Address to Churches Together In Britain and Ireland 19th October 2009

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address you this evening.

This evening I want to reflect on the relationship between Government and faith. How we have worked together in the past, how we do so today, and how we can continue to do so in the future.

As Secretary of State for Communities, I am responsible for the Government's formal dialogue with faith communities, and also for co-ordinating that dialogue among Government departments. Both my predecessors were practising members of their faith and could bring their own beliefs to bear on their responsibilities.

I, on the other hand, would see myself as a secular, humanist. Coming into this job, I thought it would be of interest to me certainly and, I hope, to you to explore the relationship between faith and government from that perspective.

It has been suggested more than once that there is a secular agenda; a secular conspiracy even, at the heart of government and the state which seeks to marginalise faith and marginalise believers.

I don t believe that is the case. And I will argue tonight that any such agenda would be profoundly misguided.

The relationship between faith and government will not always - perhaps not often - be comfortable. Those of us in government will no doubt continue to take decisions which some faith communities disapprove of. But, at root, there are good reasons to maintain a relationship based on respect and understanding.

When I say I am a secular humanist I have to admit that it would take a very skilled theological surgeon to separate my secular beliefs today from the values I absorbed from my upbringing in the Church of England. Values, moral precepts, my sense of the natural calendar and my appreciation of music all owe something to those roots.

In the same way, our supposedly secular society owes a great deal to the way in which the Judeo-Christian tradition has shaped our moral heritage over centuries. Christianity continues to play a distinct role in our national life, while the contribution of other faith groups has also enriched our society immeasurably.

Politicians are interested in shaping society for the better. Faith is one of the powerful forces which shape society. Most people of faith are concerned for the human experience today, as well as spiritual welfare in the future. It is natural and inevitable that we should be interested in each other.

However, the starting point has to be respect for faith itself; for the powerful meaning which faith has for so many individuals.

For many people, their faith plays a defining role in their lives. It runs to the heart of their character and is a central part of their identity. At different times, it can inspire and give purpose; it is a source of consolation and comfort. It brings duties and responsibilities; often challenge - but it is also an immense source of joy and hope.

It has inspired a response at times of humanitarian and political crisis. In the way faith communities responded to apartheid in the 1980 s, to casualties of the Bosnian war in the 1990 s, to victims of the Tsunami more recently.

And one does not need to have faith to recognise the way people we know have been sustained by their faith through grave illness, through caring and nursing responsibilities, or unemployment.

Of course, throughout our history, many people have been inspired by these private convictions to enter politics and public life. In Europe, social democracy was often constructed in opposition to religious faith, and could even be actively hostile and militantly anti-religious.

In Britain, by contrast, where there was a strong tradition of non-conformism and a richly diverse civil society, religious thinking played a crucial role in the growth of social democracy.

I am not going to make the crass mistake of claiming faith for my party. But the influence of faith is well illustrated by its influence on and involvement in Labour history.

Many early social reformers - like Sir Thomas Buxton, Elizabeth Fry, William Wilberforce, Charles Wesley, and William Booth - were inspired by their religion to speak out against the social injustice crushing poverty and unspeakable living conditions they saw around them.

Later, many Christian Socialists - including Arthur Henderson, Keir Hardie and RH Tawney - were instrumental in helping to establish the Labour party. Their influence leaves an important legacy to this day. It is an old saw that the Labour party owes more to ‘Methodism than Marxism'

More recently, the Labour party has provided a home for other people of faith. Many people - from a whole variety of faith traditions - arriving after the horrors of the Second World War hoping to rebuild a better world, found common cause in Labour party principles of social justice, equality and community.

Those of us who share that history can hardly fail to respect the importance of faith in the lives of those with whom we work.

I know some of those who recognise the importance of engagement with government, nonetheless believe that government has an instrumentalist view of faith.

That we are only interested in you when we have a problem to solve.

By contrast, they want faith to be respected in its own right; not as a prop to government.

I agree. I believe that respect has to be the starting point. Government should respect - should value, prize, and celebrate those things which matter to its citizens. And as I have described, for many citizens in this country, their faith shapes and defines who they are. Any government which treats that lightly will govern badly.

But I also believe that our relationship, though starting with respect, can properly be deeper.

