

WHEN CULTURES MEET: INTER-FAITH ENCOUNTER IN A COLD CLIMATE

By PHILIP J. LEWIS

IN HIS GIFFORD LECTURES fifteen years ago—before the presence of South Asian minorities and their needs impinged—Basil Mitchell noted that:

In England we are developing a highly differentiated society . . . without a common culture and shared ideals. This should not surprise us; for where are such unifying ideals to be fostered? The study of literature, history and the classics has had to be cut down to make room for the vast expansion in scientific education, and the church is rapidly losing the authority it once had as the source of unifying ideals . . .¹

A similar complaint was heard in France. The Seventh Plan (1976) admitted that:

French cultural life has not increased in homogeneity at all: on the contrary, each milieu functions in a closed circuit, secreting and consuming its own culture. It is like a series of whirlpools being created, juxtaposed without communication . . .²

Such cultural pluralism has not prevented a xenophobic reaction to migrant communities across Europe. In Britain the first Race Relations Act came into force in 1965 and twenty-five years later the Commission for Racial Equality still considers that one-third of employers discriminate against black and Asian people. Whatever the weaknesses of such legislation it is well in advance of any other legislation in Europe. The Treaty of Rome provides no protection from racial discrimination and there are anxieties that the creation of the Single European Market by the end of 1992 will be very much to the detriment of ethnic minorities.³

Across Europe the political right are capitalizing on fear of Islam. In France in October 1989 the insistence of a college principal that three Muslim girls must remove their headscarves triggered an acrimonious debate around the need to preserve the principles of republican *laïcité*. The debate was soon generalized into a discussion of immigration and the future cultural identity of France. What is particularly disturbing is that:

Immigrants are seldom popular, but . . . western Europe finds Muslim immigrants particularly indigestible. In large measure, this is because Islam had alienated the European left—the natural friends and protectors of immigrant communities of every kind The war between Christendom and Islam may have experienced a long truce, but it is . . . in the very bones of many Europeans. As Europe secularises, we are happy enough to do without Jesus, but we far more strongly don't want Allah in his place. When these ancient prejudices coincide with the more ordinary . . . nativist rejection of foreign newcomers . . . the result is *an explosive act of self-definition*.⁴

The danger that Islam will replace communism as the enemy in the terms of which we define ourselves is far from fanciful. In 1966 Roy (now Lord) Jenkins, as Home Secretary in the Labour Government, defined 'integration not as a flattening process as assimilation but as equal opportunity, coupled with cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.⁵ This definition encapsulated the aspirations of many who sought to make space for ethnic minorities in Britain. The same Lord Jenkins, at the height of the *Satanic verses* affair, could muse that 'in retrospect we might have been more cautious about allowing the creation in the 1950s of substantial Muslim communities here' but took heart from the thought that 'by far the most unacceptable threat comes not from Bradford . . . but from Teheran'.⁶

This secular Muslimphobia is seen with clarity in Fay Weldon's pronouncements and writings. In a recent pamphlet she writes:

The Koran is food for no-thought. It is not a poem on which a society can be safely or sensibly based . . . It gives weapons and strength to the thought police—and the thought police are easily set marching, and they frighten . . .⁷

Ms Weldon chided the Church for its tolerance and asked, rhetorically:

Was the church prepared to say our God is the one true God; we believe in Jesus the Son of God who is counted out by Mohammed the Prophet, and we can't have that: No they are not.⁸

Ms Weldon, with her ominous 'we can't have that' seems to be urging Christians to have a re-run of the crusades. In British history one has probably got to go back to the tradition of anti-popey in Victorian England for an equivalent polemic informed by such ideological vehemence and contempt. Even the Liberal Gladstone could succumb to anti-Catholic rhetoric. 'Liberal principles were no bar when the adversary was believed to be essentially illiberal.'⁹

Anglo-Jewry: a model for other ethnic minorities?

