CHRISTIAN LIVING IN A PLURAL SOCIETY:

Towards a Christian understanding of the sociology of pluralism in the U.K.

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Foreword

It is impossible to begin this paper without making a comment about
the context in which it was presented. The group of nearly thirty
people who had met to discuss the Christian response to pluralism
included one overseas visitor from India, one woman who was prevented
from taking part in more than half the sessions by child care
responsibilities, and 28 of us who were white male middle class
academics. This is a typical gathering of opinion formers in the
evangelical churches of Britian in the 1990's, yet another example of
what Maurice Hobbs calls the obliteration of the presence and
contribution of black people in church and society. It will not do,
either in terms of our behaviour before God, or our credibility in the
eyes of the society in which we live.


1) Case Study

As part of my work I often show theological students, and visitors
from the White Highlands or overseas around my neighbourhood. It only
takes an hour to make the point that our part of East London houses a
vast diversity of peoples and communities. This of course can be
repeated around most of the major cities of the U.K. and indeed the
world. But to illustrate let me take you on a walk starting from my
flat.

My next door neighbours are the Patels, a Gujerati speaking extended
family originating in India but arriving in the U.K. as refugees from
Uganda in 1972. Further down the street you notice the Koranic texts
above the doors of Pakistani or Bangladeshi Muslim households, and
perhaps meet in the street Lal or Jessie, elderly white widows, with
strong Cockney accents.

Just round the corner at the local Christian community centre is the
office of the Newham Ugandan Association which tries to help the
latest wave of refugees from that country, this time mostly Christian
Africans. The Christian organisation that manages the centre is deeply
involved in community work and social justice issues, being a leading
player in local anti-deportation and homelessness campaigns. The
centre also houses three Christian churches, with mainly Jamaican
congregations, a Turkish welfare group, a Karate club which is mainly
young, male and Asian and several entirely white groups of old age
pensioners.

At the other end of this street, next to the row of maisonettes
occupied mainly by young professional singles or double income
couples, is the old junior school. This now houses the local Hindu
Centre in one half and a secular  Afro-Caribbean community centre in
the other. Only two minutes walk away is the local Islamic Centre, the
Sikh gurudwara and a detached house which until recently was the home
of the local Indian Buddhists.

Across the road stands a pub and a row of rather downmarket small
shops, 85% owned by Asians. The others include several second hand
furniture or TV businesses owned by whites, a betting shop owned by
one of the big chains, an Afro-Caribbean upholstery firm, and a black
hairdressing salon. There is a rapid rate of turnover in these small
businesses, suggesting that even here in the prosperous South East and
gentrifying East London, the local economy remains in stagnation. In
the middle of the row of shops is the centre for the Asian Senior
Citizens, the Gujerat Welfare Association, an Asian Music Teaching
Centre and the office of the Neighbourhood Revitalisation Services, a
group helping to organise and finance desparately needed housing
repairs.


There is also a small mission hall, occupied on Sundays and some
weeknights by a tiny if enthusaiastic black Pentecostal congregation.
The only other church within half a mile is the Cathedral size
Catholic Parish church, with its slowly declining congregation, now
composed of equal numbers of Afro-Caribbean and Asian people as Irish
and English. Rumour has it that we are also part of an Anglican parish
but no-one seems to know which one!

Our fellowship's local cell group is the only other organised
Christian presence; a dozen of us, all under forty and professionals,
including two Malaysians and a young Black woman from Birmingham. I
describe us as a cross between a charismatic House Church and a Latin
American Base Community. A friend calls us a bunch of Plymouth
Brethren, who got filled with the Holy Spirit and got involved in
radical politics. But there are people with Methodist, High Anglican,
Baptist and Syrian Orthodox backgrounds in our group as well.

Politically the neighbourhood, like the whole borough, is a one-party
state. Politics is dominated by a ward Labour Party of twenty
activists. We are 80% white and 90% graduates. Our three councillors
are deliberately chosen to mirror the ward's residents; a female
Afro-Caribbean, a male Pakistani Muslim, and a male white Orthodox
Jewish (who describes himself as a convinced atheist!). Most people
remain apolitical, with less than a third turning out to vote at
Council elections. Relevant community politics, as opposed to left
wing posturing, only emerges when Hindus and Muslims or Asians and
Afro-Carribbeans fall out over grant allocations from the Council, or
occasionally if a local school is to close, or a child is knocked down
by a rat-running motorist.

Upton Manor is a prime example of a diverse urban neighbourhood. It is
tempting to see this urban mosaic as a paradigm of a plural or
pluralistic society. However, the more we examinine the notion the
more problematic we shall find it. In particular when we introduce the
notion of justice or value judgements about the kind of society God
would like to see we will find much to criticise. The implications for
Christian presence, involvement and proclamation in such areas will
also become more difficult but perhaps more rewarding, as we seek to
understand such complexity in the light of Scripture.

## 2) Aspects of Pluralism

Theologians and philosophers tend to argue about pluralism in the abstract, as the coexistence or conflict between contradictory world views. In the day to day world pluralism is much more clearly a social phenomenon, it is about people and groups of people and their life togeyher. At the most basic sociological level the problems and possibilities associated with pluralism centre around the tension between groups which have some sense of identity, and the need for wider social organisation at the economic and govermental level. Ever since the Tower of Babel and the dawn of civilisation pluralism has been on the agenda, at least for all societies except those living in total and splendid isolation on some remote small island. Interaction between groups has been the cause of wars and the source of cultural and technological enrichment. Different societies have handled the issues involved in a variety of ways. By looking at some of the different models and aspects of pluralism we may hope to get some clues about the situation in the U.K. today.

### definitions

It is worth clarifying the terminology that I shall be using at this point. I use the terms "diverse / diversity" to describe the situation such as that in my own neighbourhood where there are a variety of distinguishable types of people, some of which may be characterised by ethnicity. I use the terms "plural /plurality" to describe a society in which there is some level of organisation of different groups of people, usually with institutions reflecting different cultures, often in competition with each other. "Pluralism / pluralistic" is used to capture the notion of a society where the acceptance of diversity, and of at least some plurality of institutions is taken as a desirable feature of that society, by the majority of members or at least the dominant opinion formers. I shall introduce the term "just pluralistic society" to describe the yet to be achieved society where there is an absence of domination over minority groups, and where there is equality of opportunity (or better still of outcome) in the distribution of economic, legal, educational and cultural resources.

Before plunging into a detailed discussion on pluralism it is worth exploring at this point the whole concept of ethnicity. Ethnicity is a concept with deep Biblical roots. The Greek term "ethnos" was used to translate the Hebrew "Goi" which is rendered in English versions as "Gentile(s)", tribe or nations. In evangelical missiology the term "people group" is now widely used. In Biblical usage "ethnos" is a complex term often found in collocations such as "of every language, tribe and nation" or alongside "clan", "people" and "family."

There is room therefore in Biblical semantics to associate components of ancestry, language, religion and culture with "ethnos". However very little is said in Scripture about so called "racial" features

such as skin colour and the measurements of physical anthropologists.
The differentiation of the human race into "ethnos" is a post fall
phenomenon (Gen.11) so there is no support in Scripture for the idea
that races, nations or people groups are creational givens. Indeed the
NT account of Pentecost and the early church suggests that in Christ
there is a radical reversal of Babel, and a new humanity in which
there is equality for all people. The extent to which the diversity of
human cultures is to be celebrated or brought under judgement by the
Gospel remains debatable.

