



# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT *with* RELIGION *and* FAITH *in the* 21ST CENTURY

## Youth Engagement with Religion and Faith in the 21st Century

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### INTRODUCTION

The subject of youth engagement with religion and faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be addressed with a single lens. Across countries, there are contrasting accounts as well as the question of what successful youth engagement looks like being a key area of focus of this paper.

This paper will illustrate some methods and approaches used in youth engagement programmes delivered in the UK and Germany. The examples will involve people who are part of Baraza's global network and will illuminate how religion and faith can remain valid whilst connecting with 'secular' agendas led by governments and businesses.

### BARAZA: OVERVIEW AND HISTORY

Baraza e.V. is a non-profit association established in 2017 and headquartered in Munich, Germany. It is dedicated to the international promotion of peaceful

thinking, tolerance in areas of culture and religion and common understanding among nations. 'Baraza' is a Swahili word meaning 'council' or 'meeting place.' It is simply a place where people get together, share news and ideas and try to solve common problems.

Baraza envisions a future where transcultural and interfaith dialogue influence a new generation of global leaders, whose policy-making and actions are grounded in human values. Baraza's international team provides a global platform for transcultural and interfaith dialogue. It is underpinned by ideals of 'Understanding,' 'Acceptance' and 'Coexistence.' The NGO is supported by its network of knowledgeable experts and invests in education, creates real-world encounters and builds thriving partnerships.

Baraza wishes to build communities of hope over hate and promote understanding between people. In cooperation with our international team of experts, we develop ideas and projects through our relationships with partners. We support projects and initiatives across the globe which are designed for the general

public, but rooted in forming an international mindset. Through our programmes, we are able to reach broad audiences – from decision makers to parents, educators to children and leaders to communities.

The project that led to the eventual foundation of Baraza and the establishment of our international network, is the touring exhibition ‘Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence.’ This was conceived and realised by the Baraza board. Since 2010, this exhibition has been present in more than 120 locations in 35 countries around the world including schools, universities, state and religious institutions, museums, the UN and UNESCO.

Baraza maintains an active international network of renowned academics, leaders and specialists involved in transcultural or interfaith institutions. The founding members, advisors and associates of the organisation come from different countries and many walks of life. They work in various fields, are of diverse nationalities, ethnic groups and religious or belief traditions.

Baraza’s commitment to youth engagement is largely shaped by work undertaken in the UK by some of its network members. The UK is often regarded as a global reference point on matters of integration. There are many reasons for this – it is home to a wide variety and growing number of active religious minority communities in towns and cities with related connections to the education system, health service, law enforcement and other public institutions. A realignment of traditional Christianity vis-à-vis secularism; scrutiny over the place of the established church; faith-related structures at local and central government levels including the post of Minister for Faith and accompanying policies; open and often exigent public discourse about the place of religion and belief in society; tensions between some protected characteristics in the Equality Act (2010); an acknowledgement in some quarters that faith organisations contribute to the public good through social action (Kruger 2020) and the continued threat of religiously motivated extremism and terrorism.

A recent UK Government survey (Community Life Survey 2019/20) showed that the percentage of respondents agreeing that their area is a place where people from different backgrounds get along well together, has remained fairly consistent over the last seven years, with 82% agreeing in 2019/20, the same proportion as in 2013/14.

However, there was some variability amongst different demographic groups on the degree to which respondents agreed that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get along well. Those aged 75 and over (87%) were more likely to agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get along well with each other than younger age groups – ages 16-24 (80%), ages 25-34 (77%) and ages 35-49 (82%).

Whilst this report focused on people of different backgrounds with its emphasis on the whole spectrum of diversity, a groundbreaking two-year study (Woolf Institute 2020) entitled ‘How We Get Along,’ took a deeper dive into the place of religion. The report described religion as the “final frontier” of personal prejudice, with attitudes to religion being a driver of negative perceptions, more so than ethnicity or nationality (The Guardian 2020).

