belief has value. Relationships and networks are established. Prejudice is chipped away at. ‘The Other’ is humanised. And a store of goodwill is accumulated.

In Northern Ireland, especially during ‘The Troubles’, brave people from both sides made an active contribution to peace building through dialogue, sometimes simply by being present in the other’s territory, focusing on the human relationships rather than theological discussion. An additional challenge in the Province now is how to take into account a growing share of the population which identifies as neither Catholic nor Protestant.

Even a fearless, in-depth dialogue may over time simply become an interesting conversation among friends. That has its merits, though once its wider contribution to improving relationships, ironing out misunderstandings, and identifying areas of agreement and disagreement has been achieved, the scope for further added value may be limited to the fulfilment of the participants, and consolidating a bedrock of personal relationships.

Shared action on issues such as climate, food poverty, or homelessness can help sustain and normalise constructive relationships, while making a positive contribution to the issue in hand.

‘Dialogue is too often male-dominated.’

Humanism has a strong emphasis on gender equality, so this can be a sensitive issue for humanists, though presumably less so for those faith groups where leadership roles are exclusively or primarily male. The issue of gender roles is itself an important dialogue topic.

Most groups have their own ‘red lines’. Humanists UK speakers avoid all-male panels and will not participate in events in which there is a gender-segregated audience. But that does not exclude pragmatism: a group of humanists in Farnham in Surrey had a successful series of small scale, women-only dialogues with members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, including visits to each other’s homes. That would not have been possible in any other way, and it culminated in a successful mixed public meeting.

‘I can’t respect beliefs I think are wrong, or even malign.’

This objection is heard from some humanists but applies equally to some people of faith. It is difficult, for example, for a deeply religious person to respect the normal humanist belief that the god which is so central to their life is just a human creation. Likewise, most humanists would have difficulty respecting the view that they are destined for eternal torture at the behest of a deity which they think non-existent.

But this is aiming at the wrong target. The object of respect when it comes to dialogue is not belief. It is about people. We can, and should, respect decent people as fellow humans, regardless of their metaphysical beliefs. We can also respect the importance of those beliefs to them, even if we think the beliefs are mistaken. Respect is essential for dialogue. But it is useful to be clear what it is we are respecting.

Dialogue is then the ideal means to overcome the many misunderstandings and false assumptions most of us have about people who hold or identify with different worldviews, for sharpening our understanding of areas of disagreement and agreement, and for refining our own views.

A humanist may recognise common ground with faith-based worldviews in terms of ethics, and may also share some narratives as part of our shared cultural heritage – the stories of Adam and Eve, or the Good Samaritan for example – despite thinking that the underlying beliefs in an ‘unseen order’, and in supernatural events that defy the laws of nature, are false.

The picture for a religious person may not be so clear-cut. In his book ‘Making Sense of Religious Pluralism’ (2013), Revd Canon Dr Alan Race, chair of the World Congress of Faiths, and editor of its ‘Interreligious Insight’ journal, identifies three positions that Christians – and by extension, people of other faiths – may adopt as they engage in dialogue:

- ‘Exclusivist-Repudiation’: there is only one truth. Others are wrong;
- ‘Inclusivist-Toleration’: my tradition is closest to the truth. While others may have a ‘glimpsing of God’ it ‘can only be measured by the Christian conceptual framework’;
- ‘Pluralist-Acceptance’: any religion with ‘vitality and transformative power’ has ‘a glimpse of the whole of reality...but it is a partial view’. All have truth, but none have the whole truth. He uses the famous analogy of the blind people encountering an elephant, each truthfully reporting a different tactile aspect, but none able to understand the whole. (Meanwhile, the humanist would say: ‘There is no elephant.’)

However, there is another issue here. Underlying dialogue encounters are fundamental differences about what is true. While respectful challenge and disagreement is healthy, one of the rules of dialogue is that it is an exchange of equals, and no-one is seeking to convert the other. Fortunately, in modern Britain, proselytisation is rarely accompanied by a coercive power imbalance. But a drive to proselytise is a significant feature of some types of Islam, and especially of evangelical Christianity. That applies even within the Established Church: at the 2022 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion, Stephen Cottrell, the evangelical Archbishop of York, proclaimed that ‘The Church of England makes disciples. That is what we are about.’ Some evangelicals see it as a moral duty to seek to ‘save’ others by bringing them to their faith. At the very least, this is an inhibiting factor for dialogue.

