

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Can Britain Re-Imagine Itself As A Multi-Cultural Nation ?

For the Mazibuko Festschrift

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In these early years of the 21st century, both South Africa and Britain are struggling to come to terms with our respective - if rather different - challenges to become genuinely multi-cultural societies. What can this mean in practice ? How best can our churches encourage and share in this search ? What new contributions in this regard can our two nations hope to offer into the future of humanity ?

Bongani Mazibuko played a growingly important part, during his time in Britain, in the work of the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership, becoming its Co-Director in 1981 and serving as its sole director for a few months in 1985/6 before being re-called to his native land. This Centre has provided the British, more especially the English, churches with a key model for inter-cultural social, theological and spiritual friendship and acceptance. Bongani was a much valued presence and inspirer in the life of the Centre already while he was researching into its methodology for his doctorate, all the more so when he took up a post on its staff.

At meetings of the Centre's committee, which is where I chiefly met him, he was unfailingly courteous, quiet, patient and observant, with a lovely twinkle in the corner of his eye. Yet he was restrained, evidently choosing not to push himself forward, and hardly fascinated with the complex details of finance or of institutional relationships that the Committee had to labour over. For myself, I can only regret not having made more time and opportunities to get to know

him better while he was in Britain. From learning about his later service at three universities in South Africa before his tragically premature death, I realise how much more he could have contributed at our end of the world in both cultural and educational fields if only we had proved better able to encourage that. So I gladly offer this article in token of what I would love to be able to think through with him now.

A rich experience of an unusual mix of people and cultures

What a memorable and unusual mix of people we were in the CBWCP ! I could sense that already when, in my function as a staff member of the British Council of Churches, I became a member of the group planning the Centre and later of its governing committee. I travelled every three or four months from London to Birmingham for committee meetings, and especially enjoyed the annual Celebrations for the granting of Certificates by the University of Birmingham. Still more when in the late 1980s I joined the teaching staff and could accompany several cohorts of students through to the end of their courses, I learned to sense and appreciate just what a vital breakthrough this Centre was pioneering. Coming from many different backgrounds and cultures, indeed from a greater variety of churches than any of us had previously known, we learned to respect each other, to grow - at first cautiously then with increasing freedom and delight - into a fuller mutual understanding, and in the later stages to glory together in the privilege of our common calling as followers of Jesus at the service of the one God.

That deeply enriching experience, which still today far too few Christians in Britain have come to know, surely has vital lessons for the future of our churches, our nation and indeed for the world. Much has been written from within the Centre⁽¹⁾. Yet it is the personal experience that counts, the experience that includes all the unforeseeable and awkward passages as well as what can more easily be described and chronicled. So while a great deal has already grown out of the Centre's efforts, especially in inner-city areas where the Black-led churches are strong, and in the national bodies where church leaders now collaborate and encourage each other as a matter of course, it remains far from easy to demonstrate the value of this type of partnership to those without direct, personal experience.

A recent document has brought it all flooding back. *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*⁽²⁾ is written by a commission established by the Runnymede Trust and chaired by Lord Bhikhu Parekh, Emeritus Professor of political theory in the University of Hull and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Baroda. It sets out to point the way into a new future for Britain, thirty years after the pioneering study *Colour and Citizenship* by Jim Rose and Nicholas Deakin of 1969. To my delight, the basic starting-point it establishes, just like the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership, is that of the uniqueness of each person, as a distinctive human being, before and beyond any of the conventional group or cultural stereotypes that almost all of us tend to apply to others.

This means realising that, within any "category" - race, gender, age, ethnic, cultural or educational background, etc. - people are always more diverse, more wonderfully themselves than what others expect them to be. Not least was this true for us gathered in the Centre as we bumped into and tried delicately to re-shape the stereotypes we had brought from our own churches about the churches of others. The expected "stiffness" of Anglicans or "enthusiasm" of Pentecostals both faded behind the joy of coming to know Paula or Joe for the creative and imaginative persons they actually are, very different to one another and to anybody else, yet supremely themselves, neither in the least deserving to be trapped into somebody else's conventional expectation.

