

Challenge of Living Together

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The escalation of terrorist attacks around the world has thrown the interplay between religious beliefs and co-existence in a plural free society into sharp relief. Unafraid to tackle pressing but sensitive issues, the Foundation for Citizenship at Liverpool John Moore's University has organised a lecture series to discuss how better religious understanding can help bring greater unity to the wider community.

Sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi, Islamic scholar and principal of the Muslim College, London, launched the series with a lecture entitled 'The Challenge of Living Together'. Dr Badawi appeared with fellow British faith leaders, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, in Trafalgar Square following the terrorist attacks in London. Though celebrated for his attempts to establish a modern Islam that can fit comfortably with British values, Dr Badawi experienced religious discrimination first hand when he was barred from entering the US in July 2005. Despite being detained for six hours before being flown back to the UK, no explanation was given on why Dr Badawi was considered 'inadmissible'. An apology followed but his treatment highlights the problems faced by many in the fight against extremism.

Let me begin with a story told me by my wife. A Caribbean friend of hers wished to marry an Englishman. She went home to discuss with her family who did not approve of mixed marriages. Still troubled she went to her grandmother, a simple village woman – so she thought. She said, "My dear grand-daughter all marriages are mixed. They are between a man and a woman." She married the young man and despite their racial and cultural differences their union was happy and fruitful.

In the distant past most people lived in small well-knit communities. Members knew their status and roles. They also observed a recognized code of conduct based on common cultural values. The arrival of an outsider into such a community brings challenges to the hosts to accord him a space, physical and also cultural. On the other hand, the newcomer has to insert himself into the culture in one form or another,

Small, isolated communities are rare in the United Kingdom. This nation is composed of peoples of racial, cultural and religious diversity. For a long period of its history Great Britain was inhabited with peoples who were close to each other racially, being all white, and culturally having shared in the development of the cultural institutions, social or political. They were broadly Christian albeit with different bands of the faith.

No major country has ever been completely mono-racial, or culturally and religiously one. Great Britain has had the English, Welsh, Scots and Irish. It had Catholicism as well as Anglicanism. The gap between these components, though important, is far less significant than the differences between them as a group and the immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. The diversities among the immigrant groups are of equal significance. They brought with them their unfamiliar customs and traditions and style of life. They also introduced Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Islam; creeds some of which were little known.

This development has brought about a series of problems needing urgent solutions. The main concern is, as always, how will the newcomers settle along side each other and alongside the old community. How to avoid fracturing the society along the lines of differences. How to allay the anxiety of the old community about the stability of its institutions and the survival of its culture. And finally how to set in motion a negotiating process through which the communities can resolve their differences.

The early immigrants established themselves in homogenous communities as if they have translated their home villages or towns over to this country. Some even did not bother to learn the English or Welsh languages limiting their contacts with the wider society to the most essential for their survival. With the passage of time and the arrival of the new generation born and educated here their isolation was eroded but not totally broken. This new generation felt they were in a sort of no man's land – their homes geographically in this country but culturally elsewhere. Their education is neglected and their aspirations are frustrated. We have thus a section of our society excluded from the main economic and cultural stream. Their parents struggled to see that the state school did not educate them out of their faith and tradition but there was no adequate effort to educate them into them. Some of them became easy prey for those who wish to sow the seeds of discontent while others fell victims of a system that denied them the opportunity to realize their potential. Only few cut through obstacles to achieve professional skills. The wider community grew weary and suspicious of the large number of unqualified youth. Certain sections of the press chose to blame the victims rather than sponsoring a programme of tackling the problem. Indeed every time the Authorities tried to ameliorate the situation, they were accused of favouritism by right wing columnists and extremist political movements. Impoverished, disenfranchised and feeling abandoned by the authorities they lost their sense of belonging to the country. This is an extremely dangerous situation. Its remedy does not lie in the use of the power of the state through a larger police force and expanded detention centres. It should be dealt with at source,

We need to analyse the problem. To start with we must recognize the following concrete facts. Great Britain is a country with many races, religions and cultures. The disparity in the provision of services between the communities is too great and intolerable. The immigrant communities are not helped to understand let alone integrate with the

country's culture. The old community has not been alerted to the need to give adequate space to the diverse cultural norms and religions, beliefs and customs. To be sure, Britain has exercised minimum pressure on the immigrant communities to conform to their own mode of conduct. This was seen by some not as an act of tolerance but as one of indifference. The immigrants and their descendants became such a source of fear and loathing that some political parties sought support from the wider community by being anti immigrants.

The need now is to underline the theoretical basis for a programme to end the exclusion of minorities and to help them to feel not just part of this society but to be loyal to this country. The wider community will have a crucial role in achieving this objective. The authorities, local and central, should supervise and encourage but not force the process. We have to educate all citizens that every one must accept certain primary values. These are essential to the existence of society. The definition of values according to John Kekes is 'benefits whose possession would make life better than it would be without them and their lack would make a life worse than it would otherwise be.' He observes that we may regard something as a value and be mistaken because it would not improve our life nor would its lack affect it adversely. Kekes, who is a philosopher, identifies universal primary values which are essential ingredients for the good and secondary values which he describes as the application of universal values to a specific situation. Kekes's analysis, in certain respects, coincides with the views expressed by the Muslim jurists. They state that there are things which are essential (*Al-Darurat*) these are defined as the things that are necessary for the achievement of human beings' spiritual and material well-being – what Kekes call *good life* – if these things are missing the material and spiritual life of the people would be corrupted; anarchy and chaos would prevail. These the scholars listed as five:

- First, the preservation of the community; every threat to its existence is a menace to the well being of every member.
- Second, the protection of life and limb of every individual: the lack of security nullifies any hope of well being.
- Third, protection of progeny through ordered relationship between the sexes so as to ensure a family structure that helps bring healthy and stable offspring.
- Fourth, the protection of human reason. It should not be permitted to torture people or to force or induce them to consume drugs or any substance that can cause the brain to malfunction.
- Finally the protection of property; ownership of property is a psychological need. It is important for the well being of the individual and society.

