



Jewish and Scottish – the threads and the tartan

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It is a particular privilege to be invited to deliver this lecture in honour of the memory of John Baillie, former Professor of Divinity and Dean, as the EU website says “until his *retrial*” in 1956. I cannot say what trials he had to overcome, but as Moderator, and later as President of the World Council of Churches, he was a key figure the ecumenical movement, and one who, by all accounts, not just strove, but succeeded, in making the world a better place.

I have been told that I am the first Baillie Lecturer not from a Christian background, and I am therefore particularly honoured both by Cecelia Clegg for her proposal and by the Baillie family for their agreement. It would seem entirely in keeping with the memory of John Baillie to recognise that ecumenism, like sectarianism, only relates to Christians, and to broaden the scope in this way.

This, I am delighted to say, is also entirely in line with recent developments within the Kirk, and in particular the emphasis on good relations with other faith communities in the ministry of recent Moderators. I had the privilege of participating in a delegation of lay and religious leaders led by Finlay Macdonald to the European Parliament and Commission during his Moderatorial year, and I was delighted to hear last week from Sheilagh Kesting, the Moderator Designate, that interfaith activity is high on her agenda too.

My brief was to speak about “a Jewish view of the challenges facing Scottish Society”, but this is Interfaith Week, and Thursday is St Andrews Day – and tomorrow [*hereby demonstrating that the art of prophecy is not dead!*] the Scottish Parliament will approve the Bill to formalise St Andrews Day as the national holiday, so perhaps I should begin with some remarks about the challenge of interfaith activity in general. In that context it may be interesting to note that the portion of the Torah read in synagogues throughout the world last Shabbat tells the story of the original parting of the ways, as Jacob and Esau receive their different blessings from their father Isaac as he lay on his death-bed.

It may be interesting to note in passing that the verse in Genesis reads, “Rebecca had his clean clothes with her in the house”. The traditional commentators infer that even the hunter Esau took his laundry back to his mother! Clearly nothing much has changed!

However, before I turn to relations with other faiths, it is appropriate that I say something about what constitutes a “Jewish view” – of anything! It has often been said that two Jews will provide you with three opinions – of anything!

The story is told of two synagogue members who have argued for years about whether to stand or sit for a particular part of the service. Eventually one of them snaps and proposes they ask their rabbi for a definitive ruling. The rabbi listens as the first makes the case for standing, then sadly shakes his head and says “That is not the custom”. So the second gleefully exclaims, “so I was right – we sit!”, but the rabbi again says “That is not the custom”. At last, united in puzzlement, they ask in unison, “so what are we to do? – go on arguing for ever?!” “Ahha!” says the rabbi, “that is the custom!”

Some stereotypes are true (presumably that’s why they become stereotypes!) and one I have no problem with is of Jews as disputatious. It may not be in our genes, but it is in our education – the Talmud is not a statute book, but the minutes of hundreds of years of debate, sometimes even name-calling. Yet the Talmud itself says of such disagreements that “both views are the word of the living Gd”. How can that be? How can something be both black and white? How can an action be both prohibited and permitted? The answer is not Walt Whitman’s casual “I encompass multitudes”, rejecting the problem of contradiction; it is that the argument matters more than the conclusion. Look again at the words: both are “the word of the living Gd” – not, notice, “of the true Gd”, but of the living Gd. Talmudic Judaism is a living, breathing, dynamic system, in which individuals are free to follow their conscience – but provided that in doing so they are guided by tradition.

That’s not to say the Talmud doesn’t give answers – of course it does – but more often than not these answers are not the rejection of one view in favour of the other, but some kind of compromise: either endorsing a middle path, or, even more often distinguishing the cases, so that each disputant is right – sometimes!

So it’s not like the argument about whether to stand or to sit, but more like the business dispute brought to the rabbi for resolution. The rabbi patiently listens to the complainant, thinks for a while, and declares “You’re right”. Then he listens to the

other party, cogitates again, and rules, “You’re right!” They shake hands and make up, and as they leave, the rabbi’s wife asks, “How could you do that? How can you say they’re both right?!” Again he thinks long and hard before pronouncing, “You know, you’re right too.”

– and if you find what I have to say challenging – even if you profoundly disagree – that, from this perspective, is a good thing – and you’re right too!

So there is no one “Jewish view on the challenges facing Scottish society”. There are many Jewish views – and many more views of Jewish people! Jewish people will have many different views on any or all of these challenges, and not all of these will be Jewish views in the sense of being informed by Jewish tradition.