On the way to that insight lay many moments of sensitive awakening, not so much to one another's diverse theology as to the ways our habitually monocultural outlooks shape our expectations of one another, the kinds of meaning we variously can and cannot be expected to be aware of, the basic outlook we variously bring to exchanges in the area of faith and behaviour. We became aware that any standard "English" or "Afro-Caribbean" features in the culture of any one of us was already caught up in what the Parekh report calls "a process of mixing and hybridization (that) will increasingly be the norm",⁽³⁾ and learned to rejoice in this. As the Parekh report charts on the

wider national scene, the experience of being together in the CBWCP taught us all to be sensitive to the economic, educational and housing stresses that many of the group (mainly, of course, the "blacks") had to cope with. Yet while the later Parekh report faces boldly the ways in which "racial stereotypes are systematically 'gendered' ",⁽⁴⁾ we could only much more hesitantly and uncertainly venture into exploring with one another the fact that within each distinct culture or community there are invariably a set of expected or assumed roles laid down for men and for women, and the consequent unwelcome and tough questions to be faced about how each person sees and copes with this area of reality.

Still more we gradually learned how differently the many current sub-cultures are shaping today's younger generations. For there was clearly an enormous difference between the senior black pastors in the Centre's first few courses, people who had been thrust into the leadership of "independent" fellowships with little experience of education beyond primary schooling many years before, and the bright younger lay church members who came along five years later, many with higher education behind them and now working on the early rungs of a professional career. Through this contrast we could all sense how far at least those who lived in the more mixed areas of our cities had begun to respond to the challenges of a multi-cultural society.

Thus, with the Parekh report, we learned to take seriously "*both* equality and difference, the rights of *both* individuals and communities"⁽⁵⁾ without allowing either side of those tensions to win out over the other. As that report pinpoints, we were learning in the Centre the overriding importance of a genuinely open and permanently inter-cultural dialogue, the reaching of a reasonable degree of consensus through extended deliberation. Without formulating it in such neat, theoretical terms, the Centre was enabling us to sense the key roles of what the Parekh report⁽⁶⁾ calls the "procedural values":

people's willingness to give reasons for their views, readiness to be influenced by arguments better than their own, mutual respect, aspiration to peaceful resolution of differences

and the "substantive values"

freedom to plan their own lives, the equal moral worth of all human beings, and equal opportunities to lead fulfilling lives and to contribute to collective wellbeing.

In sum, we learned in the Centre that the complexities of "plurality" of culture, outlook, expectation, not least within the Christian faith and expectations of what "partnership" should mean, reach far beyond the simple "Black and White" labels of the Centre's title. No disrespect to that title. We all need clear pointers, not least in the context of the still so prevalent personal and institutional racism of British society, but it belongs to the nature of good education to help each and every one of us to realise how infinitely much more there is to be discovered and explored through the actual people we were working with.

A revealing impasse

Unlike the Centre, the Parekh report is equally concerned with Britain's "brown" (Indian, Chinese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi) and "other white" (Irish, Jewish, Gypsy) communities as with the "black" (African-Caribbean, African) and "majority white" (with all their varieties of religious and non-religious convictions !). I well remember the shock of discovering in a Christian doctrine class that the question of "inter-faith" relationships was unwelcome to many participants. Was this because of the dominance of firmly "evangelical", bible-centred standpoints ? Or was it also because we had not yet adequately grasped that our growth into mutual understanding between black and white should be leading us into a quite new paradigm of Christian mission ? The Centre was undeniably based on convictions to do with the equality in the sight of God of Christians, indeed of persons, of any and every race. But clearly not many of us had yet stretched our conventional attitudes to Christian witness and obedience into a commitment to overcoming *all* kinds of separation and hostility in the surrounding society.

So it was a painful contrast when strong bible-believing Christians expressed themselves in regard to Muslims or Buddhists with a certainty of stereotypically negative judgment, even scorn. In face of such ignorance and insensitivity one hardly knew whether to weep or laugh ! How to open up an awareness that the same imperatives of lasting inter-cultural dialogue need to apply in *all* fields of inter-group relationships ? Ten years later, with much new awareness of the fragility of our planet, endangered by climate change and the pressures of over-population, and with the increasing urgency - especially after September 11th 2001 - for radical change in the way Christians and Muslims have for so long thought of each other, that question is no longer pointing to an optional extra but to the heart of the Gospel. God's calling to Christians to love our neighbours must now extend beyond our fellow-Christians into foretastes of the universal community of humankind, embracing all the varieties of our fellow human beings into groupings that can learn to foreshadow a single human race living in mutual understanding and caring for the future of our single, fragile planet, - a task that will enrich all of us by a far greater range of gifts than any one tribe or culture can know on its own.