The second category refers to what the jurists call '*Hajiyyat*' which are in essence the application of the essential requirement to specific conditions. For example the protection of progeny does not specify the structure of the relationship between the sexes. Also in relation to the ownership of property the rules governing this aspect might differ from community to community depending on their different needs. It

is however essential to realize that the categories are derived from the principal values and cannot stand on their own.

The third category is called by the Jurists '*Tahsinat*' or embellishments that enhance the wellbeing of the individual and the community, for example, courtesy, voluntary work, donations to charity. *Tahsinat* are in essence the ethical conduct that envelops all the values.

This framework outlines universal values (*Darurat*) to which all of us are committed.

Alongside these universal values there are the *Hajiyyat*, which are the application of the universal to contingent. In other words within the framework of the universal there is a space for different applications. In accepting this procedure we bind the communities together through universal values while allowing for the varied application dictated by various needs. This is diversity in unity which is the only way to make our life together possible. These common values form the basis of commitment to the common good and loyalty to the established institutions of State such as the Crown, Parliament and the legal system. The first is a symbol of unity, the second is the expression of the people's will and the third constitutes the rules that regulate their relationship.

This programme requires a well-structured educational programme, coupled with action to improve schooling and to celebrate the various cultures as expression of diversity in unity. While the school system should be concerned with the delivery – in terms of citizenship training – of the universal values, there should be facilities to impart those specific needs of each community and its members. We all now know the danger of handing this essential task to untrained, unsupervised and dare I say sometimes irresponsible individuals who would mislead the young into betraying their own tradition and with it violating the basic values of our society.

Recognizing our diversity within our fundamental unity would be enhanced if we learn about each other's culture and take part in each other's festivals. We must encourage practical projects that will involve the effort of individual of different communities. Isolation breeds ignorance and suspicion whereas collaborating, sharing, debating, even shouting at each other leads to that precious commodity – humanizing each other. By being involved with each other our communities will discover their common similarity and understand and learn to respect their differences. Many people know very little about their neighbours, or more often have wrong ideas about them. I recall when I was teaching in a university abroad I asked the Christian students to write what they knew about Islam and the Muslim students to write what they knew of Christianity. The Christian students listed all the negative qualities which you may find in some of the ill-informed publications. The Muslim students were not less hostile in their presentation of Christianity. When I asked each side to write what they knew about their own religion, their contributions were dismal. All these students were from the same

country and some belonged to the same city; but as their communities seldom mixed they believed the worst about each other.

In our school curriculum there should be recognition of our common history and also our diverse experiences. British heritage should be owned by all people through enlarging the content of the syllabus to acknowledge and celebrate the parts played by all of us in the making of the country. No contribution should be ignored or belittled and no painful experience should be glossed over. A proper teaching of history that is inclusive, honest, neither judgmental nor apologetic, would enhance the experience of sharing a past and looking forward to sharing a future.

As I am a teacher of Religion, I would negligent of my profession if I do not touch upon the teaching of religion and the training of Religious Education Teacher. Our current crisis with regard to the threat to peace and security is attributed to a misrepresentation of Islam. The atrocity of 7/7, we are told, was committed by young people in the name of the faith. What sort of interpretation of the *Sharia* is it that legitimized indiscriminate murder of innocent passengers, the destruction of property, the disruption of the life of ordinary people and the spreading of fear and alarm throughout the city and even the country. This crime comes under the *Sharia* category of '*Herabah*' that is declaration of war on God and on His Messenger. It is a negation of every rule of the *Sharia* which decrees that innocent life is sacred, property is inviolate and that the peace of mind of the public must be safeguarded. Those who preach the message of hate serve no religious cause and those who incite the ill-informed, maladjusted and alienated to commit criminal acts do so not as servants of a noble faith or a legitimate cause but operators for base ambitions disguised as pious and religious.

I must touch upon an important exercise in the making of a harmonious relationship between our faiths, and that is Interfaith Dialogue. My involvement in Interfaith goes back to my youth when I persuaded my undergraduate colleagues to attend a church service. An act that Al-Azhar, my university, at that time would not have approved of. I have carried on with this work throughout my career. I was a co-founder with Sir Sigmund Sternberg and the Reverend Dr. Marcus Braybrooke of The Three Faiths Forum, a co founder of the Hindu, Muslim, Jain Sikh Buddhist Forum, and I am a trustee of the Maimonides Trust for Dialogue between Muslims and Jews of which Professor David Khalili is chairman.

In the present troubled times we are called upon to sacrifice some of our liberties for the sake of our security. I am hopeful, even optimistic, that the period of anxiety will be short lived and that our society will march forward in unity with confidence that we shall overcome the threats to our peaceful life and live in harmony.

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