Popular usage of the "people group" "ethnic group" concept is
problematic in that it tends to reify the group as an inflexible
entity to which persons either belong or are outsiders, and which is
linked to a particular (reified, unchanging) culture. Such thinking
can lead easily to unbiblical patterns in church and society, for
example the Homogeneous Unit Principle, or the separate development
philosophy of the South African government. Used ideologically by
those involved in power politics the notion of ethnic group or nation
can become a demonic idolatory.

Modern social anthropologists, especially those working in fluid urban
societies have preferred to see ethnicity as a process. As a social
process it can be related to changes in society such as migration and
to the socio-economic structure, and power relations of society. "It
is a reaction occurring when two sets of people come into contact or
confrontation with each other. It is a felt boundary which involves
both difference and the meaning put on difference" (Wallman 1978).
Ethnicity is a special case of intergroup relationships in that it is
usually associated with some concept of "paternity" (blood
relationship or descent) and "patrimony" (cultural heritage). (Fishman
1977).

Ethnicity depends on a process of social categorisation which has both
subjective and objective aspects. On the one hand individuals can
choose within certain constraints how closely they associate
emotionally, behaviourally and socially with one or more ethnic
identities or categories, and this can vary over time. Just as
individuals can be bilingual it is possible also to be bi-cultural or
bi-ethnic. The apostle Paul who became all things to all people is a
relevant model here. On the other hand society at large is often busy
ascribing individuals to ethnic categories of the basis of physical
features, or linguistic and cultural behaviour or stereotypes.


          territorial integrity and political pluralism


In the twentieth century world of nation states it is easy to forget
how recently the concept of political nationalism came to be a
dominant theme in Western History. At its height the Roman Empire held
together in one polity all the peoples of the then known world. The
medieval concept of Christendom was an attempt to hold the world
together following political fragmentation, and it proved remarkably

successful for a thousand years. The Renaisaance era saw the growing
dominance of national rulers in Western Europe and the beginnings of
colonial empires. But it was in the nineteenth century following the
American and French revolutions that nationalism became the great
romantic ideal. Despite some inherently internationalist tendencies in
the revolutionary spirit of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, later
taken up in Marxism, nationalism has remained a dominant political
force.

Each people, defined largely on the basis of a common language and
culture, (and this in fact created in many cases by rather dubious and
ideologically motivated "scientific" studies on the evolution of
languages and races) (Vaugen) was seen as having a right to its own territory
and government. There is no room in this view for ethnicity as a
process or the fluidity of ethnic boundaries. Partly, of course the
popularity of this doctrine was a reaction against real oppression by
imperial systems. The Balkans were the classic locus where solutions
along these lines had to be found. But even after the 1914-18 war,
when many new nation states were established as the Austrian and
Turkish empires collapsed, problems remained. Jugoslavia, a typical
example, contained not only the Slavic nations  of Serbs, Croats,
Slovenians, Bosnians and Macedonians (correlated with Orthodox, Roman
Catholic and Muslim faiths), but also sizeable minorities of Italians,
Hungarians, Romanians, Albanians and Gypsies. The political tensions
are still beeing worked out in the federal system of the present day.

Despite the high value placed on national sovereignty many European
peoples continued to suffer imperial oppression. Even after the Soviet
Revolution the Russian Empire continued, with nationalist aspirations
being ruthlessly supressed until the recent advent of Glasnost. And we
only need to glance at the history of the Third Reich to see the
consequences of an unfetterred nationalism demanding territorial
integrity at the expense of whoever stands in its way.  Yet since 1945
the world has seen the birth of more nation states than ever before.
In most cases their boundaries are purely artificial, drawn as
straight lines by colonial rulers (sic.), and including diverse
peoples in uneasy co-existence. Even the federal system of India,
which as a nation state has some natural geographic boundaries and
overall cultural identity, goes through regular crises involving
separatist movements in the regions. And we only have to look at the
Republic of South Africa and the Bantustans to see how the ideology of
national self determination can be used to support unjust political
dominance by a powerful minority group.

Nationalism is a two headed coin. When used by oppressed peoples as a
banner of solidarity against the oppressor it can appear noble and
righteous. Yet when used by governments to promote national unity,
national security or in an attempt to dominate other states it can
become purely demonic. Every state eventually must come to terms with
the diversity of groups among its peoples. And this is the case even
where division is not ethnic but mainly between class and interest
groups. The state may choose to oppress minorities but in doing so
risks sitting on a powder keg. Even formal democratic processes do not
prevent the tyranny of the majority (as for example in Northern

Ireland). Federal systems with devolved regional powers may often be useful, but in diverse urban societies are never a perfect solution.

The UK, despite its long parliamentary history, has never really resolved the issue of territory and politics. The unwritten constitution seems to rest on so many fictions, the fiction that we are a Kingdom, the fiction that we are or ever have been United, the fiction that Parliament is representative of the people and expresses the will of the majority, the fiction that Britishness (and therefore "bestness") depends on being born and socialised within the territory of the realm. While it is true that Britain as a state contains many diverse groups the claim that we are fully pluralistic in our politics cannot be substantiated. The Southern English elite continues to dominate the Scots, the Welsh, the North of Ireland and the North of England. The voting at the 1987 election clearly showed how unpopular the Thatcher government was in the peripheral areas, with only 10 Scottish Tory MPs elected. Yet she was returned to power with a massive Parliamentary majority, on a popular vote of 42% of the 70% of the electors who cast a vote. Our democracy does not obviously protect the rights or represent the aspirations of minorities.

The political definition of Britishness at the end of the twentieth century continues to be reworked. With the loss of Empire we are no longer "top nation" and are still searching for a role. The South Atlantic conflict in 1982 was at one level a pathetic, irrelevant and tragic attempt to show the world that the British lion could still roar. Yet at another it was a magificient triumph for the forces of reaction, spearheaded by a jingoistic tabloid press, to reinforce the identity of the British in traditional terms. "Our people" were portrayed as white, English speaking and united in the defence of 2000 compatriots, (and a few million sheep) at the end of the earth. More recently Norman Tebbitt has argued that the only people who should be considered truly British are those who pass the "cricket test" of cheering for England (not the U.K.) in Test matches with the West Indies or India. All this of course at a time of increasing polarisation and conflict at home with "the enemy within" seen in the "rioters" of Toxteth and the militant strikers of the Yorkshire coalfield.

