



The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility

31.03.2013 | Clive Lawton *

I start as is usual with me with a few digressions!

Firstly, I have never spoken from a sort of a script before. Because of the need to be a bit kind to my respondent who understandably wanted some forewarning as to what I might say so that she could prepare herself for how she might respond, I was not able to do what I usually do which is develop some thoughts in my head but not decide exactly what I was going to - or even wanted to - say till I saw the whites of your eyes. So this is a new discipline for me – and even then I've just given a very rough sketch of an outline of some of my thoughts. Let's hope this works for both of us!

Secondly, I feel the spirit of my parents hovering over me right now. My mother and father, Regina and Clifford Lawton, were lifetime stalwarts of CCJ and from my earliest age I learnt that this was important – even 'normal' - work!

Thirdly, I recall that I was asked to speak at the CCJ's annual conference for its 40th anniversary in 1982. At that time, I said that the CCJ was now obviously at least middle aged and must move from its preliminary stage of pleasant interaction one with another to more robust engagement, where we learnt to be comfortable with exploring differences and even, dare I say it, actual areas of disagreement. If that was true then, what now for this 70th anniversary, when, according to the Bible, a person reaches their full span? What is the next step for Jewish-Christian encounter and dialogue when we can no longer hide behind the excuse of immaturity or even the need to go steadily because of our middle-aged respectability?

Finally, I must make reference to the wonderful and compelling video we have just watched, drawing together still pictures from the contemporary record of the Shoah, bringing them together into a powerful 'Never Again' testimony. Sadly though, we know that 'Never Again' has already been overtaken. Too late – it's happened, often and often. I realise this is only the first day in a three day conference and so this might be only the opening statement of understandings that will unfold, but I hope to goodness that we can move on from the Shoah as the most important thing we have to talk about between us.

And so to the topic I was actually asked to speak about – multiculturalism and its relevance or challenges for Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue.

Where we started from

Firstly, of course we should remember how far we've come.

For centuries, the British monarch has been able, probably much to the Pope's chagrin, to name

him or herself as 'Defender of the Faith'. It actually appears on all our coins. The title was bestowed on Henry VIII just before he turned the Christian world upside down, but it's been proudly worn ever since. A few years ago though, the current heir to the throne, Prince Charles, has asserted that if he becomes king, he would like to be 'Defender of Faith' not 'The Faith'. The omission of this tiny word indicates the journey travelled by the UK in the last couple of decades. When I was a lad at an English primary school I was one of only a few who professed not to be Christian. Though probably there was a very significant number of non-Christians in any pure sense of the word, the general assumptions of the school were Christian and all assemblies and RE lessons were Christian in content. No-one much knew or wanted to know what my family and I were up to and, though the school was tolerant – mostly – I knew I was odd and out of step. I doubt that there is anyone in our cities who can feel that utter sense of the normality of Christianity nowadays – though it probably remains true in many rural areas.

TV quizzes ask questions about diverse religions, religious broadcasting carries material about other religions than Christianity, people of all religions – and sometimes none – are given airtime on Thought for the Day on the BBC. And although all countries are moving at their own pace and in their own way, what is true in the UK is also more or less true all around the world in many many countries.

Background history

Of course it's not universally true and there are pockets of dreadful narrowness and mono-cultural indifference, but we should remember that it's only a few decades ago that a 7 year old me was made to stand up in my class after my parents had asked for me to be excused from school for some Jewish festival or other and was asked to explain why I had to be more religious than the other Jewish child in my class who wasn't asking for the time off. It might be a measure of how much we expected such challenges that my parents had already prepared me with an answer. 'Different people do things differently', I answered.

It was in the 1950s too that the first Black boy arrived in my school, in my class actually. I came home with the exciting – and rather exotic - news. 'Did you make friends with him?' asked my father. 'No, not yet', I replied. 'Well you must,' said Dad. 'You're a Jew'. He didn't explain further but he didn't have to. Roxroy and I became fast friends...

By the time we enter the 60s in England – well London at least - anyone with a brain and two eyes must have known that things were not going to be the same again. Multi-culturalism started to be talked about, but in the early stages the first thing to do was ensure that the worst excesses of prejudice and racism were not allowed. Legislation might not be able to change people's minds but it creates a bottom line below which people are not allowed to fall. I remember notices saying 'No Blacks, No dogs, No Irish' but they were soon outlawed. Even dire prognostications of 'rivers of blood' if we kept on allowing new immigrants in the country were rapidly seen as provocative rather than prophetic.

