

THE  TIMES**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

Ruth Gledhill Religion Correspondent
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The Inter Faith Network for the UK grants membership to Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian bodies, but it has refused the Druid Network

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'í, 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."

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<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article3617192.ec>

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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