In an earlier era, it may have been possible to define a sharp break between the concerns of the individual and the state. The claim that an Englishman's home is his castle reflected the view that the private lives of families - domestic violence, cruelty and child abuse included - lay beyond public policy.

Today, not even the most fervent critics of the 'nanny state' feel so comfortable with that division. Like it or not, Government is frequently concerned about how people behave.

Whether we wish to promote greater environmental awareness and sustainable behaviour, reduce obesity, raise parental aspirations, or sustain support for international development, good government frequently returns to the question of what really makes people tick.

Government can’t legislate and regulate for every aspect of human behaviour. Nor should we want to.

So good government is understandably and sensibly interested in the factors which influence and shape people's behaviour. What motivates and drives them to behave as they do; and how their behaviour, in turn, has an impacts and effect on other people, for good or ill.

Politicians and policy makers must have a deeper appreciation and understanding of the other factors which motivate people to behave as they do. To understand the forces and institutions which shape people's attitudes and values - and how that is reflected in their behaviour.

It matters to government what shapes the obligations of parents to children, and of children to parents. How they perceive their responsibilities to the environment and world beyond our shores. How altruism shapes the part they play in their community or their interest in volunteering.

Now, it would be quite wrong to suggest that faith organisations alone are responsible for defining, shaping and transmitting values in these key areas. It is not necessary to have faith to be deeply morally and profoundly altruistic.

But the reality is, of course, that for millions of people, faith has an enormous influence in these areas of life. We should acknowledge and welcome the contribution faith makes to shaping these behaviours and transmitting these values. Anyone wanting to change society in a progressive direction would ignore the powerful role of faith at their peril.

And we should continually seek ways of encouraging and enhancing the contribution faith communities make to the debates around these issues.

This is obviously easiest when faith requires its members to engage in the great issues of the day.

All the great religious faiths share a common commitment to community, social justice and peace - and many members strive tirelessly to achieve those goals. Faith groups have been prominent in international efforts like the Jubilee Campaign, and campaigns for Fair Trade.

I was one of those involved at the very beginning, in 1984, of the campaign against Third World debt. In the early years, it was the support of small groups of church supporters who sustained and grew the campaign which eventually became Make Poverty History. It was when the first Bishop became involved that we really thought we were winning. And it was not coincidence that it was the biblical concept of Jubilee which shaped the Jubilee 2000 phase of the campaign.

Faith is a strong and powerful source of honesty, solidarity, generosity - the very values which are essential to politics, to our economy and our society.

Sometimes, faith groups will express those values in a critique of government policy.

Back in the 1970 s, faith groups formed the backbone of the campaign to achieve our first anti-homelessness legislation. In the 1980's, the Church of England s 'Faith and the City' report made a stark assessment of the impact of neo-liberal policy in inner cities, which helped spark a wider social debate about unemployment, inequality, and urban decline. More recently, others have spoken out about the Iraq War and the gap between rich and poor.

This has not always been comfortable for Governments - and nor should it be. A legitimate criticism, grounded in faith and drawing on your experience in practical work in the community is part of the unique perspective that people of faith can bring to the debate.

Nor should we assume that the relationship will always be comfortable in other ways. Nor that faith is unambiguously on the side of liberal and progressive values.

I am one of those who believe that the acceptance of homosexual equality in our society is one of the great and liberating changes of my lifetime. That is not a view held by all members of all faiths.

Such enormous social changes will and should be reflected in the democratic process and through that, the law. Those debates will be influences by the values of both faith and non-faith organisations, but not determined by them.

Contentious and moral questions will expose the tensions in the relationship between governments - especially as expressed in law - and faith. This is in part because, through history and choice, we have not tried in Britain to construct a sharp dividing line between the public sphere and private choice in matters of choice the sort of tensions we see elsewhere in Europe over about the role of religious symbols in schools and public life.

The British way suggests that a confident democratic society should not only permit but welcome and celebrate the expression of faith in the public sphere.

A democratic debate - which not only includes, but embraces the contribution that faith groups can play - is the only way to arrive at a legal framework on contentious issues. That is bound to include discussion of the space for personal conscience.

It is clear that we should all be equal citizens under the law. As the principle of the Jewish religious courts says ‘the law of the land is the law’ – the law of the land takes on the same status as a religious obligation; so in Jewish tradition a person of faith is obligated by religious as well as national law to adhere to the law of the land.

