

Looking Back, Looking Around

– the university lecturer as modern saint

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A lecture for staff in higher education

Looking back

Shiva Naipaul was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, of Indian parents. In 1963, aged 19, he came to London as a student. In an autobiographical sketch written several years later he described his first experiences of British life and culture. One day, shortly after his arrival, he telephoned an accommodation agency to enquire about renting a room. The female voice at the other end of the line 'twinkled encouragingly', he recalled later, and he was invited to visit the agency in person:

The office, a cramped cubicle approached up a tortuous flight of stairs, was on the Earls Court Road. A wiry woman in a luminously red cardigan was in charge. I introduced myself. 'Ah! So you are the foreign gentleman who rang earlier.' Her voice had shed its telephonic twinkle. But it was not unfriendly. 'Come in and have a seat and we shall see what we can do for you. We have managed to fix up quite a lot of coloured people in our time.'

... Extracting an index card she frowned thoughtfully at it. She reached for the telephone and dialled. 'Some of these landladies are a bit fussy when it comes to...' She reverted to her telephone twinkle. 'Hello. Is that Mrs Jenkins? This is the Earls Court Accommodation Agency here. I've got a young foreign student who is looking for a room. He seems a nice quiet fellow. What's that? Yes, I'm afraid he is. But . . . no, no. Not at all. Of course I understand.' The receiver clicked down.

She considered me. 'Next time I think we'll say straight off that you come from India. It's better not to beat about the bush, don't you agree? Anyway some of them don't mind Indians so much.'

'But I don't come from India.'

'You don't?' She stared at me. 'But you look Indian.'

'Well, I am Indian. But I was born in the West Indies.'

'The West Indies!' She seemed vaguely aghast.

I understood. Sufficient unto any man the handicap of being straightforwardly Indian or straightforwardly West Indian. But to contrive somehow to combine the two was a challenge to reason. An Indian from the West Indies! I was guilty of a compound sin.

'We'll say you are Indian,' she said firmly. 'It's better not to confuse the issue. Don't you agree?' She beamed at me.

'Perhaps we'd better forget the whole thing,' I said.

'Don't give up so easily. We have fixed up a lot of coloured people in our time. Why not you?' She gazed defiantly at the box of index cards.

Shiva Naipaul became in due course a successful novelist, though not as celebrated as his Nobel prize-winning elder brother. It was another novelist, L.P.Hartley, who observed: 'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.' And another, William Faulkner, who said: 'The past isn't dead and gone. It isn't even past.'

Let's consider these two views of the past with regard to Shiva Naipaul's experience in London as a 19-year-old student some forty years ago. Is the past a foreign country? Or is it not even past? Some thoughts about this will serve as an introduction to the lecture as a whole. The lecture will have then two main parts. In the first part I shall consider various general issues. My sub-headings at that stage will be: race equality is not enough; combating racisms; what and where is Britain; and how do you spell Islamophobia? In the second part I shall consider implications for higher education. This will include touching – I hope the audience will still be listening when I get to this – on the concept of higher education lecturer as modern saint. The lecture will close with further reflection on the question with which it has begun. Is the past a foreign country, or is it not even past?

Looking around

At first sight, Naipaul's 1963 London is a foreign country. The use of index cards rather than a computer is symptomatic, as is perhaps the use of the term 'don't you agree?' by a Londoner rather than 'innit?'. In other ways too the people there have a language and a reference system that is foreign – 'coloured', and 'West Indian'. Another difference is that there's no law there, as there certainly is here, which means that an accommodation agency's feet wouldn't touch the ground if it transparently colluded with racism.

Also, even if there weren't a law nowadays, such agencies would put themselves out of business, for around 30 per cent of all Londoners are now what that woman would call coloured and no commercial enterprise could afford to exclude and offend so many people. Plus, a high proportion of white people would boycott and denounce an agency that attempted so blatantly to collude with racism. And quite apart from law and from commercial self-interest there are far fewer white people around nowadays, particularly in London, who would bid so insensitively and so cavalierly to define someone else's identity. ('We'll say you are Indian,' she said firmly. 'It's better not to confuse the issue. Don't you agree?')

