RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL UNITY1

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ABSTRACT

If you believe what some commentators have to say, one of the major factors provoking conflict in our world is the sheer fact of different religious convictions: in our own Country, it seems to be assumed by many that if we could only get the relation between 'faith communities' right, social harmony would inevitably follow. And conversely, any expression of a belief that one's own religious loyalty is absolute, any statement of the belief that I, as a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist or whatever, am speaking the truth, is regarded as threatening and unacceptable. Surely the problem lies with this contest over the truth; surely, if religious people would stop speaking about truth and acknowledge that they were only expressing opinions and conditional loyalties, we should be spared the risk of continuing social conflict and even violence.

But what this hopeful fantasy conceals is an assumption that talking about truth is always less important than talking about social harmony; and, since social harmony doesn't seem to have any universal self evident definition, it is bound to be defined by those who happen to hold power at any given time which, uncomfortably, implies that power itself is more important than truth. To be concerned about truth is at least to recognise that there are things about humanity and the world that cannot be destroyed by oppression and injustice that no power can dismantle. The cost of giving up talking of truth is high: it means admitting that power has the last word. And ever since Plato's *Republic* political thinkers have sought to avoid this conclusion, because it means that there is no significance at all in the witness of someone who stands against the powers that prevail at any given time; somehow, political philosophy needs to give an account of suffering for the sake of

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conscience, and without a notion of truth that is more than simply a list of the various things people prefer to believe, no such account can be given.

So the fact of disagreement between religious communities is in fact crucially important for the health of our common human life. Because these communities will not readily give up their claims to truth in response to the appeal from the powers of the world around to be at one for the sake of social harmony, they testify that power, even when it is apparently working for the good of a majority, cannot guarantee that certain values and visions will remain, whatever may happen. But does this concern for truth mean that there is always going to be damaging conflict wherever there is religious diversity? What about the cost of religious diversity to 'social cohesion'– to use the word that is currently popular in British political rhetoric? Does disagreement about truth necessarily mean the violent disruption of social cooperation? I shall be arguing that it does not, and that, on the contrary, a robust view of disagreement and debate between religious communities may (unexpectedly?) playa major role in securing certain kinds of social unity or cohesion.

The first point I want to make is about the very nature of religious language. To believe in an absolute religious truth is to believe that the object of my belief is not vulnerable to the contingencies of human history: God's mind and character cannot be changed by what happens here in the world. And the logic of this is that an apparent defeat in the world for my belief cannot be the end of the story; *God* does not fail because I fail to persuade others or because my community fails to win some kind of power. Now if I believe for a moment that my failure or our failure is a failure or defeat for God, then my temptation will be to seek for any means possible to avoid such an outcome; and that way lies terrorism and religious war and persecution. The idea that any action, however extreme or disruptive or even murderous, is justified if it averts failure or defeat for my belief is not really consistent with the conviction that my failure is not God's. Indeed, it reveals a fundamental lack of conviction in the eternity and sufficiency of the object of faith. In plain English, religious violence suggests religious insecurity. When different communities have the same sort of conviction of the absolute truth of their perspective, there is certainly an intellectual and spiritual challenge to be met; but the logic of belief ought to make it plain

that there is no defence for the sort of violent contest in which any means, however inhuman, can be justified by appeal to divine sanction. The divine cannot need protection by human violence. It is a point uniquely captured in the words of Jesus before the Roman governor: 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight' (Jn 19.36).

