

GOD AND COMMUNITY COHESION - HELP OR HINDRANCE?

Introduction

If you ask the proverbial man or woman in the street whether religion contributes for good or ill towards the cohesiveness of society, much depends on what the word 'religion' brings to mind; the evidence is mixed.

On the one hand they might acknowledge that religion teaches people to be good neighbours and to care for the sick and vulnerable. It has inspired many agencies for good – the hospice movement, the Samaritans, the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.

On the other hand they might recall that doctors performing abortions have been killed in the name of religion and many contemporary conflicts have had a religious dimension if not cause – from Kosovo to Gaza. If anything, as a result of religious terrorism, the balance of public opinion has tilted against religion. John Gray has written about the 'atmosphere of moral panic' that currently surrounds religion - no longer dismissed as a declining force, but 'demonised as the cause of many of the world's worst evils'. As a result, there has been 'a sudden explosion in the literature of proselytising atheism'. The success of books like *The God Delusion* is a direct consequence of the resurgence of religion.

Until relatively recently government took the view that faith was a private matter and not its concern. It was assumed that the issues that went to the heart of social harmony were to do with tensions caused by differences of race, gender, culture, relative wealth and social class – but not religion. These other factors still remain potent, but there is now an appreciation of the role of faith in framing the identity and influencing the values, attitudes and behaviour, not just of individuals, but of whole communities.

But that recognition has created a dilemma and an anxiety. The dilemma is deciding how far the state should go in dealing with or supporting the activities of faith groups. The anxiety can be framed as a question: 'How can a society remain cohesive if it consists of a number of faith groups with different theologies, values and aspirations, as well as a growing constituency that rejects all religion?'

What is not always appreciated by government or the religious communities is that the different faiths are not at the same point of maturity or embeddedness in British society. Christians and Jews have been present in Europe for fifteen hundred years, making a major contribution to the emergence of modern Britain. Jews have a long history of working out how to be part of a minority faith within a predominantly non-Jewish society. But other faiths are still at the earliest stages of that process. We should not underestimate the distance that British Muslims, for example, have yet to travel.

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So does religion strengthen or undermine society's cohesiveness?

The journey we have been on – 1945-2010

One way into that question is to consider what has actually happened in Britain in the last sixty five years, and how public policy has responded to those changes.

Consider for a moment two points in our history – just after the Second World War, the 1940s, and the present. And then think about the journey that the people of this country have been on in that time – roughly my lifetime. It has been a journey from mono to multi.

Take my home town. I grew up in an inner-city, working class district of Leicester just after the war. The city was overwhelmingly ethnically white, mainly Christian though with a small Jewish minority. There were a few Afro-Caribbean families where the men had been in the forces during the war and had stayed on and settled. Most immigrants, however, coming just before or after the war, were white European – Poles and Ukrainians - fleeing either Nazism or Communism or both. Their children, born here, spoke English as their first language, soon dispersed from the inner-city, intermarried, and had no wish to return to their family's country of origin. So Leicester in the 1940s was mono-faith, mono-lingual, mono-ethnic, and mono-cultural, along with almost every other town or city in the country.

One consequence of that was that the question of identity was not one most of us had to think about. You put it on at birth.

Compare that with Leicester today - poised to become the first English city where the ethnic minorities are a majority. In addition, today's ethnic minorities are from all across the world, though overwhelmingly from the Indian sub-continent and East Africa. They have changed the religious landscape dramatically with places of worship of every major world faith – not only Hindus and Muslims, but Jains and Sikhs, Zoroastrians and Buddhists.

What this represents is a significant change in the scale, pattern and purpose of migration. The first to arrive in post-war Britain were men looking for work. They filled the gaps in the labour market – working shifts in mills, on public transport, in the National Health Service. They had little intention of staying here permanently; they sent their wages back home to wives and families. Then the pattern and pace changed and we have gone from being a place of migrant male labour to one of diverse but settled cultural, ethnic, and religious minorities.

One consequence has been to make the question of identity more fluid and uncertain. Identity is no longer something we put on at birth but now involves for all of us a degree of self-conscious choice and struggle. What does it mean to be British if I am also: Welsh, Asian and Christian; or Scottish, black and Muslim; or English white and Buddhist. Or Irish, dual heritage and nonbelieving. In a multi-cultural society, we all have multiple

identities and to some degree have to work at what our British identity now is and means.