But as we compare London today with the London of 1963, and see ourselves as superior, we must guard against complacency – innit? Flanders and Swann once had a song about the dangers of complacency that still has a certain poignancy: 'One cannot say much/ For the Swiss or the French, /The Danes or the Dutch. /The Germans are German, the Russians are red, /The Greeks and Italians eat garlic in bed. /But the English – the English are clever, the English are good, /The English are modest and misunderstood.' Ethnocentrism involves misunderstanding the self as well as the other. An analogous ism involves misunderstanding the present when making comparisons with the past.

Race equality is not enough

The term equality refers to the moral principle that all people are of equal value and should have equal rights, and that inequalities should be rigorously addressed and reduced or removed. But equality is not a sufficient value on its own. It must be accompanied, complemented and reinforced by two further values. The first is recognition of diverse identities. It is as unjust to treat people similarly when in relevant respects they are different as it is to treat them differently when in relevant respects they are similar. This is particularly obvious in matters relating to gender and disability – it is unjust to treat women as if in all respects their life-experiences, needs and interests are the same as those of men, and vice versa, and it is unjust not to make reasonable adjustments and accommodations to take account of the needs of people with disabilities.

It is similarly unjust to be 'colour-blind' or 'difference-blind', for not all people have the same narratives, life-experiences, perceptions and frames of reference. Such diversity must be recognised. The Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor introduces the key concept of recognition as follows:

Identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people or society can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.

A further essential concept in this context, implied by Taylor's reference to recognition, is that of belonging, also sometimes known as social cohesion. Just as neither equality nor diversity is a sufficient moral value in itself, so also both need to be complemented and qualified by notions of cohesion and belonging. A state needs not only to uphold the values of equality and diversity, but also to be held together by shared imagery, symbols and stories that give a sense of belonging, and that derive from all people having a stake in society's well-being. Yes, but what sort of stories and symbols? What symbols summarise belonging to Britain?

Where and what is Britain?

The Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, whose report was published in autumn 2000, was chaired by Professor Lord Parekh. The Commission had 23 members, many of them academics. Inevitably they spent quite a lot of time in the early days on semantics. What do these key words 'ethnic' and 'multi' mean, and what therefore is the referend, as academics are prone to say, for the term 'multi-ethnic'? How long, exactly how long, is the future? Academics then wonder and worry, of course, about words such as 'the' and 'of'. It was some time before the Commission realised that the most problematic word in its terms of reference was 'Britain'. 'The British,' said the editors of *Political Quarterly* in the first issue of their journal in the twenty-first century, 'have long been distinguished by having no clear idea of who they are, what they are or where they are. Most of them have routinely described England as Britain. Only business people talk about a United Kingdom ... It is all a terrible muddle.'

Muddles are disorienting, entrapping, depressing and scary. But also they can be challenging, intriguing, energising and exciting – they can be glorious as well as terrible. Getting to grips with issues of equality and diversity involves getting to grips also with the muddle to which the word Britain refers. Also words such as France, Germany, America, incidentally, refer to muddle. Every country known or knowable is a muddle, terrible or glorious according to your point of view.

The name of a country, the point is, has three different kinds of referend. First, it refers to a geographical territory. Second it refers to a state, a member of the United Nations. Third, it refers to a set of pictures, stories and sayings in people's imaginations about their home, and to the feelings, beliefs and commitments which these switch on and mobilise. In every country, in relation to feelings about home, there is a hegemonic story, a dominant self-understanding.

The hegemonic story in Britain – which is essentially an English story – has four salient aspects. First, our history goes back a long, long way. Second, it is a story of continuity, an unbroken chain over the centuries in which tradition not transition has been the dominant motif. Third, it is in consequence a story of calmness, gentleness and peace. Fourth, all people in Britain feel much the same about living here, and always have done.