In addition, the report made a very strong point about the effects of the pandemic further exacerbating suspicion and hostility to others because working from home has removed social interaction at work, therefore limiting human encounters (BBC 2020).

## CHALLENGES

Despite the overall headline of relatively good health, the UK is also witnessing increasing levels of intolerance and hate in national life. Rising levels of homophobia, anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiments have led to some to question the sustainability of the multi-cultural model.

In 2016, the UK Government asked Dame Louise Casey to assess the state of social integration in the country. The report concluded that successive Governments, whilst well meaning, have failed to grasp the impact of population change leading to some local communities becoming more divided.

“The problem has not been a lack of knowledge but a failure of collective, consistent and persistent will to do something about it or give it the priority it deserves at both a national and local level,” Casey concluded, who said there had been failures in each administration (Guardian 2016). The most explicit criticism was Casey describing integration efforts as amounting to little more than “saris, samosas and steel drums for the already well-intentioned” (Casey 2016).

As a reaction to the Casey Report, in 2018 the UK Government introduced the ‘Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper’ (UK Government 2018) which committed to investing £50 million over two years and identified five areas of the UK as ‘integration areas’ to pilot initiatives to create positive community relationships. However, to date, the integration areas have some way to go to address a challenge set by Casey herself that far too many schemes are “often... piecemeal and lack[ed] a clear evidence base or programme of evaluation.”

In February 2021, Sara Khan the Commissioner for Countering Extremism who undertook a lengthy consultation exercise about the state of extremism in the UK concluded that “New laws are needed to tackle the “shocking” scale of extremism in the UK [to] prevent an “ever-bigger pool” from which terrorist groups can recruit (Channel 4 News; 2021)

In 2021, the Government appointed Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities published another contribution to the debate with its own report. Among the highlights of the recommendations were strengthening the Equality & Human Rights Commission to use its powers to challenge racism and discrimination, “teaching an inclusive curriculum”,

greater diversity within and training of Police forces and building “social and cultural capital” (Commission on Race & Ethnic Disparities 2021).

In the coming months, yet another report entitled the ‘Independent Faith Engagement Review’ will land in the same arena. What does this mean in practice? As more reports and recommendations are being published, the challenges are still mounting and whilst opportunities have too, the scale is weighed heavily against the side of progress.

## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Baraza’s foray into engaging with youth has been careful and considered. It has consisted of two main outputs. First, through the production of high-quality resources for use at school or in the home such as the flagship ‘Colouring Book for Kids – World Religions’ and the testing phase World Religions’ card game set which is adaptable for use with older children and adults. The second more intentional and profound intervention is a life skills programme titled ‘UNITY’ (Understand – Navigate – Inclusive – Teamwork – You).

The ‘Colouring Book for Kids – World Religions’ has been a remarkable resource. Available in 16 different languages and 7 editions, the publication has been extremely popular with schoolchildren in Albania, Germany and the UK. In recent months, the USA and India have also expressed an interest in the material. In the case of India, a school twinning exchange occurred between the areas of Leicestershire (UK) and Uttar Pradesh (India) with the ‘glue’ being the colouring book.

The document is testimony to Baraza’s mission rooted in authenticity and quality. Several religious leaders and advocates from Leicestershire (UK) were involved in the design and production. In the coming months, Baraza will distribute the book to delegates attending the G20 Interfaith Forum in Bologna, Italy with copies also handed out to local schools.

The UNITY programme is comprehensive, frontline and impactful. UNITY is an evolution of the Catalyst young adults leadership scheme which was delivered by St Philip's Centre (UK) through the Near Neighbours programme which in turn was funded by the UK Government in 2011.

St Philip's Centre – based in Leicester, described as home to the most “multi-cultural high street in Britain” (Mail Online 2016) and “the most multicultural city on the planet” (The Independent 2013a) worked with city sixth form and further education colleges which service ages 16-19, to recruit and implement a life skills programme rooted in an appreciation of diversity. In addition, St Philip's Centre ran Catalyst in London, Luton and Nottingham – all areas with varying dynamics and demographics which added to the body expertise.

