Multiculturalism

by Julian Rivers

The movement towards a multi-ethnic, multicultural Britain has been decisive.

The Parekh Report, 2000

[The Parekh Report] does not read well in the light of post-September Islamic outpourings ... Liberalism is betrayed by ... people who put the comfort of immigrant minorities before the insistence on an irreducible list of British civic values: democracy, mutual tolerance, equality of liberty, the rule of law.
Hugo Young, *The Guardian,* 6 November 2001

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Summary

Is the United Kingdom multicultural? If it is, how should law and social policy respond? This paper argues that the Bible points to two key relevant principles: personal liberty and cultural integration. This offers us a path between brutal religious nationalism, radical privatization of religion, and social splintering into an uneasy co-existence of closed communities. In particular, it suggests that we urgently need to create an explicit and non-religious conception of British citizenship, to exercise caution over the development of faith-based schools, to challenge the increasing tendency to conflate religious and racial identity, and to oppose formal commitments to 'multiculturalism'.

Multicultural Britain?

The report of the inquiry into the murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence generated considerable controversy by charging the police with institutional racism.[1] Public attention focused almost exclusively on the institutional element of this charge. Less noticed, although more problematic, was a tension within the Report about the meaning of racism. On one hand, the police were criticized for stereotyping Stephen's friend and fellow victim, Duwayne Brooks, as a criminal.[2] The fact that he was a young black man should have been irrelevant to their treatment of him. Racial equality, it seems, means ignoring racial characteristics. On the other hand, the police family liaison team were also criticized for showing, 'a lack of training and sensitivity in understanding the way in which a black family may react to the terrible circumstances in which Mr and Mrs Lawrence found themselves.'[3] So 'colourblind policing' is inappropriate,[4] and racial equality means taking account of racial characteristics after all.

This is just one example of a broader debate about multiculturalism, or more precisely, multi-ethnicity.[5] To what extent is the United Kingdom characterized by ethnic diversity, and what is the proper response of law and social policy to ethnic diversity? That British society is increasingly multicultural can hardly be doubted.[6] Ever since the Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in 1948, providing the first supply of cheap labour to post-war Britain, the minority ethnic population has grown steadily until it is now around 4 million, comprising 7.1 per cent of the total population. The assumption that minority ethnic issues are largely a matter of immigration policy is increasingly false: half of the total minority ethnic population in the UK in 1997–8 was born here, as were 90 per cent of those aged under 15.[7]

UK population according to race in millions[8]

White	53.1	Pakistani	0.7
African-Caribbean	0.5	Bangladeshi	0.3
African and other Black	0.7	Chinese	0.1
Indian	0.9	Other/mixed race	0.7

1   The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny, Cm 4262, 15 February 1999.
2   Ibid. paras. 5.11–5.12, 5.31.
3   Ibid. para. 26.15.
4   Ibid. para. 45.24.
5   Ethnicity includes nationality, colour, race, language and religion; see *Mandla v Dowell Lee* [1983] 2 AC 548.
6   For a brief history, see Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *True Colours: Public Attitudes to Multiculturalism and the Role of Government*, IPPR, 1999, ch. 3.
7   Office for National Statistics, *Population Trends,* 105, Autumn 2001.
8   Source: Office for National Statistics, *Social Trends*, Vol. 31, 2001.

The religious affiliation of the population is harder to assess. In spite of differences in conceptions of membership, it is generally appropriate to draw a distinction between community and active membership. About 65 per cent of the total population consider themselves Christian and 11 per cent of the population are active church members; 7 per cent are members of non-Christian religious communities and 3 per cent active.