‘Some people are just not that interested. Some are positively opposed.’

Among humanists, there is a spectrum of views on dialogue reflecting the spectrum of views on religion. Some, especially those brought up in what they consider a restrictive or oppressive faith, which they rejected, or from which they had to escape, see religion in general as a malign influence. They are likely to see no point in dialogue. But in the writer’s experience, most humanists, as secularists, have a pluralist viewpoint and are broadly supportive, although it is fair to say that those willing to take time to engage in dialogue are in a minority.

That reflects the wider problem of indifference. For most people, from all backgrounds, even among those who consider dialogue desirable in principle, engaging in it is simply not as important as other calls on their time.

But in some cases, reluctance to engage, especially with humanists, seems to go beyond indifference. For example, we have so far had limited success in engaging with black-majority evangelical and Pentecostal church organisations, or with mainstream Muslim umbrella groups, though we remain hopeful. This may be because they see humanists/atheists as a threat. Or an enemy. Or they question our motives. Or they have the mistaken impression that we only want some sort of intellectual debate. Or they simply see no point to it, perhaps because evangelism is off the agenda. We can only speculate.

A particularly sensitive issue here is apostasy. Humanists’ commitment to freedom of religion or belief includes freedom to join or leave a religion. As noted earlier, Humanists UK has a section called ‘Faith to Faithless’. It was founded by two ex-Muslims and supports people from any background, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and others, who face difficulties – in some cases threats –

from families or communities when they decide to leave the religion in which they were brought up.

Whatever the reasons, these are precisely the interfaces with the greatest scope for misunderstanding, and hence the greatest opportunity for added value through dialogue between the religious and non-religious. It is a shame that, so far, success has been limited.

Perhaps a shift in focus towards joint action on issues of mutual concern, such as the environment, or engagement in sporting or other activities, such as the Faith and Belief Forum's 'London Interfaith Fun Run', may prove fruitful.

'You only get to talk to the liberals. What about the others?'

This is a significant issue. In the late 2000s (NPR 2008), the Ismaili American writer on dialogue and faith, Eboo Patel, hypothesised:

The twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together.

While the reality is more nuanced and complex than this simple binary, it highlights a fundamental point. The underlying premise of dialogue is acceptance of pluralism, and – as we have seen in the comparison between the UK and, say, Saudi Arabia – the pre-requisites for it to take place are freedom of belief and expression, limited institutional religious power, and a culture in which respect and tolerance are seen as virtues. The totalitarian may want a peaceful society, but one based on the hegemony of their worldview. She or he may engage in dialogue, but primarily in order to pursue that ultimate goal.

Dialogue with totalitarians can still achieve better mutual understanding and establish personal relationships. But pluralists should not be naïve.

Most people who identify with a religious – or a non-religious – worldview are not totalitarians. But there are totalitarians in virtually every religion, and a few among atheists too. Some of the most difficult interactions are not between people from entirely different worldviews, but between pluralists and totalitarians from the same

religion or belief background, who may consider their opponents not to be 'true' to the faith or worldview.

There is therefore some truth in the 'you only get to talk to the liberals' objection. But that does not invalidate dialogue. Engagement can help bolster the position and motivation of liberals against the more extreme or fundamentalist voices in their own communities. It can also extend beyond those directly involved in dialogue through their interactions within their communities, and so help improve understanding.

'The groups and individuals who engage in dialogue are self-selecting and therefore not representative.'

This is undoubtably true and flows from the fact that not all religion or belief groups, or individuals within them, are interested. One effect is that groups with relatively few adherents in the country are sometimes over-represented. That is fine, as dialogue must be inclusive and open to all religions and beliefs. But multi-lateral dialogue must surely always attempt to include the major faith groups, and the non-religious.