Meanwhile in international responsibilities Britannia has sought to waive the rules, especially the rules of the European Community, and the immigration rules which traditionally gave asylum to all those fleeing political persecution. The 1981 Nationality Act, the policies over the return of Hong Kong to China, the deportations of Viraj Mendes and thousands of others and the recent forced repatriation of Vietnamese refugees from Hong Kong, are all popular policies which make it clear that Britain does not desire to be an inclusive pluralist political community. The ideology of course owes much to Enoch Powell and thanks to him makes more than a little use of Christian language and symbolism. Certain sectors of evangelical Christianity slip into this reactionary way of thinking and betray it by the use of titles such as "Action for Biblical Witness to OUR NATION". The language of nationhood is consistently used in liturgies, prayer meetings, choruses and the spiritual warfare of the March for

Jesus movements in ways which owe more to the journalism of the
Falklands campaign than the inclusivism of the New Testament. Despite
th
        e goodwill expressed to "our brethren in the Black led churches"
many black Christians feel excluded and marginalised.


        economic integration

It is impossible to understand the functioning of any society without
having some awareness of its economic structures. Marxists would
express this more strongly and say that the economic base is the main
determinant of social relationships. Their classical analysis was
developed largely in the context of 19th century industrial economies
with a relatively homogeneous population and needs modifications and
revisions to cope with the 20th century post industrial world, with
its massive migrations of labour and capital, the role of
multinational corporations and the diversity of modern urban
populations. Yet it can point us to some valuable insights.

One of the key facts of the modern world in both the colonial and post
colonial period is that the prosperity of Europe and North America has
been built on the exploitation of the natural resources and labour of
the Two Thirds World. There is a continuity in the story from the
slave trade, to the black migrant labourers of Soweto, from the
destruction of the Amazonian rain forests and the Brazilian national
debt, to the plight of women working in the electronics factories and
brothels of Bangkok.

The UK economy was once the driving force and continues to play a
major part in this international pattern of domination. The inhuman
mercantile exploitation of India, Africa and the Caribbean delivered
the capital and markets which funded the industrial prosperity of the
19th Century. Exploitation these days is centred _obviously_ more in the financial
services sector; it is more lucrative and less dirty. The final boom
of traditional labour intensive British industry in the 1950's and
1960's coincided with the withdrawal from Empire. The children of the
Empire were recruited to fill the low paid dirty jobs of the mother
country. The foundries, textile mills and health and transport
services of many British cities soon had multiracial or in some cases
entirely black workforces. Higher paid more unionised industries such
as the docks and mines tended to remain entirely white.

In more recent years the change from manufacturing to service
industries has been well documented. Also the change in immigration
rules to favour European Community nationals at the expense of Black
people from the old Empire, has increased the diversity of ethnic
groups in Britain. Further changes planned for the introduction of the
single market in 1992 will introduce even harsher Europe wide controls
on the movement of black migrant workers and refugees. But many of the
most interesting developments have been around the diversification of
the labour markets, in which different ethnic groups have found their
own particular niche.

Taking East London as an example we find a local economy which is

fragmented and diverse yet which eventually relates to the wider global economy. The profiles below are mainly impressionistic but could probably be backed up by employment statistics.

1) Multinational Industry: Apart from Fords at Dagenham this sector is not obviously present. The workforce there is mainly male, multiracial to some extent, but black and Asian people will be underepresented in management and the more highly skilled jobs.

2) Multinational Finances: Centred in the City and now in Docklands. Many East London women (white, black and Asian) are employed in secretarial and clerical roles. Contract cleaning firms working in these offices employ many black and other minority groups. Management and executive posts are mainly filled by white male commuters from the suburbs.

3) Construction Industry: Major firms operating in Docklands tend to employ male gangs with a high proportion of Irish, Scots and Northern workers. Smaller local firms employ white and some Carribbean men but few Asians.

4) Public Sector: Local authorities are among the largest local employers and have vigorous equal opportunities policies. In their offices and in the education system a mixture of men and women of all races are to be found, although executive and technical officers still tend to be white and male. Among the manual workers in some sections white males predominate, sometimes exclusively.  In Health and Social Services a large number of Afro-Caribbean women are found in lower paid domestic jobs. Nursing and medical staff from most ethnic groups are to be found.

5) Rag Trade: Clothing manufacture has become an ethnic sector par excellence. Most firms are small (apart from wholesalers who include many Jewish firms) and are run by Cypriots or Asians. Tailoring workshops employ mainly Bangladeshi men (on a fairly casual basis), while homeworkers are usually women of South Asian or Cypriot origin.

6) Retail: Large chains and stores are likely to be managed by whites but have at least some black and Asian (mainly female) staff. Most small shops (other than well established specialist shops) are now owned by Asians and run as family businesses. East African Gujeratis seem to have a key role here and often have developed thriving — and struggling businesses (including pharmacies, newsagents and electrical shops), but Panjabis and Pakistanis are also found in this sector.

7) Catering: Ethnic minorities predominate here both because of low pay and the diversification of taste in recent years. Chip shops tend to be run by Cypriots and Italians, Kentucky Fried Chicken and other fast food franchises by South Asians, while Chinese, Indian and Caribbean food are prepared and served by people of the appropriate ethnic background. Only the pie and mash shops and traditional working

class cafes seem to employ "English" staff.


8) Transport: London Regional Transport and BR have multiracial staff
(employing many Afro-Caribbeans) at least at the lower levels. However
female train and bus drivers are still rather rare. Taxi drivers tend
to be white males, with a strong Jewish representation.

9) Printing: as a highly unionised industry is still largely white
male dominated. However, new technology and tough management in the
news industry, and the growth of small operations is bringing some
changes.

10) The reserve army of labour: Unemployment is still high (about 12%
in Newham) and is concentrated among the unskilled, the young, the
black, and the residents of certain Council Housing estates.

Clearly then we already have some evidence of existing plurality in
the labour markets of London and the U.K. and it is arguable that this
is functional in the growth of the economy. However, there is rarely
any ideology of ethnically based economic pluralism expressed, other
than praise for the small businesses that are the vanguard of the new
"enterprise economy". Yet even the small business sector which offers
some hope for the enterprising ethnic minority business person
involves a high cost. It demands long hours of hard work, support from
or exploitation of the family and the constant risk of financial
failure.

It is questionable whether these plural labour markets are desirable,
given that they presuppose structural discrimination which favours
white male employees. They cut off many black and Asian people from
full and equal participation in the mainstream of national economic
life. It is a recipe for injustice and suffering for many, and in the
long term for conflict and instability in society. Indeed even the
Conservative governed state plays lip service to the promotion of more
equal opportunities by race relations legislation, and by encouraging
investment in multiracial urban areas, although the evidence shows
that this is largely ineffective.



cultural pluralism

While political and economic plurality are the primary dimensions, the
ordinary language use of the term plurality (confused with pluralism)
concentrates on culture with connotations associated with
"multiculturalism". Culture here is meant in the anthropological
rather than the "fine arts" sense and includes at its broadest all
"the artefacts, structures of relationship and behaviour, symbolic,
belief and value systems shared by a society."  The Willowbank report
defines it as "an integrated system of beliefs, values, customs and
institutions which bind a society togerher and give it a sense of
identity, dignity, security and continuity." In a few words culture is
the total lifestyle of a group of people.

An obvious difficulty of definition immediately arises. When two or
more groups of people are in contact, and this has been the case in
most societies throughout history, they are bound to influence each
other. The cultures are bound to interact and therefore to influence
and change each other. Obviously the culture of the group which
dominates economically and politically will have the greater chance of
imposing its ways on the other. However minority cultures can be
surprisingly able to maintain their earlier forms, especially in
contexts where they are used as a resource with which to counter the
oppression of dominant or majority groups. They can sometimes
influence the dominant culture in surprising ways.

