

# PLURALISM AND OTHERS

By VINCE MURRAY

**W**ITHIN THE LAST YEAR I moved from inner-city Birmingham to a small college in the west of Ireland. Coming from a rural background in Northern Ireland I felt that this return to native soil would be wonderful and unproblematic. It certainly has been wonderful but it has definitely not been unproblematic and the major source of discomfort has been a return to a mono-cultural and mono-faith environment after years living with, and adapting to, pluralism. As one colleague observed by way of compliment, 'Where you come from, difference is the norm'.

Increasingly within Europe and beyond, difference is becoming the norm and many young people are growing up within a pluralist context. This pluralism involves cultural, racial, religious and political dimensions and within educational institutions where this pluralism is represented within the student and staff profile, children encounter difference from a very early age. Do young people growing up in such environments have a particular insight into how to deal with pluralism? How does living with pluralism affect young people's understanding of their own religious tradition, the religious traditions of their peers and the relationship between them? Does belief in God become more or less problematic when the divine is referred to by different names and addressed in a myriad different ways?

The following case studies are all of Roman Catholic and Sikh students between the ages of sixteen and eighteen who attended St Philip's Roman Catholic Sixth Form College in Birmingham between 1991 and 1994. During this period I taught Religious Studies at St Philip's and helped to initiate inter-faith encounters within the multi-faith student body. During the same period the college was going through a state of crisis as its own governors were trying to close it down. The grounds were that it was not Catholic enough owing to the large percentage of students from faiths other than Catholic Christian. The closure was strongly resisted by staff and students, and this campaign to save the college was an intense and protracted struggle conducted at city and national levels.<sup>1</sup> Thus the research into the adolescent religious identity formation of the Sikh and Roman Catholic students at the college took place within the context of institutional crisis specifically related to religious identity.

*The role of St Philip's*

In St Philip's, where the student population reflected the broad faith and cultural diversity of the city of Birmingham, all students were expected to participate in one Religious Education or Personal Education Programme per week. The Religious Education lessons were thus made up of students from most of the major world faiths and a wide range of Christian denominations. While these lessons built up trust within the group in order to encourage honest and open sharing, the emphasis was also on engaging with religious and cultural difference so as to develop the skills and attitudes appropriate to relationships flourishing within a multi-faith society. These lessons obviously took on an unexpected immediacy and relevance within the context of the move by the institution's own Roman Catholic governors to close the college, and the campaign of opposition by staff and students.<sup>3</sup> The research acknowledged this context as one which had the potential to provide a heightened awareness of religious identity and focused on the degree of shift within religious identity arising out of the unusual circumstances at St Philip's.

The small number of participants (four Roman Catholics and four Sikhs) and the complex development of spiritual and religious identity preclude any simplistic generalizations arising out of this specific context of plurality. Nevertheless, the heightened awareness of religious diversity provided by the college did bring sharply into focus several dimensions of the spirituality of these young people. These related to their understanding of God, their learning from other faith traditions, perspective-taking, the relationship between religious and cultural commitment, and dealing with internal pluralism.

*Total and whole identity*

The theoretical tool which was chosen to shed light on the relationship between spirituality and religious identity was Erikson's distinction between whole and total identity.

Erikson<sup>2</sup> distinguishes between two forms of identity, whole and total. An identity characterized by *wholeness* has a firm but flexible boundary which allows it to recognize outside what it affirms of itself inside, and it is also able to incorporate external elements which might be considered useful. A *total* identity, on the other hand, has hard and inflexible boundaries where what lies inside can only be recognized inside and what lies beyond must be permanently excluded as being alien to the identity. Within a context of religious pluralism, whole identity is considered to be an indication of a spirituality which at least recognizes the richness within other religious traditions, even if not

actively benefiting from them. For example, while a Christian with a whole identity would acknowledge the spiritual benefit of reading a range of scriptures from different religious traditions, one with a total identity might claim an exclusive and unique status for the Bible as 'Scripture'.

A preliminary reading of the data pointed to a further distinction within religious identity in relation to spirituality. It emerged when I linked the data to my personal experience of many adolescents within the Religious Education lessons which designated certain actions, demands or attitudes to be either 'religion' or 'culture'. This distinction is between firstly, identity based on religious belief and commitment and, secondly, identification with a religious grouping which is devoid of religious significance yet appears to have strong cultural elements. Many young female Muslim students saw the Quranic injunction to dress modestly as a 'religious' requirement, while the family desire that they wore a *shalwar kameez* was perceived by them as arising out of pressure to conform to Pakistani cultural norms. This suggested that it was important to be sensitive to the distinctive yet overlapping phenomena of religious commitment and cultural belonging. The degree to which a young person is able to make this distinction is a significant element within their spirituality.