Equally, it is important to recognise that people who become involved in dialogue have a responsibility not only to represent their personal religious or non-religious worldview, but also to make a contribution to the wider dialogue endeavour. In this respect members of smaller faith groups, such as Baha'is and Zoroastrians, have made, and continue to make, valuable contributions to the cause of dialogue.

Given the diversity of views within almost every faith or belief group, it can be argued that no-one can claim to be truly representative. Anglicanism and Catholicism are more institutionalised than most other groups, yet there is diversity among clerics and theologians, and massive diversity – including divergence from core teachings – among people who identify as Anglicans and Catholics. Islam is, for the most part, not institutionalised at all. British Muslims are among the most diverse in the world, in part reflecting their diversity of ethnic origin. The non-religious are similarly diverse.

Those who engage in dialogue speak for themselves. But one way to address this objection is for those involved to acknowledge the range of views within in their communities.

'Is religion or belief the most important dimension for dialogue? Wouldn't it be better to put energy into a more potent division?'

Religion or belief is an important dimension in society, but certainly not the only one with potential for conflict and misunderstanding, especially in a country in which most people are not religious.

Some non-religious people, especially those hostile to religion, may argue that putting special effort into this dimension simply serves to bolster its importance in our society, and to imply that religion is inherently a 'good thing'. But in practice, and as we highlight in our training, dialogue between people from different religion or belief backgrounds is rarely just that. People are multi-dimensional, and participants invariably also have other dimensions of difference, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, class, wealth, geography, or politics.

Dialogue across religions or beliefs is therefore not only valuable in its own right – doing something to help build a cooperative plural society is invariably better than doing nothing – but it can serve a wider purpose. This challenge raises the wider issue of values.

In May 2021, Linda Woodhead – now F.D. Maurice Professor and Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London – delivered a series of lectures titled 'Values are the New Religion' (University of Birmingham, 2021). Her thesis was that a former, self-sacrificing, Christian ethic, which she characterised as 'Give your life', had been replaced in Britain by a dominant liberal ethic she labelled 'Live your life', in which personal wellbeing and social responsibility are balanced. She associated this with what she described as the moral fall of institutional Christianity, associated with child abuse scandals, women's rights, LGBT rights, and greater moral and religious diversity. Disagreements on issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and assisted dying are then not so much between those with differing religion or belief identities, but between a majority who broadly align on liberal values, and those who do not.

If the 'values are the new religion' thesis is essentially correct – and the evidence indicates that in broad terms it is – it provides an important perspective in terms of dialogue.

Humanism is essentially a 'liberal' worldview (in the philosophical, not party-political sense), so it is unsurprising that humanists and the 'liberal-religious' share a wide range of values. The fundamentalist-religious ('totalitarian' in Eboo Patel's analysis) may share core beliefs with the liberal-religious, identify with similar communities, and engage in similar religious practices. But they may not share these liberal values. So, should dialogue between those from different religion or belief backgrounds be framed to a greater extent in terms of values in order better to understand areas of

common ground and of disagreement? How effective can that be if fundamentalists do not participate?

Looking at it more widely, is there greater added value to be gained in terms of social cohesion from applying the tools and best practices of dialogue to groups of people with divergent values and social backgrounds, rather than divergent religion or belief identities? If so, what dialogue structures are required to enable that to happen? That lies outside the scope of this paper and is being actively addressed by groups focused on community cohesion, such as the Jo Cox Foundation, and The Belong Network, but the ethos, tools, and broad intent are the same.

Conclusions

The diverse and complex religion and belief landscape in Britain is unprecedented, and ongoing effort is required to counter any associated threats to social cohesion. The objections to dialogue reviewed here certainly limit its effectiveness. But perfection must not become the enemy of the good. However constrained the contribution, dialogue takes us in the direction of a peaceful, plural, and well integrated society. It is a good thing. Even the simple fact that an organisation such as Humanists UK states that it supports and encourages dialogue conveys a clear message to faith groups and others with whom it interacts, and to its own supporters. That applies equally to faith groups who do the same.

However, dialogue which does not respect, and seek to engage with, the non-religious – around half of the population – is failing to acknowledge the reality of twenty-first-century Britain, and risks making the ‘religious versus non-religious’ divide another potent fault line in our complex society. We must not allow that to happen.

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