Control of symbolic resources, especially of the media and of language
is a key factor in the conflicts between different groups in modern
society. The freedom of speech and of the press in which liberal
democracy prides itself, should in theory allow minority voices to be
heard. Yet technological, financial and social processes combine to
ensure that symbolic resources in our culture are increasingly
controlled by a small elite. In Britain today the dominant forces in
the mass media reflect the interests of multinational capitalism, and
promote a mid Atlantic culture of affluence and consumption based on
secular humanist values. TV and radio are increasingly run
commercially, and the popular press is monopolised by a small number
of tycoons. The world of the media is predominantly white, unhelpful
stereotypes of minority groups abound and there are merely a few slots
reserved for contributions from "domesticated" minority
representatives, plus a few "ghetto" slots at inconvenient times on
obscure channels. While technological developments such as sattelite
and cable TV hold out some hope for greater diversity in broadcasting,
in the deregulated market place those who pay the piper will
inevitably call the tune.

As for language the situation is even more clear cut. Language of
course is the prime vehicle for expressing culture and values, as well
as a skill which has economic value. English (in its Southern middle
class variety) is dominant at both international and national levels
in education, publishing, the arts and business. The struggle of
Welsh-speakers to maintain their language and culture has only been
recognised as legitimate in the last twenty years, and even so Welsh
is by no means sure of survival. The position of "immigrant" languages
is even weaker, despite the fact there are about 150 languages spoken
by children in London schools. The only concessions made by government
are a few hours of broadcasting in Asian languages at off peak times,
a new community radio station broadcasting in Greek in London, and
translations of official leaflets into minority languages. In schools
some local authorities are offering GCSE courses in Urdu or Panjabi,
but this is outside the national curriculum, which stipulates that
foreign language means major European language (which will help the
U.K. balance of trade).

The message to linguistic minorities is clear, "If you want to come
here you must learn English, and if you want to maintain your own
language do it at your own cost". Few of course remember to point out

that British colonists and expatriates have rarely if ever bothered to
learn the language and assimilate with the peoples they have conquered
or settled among. The dominance of English as a national and world
language is a major economic incentive among native speakers of other
languages for mastering it. Yet there is no intrinsic reason why this
should be at the expense of proficiency in the home language.

Christians, with their multilingual and much translated Scriptures,
the story of Pentecost, and the multilingual inscripton on the cross
of Calvary as keystones in their heritage should be among the foremost
advocates of multilingualism. In Britain, however, the popular
assumptions in language are still largely assimilationist, even though
in other less threatening aspects of culture and even in the case of
religion the acceptance of diversity as a good thing became common in
the U.K. from the late 1960's. The fact that so many communities are
running weekend schools, producing minority language newspapers and
importing and distributing videos from their homeland, shows their
high level of commitment to language and cultural maintenance. Whether
this will be enough to ensure the survival of such languages in
Britain into the next generations is an open question. There are many
educational and cultural reasons and real possibilities to promote and
value high levels of bilingual skill. Yet in the current social and
educational climate there is also the opposite danger that without the
proper teaching input, potentially bilingual young people might grow
up with restricted command of both languages, the so called phenomenon
of "semi-lingualism".

Similar factors affect cultures as a whole. While the liberal element
in the dominant society is reasonably happy to enjoy some of the
benefits of multiculturalism, for example the food, music and dancing,
there is a reluctance even to recognise some of the deeper forms as
legitimate let alone beneficial. Instead of asking "what can British
people learn from African and Asian family and community life?" one is
more likely to encounter a negative reaction that fears the "swamping"
of British culture by alien ways. "If they come here they must be like
us," we are told. But are we going to impose on minorities some of the
attitudes and behaviours that make privatised loneliness and lack of
communal provision for neighbours a public virtue?

For reasons we will describe below we can expect to see as time goes
on a growing plurality of lifstyles, especially in the major cities of
the U.K. In addition it is likely that we will see a growing plurality
of voluntary associations, ranging from new religious movements,
leisure activity clubs, political single issue pressure groups, social
welfare bodies, ethnic heritage groups, and independent schools. Some
societies such as the Netherlands have many centuries experience of
plurality which has become pluralism in the voluntary sector. In
England the tradition is limited and is probably constrained in
religion by the dominance of the established church and in the
educational and welfare fields by the established pattern of state
provision.

Present government policy to cut back the "nanny" state will to some
extent accelerate these trends towards plurality in culture. It is

likely, however that there will be an undignified scramble for
resources and that groups concentrating on upopular minority concerns
will go to the wall. Yet there is an inherent contradiction in New
Right thinking, between the notion of total economic freedom in the
market place, and the social authoritarianism and desire for national
cohesion which is necessary for unfettered capitalism to function (and
get elected). While plurality may flourish the prospects for true
culture pluralism are not so bright.


                  pluralism of values

Since the Enlightenment (and perhaps the reformation) Western society
has prided itself on the right to freedom of belief and speech. The
classic liberal formula is expressed as "I may disagree with what you
say, but I'll fight to the death for your right to say it." However,
this has always been more of a myth than a reality. While it is true
that Britain does less than most societies past or present to enforce
conformity to a single fixed set of values, there still remain a huge
range of formal and informal mechanisms of social control which
prevent or sanction deviance beyond certain limits. In particular any
groups that question certain "sacred" beliefs such as the legitimacy
of our "democratic" system (e.g. the IRA), family life (e.g. Moonies
or Scientologists), the rule of law (Poll Tax non-payers), or of the
need for economic growth are soon marginalised or silenced by the
state, often acting on a cross party consensus.

The increasing presence of ethnic minorities in British cities with
the range of world views they bring is just one factor which has
tested tolerance of pluralism of values and belief systems to its
limits. As long as they make no claims for special treatment under the
law, and as long as their contribution to the economy outweighs the
benefits they derive from it they will be tolerated. But should they
assert their values as a positive challenge to the status quo they are
likely to meet criticism, opposition and eventually rejection. The
Rushdie affair and the ensuing public debates on blasphemy and
censorship has highlighted this issue in a dramatic way.


What then would a just pluralist society look like?

I take it for granted on the basis of Scriptures such as Isaiah 58;6-8
and 66;18 ff and Rev. 7;9 and 21;22-27 that God is planning a
multiracial society where justice is at home and that he wants to see
some reflection of this in the world today. While the perfect society
under God's reign will only come eschatologically with Christ's
return, substantial healing and transformation is part of God's
project in history with which we are called to co-operate. Obviously
it can be argued that the New Jerusalem will not be a multifaith
society and therefore that evangelism to people of all faiths remains
important. But this does not let us off the hook as far as social
justice and treatment of minorities are concerned. For both the law

(e.g. Deut.10;18-20) and the prophets (e.g. Amos chs 1 & 2) make it clear that God's standards of justice and compassion apply to all peoples and societies, not only to his chosen people.

Another way of evaluating a just pluralist society would be in terms of the trinity of values of the French Revolution.

Freedom: A minimum standard here would be freedom of travel, freedom to enjoy family life, freedom of association, freedom of belief and speech and freedom from fear of oppressive policing. Obviously these freedoms cannot be absolute but must be restrained where they deny freedom to others. It is significant that many black people in Britain today feel that they do not fully enjoy most of these basic freedoms, because of immigration rules and other aspects of our racist society.