Strain and tension

From mono-cultural to multi-cultural in less than a generation – that is a very fast rate of change. It was not accomplished without tensions – from race riots in the 1970s and 80s to the community disturbances in northern towns in 2001.

One of the few who foresaw something of this with startling clarity was the Conservative politician Enoch Powell. He argued in an emotive speech in 1968, that unless immigration were stopped the social cohesiveness of local communities and the nation as a whole would be irreparably damaged since it made successful integration into British society impossible.

What Powell feared was the ‘communalism’ he had encountered as a soldier in India during the war. There each political party was dominated by one or other communal group – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Dalit – and seemed unable to rise above sectional interest. Powell feared for the homogeneity of the British electorate. He ended his speech by warning of trouble ahead with a highly-charged classical reference. He said that like the Roman he seemed to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood’ – and it became known as the rivers of blood speech.

Powell was absolutely right to say there was an issue for social cohesion from mass immigration; but the effect of his speech, with its lurid climax, made sensible discussion of immigration almost impossible for decades. As a result, for most of that time we have been unable to articulate that crucial question: ‘Can a society that is culturally so diverse cohere – can it hang together?’

How government responded: three stages of public policy

Meanwhile, government had to respond to the changes that were happening. There have been three principal responses: dealing with racial discrimination; promoting multi-culturalism; and finally strengthening community cohesion. Let me say a word about each and why we went from one to the other.

Anti-discrimination legislation

In the 1960s and 70s the assumption was that society’s tensions were essentially and literally skin-deep – they were about racial discrimination. If we could look beyond a person’s colour and see them as a human being, all would be well. Policy and legislation, therefore, were directed at improving race relations by outlawing discriminatory practices based on race and ethnicity. We thought that if racism could be eliminated, or at least greatly reduced, ethnic minorities would soon adapt and integrate into British society - which would in all other respects carry on as before: people from ethnic minorities would become culturally like the majority community – without making any difference to the majority culture – rather as the Huguenots and the Irish and the Poles had integrated before. What we sub-

consciously hoped for throughout the 70s and 80s was, you could say, integration by absorption.

Anti-discrimination legislation has had a significant effect, changing attitudes and conduct and shifting society's moral sentiment. But by the 1980s and 90s it was apparent that integration in the sense of absorption was not happening appreciatively. Distinct ethnic and cultural groups remained in their own areas, lived parallel lives and intermarried very little.

Multi-culturalism

So public policy acquired a new focus. If minority groups were not going to be simply absorbed, their different cultures would have to be acknowledged, valued and allowed expression – on the unspoken assumption that the culture of majority Britain remained unaffected. This was multi-culturalism.

It was never clear whether Britain's cultural pluralism was supposed to be the goal of public policy or the means of arriving at some other goal. Was it a stage on the way to a new cultural dispensation, after we had learnt from one another's cultures; or was it an attempt to freeze the country with the mosaic of cultures that it now had? Are we searching together for new forms of the common good for our time, ways of living together that bring out what is best from our respective cultures but move us all on to something new; or are we forever locked in our separate enclaves? If the former, then multiculturalism seems to me to be a good; it does not assume ab initio that another culture (and I include in this religion) is without merit or not worthy of consideration. Multiculturalism in practice, however, seemed to be the idea that cultural pluralism was good in itself.

The unspoken assumption of multiculturalism in that sense (cultural pluralism as an end in itself) was that all cultures were equally valuable, and all aspects of all cultures were equally valuable. As a result, we had no way of choosing between cultures, no means of preferring or prioritising; no way of evaluating, say, the music of an Aboriginal didgeridoo or a Mozart symphony. We could never say that in this respect this was better or richer or more worthwhile than that. Multiculturalism is cultural relativism and cultural relativism, while it promises tolerance, actually breeds indifference: if there is nothing to choose between cultures why bother with anyone else's? As a result, we became paralysed, unable to mount any criticism of minority cultures and fearful of 'imposing' anything of the majority culture on others – hence the decisions of some local authorities to replace Christmas with Winterval and prohibit nativity plays in inner-city schools for fear of imposing something alien. No doubt part of the reason for this was post-imperial guilt: we did not want to treat other people and their cultures in Britain as we had once treated them when we were the colonial power.

