

A multi-storied nation – religion and belief in modern Britain

Robin Richardson, a talk in July 2016

Standing at a crossroads

'We are standing at a crossroads,' wrote someone giving evidence last year to the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life. 'What kind of society do we want? Will we be tribal and separate from one another? Or an integrated, inclusive, welcoming society?'

The same question was in effect asked more recently in the run-up to the referendum about the EU on 23 June this year, and in countless discussions since of the referendum's result. What kind of society do we want? Tribal and separate? Or inclusive and welcoming?

The commission on religion and belief quoted the question at the start of its report. Also at the start it quoted someone who wrote in their evidence that the crucial question is whether 'Britain is alert to how it came to be the place it is, and the role of faith in getting us to this point'.

The Commission's vision for Britain, and for the role of faith, religion and belief in British public life, is centrally relevant for any consideration of the role of Muslims in public life, of the relationship between Muslim values and so-called 'British' ones, and of how Britain evolves in the post-Brexit future. Do the words 'religion' and 'belief' name trends that are in opposition to each other? Or do they refer to trends that could and should be allies and partners? The post-Brexit future will clarify this question, as so much else.

Vision

Reflecting on past, present and future, the Commission declared that its own vision for Britain was of 'a society at ease with itself in which all individuals, groups and communities feel at home, and in whose flourishing they wish to take part'. In such a society, the commission continued, all 'feel a positive part

of an ongoing national story', all 'are treated with equal respect and concern by the law, the state and public authorities'; all are 'free to express their beliefs and practise their religion; and all 'feel challenged to respond to the many manifest ills in wider society, and in the world as a whole, and to contribute to the common good'.

Ongoing national story

In these few brief words this afternoon I wish to expand a bit on the concept of everyone feeling they are 'a positive part of an ongoing national story'. But first, I must stress that I am not an official spokesperson for the commission. I wasn't even a member of it, but simply a part of its secretariat. This talk expresses a personal view of the commission's report, not an official view.

'An ongoing national story'. Yes, but what essentially is the story about? Is it 'Our Island Story' – the story of, in Shakespeare's famous words in Richard II, 'a royal sceptred isle, another Eden, demi-paradise, a precious stone set in the silver sea, which serves it in the office of a wall, as a moat defensive to a house, against the envy of less happy lands?'

Or is it the story of a racist empire built on ethnic cleansing in less happy lands, and on invasion, enslavement and savage repression, and theft and merciless exploitation?

Or the story told by Danny Boyle at the opening of the Olympic Games in 2012? 'Flickering in the smoke and noise and excitement,' he wrote at the time, 'you can sometimes glimpse a single golden thread of purpose – the idea of Jerusalem – of the better world, the world of real freedom and true equality, a world that can be built through the prosperity of industry, through the caring nation that built the welfare state, through the joyous energy of popular culture, through the dream of universal communication. A belief that we can build Jerusalem.'

The commission didn't, of course, attempt to adjudicate between these three stories, or amongst similar ones. Rather, it noted that the United Kingdom is, as the term might be, a multi-storied nation. The ongoing national story of Britain, it observed, is the story of living with difference. The peace of Jerusalem, incidentally, is an apt image, amongst other possible apt images, of where we

could and should be headed.

What kinds of difference, in particular, was the commission concerned with? When it began in 2013, it was provisionally entitled 'the commission on multi-faith Britain'. The expectation was that essentially it would be about differences between major faiths, for example between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. But as soon as its members began meeting and talking they opted for a different title, one that echoed a phrase in equalities legislation: 'the commission on religion and belief'. Its report is centrally concerned with the difference and relationship between 'religion' and 'belief'. Or between 'faith' and 'reason'.

By 'belief' or 'reason' the commission meant the cluster of values known more usually as Enlightenment values or humanist values – the values in, for example the Human Rights Act and the Equality Act. It observed that sometimes in history, and sometimes in the present, religion and belief (or, to repeat, faith and reason) are in hostile opposition to each other. Also, however, they sometimes converge. At best, they can influence each other and benefit from each other, and there can be synergy and mutual reinforcement. At best, they together challenge and oppose, and propose alternatives to, the values known loosely as neoliberalism and neo-conservatism, and the Little Englander fears and fantasies that were so evident in the recent referendum.