So what you hear today is just my personal view – not, I have to be clear, the collective view of the Jewish Community, nor even an official view, but simply an individual view, though I hope one informed not only by Jewish tradition, but also by my position as Director of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, and by the perspective that gives me of the diversity of opinion within my community.

That is part of the challenge facing my Council. It was established at the time of Devolution to ensure that there was a single democratic representative body that had the legitimacy to speak for the Jewish Community of Scotland to Parliament and the Executive, churches and the media, civic authorities and trades unions. I’m pleased to say we have been extremely successful, and even have legislation to show for it! But often what we have to do is to represent the diversity of opinion within the Community, not like the old-fashioned trade-unionists who vote 5 798 372 for tea and 5 798 373 for coffee, and so order coffee for all!

But even if there is not a single view, it has to be our voice saying so! We are jealous of our right to speak for ourselves, having learned the hard way that otherwise those who should know better can put words in our mouths. For example we recently discovered

an organisation to which we are affiliated giving evidence in Parliament that contradicted our own submission while explicitly saying they spoke on our behalf;

a national diversity resource stating that Shabbat begins on Fri evening, lasts 48 hours, and is celebrated by a large meal on Sunday afternoon;

an organisation promoting dialogue claiming that there are no Jewish teenagers of Middle-Eastern origin in Scotland;

and

a head teacher explaining requiring Jewish pupils to sing Christian hymns on the grounds that “we all believe the same thing anyway”.

I therefore take it as a given that, whether about facts or policy, communities have to be enabled to speak for themselves.

– which brings me to **interfaith understanding**.

I don't wish to be misunderstood, so let me be clear that I welcome, applaud, and support the many efforts in Scotland and elsewhere to further interfaith dialogue and understanding. I am merely sceptical about some of its manifestations. I have attended interfaith events at which “culturally sensitive” vegetarian food was provided – for all except the Jewish participants, for whom a table ostentatiously labelled “Jewish food” was set up in a corner. Forgive me if I do not see segregation as fostering cohesion!

But this is just a superficial difficulty. Some of you will remember the (literally) glittering event in the Signet Library at which the Chief Rabbi launched his book *The Dignity of Difference* in aid of the Respect Project in Scotland. There could have been no better dramatisation of the message that difference does not preclude respect and dignity than the arrangements that enabled us all to share that meal together.

Some interfaith activity goes no further than this – and that too serves a positive purpose in breaking down barriers and forming friendships. Even more important are symbolic or ceremonial public events bringing lay and religious leaders together. I have been privileged to have participated in some of these, and know the good that they do.

However, my challenge to those involved is to ask whether they do enough: my eating samosas while my Hindu friend eats latkes gives neither of us any real understanding of the other's view of the world. And neither, unfortunately, does our meeting to exchange agreement on broad generalities about peace, love, and the restricted pursuit of happiness!

It is all too easy to agree on words without regard to their meaning – just think of the range of political views that style themselves “nationalism”, or the so-called Democratic Republics

that are actually hereditary dictatorships. I recently heard a respected foreign correspondent remark that even the most illiberal regime today signs up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – they just disagree about who is human enough to claim these rights! My fear is that the same is true of our readiness to sign up to a single prayer for peace, without probing each other’s understanding of peace. This is not the place for divisive point-scoring about who might “create a desert and call it peace” – but the fact is that they do call it peace! So by all means let us share food together, and even share our slogans together, but let us at least be honest enough with ourselves to admit that true dialogue requires us to share and probe our disagreements, and not merely our superficial agreements.

The interfaith enterprise is fraught with difficulty because each of us, deep down, believes that the other is fundamentally, metaphysically, and perhaps even mortally [*or should that be immortally?*] wrong. We cannot understand one another’s faith unless we understand that! To say that is not to say that we can only treat each other with contempt or disrespect; it does not even mean that our only interaction can be to seek to convince one another of our own unwavering view of the truth.

But it does mean that we have to accept each other’s scepticism, antagonism and incomprehension. Not to do so is to be dishonest to ourselves, as well as disrespectful to others – dishonest to ourselves, because it would require self-deception about the uniqueness and exclusivity of our own belief system, and disrespectful to others because it would treat their views as mere re-expressions of our own.