The law can accommodate alternative procedures, voluntarily entered into, for resolving disputes. Sensitivity to religious concerns, such as the introduction of sharia compliant financial products, can increase choice for all.

But it would never be acceptable to undermine or weaken people's rights on religious grounds. No one can lose their rights under the law because they may be of a particular faith.

Tensions between law and faith will never be easy. So it places a premium on the quality of the discussion that we have - a discussion which should respect the principles and values which we all share tolerance, diversity and ultimately, respect for the rule of law.

And part of my argument tonight is that the law itself should not be the only focus for the relationship between government and faith. Our shared interest in that common territory of what makes people behave the way they do should be a rich and fertile area to explore.

There is a common interest in not destroying the planet on which we live. If the scientific imperative drives our concern, faith concepts like stewardship may help sustain the response. In the midst of a global economic recession, driven by lending, I am sure faith has something to contribute to the debate about the values we need.

We share a common interest in how parents see their obligations to their children and to each other.

And while each faith has its own unique contribution to these discussions, their power can be enhanced when faith finds common ground together.

My colleague, the Rt Hon Alun Michael MP, brought together people from different faiths to articulate this in “Faith in Politics: Shared Values.” They suggested a range of values shared between different faith traditions – from justice and equality, to hospitality, to holistic transformation, to stewardship, to engagement and integrity – could be a starting point for building consensus on the kind of society we want to build, and how to build it.

This is one justification - not the only one - for Government backing for the UK s first ever interfaith week.

It will of course, also give us a unique opportunity to celebrate the rich and diverse contribution to the UKs social and cultural life.

I’m sure many of you will be participating in the events – which are designed to highlight and to strengthen the contribution that interfaith activity and individual faith communities are playing in social action projects around the country.

Faith groups have a strong and proud tradition of working together without government involvement, driven by a desire to better understand each other and to tackle areas of mutual concern.

Back in 1942, the 'Council of Christians and Jews' was founded to promote 'religious and cultural understanding' and combating religious discrimination. More recently, faith communities in the UK have collaborated on the innovative and influential 'Living Wage'. Make Poverty History may have had rock stars at the top but there were an awful lot of unsung believers sustaining the campaign. Faith groups joined together to condemn the atrocities of 9/11 and 7/7. Today, inter-faith activity stretches from social action and campaigns for human rights to education and arts projects.

Given these traditions has evolved naturally, without Government intervention or involvement, why should it now be more actively involved in supporting inter-faith work?

Firstly, because, as I have already argued, faith organisations have a huge role to play in the public sphere. Their voices, challenging as they may be at times, have a particular wisdom to share. Faith organisations - particularly by working together - can offer unique insights into contemporary issues. The aging population, the rise of consumerism, global poverty, climate change, social justice - the list goes on.

Faith organisations are closely involved in tackling those issues at a local level. They have an invaluable role to play in shaping the national - and international - response as well. Government should try to strengthen that joint relationship, without influencing it or compromising the independent perspective that faith groups bring.

Secondly, inter-faith activity helps bring people together in a dialogue about who we are and what we want our society to be.

Faith has shaped the way we see ourselves today. And as long as there are faith communities, faith will help shape the way we see ourselves in the future.

The truth about our British - or our English - identity is that it is not something that can be discovered; disinterred from the past through historical inquiry. Of course our shared history is an important part of who we are. But our understanding of that “we” changes as our society changes as a direct consequence of the history of trade, empire, missionary activity and war.

I would guess that the rural East Devon of my childhood had a strong and shared set of identities. But it did not have much room for many of the faiths and people who are now seen to be British. If we look for the essence of Britishness exclusively in our past we will discover past values which leave us distinctly uncomfortable.

National identities are made. Made together through shared experience and exploration.

In the week that the BNP will be on Question Time, let's remember that far more of us are building a British identity for the 21st century.

One that values history; but one that values diversity, and difference; one that has strong shared values; and one which is proud of our ability to handle issues on which we disagree with respect and without conflict.

Faith communities together have an important role to play. Many already have, in the work they have done in undermining the claim of the BNP to be a Christian organisation.

