

Draft Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Scottish Parliament, Committee Room 6

27th February 2019

Present

John Mason: MSP for Shettleston
Murdo Fraser MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife
Jeremy Balfour MSP for Lothian
Azhar Chaudhry - Ahmadiyya Muslim Community
Muhammad Akbar – Ahmadiyya Muslim Community
Naeem Sattar - Ahmadiyya Muslim Community
Ahmed Owusu-Konadu - Ahmadiyya Muslim Community
Hassan Rabbani - Annandale Street Mosque
Oliver Lane – Dundee Interfaith
Steve Begarnie - Open Doors
Patricia Findlay - Aberdeen Interfaith
Sheila Lamont - Inverness Interfaith Group
Ephraim Borowski - Scojec
Mirella Yandoli - Church of Scotland
Anthony Horan - Catholic Parliamentary Office
Linda Oxburgh - Release International
Brian Oxburgh - Release International
Alan Kay – Interfaith Scotland
Malcom Macleod - Steadfast Global
Brian Miller - Baptist Union of Scotland
Phil Lucas - Quaker Parliamentary Engagement Group
Alan Meldrum - Open Doors
Gordon Macdonald - CARE
David Robertson - St Peters Free Church
Rita Docherty - Interfaith Scotland
Jamie Spurway - Interfaith Scotland

Apologies

Charles Warren – University of St Andrews
Ruth Donaldson - Christian Solidarity Worldwide
Kieran Turner - Evangelical Alliance
Evelyn Rae Lister - Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
Yolanda Matro - Focolare
Patricia Batista - Focolare

Quorate

The meeting was quorate as three MSPs were present during the majority – John Mason, Murdo Fraser and Jeremy Balfour.

Welcome

John Mason MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the structure of the evening.

Brief Report from 2018

The group's meetings and related topics throughout 2018 were described by John Mason. David Robertson put forward the suggestion that as freedom of religion or belief is the basis of all freedoms, that at least half the group's meetings should focus on freedom of religion or belief in the UK. There was brief discussion of this suggestions. John Mason advised that he would consider the suggestion, and noted that even the topics with a more international focus usually touch on freedom of religion or belief in the UK – including the talk scheduled for this evening.

AGM

The group held their annual general meeting, during which Murdo Fraser MSP nominated John Mason MSP to be re-appointed as convenor of the group. Having accepted this reappointment, John Mason MSP nominated Murdo Fraser MSP to be re-appointed as vice-convenor. Jeremy Balfour MSP seconded these two re-appointments. John Mason MSP also nominated Interfaith Scotland to be re-appointed as secretariat for the group, Anthony Horan seconded.

General meeting – presentation from Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

Azhar Chaudhry gave the main presentation of the evening. He began by describing the founder of the community - Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who lived from 1835-1908. He was from the town of Qadian in Northern India. The founder was very much against any violent interpretation of jihad and instead viewed the struggle as one that should be pursued through writing, education and self-reformation. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community believes him to be the second coming of Jesus and the messiah prophesied in Islam and other religions. This was described as the key difference between the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the majority of other Muslims.

Azhar described the history of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Britain, informing the group that the biggest mosque in western Europe is an Ahmadiyya mosque in London. The community also established the first mosque in London in Southfields, south London in 1926. They now have 130 branches throughout UK, and are established in 210 countries. The community work actively in the context of promoting peace. In the UK, a message of peace leaflet has been personally delivered to over 5 million households since 2010. The community's key message and motto is 'love for all, hatred for none'. Accordingly, interfaith dialogue is very important to the Ahmadiyya Muslims. The community is led by a global leader, known by the title of 'Khalifa' (Caliph) who has engaged with many national parliaments and institutions. In the UK, he met last year with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The presentation then addressed the issue of persecution. Azhar advised the group that Pakistan remains a dangerous country for an Ahmadi Muslim. They would not be protected by the police against

any attack from a mob. In 1974, then President Zulfikar Bhutto amended the constitution to declare Ahmadis non-Muslim. In 1984 circumstances worsened when the Pakistani government brought in Ordinance 20 which made it a criminal offence punishable by three years imprisonment for an Ahmadi to describe themselves as Muslim, or even to use the traditional Muslim greeting of peace or call to prayer. Additionally, Ahmadis have their faith identified on their Pakistani passports and are therefore impeded from going on pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam.