So the rather paradoxical conclusion appears that the more religious people are utterly serious about the truth of their convictions, the less they will sanction all out violence; they will have a trust that what truly *is* will remain, whatever the vicissitudes of society and history. And they will be aware that compelling religious allegiance by violence is tantamount to replacing divine power with human; hence the Qur'anic insistence that there can be no compulsion in matters of religious faith. It is crucial to faith in a really existing and absolute transcendent agency that it should be understood to be what it is independently of any lesser power: the most disturbing form of secularisation is when this is forgotten or misunderstood. And the difficult fact is that it has been so forgotten or misunderstood in so many contexts over the millennia. It has regularly been confused with cultural or national integrity, with structures of social control, with class and regional identities, with empire; and it has been imposed in the interest of all these and other forms of power. Despite Jesus' words in John's gospel, Christianity *has* been promoted and defended at the point of the sword and legally supported by extreme sanctions; despite the Qur'anic axiom, Islam has been supported in the same way, with extreme penalties for abandoning it and civil disabilities for those outside the faith. There is no religious tradition whose history is exempt from such temptation and such failure

Like others, I have sometimes been very critical of the heritage of the European Enlightenment where it has been used to appeal to timeless and obvious rational truths which are superior to the truths claimed for revelation and imparted in the historical processes of communal life. But it should be granted that the Enlightenment had a major role in highlighting some of the inner contradictions of religious language and behaviour in the wake of an age when so much violence had been justified by the rhetoric of faith. After the wars of religion in Europe, it was plausible and important to challenge those habits of thought which had made it seem natural to plunge whole societies– indeed, the greater part of a whole continent– into murderous

chaos on the pretext of religious dispute. For the major thinkers of the Enlightenment, the contrast was between absolutes that could be defended only on the basis of arbitrary religious authority and absolutes that were established by universal reason; and it was obvious that the latter promised peace because they did not need any reference to authorities that, in the nature of the case, could be accepted only by certain groups. By forcing religious authorities to acknowledge that they could not have the legal and civic right to demand submission, Enlightenment thinkers in a sense obliged believers to accept what was in fact an implication of their own religious faith that power in this worldly terms was an inappropriate vehicle for faith.

But the enlightenment dream of a universal rationality proved in the event as vulnerable and questionable as any religious project. It became entangled in theories and discourses of racial superiority (supported by a particular reading of evolutionary biology) and the economic determinism of capitalist theory and practice; it developed a complex and unhealthy relationship with nationalism, which was, increasingly, seen as the practical vehicle for emancipation and rationalisation; and its own account of universal reason was (as I noted in a lecture here in Singapore some months ago) undermined first by Marxian and Freudian theories, then by the structuralist and postmodemist revolutions. European rationality– and its American manifestations in the Declaration of Independence and the political philosophy flowing from that– came to seem as local and arbitrary as any other creed; in the world of global politics, it depended on force as much as argument. And if you come to believe that the values of a certain culture– whether Western democracy or any other– are absolute and impossible for rational people to argue about, then, when some groups resist or disagree, you have a theory that licenses to suppress them; what is more, because you have no transcendent foundation for holding to these values, you may come to believe that any and all methods are justified in promoting or defending them, since they will *not* necessarily survive your failure or defeat.

Thus the Enlightenment hope of universal harmony on the grounds of reason can become a sophisticated version of the priority of force over everything else, a journey back towards the position that Plato exerted all his energy to refute in the *Republic*. If the power of argument proves not be universal after all, sooner or later we are back with coercion; and when that

happens it becomes harder and harder to hold firm to the classical liberal principles that are at the heart of the Enlightenment vision, harder and harder– for example– to maintain that torture or the deliberate killing of the innocent in order to protect the values of society can never in any circumstances be right. It is one of the great moral conundrums posed by the experience of recent years: what if the preserving of civil liberties and the preserving of the security of a liberal society turn out not always to be compatible?

The reality of religious plurality in a society declares, as we have already seen, that some human groups hold to their convictions with an absolute loyalty, believing they are true and thus non negotiable. If they thought otherwise about these convictions, they might be involved in negotiations about merging or uniting in some way; there would be no ground for holding on to a distinct identity. Yet they do hold to their claims to truthfulness, and so declare to the society around that certain things are not liable to be changed simply because of to changes in fashion or political theory or political convenience. The lasting plurality of religious convictions is itself a mark of the seriousness of the convictions involved. Some things are too important to compromise. *But* if a religious community is as serious as it ought to be about its beliefs, this refusal to compromise is accompanied by the confidence that, whether or not these particular beliefs prevail in any society, they will still be true, and that therefore we do not have to be consumed with anxiety about their survival. The religious witness is able to confront possible political failure, even social collapse, in the trust that all is not and cannot be lost, even when the future becomes unimaginably dark; what it will not do is to sanction any policy of survival at all costs (including the cost of basic humane conventions and moral boundaries).