This was the politically correct position until it began to collapse, partly under the weight of its own absurdities and partly through a growing realisation that there were some elements in other cultures that jarred with previously accepted British values. This acknowledgment was slow to be articulated because multiculturalism had the effect of stifling critical debate.

Multiculturalism, as it developed, had two lasting consequences – one good, one disastrous. First, it affirmed the right of people to have their own cultures and to be different from the majority culture. We learnt to practice tolerance, and that was good.

But in the second place, we became indifferent towards other cultures. After all, if there is nothing to choose between them, there is no point in taking any of them seriously. Relativism says everything is equally valuable; but if everything is equally valuable then that is only another way of saying that nothing is valuable, because for something to be valuable there must be a contrast with something that is not as valuable or not valuable at all. By a different route we arrived at almost the same place as those who assert the superiority of their own culture while knowing little and caring less about that of others. I say ‘almost’ – because the majority became indifferent to its own culture as well! But that’s what cultural relativism does!

What disturbed this complacency were the riots by mainly Asian youths in northern towns, principally Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, in the summer of 2001, and Islamic terrorism – the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001 and the home-grown, suicide bombers in London in July 2005. The result of this was that Britain finally got religion and that led directly to policies of community cohesion.

Community cohesion

When I say Britain got religion I don’t mean that as a country we became religious. On the contrary, the story of Britain over the period I have been sketching is also the story of a retreat from religion. The British became not hostile to religion, but indifferent– at least to organised religion. (In the nineteenth century the British separated morality from religion; in the twentieth, they separated spirituality from religion.) The British did not get religion in the sense of becoming more religious, but in the sense that they came to understand the role that religion played in the lives of many people, not least those in the minority ethnic communities. Religion, which had gone largely unnoticed and ignored for decades, now came to be seen as a potentially critical factor either in enhancing social and community cohesion or undermining it.

Faith’s positive contribution to cohesion

What then did government see in religion that could make a positive contribution to community cohesion?

In a word – or two words – ‘social capital’. Social capital refers to the way the capacity of individuals to have an impact on their environment and their lives is immeasurably enhanced if they can act in concert with others and not on their own. Faith builds social capital. It brings people together for worship and fellowship in particular localities or among particular ethnic/religious groups; and so builds strong networks of people who get to know one another - bonding social capital. And faith groups reach out to other groups – other faith groups or public bodies – the council, the police, and so on – and this builds ‘bridging social capital’. So faith communities are

very good at building both bonding and bridging social capital which strengthens community cohesion.

Faith groups also tend to outlast government projects and initiatives. They are committed to their localities and have a concern for people's long-term and not merely short-term interests. And they can be a channel to some of the hardest-to-reach groups. They commend and perform the virtues needed for healthy communities – concern for the neighbour, hospitality, civility, honest-dealing, truth-telling, peace-keeping. They encourage members to be active citizens, urging them to use their vote and promote the welfare of their fellow citizens through volunteering or charitable giving. In all this, their contribution to the well-being of the local community and to social cohesion is out of all proportion to the size of the group.

That is the positive contribution of faith that government came to understand, welcome, value and exploit. But religion also has a shadow side.

How does religion threaten community cohesion?

Religion can undermine social and community cohesion in three ways. First, when a community feels under threat and emphasises religion as a marker of its identity; second when people of faith believe the position or honour of their religion is threatened; and third, and most seriously, when believers persuade themselves that God abhors a plural world and they have a divine mandate to forward or impose their religion by any means, including violence.

Religion and identity

Examples of the first – where religion is used to mark identity – can be seen in the recent history of the Balkans. In ethnic tensions, people who had lived in the same town all their lives suddenly saw themselves not as neighbours but as enemies, and used religion to reinforce their political differences. The Serbs of Kosovo asserted their Orthodox Christianity when they felt pressure on their community from the majority Kosovan Albanians who were Muslim. The dispute was not really a dispute about religion – the two faiths had existed side by side for generations. But religious symbols – the cross and the crescent – were co-opted as a way of marking a clear boundary and reinforcing a particular identity over against someone else.

