

# **The role of faith in a multicultural society**

**Ted Cante, iCoCo**

## **Key Points of Speech to the National Secular Society Conference, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012, London**

1. the role and position of faith today is inextricably bound up in our past history of multiculturalism. Our multicultural model is now well past its sell-by date and needs to change. This also means that the position of faith in contemporary society also has to be reconsidered.

2. multiculturalism emerged (under different guises) from the 1950s and 60s. It became defined by a number of policies, many of which were progressive and marked Britain out from other European countries. For example, we introduced early legislation to try to prevent racism and to promote equal opportunities. We also tried to value cultural difference and did not insist that minorities lost their heritage and identity. Our reputation for fair play and tolerance stood us in good stead.

3. However, part of the problem with this approach was that we began to see each cultural identity with very clear boundaries. Each was given a special status, often called to meetings to discuss their points of view, generally through a series of self-appointed and government supported leaders who became the gatekeepers of their communities. Communities also received the benefit of targeted funding and action programmes to assist their (often separate) development. We have – as a result of this state intervention -- hardened and homogenised group identities and created the notion that they are fixed and ascribed, rather than chosen and developmental. Ironically, many of these identities now appear more immutable, than the now discredited racial boundaries that they have come to replace.

4. multicultural policies failed to adapt and change, however. As the idea of separate 'races' began to fade and minorities began to gain at least a semblance of equality in some areas, communities began to recognise that any form of ethnic, national, faith or sectarian difference would attract special status. Bearing in mind that there are now around 350 languages in London and 200 in most other principal cities, multicultural policies were no longer able to cope in practical terms with this new era of 'super-diversity'. And, in conceptual terms, 'difference' came to be valued more highly than any sense of commonality.

5. In addition the process of globalisation has meant that external influences now also have a major impact on our own national societal relations. The role of diaspora communities – particularly those based upon faith – are now more prominent and in the public sphere. This has provided a new and stronger aspect to identity and has begun to rival national and ethnic loyalties.

6. Globalisation also appears to have had a negative impact on identity by creating a sense of powerlessness and alienation. Corporate power and political elites appear to have become disconnected from the concerns of ordinary people. This has contributed firstly, to a sense that traditional ideas of identity – especially with the loss of so many manufacturing industries and the communities that supported them - are being threatened and secondly, that regional, ethnic and faith identities will provide some form of shelter to weather the storm of swirling transnational influences.

7. institutional policies remained unchanged until challenged by the introduction of community cohesion in 2001. People now increasingly refuse to play 'identity politics'. Inter-marriage is growing apace – across ethnic, national and faith boundaries, despite resistance from many communities. 'Mixed race' is the fastest growing ethnic category. People are rejecting the narrowing 'groupist' loyalties, challenging their leaders, or simply ignoring them. As a consequence, extremist groups are using shriller voices and more desperate tactics to try to maintain support. The Far Right, who are growing across Europe, have in particular, capitalised upon this fear of change and especially the impact of globalisation. They refuse to look to the future or even recognise present realities.

8. we are now at something of a cross roads. Multiculturalism has to give way to interculturalism. This means maintaining a framework of anti-discrimination legislation and tackling inequalities whilst also:

- Ending to support based upon particular ethnic, faith and national identities. Support should be given according to need, and on a cross-cultural basis
- Ending the practice of privileged meetings with community leaders on the basis of faith and ethnic identities
- Reconsidering the way in which institutions and employers classify identities and reinforce notions of purity and specialness
- Reconfiguring remedial programmes that tackle inequalities by ensuring that they are on a cross-community basis

9. in multi-faith societies institutional change is also both inevitable and essential:

- No faith can have a preferential position. This is not just about disestablishment, which is inevitable, but also about the way faiths are subject to special programmes – as was the case with the Muslim community under the Prevent agenda
- No faith or other identity group should be given state support for services to their community. To do so not only creates the impression that they are different and privileges them over other faith (or non-faith) or ethnic groups. In Britain the most important aspect of this is faith schools, which becomes more problematic each year as the problem is compounded by more and more differentiated faith schools

- The contestation of faith is the flip side of faith being in the public sphere. If faith organisations have the right to advance their views, they must accept that these will be contested. This means that the very idea of blasphemy is outdated in a multi-faith society. Contestation can respect deeply held beliefs, but respect cannot always be justified or taken for granted.

10. the challenge for faith communities themselves is particularly profound and they now have to accept that, like all forms of identity, their boundaries are more flexible and permeable and that the pretence of internal homogeneity cannot be maintained. They have to adjust their practice accordingly, in particular:

- Harsh apostasy rules cannot be acceptable in any circumstances and is a denial of free choice
- Mixed marriages are inevitable and faiths have no right to enforce one parent's faith on the children of that marriage – this is to deny the right of the other partner and that of the child
- Recognition of difference within faiths has to be acknowledged and variations in practice also have to be accepted from without and within

11. the idea of a 'secular society' is, however, now difficult. We need to distinguish secular governance from secular society. Faith should be a welcome component of society – along with any form of diversity. Faith based beliefs are a necessary part of democracy. They are particularly welcome as generally faith values offer an alternative set of values to more secular political organisations. Faith groups should have the right to espouse their views, to practice and, within reason to display their faith allegiance. In this sense, no modern day society is secular. However, this is very different from 'secular governance' which entails the separation of church and state, both in terms of decision taking and service provision. The state must ensure that its decisions – policies and services – are not based upon any one particular belief system and do not privilege one faith over another, or over non-faith beliefs and values. In any event, decisions are increasingly based upon evidential grounds as policy makers find that their decisions are subject to challenge in the courts.

12. Finally, people in Britain tend to fear the loss of a Christian society. This is understandable when so much of our identity seems to be under threat from the pressures of globalisation. We tend to hang on to any aspect of our past which might offer stability. The reality is that people are now less observant and, at least, less concerned with the institution of the church. This does not mean that people do not have a spiritual component, however, they chose to define it. At the same time many of the religious and cultural values that have underpinned Christian societies have become so entwined and embedded - and in some cases it is difficult to know which came first - that they are unlikely to disappear. Seeing faith as part of a wider conception of identity does not mean that the UK, or any society, will lose its cultural heritage.