Thus my first point about the role of plural religious communities in society is that they both underpin the notion that there are values which are not negotiable, and that at the same time they prohibit any conclusion that such values can ultimately be defended by violence. They challenge the drift from Enlightenment optimism to the postmodern enthronement of power and interest as the sole elements in political life; that is, they allow societies as well as person to fail with grace and to find space beyond anxiety. That is not at all the same as saying that they require passivity, resignation to the

unprincipled power of others. But they allow human beings the dignity of accepting defeat in certain circumstances where the alternative is to abandon the moral essence of a society in order to win: they suggest the subversive but all important insight that failure might be preferable to victory at the cost of tolerating, say, torture or random military reprisal as normal elements in political life. By being absolute and thus in a sense irreconcilable, they remind society that a unity imposed by force will always undermine the moral substance of social and political life. There is no way of finding a position outside or beyond diverse faith traditions from which to broker a union between them in which their convictions can be reconciled; and this is not bad news but good– good because it does two things at once. It affirms transcendent values; and *by insisting that no other values are absolute,* it denies to any other system of values any justification for uncontrolled violence. Transcendent values can be defended through violence only by those who do not fully understand their transcendent character; and if no other value is absolute, no other value can claim the right to unconditional defense by any means and at all costs. Thus the rationally irreconcilable systems of religious belief rule out any assumption that coercive power is the last resort or the ultimate authority in our world.

And if that is the case, we can see how religious plurality may serve the cause of social unity, paradoxically but genuinely. If we are prohibited from claiming that social harmony can be established by uncontrolled coercive power– that is, if we are obliged to make a case for the *legitimacy* of any social order– but are also prohibited from solving the problem by a simple appeal to universal reason, we are left with a model of politics which is always to do with negotiation and the struggle for mutual understanding. Politics is clearly identified as something pragmatic and 'secular', in the sense that it is not about absolutes. As the world now is, diverse religious traditions very frequently inhabit one territory, one nation, one social unit (and that may be a relatively small unit like a school, or a housing cooperative or even a business). And in such a setting, we cannot avoid the pragmatic and secular question of' common security': what is needed for our convictions to flourish is bound up with what is needed for the convictions of other groups to flourish. We learn that we can best defend ourselves by defending others. In a plural society, Christians secure their religious liberty by advocacy for the liberty of Muslims or Jews to have the same right to be heard in the

continuing conversation about the direction and ethos of a society that is characteristic of liberal polity in the broadest sense of the word.

Diverse religious communities thus approach each other in these social units with a powerful interest in finding what sort of values and priorities can claim the widest 'ownership'. This is not an effort to discover the principles of a generalised global ethic to which different traditions can sign up, tempting as this vision is; the work is more piecemeal and less concerned with programmatic agreed statements though it is certainly a significant moment when diverse communities can take responsibility for common declarations of some kind. The Alexandria Declaration was one such, laying down the limits of what could be defended in the name of religion within the conflicts of the Holy Land; in the same context, more recently, the declaration made by the Chief Rabbis of Israel and the representatives of the Church of England in October of this year outlined the protocols which both sides believed to be essential in defending each other– and other religious bodies– against physical attack or malicious misrepresentation. It is highly desirable that communities of faith continue to work at joint statements of witness about the environmental crisis (still an area that needs far more interfaith collaboration). And the levels of joint witness over matters around bioethics, for example, are significant wherever a narrowly and aggressively non religious rationality presses for certain kinds of change. At the same time, where each community recognises that no one religious tradition can claim to control the processes of public life, this may bring a realism about what the state can and cannot be expected to take for granted and thus a willingness to find, once again, strategies that can win maximal rather than ideal levels of ownership.