I remember some years ago participating in a diversity course for Open University tutors at which we were instructed to don masks in order to experience what it’s like to be blind. But of course, we still had no idea what it’s like for a blind person to be blind – only what it’s like for a sighted person not to be able to see. The philosophers here will be familiar with Tom Nagel’s famous – perhaps infamous – essay “What is it like to be a bat?”. In a nutshell, the point is that I can imagine what it might be like for me to be a bat – hanging upside down, sleeping by day and hunting by night, and so forth – but we have no access to the bat’s own experience – what it’s like for a bat to be a bat.

So – another challenge: however much you explain to me what it would be like for me to be Christian, how can I ever know what it’s like for a Christian to be a Christian? How can you ever know what it’s like for a Jew to be a Jew? You can imagine eating Jewish food, just as I can imagine eating the bat’s, but you can’t imagine being me.

But this way solipsism lies!!

It should be obvious that there can't be such complete mutual incomprehension as that implies. After all, we live in the same world, share the majority of our beliefs about it, and are even able to make sensible conversation about it, so we must at least at some level have a shared understanding.

True – but with caveats! – and that is what brings me at last to **being Jewish in Scotland**, that is, living at the intersection of two cultures, two ways of life.

Judaism, and to some extent Islam, have a particular problem: our very affinity with the dominant culture of Christianity. Perhaps that is something we share with Scotland itself – we are, as Ludovic Kennedy, and more recently Tom Devine put it, both in bed with an elephant! But Scotland's bed is political and social; ours is conceptual.

Judaism is not a Christian heresy – quite the reverse! It is not a pale imitation of Christianity – quite the reverse! Are you familiar with the Jewish Bible? Most of you, I dare say, are more familiar than I with the Christian Old Testament – but that is not the same thing as the Jewish Bible.

I don't refer merely to the problem of translation, but the problem of meaning. New translations are justified not by their accuracy to the original language, but their faithfulness to a particular doctrinal orthodoxy. The Hebrew Bible has no doctrine of the Fall, no virgin birth, not even the same Ten Commandments that are familiar to most of you! And the Hebrew Bible has no Old Testament, simply because it has no New Testament. I was reminded yesterday of Borges' fictional review of Pierre Menard's word-for-word transcription of *Don Quixote*. Just as Menard's *Don Quixote* is not Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, so the Christian Old Testament, even in Hebrew, is not the Jewish Bible.

It is the failure to realise that that partly explains what enables a head teacher to say “we all believe the same thing, so sing the hymns,” or a hospital chaplain to say “I studied some Hebrew at University, so I can conduct a Jewish funeral”. Both of these are real examples.

But it's only part of the explanation. The elephant with which we share our bed is not just enormous, but also short-sighted!

I have already referred to the difference between ecumenism and interfaith activity, but unfortunately perhaps of more importance today is the difference between sectarianism and religious prejudice. Of course any good doctor will treat the more commoner condition before the rarer, so I have nothing but praise for the many valuable projects seeking to address and eradicate what the composer James MacMillan called “Scotland’s shame”. That the First Minister not only made the campaign his own, but even adopted that terminology is a welcome sign of political maturity. But paradoxically, campaigning against sectarianism is itself discriminatory!

My concern is that combating sectarianism should not be at the expense of a wider strategy addressing religious intolerance in general. This is not because it risks unifying the majority against the minorities, although that may be a risk, but because it implicitly belittles the interests of others. It conveys the message that your suffering is less severe, or less significant, than my suffering.

That, unfortunately, is not a merely theoretical concern. Just yesterday the Scottish Executive issued an 18-month report on “the Use of Section 74 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003 – Religiously Aggravated Reported Crime”, which contains 57 references to football – and only 4 to sectarianism! More to the point, the report includes a table showing statistics for the “Particular Religious Group Targeted” in which the categories are Protestant, Catholic, and Other, with “Other” defined as including “Muslim, Jewish and Christian religions”, and one has to wonder how reliable are the data if “Christian” is used to exclude the largest denominations!

We know that the police are less likely to record allegations that offences were religiously aggravated than that they were racially aggravated. And we know that when they do, they are more likely to record them as racially motivated, even when the allegation referred to religion. This is to some extent understandable at a time when the law on religious hatred is in flux, but it signals a dismissive attitude to religious hatred.