Equality: The minimal standard even of right wing thinkers is equality before the law. However it can be demonstrated by criminal justice statistics that black and poor people do not have even this basic equality. In terms of equality of opportunity, again ethnic minority groups are consistently found to have circumscribed life chances, as a result of poverty, unemployment, living in urban areas with underfunded education and health systems etc. It is not surprising then that in terms of equality of outcome they lag even further behind the white middle class. While it is obviously naive to think that all inequality can be eliminated, and we may even doubt if it is desirable, there is no doubt that the U.K. could do better. Above all the policies which have deliberately increased inequality in recent years could easily be reversed given the political will.

Solidarity: (The best non-sexist translation of fraternity): This is the most problematic of the three values for a pluralist community. It is the case that in most diverse neighbourhoods where people of different cultures meet at school, in the workplace and on the doorstep there are many examples of good relationships and neighbour love to be found. However, group differences can be and often are exploited. Sociologists have often pointed out that group identity and loyalty flourishes best in the context of competition with identifiable out groups. As long as the sinful world order continues groups will be in conflict with each other. The most we can hope for is a society in which peace between groups is kept on the basis of perceived justice for all. Britain at the moment is far away from this possibility.

In this context it can be argued on Biblical grounds that a major task currently is to work for solidarity with and between those on bottom of the pile. A major task for God's people is to build up community and fellowship among those people who are suffering in isolation at the hands of powerful people, institutions and market forces. This calls for community organising strategies within neighbourhoods and in ethnic and religious groupings and the building of broad alliances which will struggle together for justice on specific issues. It may be uncomfortable for Christians who will be called to work with people who hold fundamentally different world views. Such solidarity will lead to conflict with the powers that be, and with fellow Christians,

but this is preferable to shouting, "peace, peace when there is not peace".


## 3) Processes Leading to Plurality

On the basis of the discussion so far it is evident that the U.K. is not a just pluralistic society and it remains unclear as to how far it really is a plural society. Rather we should see it as merely a post colonial society where one dominant group and cultural traditon maintains hegemony over several others, as part of the structure of international capitalism. But urban Britain is diverse and moving towards a plurality of cultures and institutions. In this section we shall look at some of the factors and social processes that push in the direction of plurality.


### urbanisation

The city always has been the locus for the development of a plural society. It is no coincidence that people from every part of the world were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost or that all the languages, tribes and nations will be found in the New Jerusalem. This century has seen an unprecedented urbanisation throughout the world, and by 1986 there were 290 cities of over a million people. By the year 2000 at least ten cities will have more than 17 million inhabitants, all of them in Asia and Latin America.

It is not just that cities attract migration from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds. It is rather that urbanisation fosters pluralism through the breakdown of traditional networks of social control. The traditional homogeneous village community is of the  "gemeinschaft" type where strong multiplex networks exercise strong  control over an individual's behaviour. In contrast individuals in the city are more anonymous, can choose their own lifestyles without being accused of deviance, and associate with whomsoever they will. Typical networks are likely to be more diffuse, with separate relationships for interaction in different roles. The worlds of work, family and leisure interact less often and such community that is built is around communities of interest or association ("Gesellschaft"). Thus it is possible for people to be fully integrated into the mainstream of economic life yet belong to any number of minority groups in relatively private worlds at other times.


### global village

Obviously the speed and ease of modern communications has been a key factor in developing pluralism in the Western urban world. Far more people than ever before have access to rapid and reliable transportation at the international and local level. Migration across international frontiers is less traumatic and psychologically

permanent than ever before. Electronic communication by telephone, radio, video and now satellite TV enables people to keep regularly in touch with relatives and the general scene "back home". It is not surprising if there is more awareness of Benazir Bhutto than of Margaret Thatcher in some parts of Bradford. And yet at the same time modern communications is the vehicle for the spread of the dominant Western culture and economic system.

### secularisation

The whole concept of secularisation is a complex one which has been discussed much more fully elsewhere (e.g. Lyon / Martin). However one key element in the secularisation story is the gradual freeing of political and other social institutions from religious control. Inevitably this must lead to the breakdown of consensus in value systems and to more space for the toleration of minority beliefs and behaviours. Traditional "sacreds" are no longer accepted as beyond question, although it is arguable that new sacreds always emerge. Indeed it may be that the notion of a plural, tolerant, democratic society is itself becoming a "sacred" notion in the modern western world, and in the process leading to some fundamental internal contradictions.

Another feature of the secularisation process is the trend towards separation of the private world of belief from the public world of society and politics. Individuals may exercise greater choice in their religion simply because this has fewer implications for communal life. There is thus a greater diversity of belief systems tolerated in society, although ironically there is a growing trend for them to be "fundamentalist" or Scripturally absolutist, whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic. It may be possible, or even necessary, for intellectual coherence and Christian orthodoxy to maintain a case (as David Cook does) for the absoluteness of Biblical revelation and ethical standards. Yet as Robin Gill has pointed out (Competing Convictions) the fact that there are competing absolutist view points even within (say) Christianity means that pluralism and relativism are even more inescapable short of a fight to the death struggle for dominance. Newbigin makes a noble attempt to resolve some of these problems by entering in depth into the issues of philosophy and epistemology. Studies in the sociology of knowledge are also of crucial importance here, although they are likely to provide a massive challenge to the most agile theological and philosophical Christian thinkers and apologists.

### privatisation

By "privatisation" of course we mean not so much the economic policy of selling the nation's assets at knock down prices, but the social processes reflected in the Thatcherite dogma that "there is no such thing as society". Perhaps the high point of social conscience and concern for the community in Britian was the years after 1945. Following a shared experience of struggle against an outside enemy the post war consensus produced some major achievements from the NHS to

the Butlins holiday camp. But growing affluence soon led to the
idolisation and isolation of the nuclear family. This was boosted by
the advent of TV, the private car and slum clearance and New Town
programmes which destroyed the old communities and extended families
of urban Britain. This led on to the invention of the teenager and the
"permissive society" of the 1960s. As long as no-one minded what
happened beyond the privacy of your front door, the lifestyle options
available continued to expand. Pluralism of value systems and
behaviour flourished, but as we now realise at a price. The stress on
freedom of the individual inevitably led to the breakdown of family
life (especially the extended family), weakening of social cohesion
and reduced concern for the poor and marginalised members of society.


Post Fordism

In recent years new technology has triggered immense changes in the
production and marketing processes of capitalism. In the early part of
the 20th century Chaplin's film "Modern Times" summed up the struggle
to remain human and refuse to become a cog in the industrial machine.
Today, instead of standardised mass production, ("You can have any
colour as long as it's black") robotised factories can be easily and
cheaply set up for short production runs of consumer goods targetted
at specific segments of the market. The use of Information Technology
and electronic communication makes the ordering and advertising of
such products relatively easy.

Industry now has a vested interest in encouraging the growth of
sub-cultures associated with particular fashions. Money can be made
out of cult videos and records, Afro hair styling products and even
from the ecologically conscious consumer out of recycled
biodegradeable toilet paper. Market forces in this case actually run
in the same direction as a common contemporary human longing; the need
for personal identity in the face of an anonymous and dominating world
system.

regionalism, and ethnicity as resistance to mass production


Many contemporary social movements are a quest for identity by
individuals and groups in a society where they feel undervalued and
oppressed. Feminism, Peace, Green and Welsh & Scottish Nationalism
have shared features here. Black Consciousness, Rastafarianism, the
resurgenge of Islam and Sikhism are a similar form of protest. Many
minority ethnic communities in urban Britain have organised themselves
in an increasingly assertive way, sometimes reinforcing their
traditional values to an extent that would surpass the situation in
their village back home. For example purdah among Pakistani women in
Bradford has been described as being stricter than in Mirpur.

