

a statement

‘MERRY CHRISTMAS’ OFFENDS?

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Over the past few years there has been concern about the secularisation or deChristianisation of certain religious festivals. In particular, concerns that local authorities decided to rename Christmas. In fact, this was not the case, although stories persist of Christmas ‘being banned’. Some have suggested that Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ and wishing people ‘Merry Christmas’ offends members of other religious traditions.

As Christians and Muslims together we are wholeheartedly committed to the recognition of Christian festivals. Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus and we wish this significant part of the Christian heritage of this country to remain an acknowledged part of national life. We believe that the only beneficiaries of a declining Christian presence in public life are those committed to a totally non-religious standpoint. We value the presence of clear institutional markers within society of the reality and mystery of God in public life, rather than its absence.

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We believe that our open and democratic society should promote freedom and expression of religion in the public space rather than restrict it. We welcome, for instance, public recognition of ‘Id al-Fitr (Eid al-Fitr), as Muslims celebrate the conclusion of Ramadan. We value partnerships in some local communities which enables others to share with Muslims at this time of celebration. This affirms the public contribution people of different faiths bring to our society. We believe that downplaying the celebration of religious festivals promotes frustration, alienation and even anger within religious communities. Such negative approaches devalue religion and undermine the positive contributions that faith communities bring to society.

We also rejoice in the contribution and value of all religious communities in our country – Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and others. It is important for the integrity of all religious traditions that we recognise the centrality of their major festivals. In our diverse society we need to foster a mature and healthy outlook which recognizes this country’s Christian heritage as well as the important part that other religious traditions play within our culture. This demands increased religious understanding by government and local authorities, and we are encouraged by the involvement of the Department for Communities in this area and the annual Inter Faith Week.

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We are thankful for policies and actions which respond helpfully to our changing religious environment. On the other hand, we are concerned that approaches based on anti-religious philosophies, or fear of religion, risk causing alienation in many communities and fanning the growth of extremism. Those who react to religious pluralism by downplaying the place of Christianity in British society unthinkingly become recruiting agents for the extreme right. They provoke antagonism towards Muslims and others by foisting on them an anti-Christian agenda which they do not hold.

People need occasions for festival and celebration. For many in our society, these opportunities are fundamentally religious and spiritual. We encourage everyone with responsibility in national and local government to give an open and welcoming space for religious festivals as part of a positive contribution to community cohesion.

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