More specifically, the editor of a major newspaper recently dismissed a complaint that a published letter was antisemitic by saying that because he received many such complaints, he ignored them all! What ever happened to the Macpherson dictum in the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry, that if an incident is reported as racist, it has to be treated as racist. That

of course, is not to say all allegations are true – that is a matter for the courts – but it cannot be right to apply that test to some hate crime and not others.

Another example is the current – and recurring – debate about whether legislation against incitement to religious hatred will outlaw both comedy and serious theological debate. The objection is nonsensical. The Race Relations Act has worked well for over 30 years without putting Rowan Atkinson out of work! So why should adding religious to racial incitement make any difference? Neither satire nor argument is intended to incite hatred, and the law is well able to handle the issue of intent in all other contexts, so why not this?

Perhaps the key lies in the aggressive secularism that bans the Ten Commandments from Alabama courtrooms, or any religious form of dress from French schoolrooms (although I do not believe the recent furore about Jack Straw’s remarks about the burqa raise quite the same issues). I recently came across a quotation from Kant:

“On all sides I hear ‘Do not argue’:
The officer says, “Do not argue, march”
The taxman says, “Do not argue, pay”
The pastor says, “Do not argue, believe”

Perhaps today we should add

The atheist says, “Do not argue, ridicule”!!

But whatever the reason, it is clear that religion comes lower down the public agenda than most of us here would wish. Let me cite what is in many ways the founding document of the new Scotland, the Scotland Act 1998. We are justly proud of the way it enshrines equal opportunities, and famously Schedule V declares:

"Equal opportunities" means the prevention, elimination or regulation of discrimination between persons

on grounds of sex or marital status,

on racial grounds, or

on grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin,

or of other personal attributes,

including beliefs or opinions,

such as religious beliefs or political opinions.

The hierarchical nature of this list is clear not just from the order, but more deeply from its grammar, with its implication that religion is just a matter of opinion, and so just a “personal attribute”, and so secondary to the main grounds of discrimination, and so no more worthy of protection than other opinions. I trust we could agree that on the contrary, religious diversity is as worthy of protection as racial diversity.

So, what of the Jewish experience in Scotland?

This year the UK community is celebrating the 350th anniversary of the readmission of Jews to England by Cromwell – indeed at this very moment, I should be attending a reception at St James’ Palace to mark the event. However this is a purely English occasion; the Jewish community in Scotland was never readmitted because we were never expelled – but probably only because there were none of us here to expel!

So the Scottish community is newer. Except for isolated individuals, it is less than 200 years old, with the majority hailing from two waves of immigration: my mother’s parents came as refugees from the Russian pogroms around the turn of the 20th century, and my father was lucky enough to escape the Nazis just before the Holocaust.

According to the 2001 census, there are Jewish people in every local authority area in Scotland, with the majority in Glasgow and East Renfrewshire. There are small synagogues in Aberdeen and Dundee, and a loose network of scattered individuals in the Highlands and Islands, as well as Jewish students at every University. In total, according to the census, there are 6448 Jewish people in Scotland – but almost exactly a thousand more – 7446 – said they were brought up as Jews. Bizarrely, only 5661 are in both categories.

So let me express my scepticism from the outset:

These were voluntary questions that more than 8% of respondents did not answer, and Jewish people, especially of the older generation, have an understandable reluctance to declare their religion on official forms.

Then there was the deliberate attempt to subvert this question by giving silly answers such as “Jedi knight” – which might explain the utterly implausible data that there are in Scotland today 55 converts from Judaism to Sikhism, and 31 who trod the opposite path. One might have thought either change of allegiance would attract some comment in both communities, yet no-one in either community can identify a single one!

Thirdly, the “current religion” question asked “What religion or faith do you belong to?”, and many people interpret belonging as participation or at least subscription. Unfortunately, as a demographer recently put it to me, we are moving from the model of membership to the model of citizenship – that is, people want to be able to call on services without contributing to the costs, and that clearly depresses the number willing to say they ‘belong’.

And most importantly, there is the interplay of religion and ethnicity. This has been a matter of discussion since the House of Lords possibly inadvertently gave Jews the protection of the Race Relations Act in a 1982 ruling relating to the Sikh turban. But the statistical evidence is incontrovertible: in the Canadian census, “Jewish” appears as both a religion and an ethnicity, and no fewer than 27.63% more people declared themselves Jewish in response to either question than did so in response to the religion question alone.