### *Understanding of God*

For none of the participants in the research did the awareness of the existence of other major faiths bring into question their own personal belief (or in one case, agnosticism) regarding the existence of God. However, a range of cognitive strategies were adopted to reconcile personal belief in God and religious plurality. Manjit Bains, a young Sikh woman, affirmed that while the particularity of the demands of the other faiths caused her to question whether 'religion' was valid, the co-existence of many faiths whose followers believed in God was a source of strength for her own believing. Thus she distinguished between religious groupings whose distinctiveness was problematic and the individual faith in God of members of these religious groupings, a faith which she recognized as transcending identity boundaries. For Manjit, faith in God was personal and witnessed to the unity of God, while the existence of differing religious systems both supported personal faith and was a potential counter-witness to the unity of God.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Satnam, a Sikh young man, had theological questions in resolving the Sikh teaching on the oneness of God with the existence of other religions. He seems to be continuing to hold these in tension using the technique of oscillating between an understanding of God who should

be able to create religious unity but does not, and a recognition that different people hold different views about God. He moves between a realist view of God, which affirms that truth is independent of human language, and an anti-realist view, which affirms that truth is constructed by human beings within the societies in which they live.<sup>5</sup>

Jill Sobers, a young woman and A-level theology student, has opted for a Christian life-style which she contrasts with institutional Catholic identification. She seems much clearer on the relationship between God as transcendent and the human attempt to comprehend the divine: 'Each religion has different ideas about God. I'm not saying there are different gods.' She also claims that it is impossible to learn everything about God from within the teachings of only one faith tradition. Here she seems to hold a distinctly pluralist view of the understandings of God found within the different religions, akin to the Hindu story of the six blind men and the elephant, or John Hick's rainbow of faiths, which see each religion's understanding of God as being partial and complementary.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Learning from other faiths*

Responses were varied to the question, 'Is it possible for you to learn things from people of other faiths which help you as a person or teach you about God?', although none of the participants excluded the validity of spirituality within other faith traditions. There was no evidence that the Sikhs or Catholics were more or less total in their religious identity. Several from both traditions affirmed that the religious commitment of peers from other traditions, usually Muslims, was a challenge to their own rather lukewarm commitment. Only one Sikh, Ranjit Bhogal, was able to cite the benefits of a particular practice within another faith tradition, in this case Islamic *zakat* or mandatory almsgiving<sup>7</sup> as a basis for social justice. While most of the participants claimed that it was possible to learn from, as well as about, people of other faiths, they also acknowledged that in practice they had not done so, even within the pluralist context of the college. Patrick Khan, for example, could provide a very articulate rationale for inter-faith Religious Education within a Catholic context: 'The more interpretations you are aware of, the more confident you can be of your own interpretation because it is made as a result of evaluating those interpretations'. However, he recognized too that his life-style was characterized more by social exclusivity than mutual enrichment: 'The whole idea of the Catholic community means that socially you will sub-consciously limit yourself to Catholics and that's what's essential'.

Baljit Kaur Bains, a young Sikh woman who had made a choice for a committed religious identity in late adolescence, felt that she could

learn about God and living from other faiths not by following what they say you should do but by experiencing the action of God through their goodness. She felt that religious commitment of any form made people better and more open. The idea that making people good was the ultimate aim of all religions was expressed by two of the Sikhs but not by any of the Catholics, to whom the cognitive and propositional implications of religious pluralism were of more concern. The understanding of the relationship between comprehension of truth and religious belonging ranged from the totalized, 'If that is the way you have been brought up and that is your belief, you stick to it', through the assertion that the Catholic religion should provide 'an inlet into other religions' to the pluralist: 'Learning from your own religion is pretty limited . . . You shouldn't just look at your own religion for all the answers, because I don't think you will get them'.