The use of ethnicity as a resource in these struggles is a key feature
of urban life in the U.K. today. Boundaries between in groups and out
groups are constantly being redrawn as people negotiate issues of
belonging and their rights to justice. Different markers can be used

to define ethnic categories, such as colour, language, or religion,
and they can be applied from the inside by the individual or ascribed
from the outside by society as a whole. Processes of ethnicity may
come to determine patterns of residential segregation, local politics
and physical confrontation between individuals or groups. In so far as
ethnic consciousness movements are successful in their mobilisation of
groups of people, the trend towards plurality will grow. But Britain
wil only become a more just pluralist society if they persuade or
force the dominant sections of society to accept their legitimacy.


4) Religious Pluralism


No doubt the Tyndale Fellowship is mainly interested in issues of
religious pluralism and to this we must now turn. Theolgians usually
argue about pluralism purely in terms of alternative values and world
views, and are particularly concerned about such issues as the
possibility of salvation through faiths other than Christian, and the
uniqueness of revealed Biblical truth. In this paper I am not
concerned with these issues in themselves, but purely with the
sociological and ethical issues of living in a society where many
communities of faith are found. The reader may however be assured to
know that I reject theological views such as the pluralism of John
Hick but tend towards a position halfway between the traditional
exclusivist view of non Christian faiths and the inclusivist view put
forward by Rahner and others. While I can see no reason in experience
or in the Biblical record for rejecting the particularism of God's
election of some as children of his Kingdom, there is equally no way I
can fail to see him at work to some degree in the lives and faith
communities of those who do not explicitly acknowledge Christ as Lord.


In fact in discussing other faiths it would be disastrous to plunge in
as many Christians have done, without the wider social analysis which
has gone before. Too often it has been assumed that the Constantinian
model of Christendom is the only one ordained by God and the only one
under which Christianity can survive. One of the positive benefits of
growing pluralism in Britain and of our growing awareness of the wider
world is that it makes us question some of our long held assumptions.
No longer is it possible to believe the lies that to be English is to
be Christian or that Britain is the prime example of a Christian
nation ordained by God to evangelise and civilise the world.

    a) within Christianity (then and now)

The dominant reading of British church history, which has seeped into
popular culture, centres around the established church of England as
the natural commonsense faith of the English people. It is portrayed
as Protestant in doctrine but catholic in spirit, the epitome of
English reasonableness and compromise. And on those rare occasions
when the CofE fails to sit resolutely on the fence (in recent years
the Faith in the City Report, the Falklands service, the protests
against Nationality Law and the recent Church Action on Poverty

declaration "Hearing the Cry of the Poor") the government suspects
treason from its most natural ally. Yet this is a church which
commands less than 2% of the population as regular worshippers, (0.75%
in UPAs), whose leaders do not often reflect the views of its members
and which is becoming increasingly fragmented and sectarian in its
practice.


A Roman Catholic or Nonconformist reading of history is a useful
antidote. Rarely do the English remember the cruel persecution of the
Jesuits, or the Scottish Covenanters, the hostility towards Puritans,
Quakers, Baptists and Wesleyans, or the fact that Grantham was the
first town in England to jail a Primitive Methodist local preacher.
The charges against them all were political subversion rather than
unorthodox belief. The long history of the struggle for toleration
shows that a nominally Christian state is no guarantee against
injustice or apostasy.

Coming down to modern times we need to learn also from a Black
Christian reading of history. One of the key themes must be that of
liberation and Exodus going back to the early black led churches of
the West Indian slaves. Yet racism has continued to hurt and
marginalise Black Christians in the U.K. The experiences of rejection
in the 1950's were real enough and the stories still circulate. More
alarmingly, younger generation black believers provide their own new
material, and organise themselves for solidarity and struggle in such
groups as the Black Anglican Youth Association and the Alliance of
Asian Christians. Despite much hard work towards reconciliation the
majority of Afro-Caribbean Pentecostals are marginalised into a ghetto
church. And when there are overtures for partnership from the BCC or
the Evangelical Alliance black leaders are reasonably suspicious that
only a takeover bid is intended.

Meanwhile the urban church increases in diversity. A third of the
fellowships in Newham are less than twenty five years old and three
new ones a year are emerging. There are probably 500 new congregations
in London in the last fifteen years. They are mainly outside the main
denominations, and of an evangelical or pentecostal flavour, although
some relate to Anglican, Catholic, Baptist or Pentecostal
denominations, if only by renting their buildings. There are groups
worshipping in Tamil, Urdu, Panjabi, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, Polish,
Philipino, Greek, Turkish as well as English speaking groups from all
parts of Africa. There are also new house groups and community
churches in profusion, from the affluent Charismatic prosperity gospel
groups to the evangelical liberationist base community. *The N American missions*

The spirit of God is at work in church planting at a far faster rate
than the ecumenical movement can keep track. It is a crucial question
whether there is enough goodwill and energy for networking to keep a
common sense of Christian identity. This is especially difficult given
the increasing plurality of theology and cultural forms in these
churches.  No credal statement could be drawn up which is acceptable
to all, any attempt to establish shared leadership structures is
doomed to failure, and attempts at establishing intercommunion will

founder on the rock of the closed table of the more dogmatic churches. Most fundamental of all is the growing conflict over political and social issues in which the church reflects the growing polarisation of British society. It is difficult to see how the concept "Christian" can embrace such diversity and contradictions. The only universal feature is devotion to the person of Jesus Christ, but in many cases the Christ portrayed in one church would not be recognisable to members of another. The lily-white, long haired, slightly eccentric English gentleman  Sunday school image of Jesus is no longer acceptable to many black believers in British cities.

The diversity of urban society poses an immense problem for Christian evangelism. There are questions of strategy and method in cross cultural evangelism, such as whether it is necessary or better to import  evangelists or returned missionaries from overseas churches, and whether evangelism, nurturing and worship should be carried out in minority languages or English. Is it possible for local churches to undertake such work without specialist help, or to build a church family in which all sections of the local community can have real fellowship together? The support of new converts particularly young people who are working out a bicultural identity and those from other faith backgrounds whose families are hostile to their change of religion is a costly practical responsibility.

But there are also problems in the philosophy and theology of evangelism. Although it is now realised by most of us that Christianity is now stronger in the Two Thirds World than in Europe, for ethnic minorities in the British context it is still the religion of imperialism. Christianity in its Church of ENGLAND form is still the established religion of the state. Most churches and evangelists still present a white middle class Jesus, and the culture of most Christian groups is little different from the dominant one. Many forms of evangelicalism abound in triumphalist, imperialist and other oppressive language and are likely to alienate rather than win people who are conscious of their minority roots and reality. Often other faiths and cultures are rubbished and belittled rather than treated with sympathy and understanding. A major change of heart and style is needed if the churches are to reach large numbers of black and Asian people with the gospel.


        b) in a multifaith society


folk religion/ black & white


It can be argued that far from being a secularised society, Britain even its majority white community remains deeply religious. Belief continues despite the low level of commitment to organised churches. Although less than 15% regularly go to church, in surveys over 75% consistently report some degree of belief in God. In working class and urban situations the levels of belief may be even higher. Folk

religion, common religion, implicit religion, subterranean theologies
are terms used by sociologists to capture this type of spirituality.