This matters because one of the primary functions of the census is to gauge future demand on services, and whether or not individuals regard themselves as actively belonging to a community, they will nonetheless call upon its educational, social, and particularly welfare facilities. On that basis I have little reservation in numbering the Jewish population of Scotland as of the order of 12 000 individuals.

There is a related matter: the question headed “Ethnicity” in the 2001 census actually asked “What is your cultural background?” and then proceeded to offer responses grouped by skin colour, and mixing geography, nationality, and other criteria. I found the apartheid hierarchy of headings offensive; my African friends resented being classified by skin colour while Asians were identified by geography (although in the English census, China was not in Asia!); no-one could explain what culture is “White”; and so on.

All this was aired at the Race Equality Advisory Forum set up by Jackie Baillie immediately after Devolution, and although we were too late to stop the question being asked in these incoherent and offensive terms, we were able to ensure that some of the sting was taken out of the categories used in publishing the data. Since then a new Registrar General has declared the 2001 ethnicity question “irrational”, and much effort is going into devising intelligible questions for 2011. However, there are still unfortunately those who see the world only in blacks and whites.

I will be blunt: this refusal to see the greys is doubly discriminatory: it allows what we are told is the political usage of ‘black’ to refer to all who have suffered disadvantage on grounds of ethnicity, to be deliberately confused with the allegedly literal use to refer to skin colour, in order to exclude lighter-skinned minorities. One of my colleagues has been told

that while she is welcome to join a “black” pressure group, she is “not black enough” to stand for office; I have been disinvited from a “black leadership forum”, I was told by collective decision, on the grounds of my skin colour. One attempted justification is to retreat into the concept of “visible minority”, but some self-professed ‘black leaders’ have expressed incredulity that a Jewish teenager attacked for wearing a skull-cap in the street was attacked because of his visible ethnicity!

In a society in which the Eastern European minority is running a close second to the largest Asian group, we need to be alert to the potentially explosive consequences of ethnic gatekeepers excluding newer minorities from their constituency. That’s why I was delighted to read at the weekend that the new Chair of the CRE, Kay Hampton, who is currently the Commissioner for Scotland, told the Sunday Herald that she wants to “broaden the lens” of the organisation to encompass immigrants from eastern Europe, and “to move away from the perception of racism as a black issue”. However, that welcome recognition contrasts with the CRE’s own definition of an ‘ethnic minority’ as “anyone who would tick any box other than ‘White British’ box in response to an ethnicity question on a census form”. This is clearly discriminatory: the options “Black British” and “Asian British” appear in the ethnicity classification precisely to include second and later generations immigrants who now regard themselves as British, but the same consideration is denied by this definition to those of European origin. At the same time, the census categories also clearly exclude Asian and Chinese people from the minority that some wish to describe as ‘black’; but whether or not Asians are included in that description, Poles and Lithuanians, just like Jews, patently are not – but neither are we members of the majority which too often is described as ‘white’.

Again, this is not mere pedantry. Thanks to the various equality Acts, ethnic and other monitoring are, like the poor, always with us – and for much the same reason! If such monitoring is to serve any useful function, it must use categories that reflect real and significant differences; and if it is to collect useful data, it must use categories that respondents identify with. It is time, in other words, to recognise the diversity of diversity.

That was recognised in the 1991 census when the so called “Indian Subcontinent” was subdivided into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, not only to allow data to be collected on the significant demographic, educational, economic and other differences between these communities, but also because Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were understandably resistant to the term “Indian Subcontinent”.

It is time for that to happen again to the discredited terminology of skin-colour and apartheid. Since identity is so personal and subjective and multi-dimensional and fluid, respondents are best placed to describe themselves in whatever terms they regard as appropriate. That puts the onus back on the authorities to devise clear, unambiguous, and easily justifiable questions, and if it conflicts with bureaucratic neatness, so be it! The choice between neat and unintelligible on the one hand, and untidy but accurate on the other, is no choice at all.

I mentioned earlier the recent attack on a schoolboy for wearing a skullcap. Unfortunately this was far from unique. Graffiti have been scrawled on several synagogues recently, and two have been subject to (fortunately unsuccessful) fire-bomb attacks. Until this year I could honestly say that although I had been the victim of racial and religious abuse and discrimination, none of it had ever been antisemitic: I have been yelled at at Haymarket and told to get back to Bombay, had “bin Laden” and “Saddam” shouted at me in Granton, and was once almost denied a postgraduate Fellowship on the grounds that it was restricted to Protestants – until the official concerned reassured himself that I am not a Catholic and declared with obvious relief “that’s all the regulation means”!

