

A MELTING-POT OR A MOTLEY CREW: JUST WHAT IS A MULTICULTURAL, MULTI-FAITH SOCIETY?

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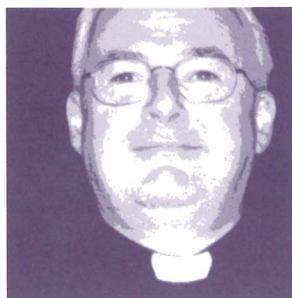
WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

I have to confess from the outset that I have always been troubled by concepts like “multi-cultural” and “multi-faith”. On good days, I can see them as shorthand for an optimistic blueprint of the society we would love to be in as near a future as possible. On less good days, my pedestrian brain cannot cope and wants people to say exactly what they mean when they use such terms. I suspect a poll of this publication’s readers would yield a whole kaleidoscope of answers, reflecting the state of Britain today.

Life as a Catholic priest has taken me to some unexpected places. The biggest surprise of my life so far has been to be asked to come and work in the Vatican, at the Pontifical Council for Culture, which will be just 20 years old in May 2002. Since 1995, my job has involved some trips out of Rome, and one of those was as head of the Holy See’s delegation to UNESCO’s intergovernmental conference *The Power of Culture*, held in the spring of 1998 in Stockholm. The process of preparation for that conference began in 1991, with the foundation of the World Commission on Culture and Development, headed by former UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar. The Commission published a report entitled *Our Creative Diversity* in 1995, and that was the working document for the 1998 conference.¹

Something one of the delegates at the conference said made me realise I am not alone in my hesitation about images of multicultural societies. The Spanish representative said that, when it is used of culture, the term *diversity* is “not a descriptive term, but a prescriptive one”. This is a very helpful distinction, which I think we could usefully keep in mind when thinking about culturally diverse societies. It is one thing to note that there is no longer – was there ever? – any justification for regarding Britain as a nation with a “pure” culture, whatever that might mean. But it is quite a different exercise to attempt to derive principles for thinking and acting from that fact. The distance between the *fact* of cultural diversity and *what it implies* is enormous, but is often skipped over in an instant.

It is also worth noting that cultural diversity has been exercising the international organisations rather a lot in recent years, and UNESCO, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe have recently issued documents on the subject.² I mention this to show how significant the idea of cultural diversity is, and also to emphasise that it is quite a complex idea. In fact, the Council of Europe had great difficulty agreeing on a definition of just what cultural diversity is. This is reassuring for those of us who feel slightly bewildered while others use the notion so ►



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► confidently. But it is also a warning: the whole area of the co-existence of different cultures is a minefield. Charity requires us to be patient with other Christians who do not share our understanding and zeal, and prudence should tell us to re-examine the key notions lurking behind terms like “multi-cultural” and “multi-faith”.

HOW CAN WE SING THE LORD'S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND?

One of the privileges of working at the headquarters of a global institution like the Catholic Church is meeting members from all over the world. Every five years, Catholic bishops are asked to come to Rome, where they can visit the various departments that are meant to serve them and guide them in their work. Some groups visit our Council, and usually one of us will sit in on the meeting between them and our President, Cardinal Paul Poupard. It is sad and worrying to hear very dedicated, humble men from Asia (and elsewhere) explaining that their greatest difficulty is that Christianity is regarded simply as an alien import, a vehicle for Western culture. As you will know only too well, certain governments view everything “foreign” religious groups do with intense suspicion; to overstep the limits of very innocuous activities is labelled “proselytism”, and the penalties can be fierce. The significant fact is that the real resistance is not religious, but cultural. Let us just consider three cases. 1. The People's Republic of China's opposition to the activities of Christians is based on a real fear of a repetition of what happened to the Soviet Union. There is an exquisite irony in the phraseology the authorities use: they are prepared to strangle the baby in the manger, if that is what is required to prevent it doing any damage. 2. Given the basic Muslim division of the world into two totally distinct portions, *dar al-Islam* (the house of submission) and *dar al-harb* (the house of war), it is understandable – however frustrating it may also be – that Saudi Arabia is completely uncompromising in its ban on other religions. 3. The Russian Federation has been extremely nervous about the activities of Christian groups on its territory, over which the Moscow Patriarchate claims absolute spiritual governance, although there seems to be a growing gap between the Church and the Kremlin these days.³

The attitude of the authorities in these three cases of official reaction against Christian communities and organisations seems to endorse Samuel P Huntington's sharp division of the world into civilisations, a view that emphasises the divisive character of the “fault lines” between different cultural regions and offers little hope of dialogue or peace.⁴ As has been pointed out recently,⁵ the

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true meaning of globalisation is that “many of the key elements of what has come to be defined as the modern, liberal Western, democratic, individualistic, capitalist way of life have spread very widely, and continue to do so”. This is precisely what appals so many who resist the influences of what they perceive as the threat of an encroaching monoculture, and for many it looks like a planned expansion on the part of the United States of America. Some analysts are quick to point out that there is no need for any such plot or for intervention by any particular nation, in a process which seems to have its own momentum. However that may be, one does not have to look very far, especially after 11 September 2001, to see that globalisation in any of its myriad forms is meeting enormous resistance. The repudiation of Western decadence or greed is hardened into a view of the world where different cultures can simply never co-exist. A culture that is judged to be wicked or sinful has to be purified or, at least, tamed (at most, annihilated).