Muslim commentators in Britain often look to the Anglo-Jewish community as 'a good example of political integration'¹⁰ and therefore a possible model for themselves. From the outside they seem to be a community which has succeeded in retaining their distinctive religious and cultural identity, while enjoying considerable success in the mainstream of British economic, political and cultural life. They have an articulate religious and lay leadership in their Chief Rabbinate and Board of Deputies and an impressive educational and charity network. Such achievements are the more creditable given a background of anti-Semitism.

Stephen Brook's insider perspective suggests rather a community increasingly worried about the allure of assimilation, which arguably accounts for as much as half the community. Brook, in his study, entitled *The club, the Jews of modern Britain*, argues that, as a response to fears of assimilation, more Jews are joining ultra-Orthodox groups, which is generating an increasing intra-Jewish intolerance, a narrowing of cultural horizons, with separate educational institutions as a vehicle for a 'deliberate and very successful attempt to erect the strongest possible defences against the encroachment of the host society'.¹¹ Brook insists that the 'philistinism and intolerance within the fold have persuaded countless gifted Jews to direct their energies away from the community'.¹²

Brook is clearly pessimistic about the future and worries that it is

hard to envisage a generation of Jewish intellectuals that could restore the cultural vitality of the community—and I'm not talking

about Israeli dancing and baking Purim cakes. Scan the cultural pages of the *Jewish Chronicle*, and weep. The standard of critical writing is . . . abysmal . . . [and] it rarely peeks at the world outside.¹³

Brook's sombre analysis of the anxieties and developments within Anglo-Jewry today is instructive. If an old and established religious community in Britain, with a shared European history, has difficulty in preserving its distinct identity, leading to sections of it minimizing interaction with non-Jews and developing a separate, institutional nexus, then the difficulties new migrants to Britain will face are considerable. Not least because, for many Muslims especially, their 'experience of Europe [has] been from the outside and primarily as an adversary'.¹⁴ Further, if Brook is right that most Britons are simply indifferent to Jews, Muslims are increasingly the object of sustained, adverse media coverage, locally and internationally, and highly visible, since the majority are from South Asia, and therefore ethnically distinct.

Modernity as a corrosive of religious certainty

The sociologist Peter Berger in his study, *The heretical imperative—contemporary possibilities of religious affirmation*, writing in an American context, observed that there are

very few individuals . . . for whom being Jewish had the quality of a taken-for-granted fact . . . all the individual had to do to get out of his alleged Jewish destiny is to walk and take the subway. Outside, waiting, is the emporium of life-styles, identities, and religious preferences that constitute American pluralism.¹⁵

If choice rather than givenness, on the level of meaning, is one component of modernity, another is the right and dignity of the individual against his/her family and community. It is significant that the Home Office Minister of State, John Patten, at the height of the *Satanic verses* storm, wrote an open letter to leading British Muslims, in which he insisted that

The important principle, and the only one the Government and the law can protect, is that individuals should be free to choose their own faith and to worship without interference . . .¹⁶

One commentator had pertinently remarked that whatever else the *Satanic verses* affair is about it involves a debate about the values which inform modern liberal societies,

a debate in which liberal culture, with its emphasis on rationality, choice, and the sovereignty of the individual, is pitted against cultures which emphasise sanctity, tradition and group identity.¹⁷

To live with such choices can breed insecurity as so often the hidden message of pluralism seems to be relativism. It is not surprising that in all the world religions there is an increasing constituency for what is usually dubbed 'fundamentalism'—understood as 'a system of beliefs and practices which treat scriptural absolutism as *the* way to counter the pluralism and relativism engendered by modernity'.¹⁸ Because 'it is a claim to certainty in the context of a knowledge of competing certainties and wider scepticism'¹⁹ such religiosity has little interest in inter-faith encounter but rather generates a polemical literature at the other's expense. When the bearers of a religious tradition are migrant workers and their children and grandchildren who experience racial and ideological exclusion, the difficulties for inter-faith meeting become acute.

Muslims in Bradford: from myth to reality

In an article in *The Sunday Times*, the political editor informs us that 'so far as Bradford is concerned the line has been held against Muslim fundamentalists who want to . . . bolster ethnic separatism'.²⁰ Islam is presented as an uncompromising monolith, with Muslims in Bradford seen as part of a homogeneous community, intent on establishing a theocracy! The term 'fundamentalist'—never defined, as if its meaning is self-evident—is now part of the journalist's lexicon when it comes to writing about Islam. On the other hand, there are some Muslim apologists who insist that the West and Islam are bi-polar realities inevitably locked into conflict and who welcome events in Bradford as radicalizing young Muslims.