But this year has been different, and more difficult to laugh at. There is no question that the volume and intensity of antisemitic abuse are increasing; the number of physically violent attacks on both property and person is at an all-time high; and concern is so great that an all-party committee of both Houses of Parliament recently investigated and reported on the phenomenon.

Let me quote from a recent comment posted on the Scotsman website in response to a comment about US relations with Iran:

6. Cristopher, Canada / 7:43pm 15 Nov 2006

... what people need to realize is that the business is only good for the top elite zionists. They are the ones making all the money from these wars. Halliburton, bush, cheney, Kellog, Dresser Industries comes to mind. All that cash from hot dripping blood. Multiple homes, multiple cars, multiple banks for grand zion thugs: Wolfowitz, Perle, Hagee, Robertson, Cheney, ..., and soooooooooo many more.

... all along it was their manipulations of their trillion dollar media that started these wars in the first place, while they were revving up their bank books at the same time.

The saliva is practically spinning off their fangs.

I'm sure I don't need to spell out how the traditional antisemitic stereotypes have simply been transferred from Jews to "Zionists". The Scotsman site is moderated – though clearly not very moderate! – and offensive material is removed, yet after two weeks this message remains on the site.

– What does that tell you about the tolerance of anti-Semitism in society today?

One of the great successes of the Race Relations Act was that it made certain kinds of language unacceptable in civilised society, and over the years we have seen public figures pay the price for letting their prejudices slip in public. Now we seem to see the opposite effect with antisemitism: public figures are allowed to make offensive remarks without any penalty (provided they have their coat on at the time!), and that gives a licence to more serious manifestations of hatred.

But not all antisemitism is directed against individuals. Alongside the name-calling and the violent attacks on Jewish people and property, there are more subtle forms of discrimination. Public figures are prepared to declare their support for self-determination for all nations – except the Jews; or their recognition of all states on Earth – except the Jewish state, Israel; or the right of all faith communities to the protection of their customs and traditions – except the Jews; or see all hate crime through the victim's eyes – except when it's against the Jews!

The story used to be told of the Tsarist officer who summoned a rabbi to explain why the Jewish community always seemed to escape the worst of the annual typhus epidemic. The rabbi thought for a moment and replied: According to tradition every kingdom has its own guardian angel who takes its lead from the king. So when this plague was decreed, the angel did as the Tsar does, and endorsed the decree "except the Jews".

That wasn't entirely funny 100 years ago, and neither is it funny today. I have no difficulty describing as antisemitic views that 'except the Jews', whether collectively or individually. There is nothing wrong with criticising Jews or Jewish institutions – provided the same criticism is made of all others to whom the same grounds apply. So my beef is not with those who are opposed to nationalism in general, but only with those who support every other nationalism except mine; my beef is with those who hide behind the slogan, "stop the war," while endorsing the terrorist war against civilian Israelis. I admire the naivety of those idealists who would do away with all border fences, but I condemn those who campaign

against only one fence in the whole world – Israel’s defence against terrorist bombers – while ignoring the fence the United States is building to keep out Mexican immigrants, or India to keep out Bangladeshis, the fence that divides Cyprus, and the solid walls in Drumcree and Belfast. Criticising Jews for what everyone does, saying it’s acceptable “except for the Jews”, is just as discriminatory – which is to say as antisemitic – as the Tsarist decrees.

Let me be clear – I do not make this point to defend any action or policy of the Israeli government, but to point out the double standards audible from both left and right in their commentary on the Middle East. The elision of Israel and Jews is obvious not just in the blogger’s rant I quoted, but every time the Scotsman refers to “the Jewish state” in stories to which religion is not relevant. It was sadly also apparent when the General Assembly voted to add a clause about disinvestment from Israel to a Deliverance about European antisemitism (while rejecting an addendum about antisemitism in the Arab media as changing the subject!).

Add to that the natural but lazy tendency to stereotype, to presume unanimity, and to over-generalise, and it is easy to see why discriminatory criticism of “the Jewish state” materialises as physical violence against Jewish individuals.

Still, not all is gloom!

It would be wrong of me to end this personal reflection on being Jewish in Scotland without some mention of the *One Scotland – Many Cultures* campaign. It has been accused of being trite, of missing the real point, of trivialisation, and even of smugness, but no-one (I hope) can deny its good intentions. Even if it is no more than a public expression of a pious hope for a future messianic state of Scotland, it is to be welcomed. It does not pretend to show us as we are – else there would be no need of a campaign – but if it is what we genuinely aspire to, I will settle for that!