The case for Catalyst was not only reinforced by the numerous reports referenced in this paper but the niche was how matters of religion and interfaith could be made universal enough to attract a wide cadre of young adults – many of whom were passive to religious identity.

The answer for this was in making Catalyst a holistic life skills programme which gave young people a metaphorical toolbox for life. On the one hand the need to value difference – so an ethical dimension with an equal emphasis on employability – the art of acquiring soft skills which are invaluable in the workplace. In 2013, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) reported that there was a shortfall in the UK employment market with young people lacking key skills such as self-management, problem solving and attitude to work. John Cridland, the now former Director-General of the CBI argued that, “Businesses want rigour, as well as young people to be rounded, grounded and ready for working life” (HR Magazine 2013).

If Catalyst in style and substance restricted itself to lessons about religion, it would have failed at the first hurdle. For those who were passive or even hostile to religion, the economic case for diversity struck a chord. For example, Catalyst succeeded in attracting young adults from white, working class, deprived backgrounds. The message to construction students was, if you wish to be a successful plumber or builder, closing yourself off from maintaining the numerous places of worship and the accompanying homes of followers, makes no economic sense. Understanding and respecting a wide customer base opens doors to work and income. Catalyst was able to recruit high numbers of women as well as young people from non-Abrahamic faith traditions.

So what of the global situation facing young people? In today's interconnected world, there are many transferable issues which allow nations to share solutions for. Some estimates suggest global youth unemployment stands “at a shocking 75 million.... [with the] number....still increasing” (FE News 2020). Arguments have been made that “soft skills — the competencies, behaviours and personal qualities that enable people to work with others, achieve their goals and navigate their environment with confidence — have become more important than ever” (FE News 2020). The World Bank has echoed these sentiments by stressing the importance of addressing the skills shortfall (World Bank 2021).

In relation to Germany, during its hosting of the European Council Presidency in 2020, the German government prioritised youth unemployment (EU 2020). In addition, a survey in 2019 sponsored by the oil company Shell (Shell 2019), spelt out a broader range of concerns raised by young people. According to the report, “nearly three-quarters (71%) of Germany's youth aged 15 to 26 rate[d] environmental destruction and pollution as their top fear....[followed by] terrorist acts....and climate change” (DW 2019). The report also indicated a distrust of party politics

and a small but significant number of young people reported sympathies with populist slogans.

On the surface, programmes like Catalyst or indeed other leadership schemes can seem positive on a superficial level. However, an evaluation carried out by Coventry University demonstrated tangible effectiveness (Coventry University 2016). Its findings included the programme meeting the expectations of 91% of participants, the building of lasting relationships with 70% of alumni staying in contact with people on the course, alumni reporting confidence in talking to, making friends/working with people from other faith backgrounds, 91% of alumni feel that coming into contact with people from a different faith or non-faith backgrounds was a positive experience (none felt it was a negative experience), 70% saw a positive change in their attitudes to people of other faith groups (with none seeing an increase in negative attitudes) and 87% of alumni felt more enabled to take on leadership roles in the community.

Baraza's partnership with SABEL School in Munich, Germany is evidence of its response. On a shoestring budget, a week-long trial programme in July 2019, changed the face of global schooling. The 2019 pilot attracted 22 students and generated immense positivity, with self-confidence a particular highlight. One cannot underplay the impact of an encounter on UNITY. Student feedback included having the opportunity to speak to a Jewish person for the first time – an eye opening observation bearing in mind the history of the city where the programme took place. Other notable moments were learning about the existence of faiths such as Baha'i and Jainism, plus having the ability to converse in an open, non-judgmental forum about societal issues linked to identity and belonging.

Since 2019 efforts have been made to widen and deepen the UNITY brand. It is now available as a series of tutorials lasting up to an hour with lesson

plans written for younger ages – currently 5<sup>th</sup> grade pupils aged 10 and 11. In addition, there is UNITY 'Academy' – a weeklong scheme for 15 and 16 year olds and UNITY Academy+ for 16 – 19 year olds. UNITY in its entirety covers individual liberty, critical thinking, democracy, networking, team building, job skills, presentation & communication skills, decision-making, respect and understanding in modern society and leadership styles. SABEL School Munich has now established a 'UNITY team' of teachers who will roll out the scheme across the establishment.