We may not think that intra-community tension could become a matter of religion in secular Britain, but we have seen how it might happen with the exploitation of Christian symbols by the BNP as a way of marking off ethnic groups. If this is to be avoided we must be very clear that citizenship does not entail any particular religious identity. That is part of the deal in a liberal society.

Religion and honour

Second, religion unsettles community cohesion when something happens to make people of faith believe the integrity, progress or honour of their

religion is at stake and it is part of their religious duty to take action to 'defend' it. In these circumstances religion powerfully motivates and can supply justifications even for illegal actions. In December 2004, for example, the Sikh community in the West Midlands took exception to a play, *Behzti*, at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre which they believed portrayed their religion in a negative light. The play dealt with issues of sexual abuse and honour killings. Four hundred Sikhs demonstrated outside the theatre, some broke down a foyer door and smashed equipment; three policemen were injured. Mohan Singh from the Guru Nanak Gurdwara in Birmingham thought that free speech could go too far and wondered whether it was worth upsetting several thousand Sikhs in Britain and millions elsewhere. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham – to its shame - told its members to boycott the play. Few voices were heard from any religious quarter supporting the right and importance of the theatre to stage controversial plays without disruption. The theatre decided to cancel the run.

What the religious bodies failed to appreciate was that by using or supporting the threat of disruption they gave the impression (or simply revealed) that they were not really committed to the liberal values of the democratic state but merely took advantage of them when it suited them. Faith communities cannot have the penny and the bun.

Extreme action for God

And then third, cohesion is most seriously threatened when believers think they are justified in taking any action, however extreme, in order to defend or forward their cause. The question that has to be faced by believers is whether such an attitude is actually the logical end-point of all religious believing. This is what many critics of religious faith believe. They argue that believers think they have a monopoly of religious truth; that God has entrusted this truth to them and they must, therefore, defend it or further it, even to the point of laying down their life or someone else's; that they see no reason to learn from others, including people of another faith, since others have nothing of importance to impart and can only confuse or lead astray; accordingly, they must attempt to ensure that everyone believes what they believe. This is why the history of religion, so the argument goes, is a history of coercion and violence in the name of God. For the religious impulse is always towards uniformity – hence the Holy Inquisition, hence fatwas, hence the burning of The Satanic Verses, hence the shooting of doctors for performing abortions, hence the bombs on the London transport system. The only reason religions on the whole do not behave like this in western societies is because they have been subordinated to the secular state; but given a chance and they will again seek to assert themselves. In other words, if religion cannot cope with pluralism, in a plural society and a plural world, religion is a permanent threat to social and community cohesion.

The question for our time, therefore, at the local, national and international level, is whether religion necessarily commits believers to strive for uniformity in belief and practice, which under certain conditions will lead some believers to take extreme action; or whether religion can contribute towards making the plural world we live in, whose pluralism is mirrored in

every urban community in Britain, 'safe for disagreement', including, and perhaps especially, religious disagreement?

Making the world safe for disagreement

We tend to think that there are only two ways in which we can make sense of a plurality of religions in the world. The first is to assume that only one religion can be true and all others false. (This is what monotheistic faiths have traditionally thought.) The second is to assume that the question of truth is irrelevant because religion is not about truth and falsity, but something else – a matter of personal taste, a universal delusion, an expression of an emotional or ethical commitment and can, therefore, appear in many guises. (This is what some religious sceptics have alleged.) Contemporary atheistic dismissals of religion can attack from either of these two directions – seeing religion as arrogantly absolutist or merely subjective – though in recent years attacks have tended to assume that religion commits its adherents to believe that they and they alone hold God-given truths and everyone else is mired in varying degrees of satanic darkness and delusion.

I want to argue for pluralism, not in the sense that we live in a world of many faiths - that is obviously true - but in the sense that a plurality of faiths is both inevitable and healthy for the human race. It is, if you like, one of God's good gifts. What pluralism does is open up the possibility of living life in a number of different ways and according to a range of different values, because an inescapably plural world is a world that does not narrow or close down possibilities for how individuals may live. Pluralism protects from a stultifying uniformity.