#### *Perspective-taking*

Perhaps the most sophisticated and creative response to an issue of pluralism was displayed by Baljit Kaur Bains when saying how she felt about the governors' attempt to close the college. She perceived this as a wish by the governors to exclude people of other faiths from a Roman Catholic college. In her analysis of this she began by identifying the essence of religion as getting on with other people. Then she affirmed the right of a Catholic college to have its own values, morals, discipline and worship: 'Because it is praises of God, that is all it is basically'. Finally she critiqued the governors' decision, using what she perceived to be internal Catholic/Christian criteria.

I don't think it is very nice to throw people of other faiths out and say it is a Roman Catholic college because I am sure it is not what the Christianity says, to segregate other people. If you are a Sikh or a Muslim, you know you are not wanted. So I think it contradicts the whole belief of Christianity. I don't like that really, because you can't call yourself a true believer if you do this.

Her own secure and chosen religious identity, founded on an active engagement with the Sikh tradition, enabled her to critique the practice of those claiming a different religious identity according to criteria which were at the same time both universal norms and particular to this other tradition, Christianity. Religious identity is circumscribed both by universal and internal moral demands which must be coherent and consistent.

*Religious commitment and cultural belonging*

It is in the area of the relationship between religious commitment and cultural belonging that a major difference emerges in the perceptions and awareness of the Roman Catholics and Sikhs. Most of the Sikhs made a distinction between religious commitment and cultural belonging while only one of the Catholics did so. The Sikh who does not is Baljit Kaur Bains; her recent conversion to engagement with the traditions and scriptures of the Sikh faith is the dominant element of her religious identity. The Catholic who makes the distinction has an Irish 'cradle Catholic' mother and a Pakistani father who became a Catholic having been raised in a 'unorthodox Muslim family'. The remaining three Catholics never referred to culture within the interview while the other three Sikhs continuously used the words culture and religion.

Manjit seemed to use the words interchangeably, yet like Satnam and Ranjit she was very clear in describing certain attitudes and actions as either culture or religion. Thus for Manjit, non-*Amritdhari* Sikhs<sup>8</sup> acted out of cultural motivation while for *Amritdhari* (the proper) Sikhs the behaviour was religious. Ranjit distinguishes between what she considers to be the cultural and the religious elements of her parents' guidance but is still unsure within which category certain actions are located, e.g. cutting her hair, marrying inside her caste. She feels that intergenerational conflict can arise when parents fail to distinguish between cultural and religious elements within the faith tradition.<sup>9</sup> While Satnam sees himself as following the cultural norms of Sikh society without much religious commitment – 'I believe in the ten prophets and God and that's it' – he also adopts many western cultural attitudes and behaviour patterns. He is very aware of the changes within the Sikh community in Britain and fears for its future as a result:

Things get less like before. When my dad came over, he never saw Sikhs smoke ever. Now it's like spot the one who doesn't smoke and the drugs . . . everyone is into the drugs. As I said like, as time goes on you find out that the religion deteriorates. I feel that it is deteriorating.

By sharp contrast three of the Catholics made no explicit distinction between religion and culture, although John Mullaly did observe that 'religion tends to dominate the lives of Irish Catholics' while Jill Sobers commented that she did not experience any tensions arising from cultural identity. Likewise, Mary Douglas seemed totally unaware

that religion and culture might be identified separately, but saw them as interconnected, as parameters of identity. Thus the values of friendliness, respect and good manners which she had received from her Catholic family upbringing she now saw as assets in making friends and gaining employment. She found many of the interview questions strange because 'You never get anyone asking me what my religion is normally'. Everyday life involved responding to everyday demands such as college life. Enjoyment was the single criterion for choice of attendance at mass and her future employment. She showed no sensitivity either to the relativity of culture or the tension between culture and religion. This cultural totality excludes even recognition of cultural rather than religious difference. There is no sense of any distinction, and the resulting dynamic between her own internalized, cultural identity and her more explicit and delineated religious identity. She claimed that being a Catholic had absolutely no influence on her everyday life and decisions.

#### *Internal pluralism*

Up to this point the analysis has focused on how the young people dealt with plurality beyond the boundaries of the faith tradition of their childhood identification. However, for several of the participants the issue of internal diversity was a major one, and again they displayed a range of responses to it. Only one of the Sikhs referred to specifically religious diversity within the Sikh community as opposed to the commonly held distinction between culturally conditioned Punjabi Sikhs and religiously committed *Amritdhari* Sikhs. The latter were just 'more religious', rather than different. For Ranjit, the division between Sikh followers of different *sants*<sup>10</sup> was a scandal against the basic Sikh principle of the unity of God, and a source of personal conflict with her father. With a great degree of vehemence she exclaimed, 'There is a fault in all of them – in a major way'. Baljit's conversion to a personal acceptance of Sikhism involves taking on the entirety of its spiritual teachings and practice as outlined in the *Rahit Maryada* or Sikh Way of Life.<sup>11</sup> She does not see how the values of Sikhism have changed or could change in the future. However, she displayed an awareness that it was a synthesis of the best of Hinduism and Islam and therefore, 'I think it covers everything'.

