

Whither Multiculturalism?

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Guyanean Dr Patrick Sookhdeo argues that modern-day multiculturalism must rest on a core of Britishness.

One of the cardinal doctrines of the Commission for Racial Equality was challenged earlier this year when its chairman Trevor Phillips declared multiculturalism out of date and that "what we should be talking about is how we reach an integrated society". He went on to declare the need to "assert a core of Britishness" across society in the UK.

Integration and diversity

Like Trevor Phillips I moved from Guyana to the UK. Growing up in this country, I have seen the gradual evolution of British society's understanding of the best relationship between minorities and the majority society. Immigrants who came in the 1950s, like my family, aimed above all to assimilate. In the 1960s Roy Jenkins set the agenda in the direction of acceptance rather than assimilation. This was to develop further in the 70s, 80s and 90s, when the concept of ethnic identity came to the fore. Each culture was to retain its own identity, like the tesserae of a mosaic. Now in the twenty-first century David Blunkett appears to be seeking to institutionalise this concept, which he describes as "integration by diversity".

Multiculturalism and separatism

Now we have reached a point where multiculturalism is held up as the ideal, that is, that individuals should maintain their own distinct cultural identities while interacting with others from different cultures. There is no larger culture to unite them, no foundational cement to hold the pieces of the mosaic together. Multiculturalism is now developing into voluntary separatism or what can be termed parallel societies. In American parlance we have already moved from the melting pot, to the stew pot, to the tossed salad, to the fruit bowl. Currently we seem to be arranging the fruit in groups on the table - all the apples together in one place, all the pears together in another place etc. This last position is perhaps the most dangerous, for it is argued that in the twenty-first century most wars will be internal and will centre on ethnic identity incorporating religion and culture set within a territorial or geographical context.

Race, religion and culture

The great failure of Enoch Powell was that he did not differentiate between race, religion and culture. Apart from a lunatic fringe, race is no longer an issue in the UK - we have some of the finest race relations in the world. However, culture and religion still pose a challenge, particularly when they are regarded in an absolutist sense, when they are linked to historical consciousness, when they are considered defining factors in ethnic identity and when they are linked to territory.

Shared values

Modern-day multiculturalism must rest on a core of Britishness, for this will be the cement that binds. For Britain the evolution of secularity over the centuries has provided the boundaries to contain the mosaic pieces and their cement. The context of a secular society can offer the best model for all religions and cultures to co-exist. Normally secularism is understood in one or other of two ways. Firstly, secular humanism is an ideology which seeks not merely to marginalize religion but actually to destroy religion. It sets itself up in place of religion. The second is secularism, interpreted from a post-modern position, which relativizes all values and negates all traditions. In this all religions and cultures coexist as equals. This position of absolute tolerance can give space to religions and groups to exist which are antithetical to each other and so can allow for the development of parallel societies which in turn can lead to social/religious conflict such as we have seen in Kosovo and many other ethnic conflicts around the world.

However, in Britain there has evolved a modified secularity in which theocracy plays a part. In

this type of society, religion and state are all but separate, though the state rests upon Judaeo-Christian values and Christianity still plays an important role. All religions and cultures are respected and affirmed, but Britain's historic values, formed from centuries of the presence and practice of the Christian faith, have primacy. It is this which the EU constitution has singularly failed to address. If we negate the Judaeo-Christian heritage of our society we do so at our peril.

The ideology of multiculturalism that is so strongly supported in the UK at present is tinged with a British self-deprecation that is proving very dangerous. Rather than viewing all cultures as of equal value, many white Britons now seem to respect all cultures bar the Judaeo-Christian-Western culture which is their own.

Incitement to religious hatred

Australia is discovering this problem in the wake of a law recently passed by the State of Victoria which dealt with religious vilification. David Blunkett's proposed bill on incitement to religious hatred could have a very similar effect to the Victorian law and I fervently hope it will not be passed. The Victorian law was quickly put to the test when two Christian speakers were taken to court for what they had said about Islam. The Australian Treasurer Peter Costello (from Australia's Liberal party) has made a bold and helpful comment on this situation. Interestingly, he was heavily criticised, including by some sections of the Muslim community, because he visited a church and made the speech there. Costello points out that Australian law and society are founded on the Ten Commandments and continues:

We have the Rule of Law, respect for life, private property rights, respect of others - values that spring from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Tolerance under the law is a great part of this tradition. Tolerance does not mean that all views are the same. It does not mean that differing views are equally right. What it means is that where there are differences, no matter how strongly held, different people will respect the right of others to hold them.

It is essential to realise that some of the bases of western society, such as respect for the individual, and the right to critique others' beliefs, are not universal norms. The very fact that they are so deeply embedded in western culture makes many westerners assume that they must be common to all humanity. But this is not so. As Costello makes clear, the western tradition derives from the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Towards religious harmony

This Judaeo-Christian-Western tradition makes a fitting context for multiple cultures to coexist. But equally it is vulnerable to cultures who do not share these attitudes. The British form of secularity embracing all cultures will not be long sustained if any one of the cultures takes advantage of the tolerance of the rest to promote itself and condemn others.

Last year the Singaporean Prime Minister sought to protect religious harmony in his country by a declaration about Singapore's secular nature. Interestingly, Christian leaders in Singapore insisted on amending this to affirm the religious diversity of their country, a move which I believe may prove counter-productive.

It remains to be seen whether Britain will move back towards integration and reassert the core of Britishness or move onwards to further separation and independence of its constituent communities. Changing these trends may seem as slow and difficult as trying to change the course of an oil tanker. But tankers are steered by small movements - it is just a case of starting to act early enough.

Michael Howard recently described how his father, a refugee, said of Britain, "This is the best country in the world and it is a privilege to be living in it." Such a view was argued too by my father, also a refugee in the UK.