A certain pragmatism about what can be agreed as common moral 'property' combined with a strong advocacy of each community's freedom both to practise its faith and to express and argue it in public– this is what religious plurality in a contemporary society may look like. It suggests and helps to secure a state of affairs in which the definition of public policy is never carried through in abstraction from the variety of actual convictions that is evidenced in society– not because anyone of these asserts its right to dictate, but because all claim the freedom to join in public argument in ways that insist on the need for what I have been calling maximal ownership. So, if

a society seeks to legislate for euthanasia, for the absolute equivalence of marriage and any other kind of partnership, for discrimination against minorities in the name of social cohesion, religious bodies may be expected to argue, not for their right to settle the matter, but for a settlement that manifestly respects their conviction to the extent that they can defend it as legitimate even if not ideal. The notion that social unity can be secured by a policy of marginalising or ignoring communities of faith because of their irreducible diversity rests on several errors and fallacies, and its most serious and damaging effect is to give credibility to the idea of a neutral and/or self evident set of secular principles which have authority to override the particular convictions of religious groups. And, as 1 have argued at length in other places, this amounts to the requirement that religious believers leave their most strongly held and distinctive principles at the door when they engage in public argument: not a good recipe for lasting social unity.

Religious diversity in the modern state can thus be seen as a standing obstacle to any enshrining of a state absolutism (even a purportedly liberal variety) in ways that could pretend to legitimise coercion in the name of (non–religious) values; and it can be seen as a guarantor of the fullest argument and consultation in a democratic society, insisting that communities of faith have a stake in the decisions of the state and its moral direction. This last is important not only in the largely negative instances I have quoted but also in the pressure that communities of faith can bring to bear in order to persuade the state to act beyond some of its normal definitions of self interest– for example in addressing international debt and poverty, securing the best possible deal for refugees and migrants, and setting itself some clearly moral aims in foreign policy. This sort of thing will only happen, of course, if religious groups can persuade an electorate to 'own' such a vision. Governments in democratic societies have to be responsive to what electorates want; and if no religious group in a religiously plural context can insist on its preferences as of right, it is still true that the organs of debate in democratic society allow people of faith to be heard in pubic argument and thus to attempt persuasion.

But there is one more aspect of the plurality of religious presences that is important for social integrity and harmony (a harmony which includes, as mature political harmony must, the processes of honest disagreement and

negotiation). Plural religious traditions are a reminder that for most of the human race the values of society are still shaped by one or another history of religious belief. The narrowly 'modern' approach which takes it for granted that social values and priorities are timeless turns its back on the history that forms our convictions. All religious practice declares that we *inherit* certain kinds of insight and perspective, and that to understand why we think as we do, we need to be aware of history. So much is true of any society in which there is a strong and visible cultural presence of religion. But when this is a diversified presence, with distinct convictions and practices in evidence, it turns the argument in fresh directions. A society in which religious diversity exists is invited to recognise that human history is not one story only; even where a majority culture and religion exists, it is part of a wider picture. And very frequently the engagement of different religions in dialogue and cooperation will open up and highlight the many ways in which diverse traditions share a heritage at various points in history. The histories of religion intersect, in their texts and their social development and their political encounters.

Religious diversity when studied with care and sympathy shows us a historical world in which, whatever we say about the claims of diverse religions to truth, there is no possibility of claiming that every human question is answered once and for all by one system. Religions have defined themselves in dialogue and often intellectual conflict with each other; but that very fact implies that there will always be other ways of posing the fundamental questions that human beings confront. Diversity of faith points us towards a past in which there is a kaleidoscope of human perceptions, sometimes interacting fruitfully, sometimes in profound tension. Yet the encounter in history of these diversities shows that diversity cannot help being interactive; and that is in itself can prompt us to think of social unity as the process of a constantly readjusting set of differences, not an imposed scheme claiming totality and finality. Religious diversity becomes a stimulus to find what it is that can be brought together in constructing a new and more inclusive history– to find some fuller sense of the ways in which apparently divergent strands of human thought and imagination and faith can weave together in the formation of each other and of various societies.