Clearly in a place like Newham there is a wide diversity of belief to
be found, ranging from semi-orthodox Christianity, through traditional
superstition to syncretised Eastern / Western religion, New Age
thinking and notions of God as an astronaut. There are probably as
many theologies as people and most of them contain contradictions
rather than form  consistent systems. Interest in the occult abounds,
and there is a small minority of people who are actively involved in
Satanism or allegedly pre Christian pagan rites. In the Afro-Caribbean
community it is not unusual to find forms of implicit religion which
can be traced back to pre-colonial Africa.

Hinduism has many similarities with the indigenous implicit religion
of England. It is the diffuse folk religion of South Asia on which has
been superimposed a system of social and political control
(Brahmanism) backed up by a variety of religous and philosophical
ideologies. Hinduism behaves like a "sponge" of syncretism, soaking up
all that comes in contact with it. In consequence diversity of belief
and practice is immense, Indeed it would be fair to say that Hinduism
invented religious pluralism, and has exported it to the West.

However everything in the garden is not lotus flowers. The traditional
caste system is a central pillar of the system, and has been one of
the most cruel and long lasting systems of oppression and inequality
the world has ever known. There have of course been many modifications
in the 20th Century and in the context of urbanisation in South Asia.
Yet even in the context of urban modernity in the U.K. caste remains
relevant, as a boundary to intermarriage and as a basis for the
formation of ethnic associations. Although some Hindus in Britain
(especially younger men) are fairly agnostic in belief and lax in
personal practice, there are few who will refuse to participate in the
rituals, especially at key festivals. On the other hand there are many
reforming groups in Hinduism, sects, missions and renewal groups
centred on devotion to particular gurus. Some of these have wide
appeal across caste and even racial and faith community lines. However
Hinduism, and the sub groups within it, remains above all a marker of
ethnic identity, with some potential for political organising and
manipulation. In contact with Christianity it is warmly accepting of
Jesus as guru or avatar, but far less tolerant of individuals who
break caste and leave their family and community to practice the
Western religion.

Sikhism, in very simplistic terms, was founded as a reform movement in
a Hindu culture which was dominated by Islamic rulers, aiming to bring
religious reconciliation around simple truths about the oneness of
God. However, because of persecution by both sides a tradition of
political and military organisation of the Khalsa brotherhood
developed. This more sectarian tradition has continued down to the
present day culminating in the agitation for an independent Sikh
Panjab or Khalistan. In Britain the communal life of gurudwaras is
strongly established in most areas of Sikh presence, although at the
present time the conflicts in the Panjab tend to turn the politics

inward, and limit the possibility of relationships with organised
groups of other faiths. Until recently Sikhs in Britain were very open
to approaches from Christians, and indeed were one of the people
groups more responsive to the Gospel. It is likely now that some
shutters have come down, especially in the case of people who are
actively involved in the Sikh community.


          c) special case of Islam

Islam is a special case in our discussion of religious pluralism in
that (in theory at least) it presents a unified system of belief and
practice which at a number of points is directly at odds with historic
Christianity and Western liberal secularism. It is a revealed
religion, accepting Moses and Jesus as prophets, but claiming that the
Holy Qu'ran is the last word spoken by Allah to the greatest and last
of his prophets. Therefore, Muslims argue, Islam must be superior to
the earlier revelations through Moses and Jesus. There can be no
question of religious pluralism for the orthodox Muslim and in the
face of orthodox Christianity many conflicting claims to truth emerge.

In social organisation Islam can make no concessions either. For the
whole of life is to be submitted to the will of Allah. There should be
no separation of individual belief and communal practice, no
separation of church and state. The ideal Islamic state is based on
the strict application of sharia law, in some Shi'ite versions under
the theocratic rule of religious leaders. The concept of
secularisation just cannot make sense in the orthodox Islamic world
view. Islam has proved particularly vigourous in its confrontation
with modernity, and has flourished in its alliance with
anti-imperialist nationalism, and the economic power of the oil
fields. This international resurgence of Islam is the backdrop against
which the growing Muslim presence in the U.K. is set.

However, in the real world, matters are far less clear cut than the
popular media would have us believe. Islam is far from being a unified
worldwide movement and there have long been divisions between Sunni,
Shia and other sects. In the South Asian sub continent, where many
British Muslims originate the sponge like influence of Hinduism has
transformed folk Islam beyond recognition. A recent Christian Muslim
fact finding delegation to Pakistan concluded there were two major
traditions corresponding to the Catholic and Protestant traditions in
Christianity. The former has much to do with shrines and holy men, the
latter is more puritanical and loyal to Scripture. Similar syncretism
with primal religions has been observed in African Muslim communities.
And in the context of migration and modernity there inevitably
develops a plurality of views and practices among people who call
themselves Muslims.

Thus the media's picture of 50,000 Bradford Muslims united in their
desire to kill Salman Rushdie, the growing demands for independent
Muslim schools, and the emergence of Islamic political parties are
only part of the picture. It is of course a significant part, and

represents a particular mobilisation on the part of a community who
are the least favoured of all minorities in Britain. In terms of
employment, education, racial harassment, bad housing and religious
freedom Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims are at the bottom of the
league even below other black and Asian people.

In one sense the issue of blasphemy in the "Satanic Verses" is mainly
symbolic, although it is obvious that the book does cause great
offense to the religious sensibilities of Muslim believers. The outcry
against Rushdie in Bradford is above all the voice of the powerless at
last making itself heard. The protest is a step in the growing
confidence of Asian political organisations in the city, and is
following on from their achievements in the Honeyford affair of 1985
when a head teacher who had publically expressed racist and anti
Pakistani views was forced by the pressure of public opinion to take
early retirement (Murphy). Christians should first of all seek to
understand, sympathise and act, to correct the underlying injustices
rather than condemn the excesses as fanaticism or fundamentalism. In
view of the record of Christian anti-semitism we should listen
carefully to Muslims who say "when gas chambers are next built we know
that it will be for us."


It is sad but hardly surprising that a large section of the
Evangelical Church, with its innate conservatism, reliance on the
interpretations of the media and little face to face contact with
Muslims has become paranoid about the aims of Islam to take over "our
nation and our churches". In contrast Andrew Wingate's booklet
"Encounter in the Spirit" shows that it is possible for Christians to
find, make friendships and enter into religious dialogue with Muslims
who are located at various points on a conservative - liberal
spectrum. We may not agree theologically with Wingate's attempts to
find common ground and even to develop joint patterns of prayer. Even
he is forced to agree to differ with his Muslim friends about basic
truth claims about Jesus and Mohammed. But we cannot remain unmoved by
his praxis of seeking out and building just, peaceable and loving
human relationships with Muslim neighbours and brothers. Around the
country many other inter faith groups have attempted and to a greater
or lesser degree succeeded in building similar relationships across
cultures and religions, embracing not only Muslims and Christians but
Sikhs, Hindus, Jews and Buddhists, sometimes resulting in good
practical projects for community improvement.

