

## Can Christian Institutions Promote Inclusion in Multifaith Societies?

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For decades the word on the street was that the coronation of King Charles would be a multifaith affair. The prince who told Jonathan Dimbleby in 1994 that he wanted to be Defender of Faith rather than Defender of *the* Faith was understood as wanting to spurn the pageantry of Christendom seen in 1953 and begin his reign with a service celebrating Britain's modern religious diversity.

And indeed we saw some significant innovations. Leaders of different faiths booked the service with their processions and their greetings to the King. Members of different faith communities in the House of Lords presented the King with his regalia.

But what we saw in Westminster Abbey last month was hardly the multicultural jamboree many seemed to anticipate. The placing of the crown of St Edward on the head of the Church of England's new supreme governor by the Archbishop of Canterbury took place in the context of a traditional celebration of Holy Communion. The hymns and prayers were exclusively Christian and the anointing at the heart of the ceremony reaffirmed the British monarch as the last anointed Christian sovereign in the world. To all intents and purposes, this was a Christian service at which other religions were, for the most part, visible and welcome spectators.

So what happened? Did the Church of England defend its privileged role to the exclusion of other groups? No. All evidence suggests the Church hierarchy took with utmost seriousness its role now enshrined in the new preface to the Coronation oath "to foster an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely."

The truth is that the kind of interreligious event some imagined was always a naïve and somewhat dated confection. The official commentary on the Procession of Faith Leaders noted how "this represents the multi-faith nature of our society and the importance of inclusion of other faiths whilst respecting the integrities of the different traditions". This attention to diverse religious integrities is something interfaith enthusiasts often overlook and ill-informed secularists fail to understand. While well intentioned, multifaith liturgies have usually been enacted by liberal-minded adherents of different faiths conforming to more or less Christian assumptions and cultural norms.

If non-Christian faiths were kept at an arm's length in the coronation service, it was not because religious pluralism was ignored; it was because we are finally starting to take it seriously. Other faiths are not exotic variations on the Christian model. They have their own worldviews, their own ideas of the sacred, and their own theologies of governance and monarchy, which should not be appropriated and shoehorned into an ancient ceremony as a tokenistic form of inclusion.

With a Hindu Prime Minister reading the lesson and a Muslim Mayor of London in attendance, religious minorities in the UK are coming of age. The census data published last year showed us that the Christian population has, for the first time, dropped under 50% and non-Christian minorities have, for the first time, grown to over 10%. In many of London's institutions (its universities, its Inns of Court) religious pluralism needs to be taken even more seriously because of the way in which we gather such diverse cohorts of people to this city from all around the world.

But different kinds of institutions have to respond to the multifaith society in different ways. Let's say there are four types of institution we should be thinking about.

The first are secular institutions, like my university (your neighbour) the London School of Economics. Our founders thought that religion was in literally terminal decline, such that consideration of religious identity or expression within the university was simply dismissed. Today this is no longer so. I lead a centre that provides facilities for prayer and worship, and supports religious life in all kinds of ways across campus. But more than that, we have developed a mission to foster the kind of religious literacy and interfaith leadership the world needs to reduce the religion-related conflict that is escalating in many regions. In addition to making students and staff of different faith feel more recognised and included, we also need to respond to the ways in which religion-related conflict is imported onto campus, whether from the Middle East, Africa, the Indian subcontinent, or pretty much anywhere else. Religion is now an issue we can no longer ignore.

I believe this is true for all secular institutions. Of course, secularity remains an important principle in the sense of creating institutions that do not privilege particular religious groups or put up barriers to non-religious thought. This is so important in the law or in healthcare, for example. But the idea that you deal with the problems of religion through a harder form of secularism (that is to say, excluding religion altogether) – this simply no longer holds. Even France with its rigid *laïcité* is having to acknowledge that you cannot force all school children to eat pork; you cannot make women take off their burkinis on the beach; you cannot turn down planning applications for every new mosque and then complain when Muslims pray in the street.

Second, we need new kinds of institutions that explicitly promote religious pluralism. We've seen the emergence of bodies like the London Faiths Forum which can represent the interests of diverse religious groups within the public sphere and help address some of the tensions between them. We've seen new NGOs like The Rose Castle Foundation with whom we collaborated this week on a dialogue between Israeli and Palestinian women. These new institutions need to model religious plurality and find ways of dispersing leadership across traditions to build cultures that don't allow particular interests to dominate.