Estimated religious community affiliation and active membership in 1995, with percentage of total population[9]			
Trinitarian churches	38,100,000 (65.0%)	6,361,000 (10.9%)	
Non-trinitarian churches	1,300,000 (2.2%)	522,000 (0.9%)	
Muslim	1,200,000 (2.0%)	580,000 (1.0%)	
Sikh	600,000 (1.0%)	350,000 (0.6%)	
Hindu	400,000 (0.7%)	155,000 (0.3%)	
Jewish	300,000 (0.5%)	94,000 (0.2%)	
Others	300,000 (0.5%)	116,000 (0.2%)	

While useful, the basic statistics also mask considerable variation. There is a substantial rural–urban split in the distribution of minority ethnic groups (about 80 per cent of Black Africans and 60 per cent of Bangladeshis live in London), often giving rise to grossly inflated public perceptions of the size of the minority ethnic population. Some non-Whites have assimilated fully to mainstream British culture; others retain strong ties to their ethnic origins. And although the vast majority of Muslims are Asian, there are many thriving Black Christian churches. Thus the links between race, culture and religion are far from clear. If the United Kingdom is multicultural, it is not uniformly so.

Multicultural policy

The *fact* of multiculturalism does not necessarily mean that multi-culturalist *policy* is the proper response, for it is possible to respond to ethnic diversity in a number of ways. *Nationalism* asserts the value of cultural homogeneity in delivering social stability, a sense of 'belonging', and mutual assistance. On this view, ethnic diversity within a single nation is a problem to be solved by assimilating ethnic minorities into the dominant culture. *Liberalism* asserts the value of a universal, cosmopolitan, citizenship. Individuals are permitted to display distinctive cultural and religious commitments in their personal lives, but this is not permitted to intrude upon the public sphere, which is supposed to be ethnically neutral.[10] *Multiculturalism* argues that nationalism and liberalism are both unjust. Ethnic identity is important and ethnic diversity is intrinsically valuable. The proper response to the multicultural nature of society is to build ethnic pluralism into national law and social policy, treating differently the ethnically different. Thus the tension identified in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report turns broadly on a disagreement between liberal and multiculturalist responses to ethnic diversity.

Multiculturalism offers various ways of incorporating ethnic diversity into law.[11] Special exemptions can be made for minority ethnic groups, for example, in exempting Sikhs from wearing helmets on building sites. Special benefits might be conferred to take account of distinctive ways of life, for example in the provision of networks of campsites for gypsies. Then again, laws may try to allocate resources by ethnic criteria, for example in setting ethnic quotas for large employers, or by 'softer' means of encouraging balanced representation, such as employment equity plans.[12] Finally, different legal systems may be applied to different ethnic groups,

perhaps as 'personal law'. Some British Muslims have argued for the application of Shari'ah law to Muslims in family and inheritance matters in just such a way.

Historically, the radical pluralism of personal law has been a feature of large empires, from Persia and Rome to the Ottoman Empire and the British Raj.[13] For five centuries under the (Muslim) Ottoman Empire, Jewish, Armenian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox minorities had official recognition as *millets*, or self-governing communities. Each was further subdivided into smaller administrative units, usually based on ethnicity and language.[14] The overriding need to preserve peace between disparate peoples with deep-seated ethnic commitments makes such policies practically necessary. But it is not insignificant that sooner or later such empires tend to split into smaller national units. Yugoslavia is, of course, the most recent bloody example of this.

Other defences of multiculturalism rely on a conception of the person which sees ethnic group membership as constitutive of personal identity.[15] Failure to respect ethnic characteristics is a failure to respect the person in a morally significant sense. Sometimes this is supported by a thoroughgoing cultural relativism, which denies the possibility of objective standards to evaluate cultures.[16] As a general argument, this is unpersuasive for, in reality, multiculturalists accept that there are ethical limits to ethnic diversity. Few would want to defend the practices of clitoridectomy or *sati* (self-immolation of widows), both of which are criminalized under English law, regardless of their position in some African and Indian cultures respectively. Differences of approach play out in respect of ethically less problematic practices, such as the Rastafarian use of *ganja*, or cannabis. Because this instance of drug-taking is rooted in religio-cultural practice, multiculturalists might well exempt it from a general prohibition.