These four points can be summarised with the belief that Britain has, and always has had, *unus rex, unus lex* and *unus grex* – one monarch, one legal system and one sense of community. Two other points in the hegemonic story are the belief that we all have a GSOH, a good sense of humour, indeed a VGSOH, better than that of any foreigner, and the assurance that all foreigners WLTM us, would like to meet us, even though we make them feel inferior.

It is not possible to grapple adequately with issues of equality and diversity without rigorously critiquing, and vigorously replacing, hegemonic pictures of, and hegemonic stories about, where British people live. That was the first emphasis of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain. We live in a space that does *not* have an unbroken long story and which is *not* all gentleness and peace. There have been and are tensions and disagreements relating to class, region, nation, gender, age and religion. The Commission's phrase for an alternative picture was 'community of communities' and its sense of history, in its opening chapter entitled Rethinking the National Story, was summarised thus:

The future of Britain lies in the hands of descendants of slave owners and slaves, of indentured labourers, of feudal landlords and serfs. Of industrialists and factory workers, of lairds and crofters, of refugees and asylum-seekers.

The balance between equality, diversity and cohesion has always been a contest and settlements have always been provisional. Britain has always contained competing perceptions, narratives and interests. The emphasis that British identity and self-understanding are continually being negotiated and re-defined can only become more important in years to come, with the mutually reinforcing pressures of globalisation, European integration, devolution from Westminster and Whitehall, migration, and increased social and moral pluralism. Further, there are new understandings of national identity as a result of the new *Pax Americana* that has been emerging over the last decade and solidified by and since the Iraq war. There will be further new understandings as a result of myriad resistances and rebellions against the *Pax Americana*.

Combating racisms

At the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) held in South Africa in 2001, it was agreed that the term 'racism' is a shorthand way of referring to a set of realities that cannot be adequately named with a single word. The full phrase that the WCAR adopted was 'racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance'. An alternative way of shortening the full phrase is to use the plural term 'racisms'. The plural term is ugly but it stresses that there are several key distinctions which must be recognised and worked with. Several such distinctions are noted below. But first, it is relevant to note an attempt at description and definition. The Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland, speaking from an explicit Christian perspective but using secular language rather than religious, has recently proposed an account of sectarianism that is also a comprehensive account of racism:

... a complex of attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures, at personal, communal and institutional levels ... It arises as a distorted expression of positive human needs, especially for belonging, identity and free expression of difference, but is expressed in destructive patterns of relating: hardening the boundaries between groups; overlooking others; belittling, dehumanising or demonising others; justifying or collaborating in the domination of others; physically intimidating or attacking others.

We must bear in mind the distinction, alluded to in the Corrymeela definition, between 'institutional racism' and 'street racism'. Another formulation of the distinction refers to 'the racism that discriminates' and 'the racism that kills'. A solution to the one is seldom a solution to the other. Though these two forms of racism are certainly they are connected in various ways, not two entirely different beasts. The definition of institutional racism in the Lawrence Report has been widely quoted. But it is barely comprehensible if it is presented away from the lengthy discussion which introduces and contextualises it. A more helpful explanation, arguably, has been provided by the Churches Commission for Racial Justice:

The concept refers to systemic disadvantage and inequality in society as a whole and to attitudes, behaviours and assumptions in the culture, customs and routines of an organisation whose consequences are that: (a) individuals and communities of minority ethnic backgrounds and heritages do not receive an appropriate professional service from the organisation (b) staff of minority ethnic backgrounds are insufficiently involved in the organisation's management and leadership and (c) patterns of inequality in wider society are perpetuated not challenged and altered.

How do you spell Islamophobia?

This college's race equality statement does not contain the word Islamophobia. If it did, a decision would have to be made about how to spell it. With a capital I? Or with a lower case initial letter? One view – that of the upper-casists, as the term might be – is that clearly the word should be spelt with a capital I, since it is derived from the word Islam, always and rightly spelt with a capital. To give it a little i, the argument runs, would be insensitive and indeed offensive. This argument prevails virtually everywhere, even in places where for most other words in the English language the lower-casists have almost total hegemony, for example *The Guardian*.