As new communities took their place, things moved forward to a more celebratory mode. Multiculturalism came into its own. Religious Education – a strange British thing which is compulsory in English and Welsh schools - diversified and started to teach about a variety of

religions. Local communities started to realise that others were here to stay and that their cuisine and colour added to localities rather than detracted. By the 80s and 90s, Britain was becoming more than just a mono-cultural place with a certain level of tolerance for others. Though it was slow to come and it's still not arrived everywhere, most people accept, and some even enthuse about, the diversity which is to be found around the country. While there is still of course a need for vigilance and even the old defensive anti-racism, there is also evident a new celebratory, embracing mood too.

Definitions of – and problems with - ‘Multi-culturalism’

In recent years some commentators have started to claim that ‘multi-culturalism’ has failed. Quite what they mean by that is not always clear but, usually, it relates to a fear that there is insufficient integration going on. It might even be an expression of disappointment that the expected assimilation isn't manifest. All to the good, I'd say, since it's certainly my assertion as a Jew that assimilation should not be hoped for and definitely should not happen. The difference between integration and assimilation is important.

To integrate is to play one's part in society as a whole without relinquishing one's clear and distinctive identity. At its best, this is what Jews have always done given half a chance by whichever society they've found themselves in. Assimilation, on the other hand, is the complete loss of distinctive identity, so that one becomes, as the word implies, 'similar', i.e. indistinguishable from the rest. Over the centuries, many Jews have taken that option too in the attempt to escape anti-Semitism, or as a result of their inability to see what, if anything, being Jewish offers that is worth sticking it out for. As a friend once put it to me, assimilating is becoming a thread in a cloth; integration is becoming a square in a patchwork quilt. I know which I prefer.

But there have been many models of the multi-cultural society. The original model was the ‘melting pot’. The term, first coined by the Victorian Jewish novelist, Israel Zangwill, described what he thought he saw happening as Jews entered and engaged with the East End. The ideal outcome of the melting pot is a newly melded common identity and such an aspiration works best in immigrant nations such as the United States or Israel. By vigorous assimilation of immigrants, the idea was that there would eventually be only Americans or Israelis - with perhaps a fond memory of the cultures and societies from which they had come. In recent decades both Israel and America have recognised that this is not going to work and so the ‘salad bowl’ model has been proposed. We're still all trying to make a salad, i.e. a common dish for all to enjoy, but no-one need feel embarrassed that one can tell the cucumber from the tomato. Mostly, but not entirely, that appears to be the consensus model for today. There are sadly still some who would be more able to accommodate Black people if only they weren't so unapologetically Black(!) but most recognise that the infusion of a diversity of cultures proudly held but generously offered to the whole community is a wonderful model for the 21st century.

Of course though there are other voices. Within most diverse communities are those who would want to argue not just for the salad bowl but who want separate tables. Why, they ask, can't different cultures remain at their separate tables in the common restaurant of the country? At each table we can eat different foods – perhaps the model is of the food hall with outlets for a huge variety of cuisines. Those of us who are relaxed about multiculturalism know that the probable trend, if one allows that, is that fusion cooking will soon emerge and each will learn from the other. Within a generation, you'll probably still have separate tables but you'll also have lots of salad bowls too.

Slightly more worryingly though are the siren voices from Right and Left for separate restaurants. There is a Left-wing trend that wants to exploit the differences of communities, possibly to divide

and rule them. They only deal with different communities as different communities and almost seek to keep people separate. They do this under the guise of a kind of identity politics that offers no way of developing integration and community commonalities. On the Right of course is the discourse that proposes that it is anyway impossible for diverse communities to interact successfully so that separate development is simply common sense.

To milk the metaphor a little more – one of the problems with all multi-cultural activity is an accent on the exotic. Surely foreign food is more interesting than pie and mash. The local and ‘ordinary’ potentially become downplayed, even denigrated, in the enthusiasm for the accommodation of the esoteric.