Biblical perspectives on multiculturalism

It is easy to be attracted to all three approaches to ethnic diversity. We may want to modify John Major's vision of warm beer and elderly ladies cycling to communion through the early morning village mist,[17] but it is hard not to feel a certain nostalgic commitment to a picture of Britain in which Christianity is at least the assumed cultural background, if not the practice of personal conviction. It is too easy to feel that to be quintessentially British means to be white and Protestant, even Anglican. Then again, liberalism's 'colourblind' approach to race and religion seems intuitively right. Surely racial identity is irrelevant in the sight of God? Surely government is not responsible for religious orthodoxy? But finally, as society drifts further from its moorings in a Christian consensus, multiculturalism seems to hold out the hope of cutting our losses and retaining some enclaves of Christian culture, within which ethical life can proceed by way of example to the world.[18]

The Bible contains a wealth of material relevant to issues of national identity and ethnic diversity.[19] In an earlier Cambridge Paper, I argued that the Bible bears witness to two important principles relevant to international order: the value of a plurality of nation-states and the universal validity of a single ethical code.[20] Here, it is suggested that the Bible points us to two further principles of internal organization: a principle of personal liberty and a principle of cultural integration. Obviously, these can conflict at times, so it is important to identify the proper scope of personal liberty and those aspects of cultural integration which are of particular significance.

9 Source: Office for National Statistics, *Social Trends*, Vol. 28, 1998, Table 13.24 and Vol. 29, 1999, Table 13.23.

10 For a recent vigorous critique of multiculturalism from a liberal perspective, see Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality*, Polity Press, 2001.

11 See generally Sebastian Poulter, *Ethnicity, Law and Human Rights*, Clarendon Press, 1998.

12 See in particular, Bob Hepple, Mary Coussey and Tufyal Choudhury, *Equality: a New Framework*, Hart Publishing, 2000.

13 See Michael Walzer, *On Toleration*, Yale University Press, 1997.

14 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp.156–8.

15 E.g. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, CUP, 1982, ch. 1.

16 As in Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, Macmillan Press, 2000.

17 Cited in the Parekh Report (below, note 48), para. 2.15.

18 See the work of Stanley Hauerwas, from *A Community of Character*, 1981, onwards, and David Fergusson's careful critique in *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, CUP, 1998.

19 The focus here is directly on biblical material; for a very helpful and more theologically informed perspective, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, Abingdon Press, 1998.

20 'The New World Order', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 8, No. 4.

OT Israel was characterized by common kinship and language, common laws, a common history and a common religion, all of which were, of course, closely intertwined with each other. So how did Israel deal with 'foreigners' residing within their jurisdiction?[21] Biblical law draws a distinction between different types of 'foreigner', ranging from those who were long-term residents across several generations and who wished to assimilate into Israelite culture, to 'strangers', or 'resident aliens', who might only be short-term visitors. The latter were to be treated fairly, but were not granted full civil rights. By contrast, Israel was remarkably open to foreigners wishing to assimilate. Biblical law specified that they should have the same legal rights and be subject to the same legal prohibitions as natives. They were to benefit from equal participation in the religious and political life of the nation; they were to have equal access to the cities of refuge, and most radically, at least one later text insists (perhaps only prophetically) that they were to have equal rural land rights in addition to property in the walled cities.[22]

Furthermore, the effects of intermarriage could blur the racial boundaries. While there are several warnings against 'marrying foreign wives',[23] of the four women mentioned by Matthew in the genealogy of Christ, two were Canaanite, one was Moabite and the fourth had married a Hittite. Moses married a Cushite.[24] In every case in which intermarriage is prohibited, the reason is for the preservation of religious – not racial – purity; although in one case the failure of children to learn 'the language of Judah' is also mentioned.[25]