There have also been numerous acts of violence against the community. In 2010, 86 members of the Ahmadi community were killed in an attack on two of their mosques in Lahore. Azhar described that following this attack, he spoke to a young man who said that because his photo was shown on TV, identifying him as an Ahmadi, other pupils and even teachers tried to set him on fire.

On a global scale, in Indonesia for example a 1000 strong mob attacked an Ahmadi group, killing three. In Algeria over 280 Ahmadis have been arrested and faced prosecution on grounds of faith, and in Egypt arrest warrants were issued for 25 Ahmadis – again on grounds of faith.

How is this relevant in a UK context? The presenters described a pattern of hatred spilling over from Pakistan. As examples, it was described that in areas with large mainstream Muslim populations, where the beliefs of Ahmadis were displayed on billboards, there were complaints to the advertising companies and the signs were taken down. Members of the community were been denied the right to membership in interfaith groups including some city councils. Hatred has also been spread through UK radio and extensively through broadcast and social media. The group were shown a tweet supporting the murder of Asad Shah and a request to boycott a set of juice products allegedly owned by an Ahmadi family. It was explained that the name 'Qadiani' is a derogatory term used by other Muslims to describe the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. Qadian being the town that the founder of the Ahmadiyya community was from.

The main root of the spread of intolerance was attributed to hate preachers. Radical messages of hate are spread against the community. For example, a Pakistani hate speaker came to the UK to speak to a Luton mosque.

The most obvious example of hatred against the Ahmadi community in the UK was the murder of Asad Shah in Glasgow in March 2016. Earlier the same day, Mr Shah had sent out a tweet wishing his followers a happy Easter. Later that evening he was brutally murdered by Tanveer Ahmed. Mr Shah was described as a man who was well-liked in his local area and among many communities.

The presenters ended on an optimistic note by outlining the work of their youth association to clean up local areas, deliver food to the homeless and work for the benefit of the environment. The group also has a women's association and elders' association who work to engage positively with their local communities.

John Mason welcomed the robustness of the presentation.

Brief dialogue and discussion with the presenter

Questions and discussion followed the presentation. This included a query about the original faith of converts to the Ahmadiyya beliefs - it was described that converts come from many different faiths. John Mason questioned what so angered mainstream Muslims about the Ahmadis - the presenters

described a sense that it is a political issue in Pakistan where Ahmadis are a soft target for political gain. It was also advised that a core belief of mainstream Muslims is that Muhammad was the final prophet, whereas Ahmadis believe that there has been another prophet – albeit a one who came to revive Islam rather than bring any new teaching - since then.

There was also discussion around the case of Asia Bibi and how that compares to the situation of Ahmadis. It was relayed that an important difference is that Pakistani Christians would not be persecuted here in the UK, whereas Ahmadi would be. Also Ahmadis are the only community to be explicitly targeted by federal laws in Pakistan.

Another participant asked about the extent of support from the Scottish Government in relation to the community's safety. The presenters advised that 'When we compare the periods before Asad Shah's murder and after we see big differences. Since the murder we see much more effort from the police and government since then.'

There was suggestion of a need to expand the definition of sectarianism in Scotland. Disagreement within a faith can often be stronger and more bitter than between faiths. Currently the definition of sectarianism only covers enmity between Catholic and Protestant.

In relation to the discrimination experienced by the community, it was noted that it could even be difficult for the Ahmadis to be accepted as full members of interfaith groups, as there could be resistance from mainstream Muslim organisations.

Action Points

John Mason invited the speakers to propose an action. Ahmad suggested that that it may be worth the Scottish Parliament writing to the Pakistan High Commission. He also commented that the group could raise a question for the Home Minister with text suggested by the Ahmadiyya community. It was also suggested that religious freedom be considered in relation to aid money being given to Pakistan. Ahmad expressed the concern that such a policy only really hurts the poor of that country.

Separately, the idea was put forward that future discussions could be between people of opposing views. John Mason promised to reflect on this suggestion.

Date of Next meeting

The date of the next meeting is still to be decided.