The generality of Britain's Muslim community, however, do not strike such rejectionist, ideological stances. The majority belong to a 'a semi-industrialised, newly urbanised working class community that is only one generation away from rural peasantry'.²¹ Muslims in Bradford have only been here in any numbers for some thirty years. The first mosque—a simple house-mosque—was opened in 1959. The elders largely migrated from rural, undeveloped areas in Pakistan and a minority from rural Bangladesh and India. Only a couple of hundred came as political refugees from East Africa.

The majority live in four of the inner city wards, in relatively encapsulated communities. The elders suffered greatly from the recession which particularly hit the Bradford textile industry, where many worked.

The community numbers about 50,000, or 1 in 9 of the population of the metropolitan district. It is a disproportionately young community accounting for 23% of the district's school children. The elders are worried by inter-generational stresses. The majority of the youngsters are educated, English-speaking and urban and thus relate to a different degree to the three social and cultural worlds they share with their parents: the world of rural Pakistan to which most elders are still very attached; the Pakistani community in Bradford and the wider non-Muslim society. Most of the imams in the mosques continue to be imported from South Asia—only one of the Muslim 'denominations' has established local, Islamic seminaries in Britain, given limited resources. What worries many of the Muslim elders is that very few of their young men go regularly to the mosque. One obvious reason is that many of the imams do not have much English nor an understanding of British society. Thus they are unable to enter the world of the youngsters, whom they are teaching in the mosque schools.

In all there is only limited interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Muslim community now lives largely in self-contained Muslim areas, where an infrastructure of community facilities exist e.g. mosque-school, halal butcher, Hindi/Punjabi video shop, community centre. Bradford's schools are increasingly mono-ethnic with twenty-seven 90% + Asian intake (this latter includes some of the city's Hindu and Sikhs). Among many of the elders understanding of English remains rudimentary, especially among women. There is also anxiety at the perceived permissiveness of the majority community, which strengthens their desire to minimize social contacts.

If Bradford now has some thirty-four mosques, mainly house-mosques in terraced housing, or disused churches, cinemas and warehouses, few have benefited from foreign funding. Only three are in the *Wahhabi* tradition of Saudi Arabia, a reform movement opposed to the traditional world of Muslim saints and shrines. It is to this latter tradition that the majority of Bradford's mosques belong; a tradition itself sub-divided into two mutually antagonistic 'denominations'. In all Bradford's Muslims are divided along

sectarian and ethnic lines. However, their sense of being a beleaguered minority has enabled them to work together, on a limited agenda of shared concerns, under an umbrella organization set up in 1981, the Bradford Council for Mosques.

The sense Muslims have of being on the defensive is well communicated by the Director General of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, an Islamic research centre, when he asks:

Should . . . we accept to live as a grudgingly accepted minority sub-culture, always under siege, always struggling to retain the little niche it has been allowed to carve out for itself? That perhaps is the destiny to which most of us seem resigned . . . especially today the odds are heavily stacked against [us] . . . through institutions like omnipotent state, omnipresent media, compulsory school system, the tentacles of the dominant culture reach every heart and mind.²²

This defensive stance is also evident in the popularity of the audio and video cassettes of the anti-Christian controversialist from South Africa, Mr Ahmad Deedat, who visits Britain almost annually for stage-managed debates of a polemical sort with selected Christians. His polemic includes Hindus and Jews—recently *The Muslim News* contained a report that Mr Deedat's organization, the Islamic Propagation Centre, was being investigated by the Charity Commission for possible breaches of its charitable status caused by the distribution of 'virulently anti-Jewish literature'.²³

Challenge to the Churches

Archbishop John Habgood of York in his many writings has always insisted that one of the values of a national Church is that it can act as an antidote to nationalism and a little-Englander mentality, because a Church which is true to itself can never just be Church of the nation. It is vital that all Churches learn to affirm the fact that they are already multi-racial and multi-cultural. This is a vital at a time when xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism and Muslimphobia are pervasive.