Cultural integration was desirable in itself, not simply good because Israel was peculiarly blessed by God. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles exhorted them in the light of their 70-year absence to 'build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters ... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you'.[26] Daniel and his friends received new names and became expert in Babylonian language and literature.[27] Nehemiah was trusted enough to become cupbearer to the King, and Mordecai second-in-rank in the kingdom. At only one point was assimilation to be resisted: faith in the God who had revealed himself and saved his people was not negotiable.[28] Cultural integration was thus treated as intrinsically good, but it was subordinate to the need to preserve religious truth. To the extent that it is possible to disentangle religious from other elements of cultural assimilation, the Bible seems to place the stress on the need for common territory, kinship and language rather than other factors.[29]

The gospels present the ministry of Jesus as radically inclusive in the face of organized religion's exclusivity. He himself experienced ethnic prejudice on account of his perceived origins in Nazareth,[30] and he taught, and healed, in Samaritan and Gentile regions around Israel.[31] However, Jesus' inclusivity was not without limits, made most apparent in John 4. While he broke social convention by speaking to a woman and a non-Jew, he neither compromised his ethical criticism of her serial polygamy[32] nor his belief in the superiority of the Jewish understanding of God.[33] Racial and cultural barriers are broken down, but doctrinal and ethical truth is reasserted.

This distinction remains the hallmark of apostolic teaching, summed up by Paul in Galatians 5:6: 'neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any value, what counts is faith expressing itself through love.' However, the fact that cultural distinctions are insignificant does not mean that they are to be disregarded. Just as the Holy Spirit worked through different languages to reach the crowds at Pentecost, so Paul was willing to use cultural distinctives as a vehicle for the communication of the gospel.[34] Timothy was circumcised, Titus was not. What is wrong is the collective insistence on 'moral' or ritual requirements which only perpetuate division and give a spurious sense of moral purity.[35]

The idea of foreigners as equal citizens in Israel is spiritualized and universalized by the apostles,[36] as the prophets had foretold.[37] Can we also detect a note of pride in Paul's voice as he asserts his own Roman citizenship?[38] Imagery of the perfect heavenly city in which all believers have the privilege of common citizenship is certainly commonplace.[39] The immediate consequence to draw from this is that earthly citizenship is incomplete and only temporary; any attempt to create a religiously pure conception of citizenship suffers from overrealized eschatology. But it also means that an earthly citizenship which is equally guaranteed to all is a better symbol of spiritual reality than any form of legal stratification or classification.

Nowhere is the incomplete nature of earthly citizenship more plain than in the fact that with Christ the Kingdom of God is no longer a political entity.[40] As had already been foreshadowed in the Law's division of priestly and kingly roles, there is a fundamental distinction between church and government.[41] The problem is knowing how broadly to define the scope of the 'religious' over which government has no jurisdiction. Religion impacts on ethics and ethics on law. One way of proceeding is to generalize out from activity which is distinctively Christian. On this account, prayer, praise, reading, meeting, teaching, ceremonies, proselytism, and service to the poor, the sick and the oppressed are 'religious' activities, whatever their doctrinal basis and content. In these matters there is personal liberty, because they are not the law's business.

To this must be added a conception of ethics which also allows considerable personal freedom. In both Galatians and Colossians the abolition of 'the law', which divides Jew from Gentile, is immediately followed by an account of what life in the Holy Spirit looks like. Far from being a set of rigid prescriptions which define goodness, Paul sets out ideals which can be lived out in various ways. While there are clear ethical limits, individuals must work out for themselves how to 'live in step with the Spirit', and that lifestyle decision should be respected.[42] Paul was sensitive even to those whose conscience required them to behave in ways which were, objectively speaking, unnecessary.[43]