Re-imagining our nations as microcosms of the world community

But that is to jump ahead. What can such huge affirmations mean for British society and the British churches as we move into the new century ? What can they mean for societies in Southern Africa ? Let's look first at the implications for British society. The Parekh report has chapters looking in close detail into a number of fields which undoubtedly need far-reaching re-imagining - including policing, education and what they term "legislation and enforcement" - in seeking to bring together an expectation of cultural diversity throughout society and a common culture of human rights. Much of this will apply even more to the situation in South Africa, a nation deeply wounded by a history of much harsher segregation. The CBWCP, in the vital field of Christians from European, African and African Caribbean backgrounds, has taught its participants to dare to open up to the others' different range of culture and inheritance. But intra-Christian relations cannot be the whole story. All of us, from whatever background, need to begin to draw on an ever widening field of

social, cultural and spiritual inheritances and identities if we are in future to know ourselves as no longer simply one monocultural society among others - usually seeing ourselves in competition with those others - but rather a microcosm of the entire human race, of the "world community" of tomorrow. Does this sound like yet another face of the dreaded "globalisation" ? Yes, it does, and should, though not now with the feel of any "big brother" sweeping the many little siblings up into his powerful claws, as is so often the case with this term in its economic/trading/technological contexts. We British have all too often appeared in that "big brother" role as our adventurers (if not alone among Europeans !) roamed around the world from the 16th century on, grabbing new wealth and power from those they considered inferior, thus bequeathing the long and painful tradition of imperialism. Yet now, with a new century - and even if all too much economic imperialism continues stronger than ever - the fact that people from so many different parts of the world have come to Britain (as to France, Germany, Scandinavia, etc), who can put us "old natives" in touch with a far wider range of cultures, communities, traditions, and not least religious faiths, from around the globe, is surely an encouraging pointer to a "new world order".

Not that any such microcosm can be taken for granted. The Parekh report rightly points out⁽⁷⁾ that today's situation leads to each of our little worlds becoming "an unpredictable place" in which

people have competing attachments to nation, group, subculture, city, neighbourhood and the wider world; and belong to a range of different but overlapping communities, real and symbolic, divided on all the critical issues of the day. (...) The pace of change has created anxiety and uncertainty.

All the more need then for us to be working together on a common purpose for the new Britain as a whole and single community, not chopped up into mutually exclusive segments. In regard to the religious, not least Christian contribution, this must involve a mutual care for the development of a shared spirituality drawing on people's varying inner resources, fostering new

mixtures, and helping us all to withstand the pressures encouraging hostility and segregation.

What is to be feared and avoided, at the same time, is the kind of complacent "McDonaldisation" so easily provoked by current forces of globalisation, any acceptance of an approach relying on "lowest common denominators". This simply trivialises the common life, preferring to overlook the many distinctive - and therefore inevitably often apparently competing - features of the different traditions in favour of what "we can all enjoy doing together", as if it is that easy. The much vaunted "melting pot" model of the USA, which in effect marginalises - and in its earlier history all too often simply exterminated - the original, indigenous cultures, and still now insists on obliterating much in the rich inheritances the invading newcomers have brought with them, is not one that deserves to be copied in other parts of the world.

Rather, and for the longer run, Christians must hope that all citizens - whether in Britain, South Africa or wherever - can discover the patience to learn to follow what the Parekh report calls the "ground rules" for inter-cultural dialogue, and so to grow into that wider range of inheritances and traditions as we interact on and enrich one another. Only in that way shall we become more adequately educated and more joyfully equipped for the demanding challenges that the 21st century will yet throw at our children and grandchildren.

It is dismayingly difficult to try and offer specific details of any such pilgrimage. Things will invariably turn out to be different to what anyone may have been expecting, and of course any outcomes will depend a great deal of the particularities of each specific context.. Yet what matters at this early stage is not so much the details as the spiritual willingness to enter into a process of dialogue, together with a firm commitment to recognising and avoiding the signs of any exclusive attitudes to "the other" that can nullify the hope of dialogue. The Parekh report usefully offers, at the end of its chapter on "Religion and Belief", a Table⁽⁸⁾ with 8 pairs of frequent contrasts or tensions,

in each case one "closed" set over against one "open". These are respectively labelled:

Monolithic / Diverse

Separate / Interacting

Inferior / Different

Enemy / Partner

Manipulative / Sincere

Criticisms of the self rejected / considered

Discrimination defended / criticised

Hostility toward the Other seen as natural / problematic.