For the young Catholics the reality of internal diversity was much more acute. Perhaps this was inevitable within the context of the college governors and the college staff both adopting arguments from within the Catholic tradition as support for totally contrasting positions in relation to the Catholicity of the college.<sup>12</sup> While Mary was not

aware of the complexity of this situation, Patrick and Jill were able to articulate their own personal position within a range of Catholic identities; John found the conflict a source of acute personal confusion. Patrick, also an A-level theology student, recognized that there are currently a wide range of cultural and ideological identities within the Roman Catholic Church. While he felt comfortable with claiming a strong cultural identification as an 'Irish Catholic', he felt absolutely no empathy towards Catholic doctrine and practice. This was despite the fact that he was able to identify objectively a wide range of internal Catholic religious identities represented by the football-playing Catholic priest, liberation theology and the orthodox-liberal pendulum since World War II. In this context, his analysis of the Governors' viewpoint was that it was 'a minority view and hopefully not that dangerous'. Thus, while he was aware of internal Catholic diversity, his somewhat totalizing view of true Catholicism caused him to exclude himself from it: while he considered himself to be Catholic in the social and cultural sense, he did not consider himself to be a 'complete Catholic' because he was not 'committed spiritually to Catholicism', which he perceived as involving belief in its doctrines and adherence to its practices.

Jill made a clear distinction between following Jesus, which helps to make the world a better place, and conforming to Catholic sexual moral teaching, e.g. the prohibition of certain forms of contraception, which she considered shows gross insensitivity to the situation of the world's poor. Her sense of Catholic identity had been significantly affected by her time at the college and her involvement with the struggle against closure. While the governors represented for her the 'bigotry in Catholicism', she had come to recognize that the groups in conflict over the future of the college expressed two totally different views of Catholicism. This recognition of a more open understanding of Catholicism gave her a more positive attitude towards it. She felt that the attempt to keep the college open for all faiths and cultures was 'what real Catholicism is like', and that the exclusive stance of those trying to close the college was 'not real'. She had moved to a recognition of real Catholic spirituality being characterized by appropriate outreach rather than by concern for boundary maintenance.

In sharp contrast, John's perception of the internal Catholic conflict led to a painful personal dilemma. In addition to confusion over theological issues regarding interpretations of Genesis, he saw himself as being caught between the positions of the governors and the staff. On the one hand he was able to articulate and appreciate the case of the staff which described the college as an open, 'faithful community', and

thought that the crisis in the college was 'sort of very racist'. On the other hand, he could not commit himself within the conflict because he also attended daily mass in the governors' Oratory and was himself considering entering the seminary. He tried to deal with this dilemma by 'trying to get on with my studies and just sort of let the people with power sort it out for themselves'.

### *Conclusion*

The above case studies on coping with religious diversity within a context of crisis suggest that not only is there a complexity within pluralism, there is also complexity in how young people perceive and cope with pluralism. There is no single way. However, within a context of daily contact between students of diverse religious communities, some have discovered elements of their tradition which enable them to engage with others in ways which foster both healthy belonging and healthy uniqueness. In achieving this end, Erikson's whole identity might provide a useful model for all religious identities, both individual and group, while Panikkar's concept of Christianness could be construed as its expression using the language of Christian spirituality.<sup>13</sup>

Panikkar distinguishes three different attitudes within the Christian tradition identifiable with, but not exclusive to, consecutive periods within the history of the Christian tradition: Christendom, Christianity and Christianness. Christendom, identified with the high Middle Ages, perceives the Christian ideal as living within enclosed Christian groupings where the spiritual and social commitments are coterminous within an all-embracing Christian civilization. Christianity, the predominant attitude until recently, understands being a Christian as belonging to a particular religion among many and is at the same time concerned to maintain its position in relation to the others. This has usually been a position of explicit or implicit superiority. Christianness, the emerging Christian spirituality within the context of global religious pluralism, is characterized by a personal religiousness which is not individualistic:

Christianness stands for experience of the life of Christ within ourselves, insight into a communion, without confusion, with all reality, an experience that 'I and the Father are one', that labels do not matter, that security is of no importance and that reflection is also a secondary source (although a primary tool).<sup>14</sup>

While the Oratory Fathers' desire to close the college on the grounds that it was not Catholic enough could be construed as expressive of the

attitudes of Christendom, the reluctance of Jill Sobers to give herself a religious label in the cause of faithfulness to Christ and global social justice displayed characteristics of an emerging Christianness.