Third, we need new religious institutions that represent these new and growing religious communities, whether that's places of worship, community centres or schools. These often

meet with the most hostility, perhaps being perceived as threatening the identity of a community or fuelling suspicions about their motives. I remember watching the late Christopher Hitchens protesting on Newsnight against the last Labour government's expansion of faith schools. "Single faith schools will close themselves off and feed sectarianism," he argued. "No they will not," replied the then Bishop of Southwark, "because we will befriend them." And indeed I have been involved in building partnerships across Christian, Jewish and Muslim schools to make sure that children growing up in single faith educational environments are also able to interact with, and form friendships with, children of other faiths.

And then fourth, we have the institutions that history has bequeathed us. In this part of the world, they are the institutions of Christendom, established by the Church with Christian ideals to serve almost exclusively Christian populations. For these institutions, responding to the multifaith society is about deepening their understanding of the role they play as host to those who are different. This might be given greater urgency by the diversity of our times, but it is not a new challenge. In this country, the Church of England has journeyed through a succession of Toleration Acts and the Catholic Emancipation Act legitimising other Christian denominations. Many within the Church saw toleration not as a threat to the Church but as a deepening of its role to sustain the spiritual life of a nation. Today this now extends to other religions, which brings us back to the Coronation and the calling of the church "to foster an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely."

Just as in the coronation service, Christian institutions do not make themselves more inclusive by shoehorning tokenistic expressions of other faiths into a Christian way of doing things. Neither do we achieve anything by falling on a secular sword, seeking to eradicate the vestiges of religious expression from our cultures. In 15 years of interfaith work, I've only ever heard non-religious people argue that that approach would be more inclusive. When my university recently renamed its academic terms from Michaelmas, Lent and Easter, to Autumn, Spring and Summer, some Muslim students told me what a shame they thought it was and how they wanted to learn what these names meant, not see them replaced with less interesting ones.

So how do Christian institutions become better hosts of religious diversity? Let me speak to you from my experience in this field, stemming from my work at LSE but engaging with many church institutions on these questions, particularly our Church Schools.

First of all, find out what the real practical needs of the community are and work out how they can all be met. If people need a place to pray, find one. If they need particular dietary provision, do your best to make it available. The life of faith is a lot of little practical realities and it's very easy to get distracted by big symbolic gestures that don't actually mean very much to the believers concerned.

Second, make learning about religious difference part of the culture of the institution. The maturity of the interfaith approach to the coronation that I described is that it didn't presume that everyone understood this event in the same way or wanted to participate in the ways that we saw fit. Engagement with difference has to be grounded in what Pope Francis describes as the "culture of encounter". Let's not claim to know how other people see things; let's create spaces where we can listen to each other.

And third, recognise how the religious diversity of the institution connects in good ways and bad with the religious diversity of the world. When Israel is at war with Gaza, this profoundly affects our institution. When Russia invaded Ukraine, we found Orthodox Christians were struggling with a lot of questions about their churches and their theology. This is also part of the learning about religious difference. In fact, it's a very important aspect of it because it's about what people are struggling with. The story is told of a rabbi whose fervent disciple says, 'My master, I love you!' 'But do you know what hurts me my son?' responds the rabbi. 'For if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?'

For the Christian believers within historically Christian institutions, these changes require the openness and grace to see their institutions evolve. But as I hope I've argued, this kind of hospitality to the religious other is not alien to our tradition. Jesus showed a radical hospitality (including to people of other faiths) time and again, which met with frequent opposition. In today's passage from Luke's Gospel his miracles provoke unease and suspicion that his religious innovation has gone too far. The Old Testament passage is a story to which Jesus himself refers elsewhere as an example of breaking religious taboos when David shares the consecrated bread with his soldiers. Defensiveness, or excessive policing of the boundaries of our faith, is not faithfulness to Christ.

The Inns of Court are among many institutions of Christendom that are thinking about how they can become more inclusive in a multifaith society. So learn the lessons of the Coronation. Its planners did not adopt an outdated approach to these questions: tokenistic forms of participation or radical secularisation. Instead, retain confidence in your institution's story and see that as the foundation for an ever more inclusive embrace of those who are different.

The reign of King Charles as an era of flourishing religious pluralism will not be measured by how he was crowned, but by how well we continue to take religious communities seriously on their own terms, listening to the problems they face, learning about their cultures and worldviews, and effectively responding to the global tensions that arise between them. And in that effort, all the Christian institutions of this country have a very important role to play.