

Interfaith group's refusal to admit Druids sparks row



The Druids were the first pagan organisation to be recognised as a religion by the Charity Commission Matt Cardy/Getty Images

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The country's leading interfaith organisation has provoked controversy by refusing admission to the pagan Druid Network.

The Inter Faith Network for the UK, a registered charity, grants membership to Bahá'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian bodies.

But it has refused to allow the Druid Network, the first pagan organisation to be recognised as a religion by the Charity Commission, to sign up.

Phil Ryder, chairman of the Druid Network, applied to join the IFN in April. He said that he had been invited to take part in a review process of the network's membership policy.

"They are the largest interfaith network in the UK but they also control local interfaith work," he said. "So we are being excluded from local interfaith work. We oppose this because the only way of understanding each other's faiths is to talk to each other so we can work together in the community."

One example given was of the Anglican chairman of a local faith forum who refused to add pagan festivals to its e-mail news bulletin.

Supporters of the Druids cite the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which states that it views "with concern" any tendency to discriminate against religion or belief for any reason "including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community".

The Rev Peter Owen-Jones, a Church of England clergyman who chaired a meeting at the House of Lords this week to discuss the conflict, said: "The Inter Faith Network is publicly funded. By refusing entry to the Druid Network, it raises huge questions about whether it can continue to operate as a publicly funded body."

The meeting was told that the IFN has sought exemption from admitting Druids under the 2010 Equality Act "to avoid causing offence" to the other faiths in the network.

Muslims are among the faiths in the network who back the attempt by the Druids to join. According to a statement signed by Professor Mohamed Elsharkawy, Dean of Al-Azhar College, in East London, allowing Druids to join would not offend Muslims.

The IFN defended its exclusion of the Druids by claiming that to allow them in would damage the charity's work to the extent that it could no longer carry out its charitable aim of "promoting religious harmony among faith communities in Britain".

A spokesman for the Church of England said: "The Inter Faith Network is an autonomous organisation; its membership policies are a matter for the Network itself. However, the IFN is currently embarking on a strategic review of its membership policies, and it would therefore be wholly premature to comment at this stage."

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Presumably the druids are just about the only religion that treats women remotely decently. All the others seem to keep women down and out of positions of power hence misogyny and sexism may well be behind this. God, who may well be female, may well despair.

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Modern Britain is an immensely diverse and plural society, with an increasingly novel variety of belief and agnosticism.

The Inter Faith Network has been paid for by the British taxpayer in millions of pounds - at a time of economic hardship for ordinary Britons. Therefore, the refusal by the IFNUK to admit a peace-loving and lawfully-recognised faith community like the Druids triggers major discussions around possible religious discrimination under the Equality Act 2010, which have been discussed by a leading human rights law firm, Bindmans LLP here:

<http://www.religiousfreedom.org.uk/guidance.pdf>

In particular, this activates questions related to Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 concerning the Public Sector Equality Duty of government and public bodies to consider issues of religious discrimination and exclusion that may arise when they decide to give the money of British taxpayers as public funding to interfaith and other groups.

As decent, open-minded Anglican clergymen like Peter Owen-Jones will agree, Jesus Christ had no problem talking to despised and excluded religious groups like the Samaritans (John 4:7-9), while St Paul happily dialogued with Pagans in the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 17:22-28). It therefore seems absurd that the Church of England should have manufactured a 2009 policy document to exclude and denigrate from equal dialogue 'New Religious Movements and Alternative Spiritualities' which has no biblical foundation whatsoever, but rather violates the Christian injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Christianity was at one time a persecuted cult, as were all the so-called 'mainstream' religions. The Inter Faith Network leadership has acted with extraordinary arrogance and lack of integrity in excluding a law abiding, nature-focused Druid community, at a time when serious questions are being asked about Church child abuse, Muslim terrorism, and other criminality by so-called 'mainstream' religions.