The lower-casists' position, in a nutshell, is that Islamophobia has very little to do with Islam. Therefore it is immediately and seriously misleading to spell it with a capital I. The Islam that Islamophobia fears, it is argued, is not the real Islam. In saying this they make two separate points. First, real Islam has been hijacked in the modern world by various fanatics and extremists for political reasons. The claim of such people to be motivated and inspired by Islam is false, a mixture of self-deception, misunderstanding and shrewd calculation. Second, the Islam that Islamophobia fears is a bogey figure created and kept alive by collective paranoia in so-called and self-styled Western countries. 'The West', according to this view, needs to imagine an enemy for itself, a dangerous and malevolent being that must be fought and suppressed. The supposed existence of a threatening enemy helps to maintain social cohesion and a certain deference towards political leaders, and helps to maintain public support for expenditure on elaborate weapons programmes. It is proclaimed not only by political and military leaders but also in a myriad of popular films, TV programmes, novels, comics and computer games.

For several decades after 1945, the lower-casist view continues, the bogey figure in the West was the Soviet Union and, more generally, global communism. When the Iron Curtain came down, a new bogey had to be constructed. Folk memories of the Crusades and the Ottoman Empire were brought out of storage, and were combined with resentment at the oil-based power of many Muslim countries. It is all the easier to sustain an image of Islam as deeply malevolent since the hijackers of the real Islam (so-called fundamentalists, extremists, militants) played up to it and thereby confirmed people's worst fears with their acts of terrorism and lurid denunciations of Western ways ('the great Satan'). The image is additionally attractive since it could be used to justify why Muslim immigrants to European countries should be prevented from moving out of

the menial and low-status jobs for which they had originally been recruited, and why Muslim demands for cultural and religious recognition within Europe should be resisted and rejected.

Both upper-casists and lower-casists have a point. Islam is a civilisation that should be treated with respect and it is a mark of such respect to spell any word derived from it with a capital letter. At the same time there is much misunderstanding of Islam, both amongst Muslims and amongst non-Muslims, and on both sides paranoia plays a part in the misunderstandings. It's a pity that a middle-case letter I/i doesn't exist, to signal that key concepts are contested and that the search for shared understandings is profoundly and desperately difficult. There are many Islams and many 'Westes', and many Christendoms. Also, for that matter, many Islamophobias.

Implications for higher education

First, there are issues around the recruitment of students. The statistics collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency are necessarily broad-brush. But they show that, nationally, young Asian and black people are statistically over-represented in higher education, or else are represented at the level of the national average. The one exception to this broad generalisation is African-Caribbean males. (Pakistani/Kashmiri young people, both male and female, are almost certainly an exception too, but statistics by ethnicity at this level of detail are not collected.) Some universities, however, are far more successful than others at attracting applications. Every university needs to review its recruitment and publicity procedures and documentation to ensure that it is attractive to the full range of potential students.

Second, in universities which do attract substantial numbers of Asian and black students, there are issues to do with deepening participation, namely problems in retaining such students. As itemised by the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, the problems include the following:

... isolation; the possibility of indirect discrimination in assessment procedures, for example in clinical examinations on medical degrees where students are directly assessed by their tutors; curricula and programmes of study which do not reflect Asian and black experience and perceptions; assessment regimes which are not appropriate for mature students; timetabling arrangements which are culturally insensitive; lack of sensitive pastoral support for students experiencing difficulties associated with colour or cultural racism; and a lack of Asian and black lecturers and tutors.

Third, there are problems in some universities around the recruitment and retention of Asian and black lecturers and tutors. Fourth, there are issues to do with curriculum content for *all* students. Some subjects and courses readily lend themselves to direct teaching about the themes of this lecture. But all or virtually all can be permeated with relevant concepts.