Thus while cultural integration is desirable, the principle of personal liberty creates space for the individual in matters religious and in respect of a whole range of ethically acceptable lifestyle choices. This leads to a model for dealing with ethnic diversity which has the following features: a concern for racial inclusion and non-discrimination, a common culture and citizenship with which all can identify, respect for individual liberty, and the voluntary organization of religious activity. This model is not totally opposed to all forms of multiculturalist policy. Respect for individual conscience can lead to group exemptions. And where the interests of religion and government overlap (most notably in education and the media), some form of institutional pluralism is an unavoidable compromise, although such pluralism must be fair in its resourcing and openly accessible. However, the biblical emphasis on common-

21 I am indebted to Jonathan Burnside's excellent study, *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants*, Jubilee Centre, 2001.
22 Ezek. 47:22–23.
23 Exod. 34:16; 1 Kings 11:1–3; Ezra 9 and 10; Neh. 13:23–27.
24 Num. 12:1.
25 Neh. 13:24.
26 Jer. 29:5–7.
27 Dan. 1:4, 7, 17.
28 Dan. 3:16–18; 6:10–11; it is likely that the refusal to eat the king's food was simply a marker of Daniel's refusal to accept total control over his whole life, rather than reflecting a concern for ritual purity. See Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel*, IVP, 1978, p.83.
29 Gen. 10:5, 20, 31; Isa. 66:18; see also Rev. 7:9.
30 John 1:46.
31 Mark 7:24–8:21 is an extended account of Gentile inclusion in the Kingdom of God.
32 John 4:17–18.
33 John 4:22.
34 1 Cor. 9:19–23: 'to the Jews I became like a Jew ...'
35 Gal. 5:2–3; Col. 2:16, 20–22.
36 Eph. 2:12,19.
37 See the way in which Heb. 8:11 translates Jer. 31:34.
38 Acts 21:39; 22:28.
39 Phil. 1:27 (Greek); 3:20; Heb. 11:10,16; 12:22; Rev. 3:12; 21:2,14; 22:14,19.
40 John 18:36
41 Luke 20:25.
42 See, for example, 1 Cor. 7:38; 2 Cor. 9:7; and generally Julian Rivers, 'Beyond the Morality of Rights' in Michael Schluter (ed.), *Christianity in a Changing World*, Marshall Pickering, 2000.
43 1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:23–11:1.

ality and inclusion means that multiculturalist policies should be limited to the minimum necessary to allow religious integrity. All this is diametrically opposed, for example, to the closed pluralism of the Ottoman-style *millet* system.

Issues facing multicultural Britain

The context in which this model must be applied in the United Kingdom today is one of widespread Christian belief giving way to agnostic humanism and hedonism, of memories of colonial injustice, of ongoing interracial violence, of nationalist backlashes, of a thousand daily experiences of prejudice, ignorance and fear on all sides. And most recently, we have been brutally reminded of a strand of Islamic thought both powerful and vicious in its promotion of religion. There are numerous issues which require careful thought in the light of the biblical material outlined above; here there is only space for highlighting a few of the more pressing ones.

First, it is imperative that we develop a conception of British citizenship which is not exclusively Christian. Even if a majority of British citizens see themselves as at least subliminally Christian, it is wrong to assert that this is a condition of being 'really' or 'properly' British. A commitment to equal citizenship requires movement on all sides, not only from ethnic minorities to master the English language and to live by a set of civic virtues which includes a commitment to individual liberty of religion and lifestyle, but also from the majority to provide the resources to enable integration, to respect the acts of conscience, and to be prepared to restate the story of national identity to include and acknowledge Britain's rather uncomfortable relations with the rest of the world. The Home Secretary's recent announcements concerning compulsory citizenship and language classes for new immigrants,[44] and the plans to criminalize hate speech against all religions,[45] can be welcomed as examples of movement from both sides.

Secondly, we must think carefully about the Government's recent enthusiasm for the expansion of faith-based schools to include Muslim and Sikh schools.[46] Education is about both citizenship and truth. We have a collective social interest in teaching children to be good citizens, familiar with, and tolerant of, ethnic diversity. At the same time there is no religiously neutral mode of worshipping God or of studying 'religion', perhaps even of understanding 'truth' at all. Certainly at secondary level we must ask whether this tension cannot be better reconciled within the context of multi-faith schools, with religious streaming where necessary.