The commission's report

The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life was convened by the Woolf Institute, based in Cambridge, and chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss. Established in 1998, the Institute promotes the multidisciplinary study of relationships between Christians, Jews and Muslims and engages in reflection on the practical implications for public policy of academic research and theory. On the basis of its teaching and public education programmes over some 15 years the Institute's trustees considered there is a great and urgent need for a deeper understanding of religion and belief in modern society and for the key issues to be reviewed holistically, not each on its own. If deeper understanding is not developed amongst policy-makers and in the public square more generally, it was believed, there is a danger that policies and decisions will be insensitive and inadequate and that the public good will be severely damaged. Everyone will then be negatively affected, regardless of what their private views of religion

and belief may be.

The commission's report was published in December 2015. It received favourable reviews in *The Times*, *Independent* and *Guardian*, and on the BBC. There was a hostile reception, however, in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *Spectator*. In consequence of the latter negativity, wrote an observer on behalf of the Law and Religion UK network in January 2016, 'the British Christian community is in danger of squandering an important and timely opportunity to contribute to the debate about the role of faith in the public square, a debate marred by much confusion, misunderstanding and ill-temper'.ⁱⁱ

The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, ran a front page story headlined 'Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is, says judge'.ⁱⁱⁱ The stand-first opening sentences of this news report repeated the headline and ran as follows: 'Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is, a major inquiry into the place of religion in modern society has concluded, provoking a furious backlash from ministers and the Church of England. A two-year commission, chaired by the former senior judge Baroness Butler-Sloss and involving leading religious leaders from all faiths, calls for public life in Britain to be systematically de-Christianised.'

This interpretation of the report was not explained or justified in the news item that followed, and in point of fact there was nothing in the report itself which could have been quoted in support of it. But substantial damage was done. As of today (July 2016) the report has not yet been considered and debated with due regard by the Church of England.

Key points

To give a flavour of the report's concerns and conclusions, here is a handful of quotations from its opening chapter. They appear not only in the main body of the text but also as pull-out extracts printed in a distinctive font size so that readers cannot easily miss them:

- 'Living with difference was not only a topic for discussion at commission meetings but also, for those who were present, a constant and unavoidable experience.'

- 'Religion has the potential to be both a public good and a public bad and governments must have due regard for it.'
- 'Frequently Enlightenment values ... have been in opposition to religion, and religion in its turn has been suspicious of, or downright hostile towards, humanism ... The two sets of values have also at times intertwined and converged and have deeply influenced each other.'
- 'The present interplay between religious faith on the one hand and the humanism of the Enlightenment on the other is a specific achievement that has been worked out over a long time, and with great difficulty.'
- 'No tradition is monolithic, none is unchanging and none exists independently of specific cultural, historical and political contexts and circumstances.'

Proposals and recommendations

The report contained about 30 practical proposals for further development, including the following:

- Much greater religion and belief literacy is needed in every section of society, and at all levels. The potential for misunderstanding, stereotyping and oversimplification based on ignorance is huge. Educational and professional bodies should draw up religion and belief literacy programmes and projects, including an annual awards scheme to recognise and celebrate best practice in the media.
- The pluralist character of modern society should be reflected in national and civic events so that they are more reflective of the UK's increasing diversity, and in national forums such as the House of Lords, so that they include a wider range of worldviews and religious traditions, and of Christian denominations other than the Church of England.
- All pupils in state-funded schools should have a statutory entitlement to a curriculum about religion, philosophy and ethics that is relevant to today's changing society, and the broad framework of such a curriculum should be nationally agreed. The legal requirement for schools to hold acts of collective worship should be repealed, and replaced by a requirement to hold inclusive times for reflection.