Curiously, the incompatibility of cultures is something to which “multiculturalists” – in the world of cultural anthropology – subscribe. It is crucial to note this, because, in a situation where “most cultural anthropologists now favour a multicultural perspective that pronounces all cultures more or less equal”, the notion of a multicultural society has to refer to one society with many cultures, which are different and in a sense, self-contained. If that is what we mean when we say our society is multicultural and multi-faith, we are accepting the task of negotiating for ever between the legitimate claims and causes of the different cultural groups that make up our society. It means that no culture can (justly) dominate or claim to be “British”. This may already be the case; one can discover whether it is by asking any group of British people to describe their own culture – a fascinating exercise, as I have found with various groups. But I think honesty imposes on us the duty of asking whether such a situation is really the best. Or would we rather aim for a blending of cultures? Here again, asking ordinary people what they would like to gain from other people's traditions provides some interesting results. But so does the question about what they would not be prepared to negotiate! This truth is sometimes painful, but we must be willing to hear it.

CATHOLICS AND CULTURES

I was asked for a specifically Catholic contribution. Presumably that means the official approach of the Catholic Church to cultural questions. I would recommend a document produced by the Council where I work, which speaks at one point of national identities

NOTES

1 Briefly, *Our Creative Diversity* [Paris (UNESCO) 1995] dealt with 10 aspects of culture: global ethics, a commitment to pluralism, creativity and empowerment, challenges of a media-rich world, gender and culture, children and young people, cultural heritage for development, culture and the environment, rethinking cultural policies and the need for research. There were 10 actions recommended for implementation: publication of an annual report, preparation of culturally-sensitive development strategies, international mobilisation of cultural heritage volunteers, an international plan for gender equality, implementation of policies designed to enhance international media access, diversity and competition, media rights and self-regulation, protection of cultural rights as human rights, global ethics, a people-centred United Nations and a global summit on culture and development. These themes defined the vocabulary and areas of discussion for the Stockholm conference.

and minorities, and sums up principles to be found scattered throughout Catholic teaching. “Each culture aspires to the universal through the best it has to offer. Cultures are also called to purify themselves of their share in the legacy of sin, embodied in certain prejudices, customs and practices, to enrich themselves with the input of the faith and to ‘enrich the universal Church itself with new expressions and values’”⁶. The fact that Pope John Paul II founded a department in the Vatican to focus the pastoral activity of the Church on the evangelisation of cultures and the inculturation of the gospel speaks volumes in itself, and echoes his words at UNESCO headquarters in 1980: “The future of man depends on culture ...! The peace of the world depends on *the primacy of the Spirit* ...! The peaceful future of mankind depends on *love!*”

I could not agree more, which is just as well, given my situation. To anchor those fine hopes to what I was saying earlier, I think one has to recognise that *cultural diversity is a complex concept*, one which can be crippling if, rather than being genuinely neutral to all cultures, it actually neutralises them in the name of some other agenda. To take a familiar example, respect for cultures is not absolute if one objects – on the basis of human rights – to traditions like those that we from another culture call female genital mutilation (or, indeed, cannibalism). *The question of identity* demonstrates not only our justifiable pride in belonging, but also the fragility of the human spirit when our identity is threatened, so it has always to be recognised and respected. And I have a feeling that *love begins at home*. What I mean is that we are bombarded with a postmodern mistrust of what were once perceived to be pillars of our national “personality”. That has bred a clear contempt for things Western (directed in many groups at the Judaeo-Christian roots of European culture). While it is undeniably true that Christians are challenged to be in the world but not of the world, how could we ever claim to have some privileged view of the culture which is as much what makes us as what we make? Should we not love our culture, aware of its faults but wanting to make it what the Lord would want it to be? And if our culture has grown, developed and changed since we were young, that is neither a good thing nor a bad thing. The culture of which we are a part is our world, the place where we are commissioned to preach Good News. ■

NOTES CONTINUED

2 The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted on 2 November 2001 at the 31st General Conference in Paris; the European Parliament Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport, resolution on cultural co-operation in the European Union (2000/2323 (INI)), 5 September 2001; the Council of Europe Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted on 7 December 2000 at the 733rd meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies and published in September 2001.

3 The Keston News Service’s Moscow correspondent,

Geraldine Fagan (<http://www.keston.org>), has provided excellent reports on the current situation, particularly in the wake of the Catholic Church’s recent “normalisation” of pastoral care for Catholics in the Russian Federation with the erection of four dioceses in place of what were previously called Apostolic Administrations. At pains not to provoke the Russian Orthodox Church, the Vatican gave the dioceses devotional rather than geographical names and insists, for example, that it does not have a bishop of Moscow but a bishop in Moscow. Historical data on the situation of Catholics in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union before and during the Communist era seems to cut little ice.

4 Cf. Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York (Simon & Schuster) 1996.

5 in an article by Daniel Chirof on “Culture and Modernization in Times of Globalization” in the Institute for Human Sciences Newsletter 74, Fall 2001, pp. 26–30 (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, A – 1090 Wien, Spittelauer Lände 3, Austria. www.iwm.at).

6 Pontifical Council for Culture, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, Vatican City 1999, No. 10.