Furthermore, there can be no easy assumption that every religion fulfils similar social functions. Owing to their ethos of religious tolerance and higher moral standards and discipline, some church schools do actually function as places of racial integration, and indeed as training grounds for liberal citizenship. We have to ask ourselves the politically uncomfortable question of whether Muslim and Sikh schools will function in a similar way, or whether they might not strengthen mutual distrust and racial segregation.[47]

Thirdly, and more generally, we need to engage critically with the multiculturalist debate. The recent Parekh Report represents one of the most comprehensive attempts to think through the issues raised by ethnic diversity in the United Kingdom.[48] Unfortunately, an incautious comment about the racial connotations of Britishness led the then Home Secretary to distance himself from it.[49] Nevertheless, its basic strategy was surely sound: while recognizing the need for shared national values and a national identity (nationalism), it also sought to think through what it might mean to treat the United Kingdom both as a community of individuals (liberalism) and a community of communities (multiculturalism). Many of its recommendations are simply a matter of monitoring and raising awareness. There are undeniably serious concerns about the impact of policing and the criminal justice system on race relations, and *de facto* segregation operates in several elements of health, housing, education and social services provision. Much in this report deserves the wholehearted attention and support of Christians.

However, some aspects of the Report also need challenging. The most fundamental is its conflation of racial and religious identity. It assumes that inter-religious co-operation is desirable in the same way as racial integration, for example, in expressing regret that Christian anti-racism campaigns are not coupled to inter-faith engagement.[50] But there are good reasons for this. A true love of neighbour includes a desire to show all races the love of God *in Christ*. As we have seen, the Bible treats racial and religious diversity in fundamentally different ways. In addition, the questions the Parekh Report raises about the remaining features of Christian establishment need careful disentangling.[51] Even if at one level religious neutrality is possible, the scope of 'the religious', and the terms on which religions are permitted to operate, cannot avoid being religiously determined. So while being a Christian is not a part of British national identity or citizenship, law and social policy in the United Kingdom is rightly structured according to principles derived from, or at least compatible with, Christian revelation. Certain forms of establishment can be seen simply as honesty about the religiously-determined nature of political principle.[52]

Finally, the suggestion that Britain should formally be declared 'multicultural' should be opposed. Even if this were true as a matter of social fact – and the picture is complex in this respect – it carries the danger of creating a presumption in favour of multiculturalist policies. And as we have seen, these are not always the best way of responding to ethnic diversity.

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Ouseley's report into racial tensions in Bradford, *The Times*, 23 April 2001.

48   The Runnymede Trust, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, Profile Books, 2000. (The Parekh Report)

49   See reports in *The Times,* 11 and 12 October 2000.

50   Para. 17.4.

51   Paras. 19.17–19.18 and 17.16.

52   For a fuller version of a similar argument, readers are directed to the excellent analysis by Lesslie Newbigin, Lamin Sanneh and Jenny Taylor, *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in 'Secular' Britain*, SPCK, 1998; see also Julian Rivers, 'Disestablishment and the Church of England', in Michael Schluter (ed.), *Christianity in a Changing World*, Marshall Pickering, 2000.

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44   See *The Guardian*, 26 October 2001.

45   See Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Bill, Part V; see also Julian Rivers, 'Blasphemy Law in the Secular State' in Michael Schluter (ed.), *Christianity in a Changing World*, Marshall Pickering, 2000.

46   The Church of England also hopes to open 100 new secondary schools, a plan which has both governmental support and recently, in Islington, that of a majority of parents. See *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 2001.

47   For words of warning, see the Parekh Report (below), paragraph 17.12; also Lord

Next issue: Idolatry