That chapter is understandably written from outside any of the religious communities, dealing entirely with their role in the wider society and keeping off the sensitive ground of their internal searches for new integrity under the new circumstances and in a new environment. Even the report's predictable, and inevitably superficial, handling of the "establishment" of the Church of England (i.e. its position ever since 1662 in regard to the monarchy, Bishops in the House of Lords, and one or two minor constitutional privileges) is written entirely - and not very perceptively - from the outside looking in. In the closing paragraph of this passage⁽⁹⁾ they recommend the calling of a new "commission on the role of religion in the public life of a multi-faith society, to make recommendations on legal and constitutional matters". I have no quarrel with that recommendation, but it simply passes the sensitive buck. The lines leading up to the recommendation are in no way ungenerous, but fail to be aware of the many internal questions, touching on profound matters of spirituality, authority and mission, that the Church of England will need to explore at depth with its many partners when the time comes for such a radical change in the basic fabric of British society. This is a very different situation to yours in South Africa, though among you too there may need to be yet more careful and far-reaching measures for moving beyond a pattern where any one religious community can believe itself to have a God-given right to control the others.

What does this mean for the churches ?

So let me finally turn to what the Centre's experience may suggest - at least to one white, middle-class Anglican participant - for the future struggles of the British churches within this search for a new Britain and its role in the world as a whole.

First, we should be grateful that the Centre launches through its practice and experience, as the Parekh report does in writing, such a clear, hopeful **challenge to earlier and narrower views of British "society", "nation", "culture" or "tradition"** - all obviously important but dangerously unreal abstractions that can easily constrict rather than liberate our hearts, minds and wills. The fact that Christians in Britain are under pressure to pursue new and imaginative re-thinking of our citizenship is already a good and joyful thing. All the more "good" and all the more "joyful" since the pressure is to pay more respect and show more love to our fellow human beings - no longer just of our own sort but right across the spectrum of the total human family that God has created and nurtured - than we ever have done in earlier centuries. Second, we are reminded that **Christian faith is a universal faith**, not to be narrowed down to any one group or time or place. We need to be able to live and know the truth we live by as the truth for everyone else who ever has and ever will live on this earth. Again, it is good to be jolted out of any habitual equation of Christianity with one particular nation, language, culture, race or class.

Third, **the Centre points to a crucial new dimension of Christian witness and mission.** It has developed an inspiring model for Christians to experience the Gospel they follow, and the fellowship it creates, as embracing people of a wider variety of cultures, theologies and outlooks than any of our churches normally expects. In today's Britain, as in its European neighbours, we can find, if we are prepared to go looking, almost every type of church from all the different continents and contexts of today's world. Even in as comparatively small a city as Oxford, where I now live, Christians from churches originating in an astonishing variety of cultures and histories can meet, come to know

each other and increasingly share in worship, fellowship and action. That in itself must offer in the long run a crucial witness to the purposes of God to any who are tempted to place their faith and trust in more mono-cultural realities.

For, fourth, **the whole point of being "church" is not for our own enjoyment but for service of the surrounding community**. Archbishop William Temple has often been quoted as saying ⁽¹⁰⁾: "The church is one of relatively few human organisations established for the benefit of those who are *not* its members - and most of the time fails to live up to this". Our faith sends us out in joint mission into the surrounding communities of many cultures to offer witness and service pointing towards ever greater degrees of mutual acceptance, respect and love. The churches in today's Britain, as in many other societies, are gifted with members of many cultures and outlooks precisely in order to be able to witness to society about God's purposes for the enrichment of the entire human family, indeed of the entire creation. For this, we shall need to draw on the potential of all the neighbours and fellow-citizens God gives us.

Good news of a multi-faith society

That is why I delight in what the Centre taught me about "the good news" in Britain's long-term development into a multi-cultural and multi-faith society. Another, more quizzical way of putting this comes from Ninian Smart, a leading academic in inter-faith questions. He has written ⁽¹¹⁾: "From a Christian perspective we can say that God put other faiths there to keep us honest". The presence in one's own community of those formerly regarded as "different", even "hostile", forces all of us to re-learn, soberly and realistically, precisely what can be claimed as unique by our own faith or community, and what belongs to all of us. If this is true from a Christian perspective, then no doubt it will deserve to be pondered also from that of Jews, Muslims and Sikhs. When it comes to matters of national identity, of religious truth, of God's overall purpose for tomorrow's world, we all need the help of "others" to stay honest and not be enthralled by our own generalizations !