Fifth and last, the HE lecturer as modern saint. I derive this notion from a contemporary theologian and philosopher of religion who writes of the importance and dignity of 'the continuing work of brokering peaceful coexistence between different interests, points of view, fundamentalisms and pressure-groups.' 'The new saint,' he says, '... is the democratic politician, the fixer, the flexible compromiser, the problem-solver ... the canny chairperson who finds a form of words that enables the meeting to come to an amicable conclusion.'

The academic as fixer is perhaps better known – more readily recognised – than the fixer as saint. But in a world of competing grand narratives, identities and perceptions, where

the task is to build and hold in being a community of communities and citizens, let us indeed celebrate the skills of the democratic and flexible compromiser, the canny chairperson, the wordsmith. Let us celebrate, in the context of meeting the equality challenge, the work of brokering peaceful coexistence.

Such work involves a sense of irony; rigorous commitment to procedural values of fair play and fair hearing; and a political philosophy which treasures equally the values of cohesion, equality and diversity; and qualities and skills which may be known as 'cultural literacy' – these include an awareness of problems of misperception and miscommunication in cross-cultural settings, particularly when there is not only cultural difference but also a power differential, and an awareness of one's own inevitable biases, prejudices and partialities.

Conclusion: redeeming the time

'The past', said William Faulkner, 'is not dead and gone. It isn't even past.' This is obviously true in the case of physical landmarks such as buildings, monuments and streets. That place in Earls Court Road visited by Shiva Naipaul in 1963 is no doubt still there. It is also powerfully true of memories, imaginings and narratives. They shape consciousness in the present and also, therefore, practical plans and agendas for the future. What people plan and do in the present and how they do it is profoundly influenced by beliefs and feelings about the past – feelings of pride, anger, guilt, hope, apathy, cynicism, generosity, inspiration.

If the past is to be a source of inspiration and hope rather than of guilt and resentment, there is a sense in which it has to be redeemed. Renewal of the present and re-assessment of the past go hand in hand. The overall process might be seen as redeeming the time.

The struggle for racial justice is a case in point. Renewing the present and planning and acting for the future require attention to the past: the carelessness, follies and crimes of those who created structures of racism and kept them in existence; the miseries and anger of those who suffered from racism; the determination, spirit, courage and hope of those who battled to oppose and dismantle it and who did, often, prevail.

In the struggle for racial justice there have been many iconic moments – incidents when the consciousness of millions of people has been affected. In these islands, one such event was the murder of Stephen Lawrence on a London street in 1993 and the eventual inquiry conducted by Sir William Macpherson. The murder itself was a shocking reminder of crude racist violence in public spaces. The subsequent inquiry revealed how public institutions and services can act with racist effects even when officials within them neither know this nor intend it. The murder and the inquiry left no doubt that 'the past isn't even past'.

The time and times of racisms are not yet past, and the endeavour to redeem time continues. People come to that endeavour with a range of experiences, languages, perspectives and narratives, and with a range of resources and bases of power. The tasks and processes of redeeming time, however, belong to all. We all have parts to play – thinking globally, acting locally and interpersonally and in daily professional practice, as we look back, and look around.

Background and references

Shiva Naipaul (1945-85) published *Beyond the Dragon's Mouth*, a collection of short stories and essays, in 1984. A lengthy extract from it, entitled 'Living in Earl's Court',

appears in *Extravagant Strangers: a literature of belonging*, edited by Caryl Phillips, Faber, 1997.

The quotation from Charles Taylor is from *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, co-edited with Amy Gutmann, Princeton University Press, 1994.

The arguments about equality, diversity and belonging are drawn from *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: the Parekh Report*, Profile Books for the Runnymede Trust, 2000.

The definition of sectarianism from the Corrymeela Community appears in a paper entitled *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* by Celia Clegg and Joe Leichy, 2001. It can be found on the community's website.

The adaptation of the Lawrence Report definition of institutional racism appears in *Redeeming the Time: all God's people must challenge racism*, published by the Churches' Commission for Racial Justice in autumn 2003.

The quotations about a modern saint are from *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* by Don Cupitt, SCM Press, 1997.

The closing discussion of past and present is drawn from *Redeeming the Time: all God's people must challenge racism*. (See above.)