In July 2021, a teacher training programme took place at SABEL School Munich since the model of UNITY is to mainstream the scheme as a fundamental part of the curriculum. One teacher remarked, "The Unity program is a tremendous asset to this world. I am proud to be part of it. It will be good for the children." Another teacher added, "Imagine children: strong, self-confident, critical yet warm-hearted and open-minded to others. Standing their ground in times of post-facts and withstanding the temptations of radical solutions in a world consuming simple black or white-answers. In fact we share this vision for our pupils in the UNITY-Team, a program to supply our Kids with the tools they need to live a good life in an open society. The cooperation between the Baraza and our SABEL-school is a great forum to set this splendid vision into life and for me it's a pleasure to take part."

UNITY's goals are designed to enable young people to develop positive identities, the confidence, character and appreciation of liberty to live well in a democratic, multi-faith, multi-ethnic Germany, to acquire practical skills and experiences to play their part in building a strong civil society which will also enhance their employability, to act as agents of change for the common good and to fulfill their unique potential whilst being at ease with themselves and others.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of recommendations, which are based on many years of experience, here is a ten (10) point plan applicable to a range of stakeholders:

### *International cooperation*

All too often relations between nation states are led by officials – elected or otherwise or revolve around business. Whilst this is crucial, religious and belief communities are also multi-national and have much to share and learn from one another. We have seen how the pandemic has enabled people to access technology to bring them closer to their peers across the planet. Intergovernmental bodies must further open opportunities for expanding and sustaining these relationships.

### *Personal encounters halt prejudice*

This paper has demonstrated strongly through research and anecdotal examples, that when people meet others different from themselves, barriers are reduced and a feel-good factor is created. While online communication has been mandatory during the pandemic, it cannot replace the value of human engagement and connection.

### *Corporate to Communities*

Multi-national corporations have invested heavily in global causes linked to their corporate social responsibility commitments. Greater emphasis for acquiring funding should be placed on the need for transnational partnerships.

### *Prayer plus Purpose*

Religious and belief organisations come in many shapes and sizes with diversity being their greatest strength. However, this discourse need not be dominated by liturgy. We have seen examples in this

paper of how faith-based organisations are offering prayer but also purpose which equips young people for life. The global faith sector must emphasize the wider provisions within its umbrella.

### *Education for Life*

Governments must create the conditions for schools and colleges to become more than “exam factories<sup>1</sup>” so that they prepare children and young adults for life as active citizens. This requires set time in the curriculum or out-of-school for an exploration of such topics.

### *Diversity of provision*

A one-size-fits-all approach stifles innovation and prevents tailored interventions. Intergovernmental and governmental bodies must encourage a multitude of NGO actors to enter the space of support.

### *Universality*

Human life regardless of religion or belief must be cherished and valued. This paper has shown how faith-based organisations can engage effectively with young people who are passive or even hostile to religion because the case for understanding, respect and acceptance has many facets to it. Therefore, NGOs must reach out.

### *Alliances of Hope*

In order to translate words to actions and to move from aspiration to sincerity, religious leaders and organisations must commit to tackling and speaking out against hate.

### *Sound safeguarding*

Faith has enormous power and appeal to an overwhelming majority of people in the world. This authority comes with responsibility and so creating policies, practices and cultures which safeguard the

health and well-being of young people that build trust and confidence are vital. Systems which are open to scrutiny, accountable in process and proportionate in justice are non-negotiable.

### *Sharing across the ages*

All too often people who are from older age groups are dismissed as being backwards or irrelevant when it comes to young people and the future. This is not only discriminatory but misguided because life stories and learning are invaluable examples of how soft skills can be developed. Intergenerational initiatives which focus on sharing and learning should be supported.

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## ENDNOTES

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