- Bodies responsible for admissions and employment policies in schools with a religious character ('faith schools') should take measures to reduce selection of pupils and staff on grounds of religion.
- The BBC Charter renewal should mandate the Corporation to reflect the range of religion and belief of modern society, for example by extending contributions to Radio 4's daily religious flagship Thought for the Day to include speakers from non-religious perspectives such as humanists.
- A panel of experts on religion and belief should be established to advise the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) when there are complaints about the media coverage in this field.
- Relevant public bodies and voluntary organisations should promote opportunities for interreligious and inter-worldview encounter and dialogue. Such dialogue should involve Dharmic as well as Abrahamic traditions, young people as well as older, women as well as men, and local groups as well as national and regional ones. Clergy and other opinion leaders should have a sound understanding of the traditions of religion and belief in modern society.
- Where a religious organisation is best placed to deliver a social good, it should not be disadvantaged when applying for funding to do so, so long as its services are not aimed at seeking converts.
- The Ministry of Justice should issue guidance on compliance with UK standards of gender equality and judicial independence by religious and cultural tribunals such as ecclesiastical courts, Beit Din and Shari'a councils.
- The Ministry of Justice should instruct the Law Commission to review the anomalies in how the legal definitions of race, ethnicity and religion interact in practice and make recommendations to ensure all religious traditions are treated equally.
- In framing counter-terrorism legislation, the Government should seek to promote, not limit, freedom of enquiry, speech and expression, and should engage with a wide range of affected groups, including those with which it disagrees, and also with academic research. It should lead public opinion by challenging negative stereotyping, for example of Muslims, and by speaking out in support of groups and communities that may otherwise feel vulnerable and excluded.

These proposals and concepts were advanced against the background of significant demographic changes over the last 50 years, including the increasing number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities; the general decline in Christian affiliation, belief and practice, combined a shift away from mainstream denominations and a growth in evangelical and Pentecostal churches; and the increased diversity amongst people who have a religious faith. Further, the report noted that disputes and tensions within and between different traditions in Britain are inextricably linked to geopolitical crises across the Middle East, and in many parts of Africa and Asia. 'Ethno-religious issues and identities in the UK and globally,' it pointed out, 'are reshaping society in ways inconceivable just a few decades ago, and policy responses to such changes will have a profound impact on public life. The resulting uncertainties about national identity, cohesion and community can lead to over-simplistic conclusions about the negative impact of such changes on society. These, in turn, may feed the very anxieties about immigration and the fear of "the other" that need to be addressed. Certainly the development of public policy relating to religion and belief has too often been piecemeal and kneejerk.'

By the same token, the responses of the Daily Telegraph to the commission's report, as summarised above, and of newspapers and church organisations which took their lead from the Telegraph, were piecemeal and kneejerk. It remains to be seen whether a serious conversation about religion and belief in public life does in fact take place, as the commission hoped. Such a conversation will now take place, of course, in the context of post-referendum considerations of the kind of society we in this multi-storied Britain want.

Concluding note: ongoing stories

'Stories,' Ben Okri has said, 'are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations.' Our vision, said the commission's report, 'is of a society at ease with itself in which all individuals, groups and communities feel at home, and in whose flourishing all wish to take part'. In such a society, it continued, 'all feel a positive part of an ongoing national story'. Okri's haunting words are relevant as a conclusion to this brief talk. He continued: 'Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell

themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.^{iv}

ⁱ *Living with Difference: community, diversity and the common good*, published by the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, December 2015, <https://corablivingwithdifference.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/living-with-difference-online.pdf>

See also <http://www.corab.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Chaplin, 'Living with Difference: time for a constructive Christian engagement', <http://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2016/01/20/living-with-difference-time-for-a-constructive-christian-engagement/>

ⁱⁱⁱ John Bingham and Steven Swinford, 'Britain is no longer a Christian country and should stop acting as if it is, says judge', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Dec 2015
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/12036287/Britain-is-no-longer-a-Christian-country-and-should-stop-acting-as-if-it-is-says-judge.html>

^{iv} *Birds of Heaven* by Ben Okri, London: Phoenix Books 1996. Quoted in *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: the Parekh report*, Profile Books 2000, chapter 8, 'summary of the vision', p. 103.