And this goes hand in hand with other principles that I know the Scottish Executive endorse: the right of communities to speak for themselves; the empowerment of isolated and disadvantaged groups to enter the political arena on their own behalf; the removal of the gatekeepers who purport to speak for them, but in fact isolate them further; the direct targeting of resources at need rather than vested interests; the mainstreaming of equality into all areas of policy. I used to think there was a paradox in the existence of the Equality Unit,

tasked as it is with ensuring the mainstreaming of the equality agenda, but it is no more paradoxical than a finance department tasked with ensuring that policies are properly costed.

But not everything is simple. A late colleague of mine once described how, at an inter-faith meeting, she had reported the view of some Muslim women she had met. The Muslims present, all men, retorted angrily, “How dare you speak for Muslims?” to which she responded “How dare you speak for women?”

The scope for such conflict increases exponentially as the three equality strands expand to six – race and religion, gender and sexual orientation, disability and age – to say nothing of legal protection for more individualistic human rights. The current furore about the burqa and the cross are examples of the clash of different equality agendas.

Any first year moral philosophy student will tell you that fairness is not treating everyone the same – we don’t all need plaster casts just because one person has a broken leg! So are insurance premiums unfair if they are based on empirical evidence about differential risk? Even within a single equality strand there is no single measure of equality: paying women a lower pension than men is obviously discriminatory – but women retire at 60 and men at 65, only women take maternity leave, and women live longer, so does fairness require the same weekly benefit, or the same lifelong benefit, or the same ratio of benefit to contributions? I could go on – the list is endless, and our society, and the law, will have to devise ways of reconciling such opposing claims.

We all have many identities, and we use badges – literal and metaphorical – to express them. We have club ties, lapel pins, team colours, supposedly secret handshakes, and so on – and we use these to build a whole vast network of commonalities with others. Although these mark differences, difference in itself is not threatening; the threat arises only when extremists elevate one identity above all others and seek to eliminate the rest.

The day after tomorrow is St Andrews Day, and I will freely express my reservations about the conversion of a Christian saint’s day into a celebration of our national diversity. Perhaps St Andrew was an icon of egalitarianism – from what I read, he was equally keen to convert everyone to Christianity, whatever their origin – but I fear that this reinforces the message, to quote Cardinal O’Brien’s recent Time for Reflection in the Scottish Parliament, that “Scotland is Christian to its very bones”. That Andrew is also the patron saint of Greece and Russia does not make him the patron saint of Jews, Zoroastrians and Hindus. Scotland is undoubtedly predominantly Christian in its history and perhaps its origin, and even today in

its culture, and I have no problem with that – but that does not oblige the minority to see the world through Christian spectacles.

On the contrary, we need to embrace diversity, even while recognising that that diversity is set against a particular background. The United States sees itself in rather self-congratulatory terms as a melting-pot, but that is an image that fills me with dread: in a melting pot all diversity is stirred away; pattern becomes sludge; everything becomes the same, as all difference is dissolved. But neither am I attracted to a society of segregated communities, of isolated and ghettoised minorities, each incommunicado in its own silo, as they are aptly described, fermenting resentment.

There is a third model – the tartan, with its intersecting pattern, each thread visible as itself against the background, but all holding together, not despite their intersections, but because of those intersections. Thanks to Jamie McGrigor’s Bill, we will soon even have a formal statutory definition that makes the point clear:

A tartan is a design made with two or more alternating bands of colour which combine, vertically and horizontally, to form a chequered pattern or sett.

– different colours, different directions, but combining to form a single pattern. A cloth of parallel threads is no cloth; it readily falls apart; it is divergence, difference, even disagreement, that holds society together.

I began with the argumentativeness of Jewish tradition. The Talmud teaches that argument for the sake of heaven endures, while argument for the sake of personal glory perishes. The analogy is clear: the point is not for one colour or thread to overwhelm the others, but for all to coexist for the sake of a coherent whole. That is where strength lies – not in uniformity, but in pattern, which is to say the coexistence of difference. I see this Scotland of many cultures as a society in which each community makes a valuable contribution to the whole, while still retaining its own unique identity. It is our diverse identities that are the weave that holds the fabric of Scotland together.

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