If all of this is true for the intermingling and coexistence of cultures, it remains equally true a journey for religions. What in fact do we believe about what’s desirable or possible in the encounter between religions? – and here we come to one of the major challenges for the oldest formal encounter of them all – Jews and Christians. It’s 70 years since the endeavour was founded for each religion to talk to the other without compromise and with full respect. Have we yet bottomed out the implications even of this limited and, one might have thought, not particularly complicated, aspect of the process? Often we’ve managed our encounter by choosing to overlook the very radical differences between our two traditions. Because we share some common scriptures and therefore some common language we allow ourselves to talk of a ‘Judeo-Christian heritage’, as if this doesn’t hide a multitude of over-simplifications and suppressions of deeply cherished differences. If Jews and Christians can’t come clean about our differences for fear that that might make it difficult for us to interact, what hope is there for others who speak an entirely different cultural or religious language?

Christianity is without doubt the hegemonic cultural/religious power in the West. Is it surprising that while many – even most – people think that satiric and comedic approaches to Christianity’s most dearly held principles are fair game such satire of or challenge to the beliefs and practices of others must be more carefully avoided? It was only a smallish band of Christians who objected to ‘The Life of Brian’ or ‘Jerry Springer - the Musical’ (neither of them, by the way, actually any kind of attack or criticism of Christianity once carefully viewed) but we allowed the chasing off the stage of a play which offended Sikhs in Birmingham so that it’s never actually been performed. (Is it a backhanded compliment to Jews and their settled place in UK culture that one can be fairly unpleasant about some Jewish things with impunity, for example, the staging again and again of Caryl Churchill’s truly offensive ‘Seven Jewish Children’?)

In the field of Religious Education in British schools it is often true that Christianity is least well taught – and least enthusiastically taught either - because the teacher is not a Christian and holds some tricky residual feelings towards Christianity or because s/he is a Christian and that often doesn’t help at all!

What do Jews and Christians have to say about this – and do our basic instincts help or hinder?

To turn then specifically to the Jewish Christian encounter and what, if anything, we might have to offer the multicultural challenges of our rapidly changing, shrinking and intermingling world.

Jews of course are predicated on a minority understanding of ourselves. Not only is this true historically and sociologically, it is pretty true theologically as well. We recognise that God did not intend to make a world full of Jews and Jews have developed a clear understanding that others –

not Jews and with no intention of ever becoming so – can gain salvation. As the rabbis asserted two thousand years ago – The righteous of all nations will inherit the World to Come. They developed the doctrine of the 7 laws to the Sons of Noah – the 7 Noahide laws. (Don't worry, you'll search and search the story of Noah and will not find them!) – to explain what basic moral behaviour was expected of all human beings regardless of their specific beliefs. The 7 laws are basically the 10 Commandments less a few, but with one or two notable differences.

One is a food law – how strange, given that food laws are such a big deal in Judaism that not one of them makes it into the 'Big Ten' - which is a reminder if you need it that Judaism is not at all 'all about the 10 Commandments'. Amongst the 7 basic laws for humanity is that one should not eat meat torn from a live animal. You can understand then why it feels odd for Jews to now have people lecture us on how to treat animals kindly – especially when one remembers that throughout the world it remains true that it is still entirely legal, and in most minds entirely acceptable, to shoot, bash or tear an animal for sport and then eat it! The other perhaps surprising law of the 7 – the only positive 'Thou shalt' out of six other 'Thou shalt nots' is that one must abide by a system of law courts. Judaism doesn't want anyone taking the law into their own hands. We will not call civilised or moral revenge or vengeance. Justice must always be a system, impersonal in its administration.

So, within the limits of the 7 Noahide laws, Jews accept and even enjoy diversity. There are not many Jews throughout history who have been unaware that others do it differently. Whenever Jews have been given the opportunity to encounter the other fairly, it is rare that major Jewish thinkers have not found value and instruction in the insights of the other too.

Can the same be said of Christians and Christianity? Obviously in one very significant way – absolutely not. Christians aspire to a world in which everyone is Christian. Certain New Testament references reinforce this aspiration. 'It is only through me that you come to the Father,' says Jesus in John's gospel. Christian evangelism is dedicated to spreading the Good Word and in its most self-confident and aggressive times Christians have even been prepared to kill people rather than leave them unsaved.

Much or even most of this has changed but it presents thoughtful Christians with the challenge of continuing to stand firm by their commitment to spreading the gospel while respecting the integrity of the other. Several Churches, not least the Catholic Church, have found this easier with the Jews since there is a clear shared story and it is easy to argue that God's covenant with the Jews has never been abrogated whatever new covenant might have been developed for Gentiles too. There are other Churches who would feel that such a position is a total betrayal, and others still who haven't even much started thinking about the topic, let alone facing the challenge it might pose. Then again, relations with other religions do not even have the refuge of a shared biblical narrative to argue over.

