

## **SEMINAR 1: FAITH, SECULARISM AND PUBLIC LIFE (January 22<sup>nd</sup>)**

Revd Dr Mark Chapman and Prof Elaine Graham were the two key speakers of the first seminar. Dr Chapman's paper addressed the issue of 'community' (both faith-based and secular) and 'community cohesion'. He presented the example of the Borough of Tower Hamlets where, according to the last census, approximately 36.4 per cent of the population were Muslim (more than 10% of London's Muslim population), together with an almost equal percentage of Christians (38.6 per cent), and a smaller number of Buddhists, Jews and Hindu (between 0.8 and 1 per cent). The remaining population either had no religion or did not answer that question in the census. He compares this experience with the one of the “chocolate-box village” of Aspley Guise, which is regarded as typical of how a British village should look like, partly because of the lack of diversity in the population (out of the 24,000 inhabitants, the Muslim population counts six). Recently, fear has arisen amongst the inhabitants of Aspley Guise, because of the possibility of being annexed to the county of Milton Keynes, a change that might make the town lose its “Englishness”.

In the second paper, Prof Graham argued that the role of religion in politics and the public sphere can no longer be ignored, and neither can religious perspectives be withheld from debates. She also considered how the 'local' and the 'global' are intertwined, giving the example of the public reactions in the UK to the situation in Gaza.

After these papers the participants divided into groups and discussed the topics that were addressed. They debated, for instance, the idea of 'community': does the community still have a function today? Is the multicultural community an assembly of different communities or is it a single community? How many sub-communities are there within a community, and how can they learn from each other?

And from here the issue of 'space' was addressed: what is intended by 'place'? How does a community identify with a space; or does space identify the community? This then led to the question of whether “Englishness”, as discussed by Dr Chapman, really exists.

In the plenary session that followed, the participants brought forward some of the topics they had previously discussed.

If community cohesion is considered to be based on ongoing dialogue, is this permanent dialogue actually effective? Are all voices heard within this dialogue? Unfortunately, there is a tendency for the dialogue to remain often on the surface but is not put into practice.

Through the experience of membership, communities shape people's identity. But do the people of Aspley Guise see themselves as the real representatives of “Englishness” or as an escape to what “Englishness” should be? According to some, “Englishness” has always been the hyphen between Anglo and Saxon.

Within the faith-based communities, the secular community is not often recognised, and often, from the secular perspective, the concept of 'faith' is seen as awkward without knowing where to position it in public life (although there is a tendency amongst the younger generations to adopt a more “relaxed” approach towards faith and its role in society). Having said that, most voluntary work organisations are set up by faith communities. So there appears to be an important role for the faith-based community within society that does not try to provide the salvation of one's soul, but primarily one's well-being. In this debate, the position of the government and local authorities seems to be a bit confused and although they should be aware that ignoring religion(s) is not an option, this does not mean that “the good old days” of political participation are back again, as some Church leaders now seem to think. Religion may be seen as an obstacle, but only on a lower level; on higher levels, such as authority because authority does not have an attitude, only people, which, due to the present situation, seems to be the perfect place to start for a effective dialogue.)

Dr Chapman responded by saying that the ending of his paper presents a practical solution (i.e. the importance of dialogue is to *do* things and bring it in the practical

sphere). He stressed the difference between religion and faith and because faith is not the same as religion, it influences people's identities and makes them more complex. In conclusion he said that finding the boundaries within public space is a difficult task, e.g. in London the majority of Christians are not British but immigrants from Africa. Hence, at the local level one can see new spaces where dialogue between different communities is being created.

Professor Graham touched upon the issue of fear, stating that our society is a technocratic one, i.e. once one knows how to classify something or somebody, the fear disappears. Hence, fear is mainly caused by the unknown, which can only be eliminated by permanent dialogue. With regard to the issue of the government's position towards religion, she referred to how New Zealand has been a multicultural and liberal state since 1840, but, in 2007 the 'Religious Diversity Statement' was enacted due to the high number of immigrants with different faiths. Therefore, from a permanent absence of religion in governmental issues, there was in 2007 a need to make an official statement regarding the importance of religion. This constitutes an interesting example of the relationship between government and religion and how religion has now become an issue that just cannot be ignored by the government and authorities in general.

The seminar concluded with the acknowledgement of the presence of a continuous interchange between different communities, which is both good and bad, and which cannot be avoided. Probably, apart from attempting mutual understanding, there is no other solution to cope with this permanent interchange. Sometimes the interchange between different faith groups in society and the problems that it brings have to come to the surface and can only be dealt with once they are acknowledged.