None of this is straightforward or easy. Among Christians, as in many other groupings, there will need to be many, many processes of active dialogue towards the resolving of awkward differences. We need deliberate work for consensus-building in place of passive acquiescence in lack of contact with "the others", let alone hostile rejection. Some problems may crop up over relatively trivial things like the shared use of a church building. But there will also be major problems concerning, say, the nature of authority in a democracy or the roles proper to women and men, that we shall all need much patience and persistence to find a way to resolve. We shall have to learn to put up with many disturbing or infuriating things other Christians or other believers see fit to do in their way. On occasion we shall need to seek out appropriate inter-mediators, "link persons" who can help both parties understand one another and find an appropriate way beyond the problem. In much of this we will be able to benefit from existing experience in other parts of the world if only we are ready to go looking for it. In the more difficult moments, as in those of happy mutual acceptance and friendship, let's thank God that our learnings can be potentially true for many other situations too. This is why it was significant that a South African such as Bongani Mazibuko served the CBWCP as co-director, alongside the German Roswith Gerloff, in its early stages. Your country has long had to live through sufferings and struggles based on mutual rejection and resentment, with much painful experience of the costs to be paid for winning through to a political and legal situation of justice and respect for all. Those oppressed among you have had to experience situations of cruelty and degradation, from which all of you, for instance through your *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, have had much to learn. One of our ingrained problems in Britain is that of a ruling class proud of a certain history and type of Christianity, and which has long supposed our nation to be essentially different (and better !) than others. The CBWCP has encouraged me to believe that we are capable of learning better, but it seems to be taking a painfully long time.

Jesus was a person of his own time and place, as are we all, yet one who brought a fresh and startling view of God's purposes for the whole world. At his Ascension he promised his disciples that they would be his witnesses "in

Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even in the furthest corners of the earth".⁽¹²⁾ For a century European Christians have slowly become aware of many, many indigenous fellow-Christians and churches to be found in most of those "furthest corners". In the 21st century many, perhaps most cities in every continent will have among their citizens a cross-section of the astonishing range of human tribes, tongues and traditions. This will usually include a fair number of fellow-human beings whom Jesus has called into his service. Can Christians in the communities who think of ourselves as "hosts" to such "newcomers" grow to realise that our Christian "guests" are rather the essential friends, teachers, and colleagues in mission that God is giving us for the new tasks we need to face and work on together in this new century ? Only so can we all grow into the servant community God both calls and needs, to celebrate and work towards the day when the whole human family will discover itself caught up into the loving friendship not just of "our own sort" but of "all sorts" and so of the one creator and eternal God.

*Dr Martin Conway is a lay member of the Church of England who served on the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership's Executive Committee from 1978-1994, while he was successively Ecumenical Affairs Secretary of the British Council of Churches (to 1983), tutor in Church and Society at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, an Anglican seminary (1983-6), and President of the Selly Oak Colleges (1986-97). He now lives in retirement in Oxford He spent six months in Southern Africa in 1988 visiting former students of Selly Oak in several countries, in preparation for the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, on which he has written *Journeying Together Towards Jubilee* (available from him at 303 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 2AQ). He is a contributor to the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, as well as to the *International Review of Mission* and *The Ecumenical Review**

Notes

1. For instance *Learning in Partnership* (London: British Council of Churches, pp. 32, 1980), a moving report by the Co-Directors, Roswith Gerloff and Martin Simmonds, with contributions from several student members, on the first year of the course in theology offered by the Centre and shaped with much care to respond to the needs and possibilities of its distinctive constituency.
2. *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, Runnymede Trust, London: Profile Books, 2000, ISBN 1-86187-227-X, price £ 10.99.
3. Para 3.2
4. Para 3.4
5. Para 3.27
6. Para 4.30
7. Para 2.23
8. Table 17.1
9. Para 17.16
10. Though, to my great regret, I have never been able to track this down to any of his writings, nor to some specific occasion.
11. Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991, ISBN 0-551-02055-5) p.11.
12. *Acts of the Apostles* 1:8, New English Bible.