To affirm the social fact that our Churches are multi-racial and multi-cultural is by no means easy. *Learning from diversity*, the report of the working party on Catholic education in a multiracial, multicultural society published in 1984, has a revealing appendix, entitled, 'A Minority Experience—The Irish'. What is astonishing is that most Catholic schools have between 20% and 50% of

children from Irish backgrounds and yet few reflect this fact in their curriculum:

At another school, a sixth form girl passionately defended her Irishness, which she said was ignored unless a scapegoat was needed, for example when the IRA was in the news . . . Although the 'Irish question' had been discussed in social studies in some schools, this was generally in the context of violence in Northern Ireland. Surprisingly, we found that Irish history was rarely taught

. . .²⁴

The fact and contribution of Christians from African and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds in our Churches is also only slowly being acknowledged:

. . . a recent study in the diocese of Birmingham showed that around 10 per cent of practising Anglicans were black, and that in six Birmingham churches they were the majority, while in 15 per cent of churches they formed between 40 and 85 per cent of the congregation. But the presence of black people is not reflected in their place within the leadership and power structures of the Church . . .²⁵

If Churches are only slowly acknowledging and affirming their own multicultural and multiracial composition, it is hardly surprising that there is still considerable confusion as to how to respond to the presence of other faith communities. This is not simply because there is indifference or suspicion among members of other faith communities. Islam, unlike Judaism or Hinduism, is a missionary tradition and 'some Muslims in Britain . . . are the first migrants in Britain for almost a millennium who, rather than adopting the ways of Britons, fondly hope that they make Britons like themselves'.²⁶ Europeans cannot ignore the fact that from the very birth of Christendom Islam 'threatened the legitimacy of both the theological and political dimensions of Christianity'.²⁷

The fact that most Muslims in Britain are, in fact, relatively powerless and at the receiving end of racial harassment necessitates the holding together of two concerns: racial justice and inter-faith meeting. As the *Satanic verses* affair unfolded, it became apparent that the race relations constituency found it very difficult to deal with the issue, in part, because throughout the 1980s the temptation was to homogenize Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Afro-Caribbean

into such categories as black or Asian and thereby discount the importance of religion in individual and community identity. This is one reason why the Bishop of Bradford was able to act as an honest broker in the city, keeping a dialogue alive between Muslim community leaders and civic and political leaders at a time when Muslim and non-Muslim were polarizing into mutual incomprehension and anger.

Shared religious commitment can, thus, in certain circumstances facilitate Muslim-Christian meeting. This is evident, too, with regard to Anglican and Catholic schools. Many Muslim parents seek places for their children in them since they prefer a religious ethos to a secular ethos, assumed to obtain in the rest of the state sector. Other points of meeting exist between Christians and Muslims: many Christians are involved voluntarily in teaching English to Asian migrants; inter-faith groups now exist across the country²⁸ and from their inception, over twenty years ago, Christians have been active in Community Relations Councils—recently renamed Racial Equality Councils.

Perhaps Archbishop John Habgood is right to insist that the continued pervasive presence of Christianity in the nation's life is the best guarantee that space and sensitivity will be shown to minority religious and cultural tradition:

... a single nation cannot give equal weight to Friday, Saturday and Sunday as days of rest. The political solution towards which some are trying to take us is to say 'abandon this idea of one special day, and let everybody choose'. The Christian lobbies have fought this ... on two grounds ... first that such a policy would effectively signal that Christianity no longer has a major role in our culture; and secondly that all faiths would in the long run be losers. At present the existence of officially-recognised Christian holy days as part of our general culture brings to public awareness the need of other faiths to be given space for their own observances within their own communities. The British pattern, in other words is that of a major cultural influence, Christianity, tolerating and affirming sub-cultures, while providing the general religious environment in which they can be accepted and understood.²⁹

A precarious yet vital venture

Sir Michael Howard, recently retired as Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, in a lecture delivered at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, observed that:

The problems which confronted my generation, though alarming, were fairly simple ones, requiring the application of traditional virtues and values. Those which I see ahead are more complex. They involve the structure and cohesion of our own societies . . . the problem of maintaining a sense of identity and consensus in multi-cultural communities in a world of instant communications . . . and a sense of purpose.³⁰

To Bishop Kenneth Cragg, who has devoted his life to the study of Islam and improved Christian-Muslim relations, belongs the last word:

Majority faiths have to respond generously and effectively to the demands made upon their social and legal institutions by the needs and aspirations of minority groups . . . Religion . . . cannot well be contemporary unless it be inter-religious in awareness and temper . . . [However] we need also to be sufficiently aware of the danger present in easy language about pluralism in society. Multiform culture is liable to be a dubious concept . . . For the things which constitute human identity—whatsoever identity it be—are so bonded in birth, history, geography, law, time and place, as to be capable of conceding pluralism only by patient and discerning response, never by negligence or bland sentiment. It is here that historic faiths have so keen a test in the constraints and confusions of co-existence. The inter-play of identity and hospitality is a precarious thing . . . For faiths are not reducible to genial compatibles.³¹

NOTES

- ¹ *Morality, traditional and secular: the dilemma of the traditional conscience* (O.U.P., 1980), p 23.
- ² Quoted in Zeldin, Theodore: *The French* (Fontana, London, 1984), p 362.
- ³ See Gordon, Paul: *Fortress Europe? The meaning of 1992* (Runnymede Trust, London, 1989).
- ⁴ Johnson, R. W.: 'Wars of Religion', *New Statesman & Society* (15 December 1989), p 14.
- ⁵ Jenkins, Roy: *Essays and speeches* (Collins, London, 1967), p 267.
- ⁶ *The Independent*, 4 March 1989.
- ⁷ *Sacred cows, a portrait of Britain post-Rushdie pre-Utopia* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1989), pp 6-7.
- ⁸ 'Sackcloth & ashes', Channel 4, 30 March 1989.
- ⁹ See Norman, E.R.: *Anti-Catholicism in Victorian England* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1968), pp 21-2.
- ¹⁰ Anwar, Muhammad: *Race and politics* (Tavistock, London, 1986), p 151.
- ¹¹ *The club, the Jews of modern Britain* (Pan Books, London, 1990), p 239.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p 411.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 413.

¹⁴ Nielson, Jorgen: 'Co-existence of cultures—the European experience', in *Newsletter*, Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, No. 16 (November 1986), p 20.

¹⁵ Collins, London, 1980, pp 29–30.

¹⁶ *The Times*, 5 July 1989.

¹⁷ Mendus, Susan: 'The tigers of wrath and the horses of instruction' in *Free speech*, Discussion Papers 2 (Commission for Racial Equality, London, 1990), p 3.

¹⁸ Gill, Robin: *Competing convictions* (S.C.M., London, 1989), p 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 34.

²⁰ 3 September 1989.

²¹ Modood, Tariq: 'British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie affair', in *Political Quarterly*, vol 61 no 2 (1990), p 145.

²² Murad, Khurram: *Muslim youth in the West* (Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 1986), pp 6–7.

²³ *The Muslim News*, 27 April 1990.

²⁴ Catholic Media Office, 1984, pp 76–7.

²⁵ Leech, Kenneth: *Struggle in Babylon, racism in the cities and churches of Britain* (Sheldon Press, London, 1988), p 21.

²⁶ Robinson, Francis: 'Varieties of South Asian Islam', Research Paper no 8 (The Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick, 1988), p 24.

²⁷ Herrin, Judith: *The formation of Christendom* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, and Fontana p/b, London, 1989), p 9.

²⁸ The Inter Faith Network for the U.K. now produces a useful handbook of affiliated organizations—5–7 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SS.

²⁹ *The Independent*, 'The supermarket of competing faiths', 3 June 1989.

³⁰ 'Capitalism's chronicle of success', *The Independent*, 21 July 1989.

³¹ *What decided Christianity?* (Churchman Publishing, Worthing, 1989), pp 14–15.