

RELIGION, DEMOCRACY, AND RESPECT

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Let me come at this from a tangent: I was recently asked whether Britain – or for that matter Scotland – is a broken Society. Of course there are pressures and tensions – but without stresses and strains we could not build bridges! Yes, there are divisions – of class, of colour, of culture, of creed, and more – but divisions are not even cracks; far less are they breaks.

Democracy

We should be glad that we live in a democratic society, even if it is, as Churchill said, “the worst form of government – except for all the others”. After all, its defining characteristic is that each and every one of us is at once subject, ruler, and beneficiary, under what Abraham Lincoln famously called, “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. But how can we all be rulers when we have such divergent aims, and how can we all be beneficiaries, when we have such different needs?

That is behind Plato’s notorious view that democracy is a Very Bad Thing – second only to tyranny at the bottom of the league of governance, because it can degenerate into anarchy and tyranny – and we don’t need to look very closely at the twentieth century to find examples of both. The antidote is something common, remarkably, to Plato’s proposal to place power in the hands of Philosophers (far be it from me to object!), and John Stuart Mill’s doctrine that “the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge must be admitted as final”. This may be elitist, but the father of liberalism is not illiberal, because what he grants “competent judges” is not power but authority, and it is an authority to which all can aspire through education. For Mill, we can all be Philosopher Kings!

Forgive my rushed synopsis of Political Theory 101, but what I want to suggest is that Lincoln’s superficial slogan (anyway borrowed from John Wycliffe’s introduction to his translation of the Bible 480 years before Gettysburg!) misses something fundamental – the *how*, as opposed to the *who* and the *what* of democracy. It’s what goes on inside the black box that matters. It is because we all have different interests, needs, aims, and desires that what distinguishes democracy from anarchy is that it provides a mechanism for resolving those

differences. It is inherent in the very idea of democracy that each of us will be dissatisfied much, perhaps even most, of the time, because democracy is not rule by unanimity, but by majority.

But on the other hand, majority rule has to be self-denying, not only, as Mill pointed out, because the minority might actually turn out to be right, but because tyranny of the majority is no less tyranny. Indeed democracy would be worth nothing were all of us, at all times and on all matters, in perfect agreement, since there would be no disagreements to resolve.

Diversity

But not all differences need to be resolved. The fact that some of us are tall, some short, and others middling does not call for resolution. Instead it requires accommodation – one size, literally, does not fit all. On the other hand, sometimes governments have to make decisions, and not just seek carefully crafted compromises – it can't let some of us to go war and others make peace, or some of us increase our taxes and others reduce them!

So the question is whether the diversity of faiths in Britain today is something to be accommodated or resolved. I believe Scotland, with the positive results of successive Governments' commitment to "*One Scotland – Many Cultures*", not merely as a slogan but as a driver of policy, has provided empirical proof of the answer. As I have said elsewhere, it is not just that there are many threads in the tartan, but that the weave of tartan is what holds it together. A cloth of parallel threads is no cloth – it readily falls apart; it is divergence, difference, even disagreement, that holds society together.

The same, I would suggest, is true of the intersection of "equality strands". If we fixate on a single dimension we risk segmenting society into disjoint subgroups – metaphorically into "silos", and perhaps even physically into ghettos. Just two weeks ago the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights told the Durban Review Conference in Geneva – not itself a universal beacon of human rights! – that "racism and racial discrimination attack the very foundations of a person's dignity, for they seek to divide the human family into categories of people, some of which are considered more worthy than others." That is no less true of the other strands. Awareness of the diversity of diversity reinforces the message that there is no homogeneous majority, but that we are all members of a multiplicity of intersecting minorities,

and so that if no two of us are literally “equal” what we have in common is no more or less than our humanity.

Equalities

On the other hand, we can’t pretend there is not scope for conflict between the strands, and potentially between the equality and the human rights agendas. The Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council recently expressed concern that Human Rights legislation has “encouraged individualism and intolerance”, and “failed to allow [Christians] freedom of their beliefs”. I’m not sure I would go that far, but we can’t ignore the emergence of a hierarchy of equalities. For example, in the leading case of *London Borough of Islington -v- Ladele*, the President of the Employment Appeal Tribunals, Mr Justice Elias, said, “The right to manifest religious belief must give way to the right of same-sex partners to have their partnership recognised by law.” Could he have said “The right of same-sex partners to have their partnership recognised by law must give way to the right to manifest religious belief”?

And closer to home, Schedule V of the Scotland Act defines “equal opportunities” in terms of a list in which religious beliefs are not just last, but grammatically subordinate and equated with political opinions. We seem to have lost sight of the fact, to quote the striking phrase of John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, commenting on another recent similar *cause celebre*, that “asking someone to leave their belief in God at the door of their workplace is [like] asking someone to remove their skin colour before coming into the office”. In a truly tolerant society, it is not for others to determine or circumscribe what is at the core of my identity. So it is ironic that while we as a society have put so much effort into overcoming barriers between faiths, and building respect for what the Chief Rabbi calls the “dignity of difference”, we at the same time seem to encourage hostility, disrespect, and intolerance of faith as a whole.

The diversity of Scottish society is a strength, not a weakness. It is not just that we all have different beliefs and interests, but that we share a commitment to the democratic process as a means of resolving our disagreements. And that in turns excludes fundamentalism, not in the sense of a belief in the literal meaning of some text, but in the sense of a total commitment to any doctrine that seeks to deny not just the truth of any competing belief, but its admissibility even into discussion.

Understanding

That is why interfaith dialogue is inherently paradoxical – at least the genuine kind that goes beyond superficial socializing, though that has its place too, and seeks to explore and understand religious differences – because each of us believes that the other is not just mistaken, but deeply, fundamentally, metaphysically wrong to the extent of endangering his or her very being. Yet we prefer dialogue to conquest. That that is the case is perhaps the best example of the self-denying ordinance that underpins democracy at work.

But I suggest this goes deeper than a counsel of prudence – perhaps the radical secularists are right that all religion is bunk, or the fundamentalists are right that all other religions are not merely wrong but unintelligible. In a justly famous paper now too many decades ago, Thomas Nagel posed the kind of question that gives philosophy a bad name: “*What is it like to be a bat?*” He says, “It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, ... perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat.” Now ask yourself, whether you can imagine what it is like to be Jewish – that is, not what it would be like for you to behave as if you were Jewish – but what it is like for me to be Jewish. But this way madness lies – or at least solipsism! Imaginative identification may be paradoxical, and it may even be speciesist, but it is not incoherent, and insofar as you can imagine what it is like to be me, you can imagine what it is like to be anyone.

Openness to that possibility is what distinguishes the very British diffidence of the bus advert “There is probably no Gd” from the evangelical atheists who want to ban religion from public debate in the name of a liberalism made in their own image. My point is that the true democrat has to make room for the self-image of others.

What matters is not identity but identification, not equality but respect – in our context, the British model that accommodates and even encourages the coexistence of faiths and cultures so long as they do not seek to exclude the other, rather than the French model that excludes and indeed represses all diversity in the public space. Perhaps we should recognise that the most fundamental of human rights is the right to be oneself.