Thirdly, I believe that there is immense practical value to society in having faith groups work closely together to overcome social division and promote cohesion. It's a vital ingredient in the development of the healthy social capital which contributes so much to our collective well-being.

In the aftermath of the 2001 riots, substantial work went into working out why some communities exploded into riots and some were able to keep a lid on the tension.

One distinguishing feature was the strong relationships between different faith groups, political leaders and the leaders of public organisations in areas which kept the situation under control. They knew each other. They had learned to work together and trust each other. They had - very important sometimes - each others mobile phone numbers.

In contrast, in places which did experience riots, there were no relationships and no connections - which meant there was little resilience when the community was under pressure.

The response to the recent emergence of deliberately provocative groups like the English Defence League shows how much we have moved on.

I am never complacent, but the relative success in handling those demonstrations, the widespread refusal of young people, particularly from the Muslim community, to respond to provocation and play into the extremists hands, could not have happened without the investment of time and effort in building links between faiths, and between faiths and the police, local authorities and political leaders.

So while the issues remain difficult, the fact that they are being addressed head on is tribute to the quiet, often unnoticed, work of hundreds if not thousands of members of different faiths across the country who help to bring people together.

Their contribution is something that I am deeply, personally grateful for, and I know that gratitude is shared by all those around the country - in the police, in councils and among residents of neighbourhoods - struggling with real challenges. This reflects what the Archbishop of Canterbury has called the 'ordinary humanity and the ordinary neighbourliness' of people of faith. Their efforts not only help to build communities resilient to stress and tension, but are also a powerful force for good and social change.

And finally, but most elusively, one of the best things about bringing people together is that it has unpredictable results. So I am sure that all sorts of new networks and new initiatives will be generated from inter-faith week, even if we don t in advance what they will be.

Given the value I place on the contribution of faith and faith communities to our society, it is worth ending by asking how Government and faith groups can build on our existing relationship and work positively together in the future. In particular, I want to reflect on how Government can best enable and support their faith communities to play their important role.

It is really only in the last decade that Government has begun to recognise the importance of a structured dialogue, culminating in the 'Face to Face and Side by Side' strategy. Our main vehicle for that dialogue today is the Faith Communities Consultative Council.

The FCCC will remain the primary representative forum for discussion policy issues which interest us both.

Many of you will know, I have also been looking to broaden and strengthen the range of expertise available to Government.

I am in the process of setting up a panel of experts on issues of faith and public policy to act as a sounding board for myself and the Department, as well as recruiting a permanent advisor who specialises in the role faith communities can play not just in community cohesion but in the wider issues I have touched on tonight.

But beyond all this, should we go further? If the relationship between the faith communities and government is as important as I have said, how can we develop it further? Should we invest more – either time or money – in facilitating dialogue and developing common issues? It is not the role of Government to fund faith organisations per se, but would it be appropriate to give some support to those communities which lack the infrastructure to respond to dialogue?

In principle, I'm willing to make a modest investment in strengthening our ways of working. But I'm also nervous of doing anything which looks like imposing a governmental way of working on our relationships with faith communities when different ways of working may be better. So your view would be welcome.

To conclude, let me summarise some of the principles which definte what I believe about the relationship between government and faith. First and foremost, faith must be respected and it's power acknowledged by government – faith in its own right, not just for the instrumentalist role it might play. Second, that to address any of the major challenges facing society, government needs to understand and engage with the factors which shape people's behaviour – and faith can be a huge influence here.

Third, that while the process of making law should show an appreciation and understanding of faith; we are all equal under the law.

And finally, government has a huge interest in supporting faith communities as they work together – both to promote cohesion and address conflict, but equally importantly: because of the social good that they can create together. These are the principles which I start from and I look forward to a considered discussion about how these should work in practice.

Today, in this unprecedented economic turbulence, we are grappling with extraordinarily difficult issues. It is difficult to overstate the important role which faith communities can play in that shared endeavour. Many of you will be directly involved in practical efforts to support people who have lost their jobs, who are worried about keeping their homes and so on. I for one recognise and sincerely appreciate the value of those selfless acts of kindness and compassion.

If Government is prepared to listen and learn, it will benefit immeasurably from the thoughtful, reasoned and principled contribution that faith communities bring to the debate about how to build a just and fair society. I look forward to working with you - and learning from you.

Thank you very much.