Thus in what has been historically a majority Christian culture in the UK, the present diversity of religions within a mostly fairly secular social environment means that the UK has had to think through its history again in the consciousness of how it has engaged with those others who are now on its own doorstep or within its walls which means recognising how even a majority Christian culture has been affected by the strand of mathematical and scientific culture stemming from the Islamic world of the early Middle Ages and how aspects of mediaeval Christian discourse took shape partly in reaction to Islamic thought. The apparently alien presence of another faith has meant that we have had to ask whether it is after a11 as completely alien as we assumed; and as we find that it is not something from another universe, we discover elements of language and aspiration in common. The fuller awareness of a shared past opens up a better chance of shared future, a home that can be built together, to borrow the compelling image used by the British Chief Rabbi in his most recent book. Indeed Dr Sacks offers a very helpful framework for understanding the kind of social unity I have been imagining in this lecture. As he points out, the truth of many contemporary societies is that there is no straightforwardly prevailing religious position dominating society, and– with migration and growing ethnic diversity– no ready made shared history to which everyone can look in the same way. In such a world, a stable and robust social unity comes from the sense of a common project which all can learn to inhabit equally. Diverse communities resolve to enter a kind of 'covenant' in which they agree on their mutual attitudes, and thus on a 'civil' environment, in every sense of the word; and they build on this foundation a social order I which all have an investment. They build a society governed by law– law as a system in which strangers can become partners by accepting the same context of duty and entitlement in the common project of constructing their social world.

And this happens most fruitfully, so Dr Sacks argues, when we begin from acknowledging what he has elsewhere called 'the dignity of difference', from taking seriously the experienced diversity of conviction– not from a utopian and potentially even oppressive set of assumptions that boil down to the belief that everyone who is 'reasonable' is bound to have the same view. Throughout this lecture I have been arguing that different religious convictions all held in depth and with passion, give a necessary human fullness to the moral practices of a society. They give the resources needed to

preserve the idea that some principles are non negotiable and they also declare as plainly as possible to the society around them that there are therefore elements of the human condition which cannot be ignored or sidelined in the search for lasting human welfare and justice. To extend and alter the scope of my title a little, religious diversity tells us that the unity of actual human beings, the integration of their experience into a meaningful whole that takes in all aspects of their reality, is impossible without reference to the relation of human beings to the sacred without reference to the 'image of God' in Jewish and Christian terms. Any society that marginalizes religious communities or denies them the liberty to share honestly in public debate is fragmenting the human subject not only human society by demanding that we ignore one overwhelming dimension of what it is to be human.

In conclusion, then, I would maintain that the presence of diverse religious groups in a society, allowed to have a voice in the decision making processes of society without embarrassment, is potentially an immense contribution to a genuinely active and interactive social harmony and a sense of moral accountability within the social order. It is not something to be afraid of. This argument, of course, does not directly address the details of interfaith dialogue or its methods; but it does suggest that when honest and careful dialogue is going on, this will be for the ultimate good of any society. As I have said, none of this implies for a moment that dialogue entails the compromise of fundamental beliefs or that the issue of truth is a matter of indifference; quite the opposite. But there is a proper kind of humility which, even as we proclaim our conviction of truth, even as we Christians proclaim that all human beings are called to union with God the Father in Jesus Christ by the gift and power of the Spirit, obliges us to acknowledge with respect the depth and richness of another's devotion to and obedience to what they have received as truth. As we learn that kind of respect for each other, we remember that we have none of us received the whole truth *as God knows it;* we all have things to learn. And it is that expectant and positive attitude to our mutual encounter that makes the relation between passionately convinced Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, whatever else, finally a gift and not a threat to a thoroughly contemporary and plural society and its hopes for coherence, justice and peace.