



Christian
Muslim
Forum



Religious Festivals and Celebrations

We have faced various calls over the past few years for the secularisation or de-Christianisation of certain religious festivals. In particular, certain local authorities have decided that Christmas shall be called by another (non-religious) name. The reason usually given is that to use a specifically Christian name for this festival offends members of other religious traditions.

As Muslims and Christians together we are wholeheartedly committed to the retention of specific religious recognition for 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. The desire to secularize religious festivals is in itself offensive to both of our communities. We believe that the only beneficiaries of eroding the residual Christian presence in public life are those committed to a totally non-religious standpoint. We value the presence of clear institutional markers within society which embody the reality and mystery of God in public life rather than evacuating the public space of any such reminder.

We believe that our open and democratic society should promote freedom of religion in the public space rather than negatively restrict its observance. We welcome, for instance the public recognition of Eid al Fitr, as Muslims celebrate together at the conclusion of the month of Ramadan. We value the partnership evident in some local communities which gives opportunity for others to share with Muslims at this time of celebration. This is a positive way of affirming the public contribution that people of different religious traditions bring to our society. We believe that any attempt to privatise and hide 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 major festivals within each community. In our increasingly diverse society we need to foster a mature and healthy approach to religious diversity which both recognizes the specific Christian heritage of this country and welcomes the important part that other religious traditions increasingly play within our culture. This demands a greater religious understanding on the part of government and local authorities than has been evident or necessary in the past.

We are thankful for those policies and actions which are responding helpfully to our changing religious environment. On the other hand we are concerned that those approaches which are based on anti-religious philosophies or a fear of religion are in danger of causing alienation in a wide variety of communities and fanning the growth of extremism. Those who use the fact of religious pluralism as an excuse to de-Christianise 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.

Human beings require occasions for festival and celebration and, for many in our society, these opportunities are fundamentally religious and spiritual in nature as we mark the high points in our different traditions. We call on all with responsibility in national and local government to give space and encouragement to an open and welcoming space for religious festivals as part of a positive contribution to community cohesion.

Released by Bishop David Gillett, Chair of the national Christian Muslim Forum and Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, Vice Chair of the Forum.