However the generosity and optimism that also lie at the heart of Christianity and its determination that the whole world is its business - something that Jews have often lost sight of as an assertion about Jewish responsibility – makes for a rich determination by many Christians to be 'part of the solution' rather than 'part of the problem'. In millennial terms, it's early days yet, but new models of witness which are not explicit and assertive, conditional and manipulative, but generous and servicing, thoughtful and reflective give great hope for the future.

This Christian interest in the whole world then has its strengths and weaknesses. It may disable their accommodation of diversity – note the rocky but progressing path of ecumenism – but it offers a world view of humanity which gives a canvas and stage utterly embracing in its requirements. Jews, on the other hand, have little problem that the other might be different from us. Indeed we expect it. But does that lead to a kind of parochialism that means that so long as you don't bother me, I won't bother you. For many Jews through history, that would have seemed an almost

messianic outcome in itself, but in this new globalised world it is not going to be enough for any tradition that wants to suggest that it has something worth saying and worth hearing, even for its own adherents.

Ways forward?

So - are our religions part of the problem or part of the solution? Certainly, we've not done all we can in past centuries and I don't want spend any time apportioning blame for that. However, if it's true that we've not done all we might – and that we're still not so doing - how might we change?

The first step in 'doing teshuva', repentance, is admission of wrong doing. For Christians it will be a continuing struggle with the default hope that it would be a lot better if everyone were Christian. For Jews it'll centre around 'Why should we care about them, when they didn't care much about us?' Struggling with those attitudes, coming up with solid theological, philosophical and emotionally satisfying articulations to counter those challenges will be a first step.

Beyond that we might start on a re-evaluation of why we think that all human beings are worthy of our attention, respect and interest. This is not just the minimum level of tolerance – putting up with people for the practical and utilitarian reason that not putting up with people leads to an unpleasant cycle of intolerance, but an active valuing of the other because s/he is created b'tzelem Elokim', as the Book of Genesis has it at the creation of Mankind, long before we had religions to enrich and confuse us, in the image of God.

This requires a principled and powerful addressing of the secular doctrine of human rights. Currently that doctrine is articulated as part of the world response to the Shoah and its recognition that we could no longer leave regimes to do whatever they wanted to their subjects. After the Shoah, the world – or at least the Western world – wanted to assert that there were certain incontrovertible bottom lines in what human beings could expect.

Why? Because they were created equal and so had a right to equal rights. Who says? And created by whom? The whole doctrine is built on a range of Jewish and Christian assumptions asserted in the Bible and often more honoured in the breach than in the observance. We know that the doctrine of human rights has only partial adherence even now across the world and certain huge cultures – China for example – have their severe doubts about them as a model and frame. Understandably so. The idea of human equality is a metaphysical idea, not justified by any measurable or verifiable indicator. If you don't share our beliefs there's no particular reason why you should share our convictions – expect perhaps the utilitarian one. And presumably that will remain the best source for securing global agreement if it is possible. But that's not a reason for Jews and Christians to fail to remind people – we might start with ourselves! - of the principled and inspiring origin of the idea.

We need to come clean about the origin of these ideas and refresh them with an underpinning, if we can find it, from within our own deeply cherished beliefs, not to supersede the utilitarian consensus but to reinforce the commonsensical value of these doctrines with our own principled espousing and commitment to them. We might encourage groups of young Jews and Christians to work out together what human rights would sound like, utilising the language of Jews and Christians. This might also have the concomitant by product of bringing us back to the desire of the French Jewish jurist who framed the original Declaration, Rene Cassin – he wanted a declaration of rights and responsibilities. The implications for Jewish and Christian communities around the world working separately and together to show that we can accommodate people's distinctiveness along with their commonality, a definition if one were need as to the ideal aspiration of an perfect multicultural society, would in itself be an inspiring endeavour.

Can Christians mute their evangelical stance, which sounds and is often experienced as triumphalist denigration of other rich religious traditions? Clearly they can, as many Churches and Christians have already started to demonstrate. Can Jews more relaxedly recognise their frequently highly privileged place, hard won without doubt, in many of today's societies and spend less time on their own defence and more on the defence of others far more disadvantaged than we are.

In short, can we both come out fighting for causes that don't serve our own private ends? – the Christian aspiration of the spreading of Christianity and the Jewish aspiration for security. Time will tell.

After 70 years, time to start!

{newsItem.description->f.format.html()}