Panikkar suggests that the present epoch is one of fundamental transition in which the temptation to retreat behind social and cultural barriers (Christendom) or ideological certainty (Christianity) will be very strong. He suggests that the fundamental, corrective symbol of Christianness is the earth: '... that is secularity (*saeculum*) or the kingdom of justice here on earth which entails a readiness to collaborate with all others even if we disagree with them'.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, while a whole religious identity might provide the intellectual framework and basic trust for inter-faith dialogue within an historical period of rapid transition, Christianness transcends religious identity completely in the service of a 'grounded spirituality'. When four young people from different faith traditions returned from an international, inter-faith conference in Bangalore in 1993, they addressed the Birmingham Council of Faiths in the City Hall. While they had been inspired by the sense of spiritual connectedness across religious boundaries, they were also shocked and scandalized by the gulf between the luxury in which the conference took place and the surrounding abject poverty. As a result the Birmingham Council of Faiths is now considering the implications for the city of Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit. In the midst of the confusion of religious pluralism, these young people provide one clear insight which might serve as a touchstone for spirituality in the future. All the great spiritual traditions of the world share a definite and tangible common ground: it is called the earth.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A short history of the initial phase of this campaign can be found in Michael Walsh's 'The battle of St Philip's' in *The Tablet* (London, 10 October 1992), pp 1261–1262. Fuller treatments of the conflict are found in 'St Philip's Sixth Form College: debate on motion for adjournment' in *Hansard* (London: HMSO, Tuesday 26 October 1993), Vol 230, No 232, pp 797–804, and in the report of the Government enquiry by Sir John Caines KCB, *St Philip's Roman Catholic Sixth Form College: report of an enquiry into the governance and management of the College* (The Further Education Funding Council, Cheylesmore House, Quinton Rd, Coventry, CV1 2WT, November 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Erik Erikson, *Identity, youth and crisis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), pp 128–135.

<sup>3</sup> Vince Murray, 'Other faiths in our schools: general implications of a case study' in T. H. McLaughlin, J. O'Keefe SJ, B. O'Keefe (eds), *The contemporary Catholic school: context, identity and diversity* (London: Falmouth, 1996), pp 240–243.

<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Hughes, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *A theology for the world* (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp 14–37.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch, *The puzzle of ethics* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1994), pp 15–21. A realist view of truth affirms that truth is independent of human language, while an

anti-realist view suggests that truth is constructed by human beings within the societies in which they live.

<sup>6</sup> John Hick, *The rainbow of faiths: critical dialogues on religious pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Ghulam Sarwar, *Islam: beliefs and teachings* (London: The Muslim Educational Trust, 1992), pp 74–76.

<sup>8</sup> W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs* (London: Routledge, 1979), pp 122–129.

<sup>9</sup> W. Owen Cole, *Teach yourself Sikhism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), p 90.

<sup>10</sup> W. Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi, *The Sikhs*, pp 5–6, 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 168–179.

<sup>12</sup> Vince Murray, *op.cit.*, pp 245–250, and Gerard W. Hughes SJ, ‘Shades of the ghetto’ in *The Tablet* (7 November 1992), pp 1396–1397.

<sup>13</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, ‘The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges: three kaiological moments of Christic self-consciousness’ in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds), *The myth of Christian uniqueness* (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp 89–116.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 102.

. . . there is no remote control . . .

**F**OR ME OUR TV SET represents my relationship with God. It's a very old set, from before I was born. I don't think it has ever been turned off completely. The screen starts out all blurry. I can adjust the channel, but only I can do it because there is no remote control.

There is no picture at the moment. It starts out all blurry and when it does come clear it's in black and white. When there is a picture on the screen it means this is a happy time in my life and that God is with me.

So far it has never been broken. If it did break I would need someone to help me fix it and make it work again. But that person would have to be very special to me.

*Dean  
Australia*