And the genius of the western democratic tradition is that it has found ways of organising society so that pluralism is possible and does not have to lead to an uncohesive society. The west made this happy discovery as a result of its own religious history. After Europe lay exhausted in the seventeenth century from years of religious wars, it had to find ways of making it possible for two forms of Christianity – Protestant and Roman Catholic - to co-exist without adherents killing each other. The key features and institutions of the liberal state evolved to make this possible – the rule of law, democracy, freedom of speech and worship, the elevating of the rights of the individual above those of a religious community. The point about these is that we can all agree on them, or at least acquiesce in them, whatever our religion. These are what I would call the contractual arrangements of the liberal state; they make it possible for a plurality of religions and a plurality of believers and non-believers, to co-exist peacefully; they make societies safe for disagreement, including religious disagreement.

Pluralism and monotheism

But can we argue theologically for pluralism, including a plurality of faiths if we are monotheists? Let me make two brief points.

Divine and human perspectives

First, the starting-point for any theological recognition of pluralism has to be with the fact that while God may stand outside history and culture, we do not. We have no God's eye view of the world and its competing values and therefore no way of deciding between ultimate values when they conflict other than through using our own fallible judgement. We may find this an uncomfortable thought and so look for security and think it can be found in some unchanging and infallible tradition, including a holy scripture; but this is an illusion. Scripture needs interpreting and applying again and again as circumstances change – and we know that when this happens there will be differences between us.

None of this means we are reduced to paralysis and can never embrace a particular faith and its values. We have no choice since we have to live our lives according to some ultimate values. We try to ensure that they are consistent and coherent. But we can never view them from God's perspective. Our way of interpreting the faith is always open to challenge and to say otherwise is to be guilty of the ultimate sin in both Christianity and Islam: it is idolatry, shirk.

Irreconcilable differences

Second, we should note that every religious tradition is already internally pluralistic with differences of interpretation that are incommensurable. Not surprisingly, therefore, we find that different interpretations of holy texts lead to different ways in which the religious life is lived out. For instance, there are some Christian communities who believe profoundly that following Christ commits Christians to repudiating any form of violence – the Amish, Quakers, Mennonites - while others puzzle over the meaning of a just war in a nuclear context.

This question of different interpretations is less of a problem for many Jews who are used to lively and on-going debate about the meaning of texts. 'Does not every text have seventy meanings?' But in Christianity the impulse has invariably been to try to close debate, to resolve issues in creeds and confessions. In Islam, although plurality can hardly be denied – Sunni, Shia, Sufi – together with different schools of jurisprudence - there is nevertheless a strong impulse against new interpretations. Muslims tend to value taqlid rather than ijihad, preservation rather than innovation.

Pluralism in the traditions

But there are texts in all our traditions that recognise the plural nature of the human community and they need to be considered afresh given the contemporary context of a plural society.

According to the Hebrew Bible, God's call is to the Jewish people; the laws of the Torah are binding on Jews in particular not all people in general. After Babel the human community is fragmented with many languages and cultures, with each people having their own route to salvation. This is why, as the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, has pointed out, Judaism has no equivalent of the Christian doctrine of extra ecclesiam non est salus (there

is no salvation outside the church). Other people will have their own relationship with God.

There is something similar in Islam. Take surah 5.48 in the Qur'an:

To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of matters in which you dispute.

And for Christians too, the Gospel according to St John says that because we cannot bear too much truth at any one time, one of the functions of the Holy Spirit is to lead us in the fullness of time to new truths.

In the west, the liberal state – whether it formally separated church and state as in America or had a religious establishment as in Britain - required Christians to acquiesce in living with denominational differences without recourse to violence or repression. Christians then found over time that what began as toleration eventually resulted in discovering much in each other's tradition that was valuable. Christians began to learn and even borrow from one another. In the process, each denomination was changed in ways it once could not have imagined. The idea of community or social cohesion in a sense invites the world's religions now present in Britain to embark on a similar ecumenical journey – from tolerance to discovery – made possible by mutual commitment to or acquiescence in the contractual arrangements of the liberal state.

Conclusion

We began with a question, 'Does religion help or hinder community cohesion?' I have tried to show how religion and faith groups can contribute positively towards community cohesion. I have also sought to show how religion can threaten cohesion. What will decide whether religion makes a positive or a negative contribution will be whether believers can learn to embrace pluralism not as a threat to God's plan for the world but as an essential element of it.

Britain with its plurality of faiths is uniquely placed to pioneer that.