Nonetheless relationships with Islam are the crunch point for both
Christianity and secular pluralism. How is it possible for non Muslims
to live in peace alongside a community whose values and behaviour are
so evidently in contradiction with the mainstream of society?  Can the
state allow separate Muslim institutions, (schools, political parties,
law courts) to develop in Britain? Can a liberal society be liberal
enough to allow an Islamic group to promote its own values which in
the eyes of many appear as illiberal, oppressive to women, and
limiting individual freedom? Can we tolerate intolerance? Whatever
answers we give to these questions, Christians should expect to find
no refuge in a retreat towards the idea of a monolithic Christendom,

which probably never existed anyway.

From the Muslim viewpoint can a person live a good life according to Islam in British society simply by performing personal and communal acts of devotion, without insisting on greater civil rights for the Muslim community, or without urging that the whole of society becomes Islamic? The fact that many liberal Muslims are still to be found suggests that such tolerance within Islam is not inconceivable providing that the dominant majority provides justice rather than oppression.

Christians need to be protected by pluralism.

It is my personal belief that Christians need to be in the forefront of the fight for religious and cultural pluralism. In the U.K we make much of our heritage of freedom in the dissenting tradition of the free churches. Over the last half century Evangelicals have had no doubts about defending the rights of their fellow believers against totalitarianism in the Eastern Block, and today rejoice at the signs of liberalisation.  However this support (especially in the USA) has been motivated as much by the ideology of capitalism and national security as by genuine concern for human freedom. At the same time in the West we have seen increasing state control and centralisation of power (police powers, I.D. cards, deportations, erosion of Local government etc.), a growing polarisation between rich and poor, and increasing intolerance of minorities and deviant behaviour.

In Britain committed Christians are increasingly becoming and seeing themselves as a countercultural minority, and wanting to speak out (often with conflicting voices) against the way the world is going. Some loud voices are advocating a return to "christian values" in "our nation", basically to a position where the state imposes standards of Christian behaviour. Such an approach is wrong and futile, wrong because it is oppressive, unjust and usually targetted on narrow issues of personal morality, futile because there is virtually no chance of introducing major programmes of legislation in the present secular climate. Rather we Christians should be recognising our position as a cognitive minority, forming alliances with other minority groups in an organised struggle for human rights and justice for the marginalised and oppressed. In the long term this is the best strategy for protecting our own religious and civil freedoms. We may at times appear to be promoting the rights of groups which have no time for Christian beliefs and values. Yet it is relinquishing our rights that we will protect them, in losing our life that we shall gain it.


5) The Political Battlefields

Let us look next at some of the current debates in which we christians are called to engagement.

Crisis in education:

Education is one area in which Christians have struggled to find a voice as the work of the Association of Christian Teachers centre at Stapleford, and other organisations  proves. Unfortunately much of the concern has come from white middle class parents concerned mainly about traditional academic standards and the lack of Christian indoctrination in schools. Usually the presence of black children and those of other faiths is simply ignored or obliterated. From the inner city perspective there are different key issues.

The first is about basic provision and resources. Why is there such a shortage of teachers in Tower Hamlets that hundreds of Bangladeshi students are sent home untaught every day? Why are inner city and especially black children being failed by the education system at every level while wealthier white children in the suburbs have no difficulty achieving places in higher education? These scandals would not be tolerated if the victims were articulate and white rather than poor and black. It is against this background that we need to evaluate the emergence of Muslim and Black Adventist schools. Parent power and local management of schools may be a good idea in extending participation of the community in affluent areas. But in neighbourhoods where people are already forced to make bricks without straw the extra burdens placed on parents are unrealistic. At worst they present an opportunity for small cliques of articulate parents and political or religious activists to manipulate local schools for their own vested interests.

Into the educational ferment comes the idea of the national curriculum. Again there are some things to be said in its favour in setting recognised bench marks for educational attainment (although it is very doubtful whether these can be measured). However it is also an obvious method of centralising political control over the education system and minimising dissent. The philosophy of education behind it is that of maximising the economic results of education at minimum cost, and at the expense of holistic human development. The arguments over the teaching of history and the mainly Christian emphasis of RE and assemblies are about the resurgence of nationalism at the expense of minorities. There are some evangelical Christian teachers in Newham who now feel unable to take part in assemblies which are a) a farce in that less than one in a hundred pupils have any real desire to participate in Christian worship b) the oppressive racist implications of the style of Christianity presented actually brings dishonour on the gospel. Sadly the majority of evangelicals in Britain have supported the government line without thinking through the issues.

A further thorny issue is that of church schools which are aided by state money. Most of these are either Church of England or Roman Catholic. Defenders of them argue that people have a right to choose a religious based education for their children, and that they often offer a quality of education which even members of other faiths seek for their children. Natural justice suggests that all faith communities should be treated equally on this issue. There are three policies different from the present one which could be pursued. 1) schools of all faiths should be aided equally by the state. 2) there should be no religious schools and religious instruction (as opposed

to education if one can make the distinction) should be the
responsibility of parents and/or the faith community 3) all religious
schools should be independent and unsupported by the state. Policy 3
is a dangerous route towards further privilege and extending choice
only for those families who can afford to pay. Policy 1 looks
attractive and requires minimal change, although a recent decision not
to fund an Islamic school in Brent makes it less likely to happen.
However, there are dangers of an apartheid like system and of conflict
between faith communities and the state over curriculum and resources.
Policy 2 has the advantage of educating all types of children together
and as long as all cultures and religions are fully and equally
respected seems the most attractive option. However it might well be
unjust to impose it on religious groups who are deeply committed to
providing religious schools for their children.

### racial justice

There is a long minority tradition from the Council of Jerusalem
onwards of Christians involved in the struggle for racial justice. The
struggles of indigenous Americans against the conquistadors aided by
the Jesuit Bartolemew de la Casas and of the black churches of the
Caribbean and USA against slavery, aided by white evangelical allies
such as Wilberforce, are replicated in the modern world by the
struggles led by Martin Luther King, and Desmond Tutu. In Britain
there are equally clear cases in the church and wider society. One
specific area of concern is the continued separation by immigration
rules of families entitled to be together in the U.K. and the
deportation of hundreds of refugees, assylum seekers and technically
"illegal" immigrants. The emergence of a sanctuary network in the
inner city churches of London, Birmingham and Manchester is of great
significance.

### Community Work and Communal Politics

In the last two decades and especially since the Faith in the City
Report of 1985, the inner city has seen an upsurge of Christian
involvement in social action and other urban mission projects. Many of
the more radical churches and now some evangelical ones have moved
beyond models of charitable social service towards community
development and community organising models (See Smith in Changing the
Agenda). Funding for projects comes from a variety of church,
voluntary sector, local government and central government sources,
each with its own kind of strings attached. In all urban and
especially in multicultural areas the church initiatives are set
alongside a plurality of other voluntary sector initiatives and are
often in competition for limited funding with secular and other faith
groups.

It is often hard to demonstrate the distinctiveness of a Christian
approach to community work, especially if evangelism is removed from
the equation (as it needs to be in applications for public funds, and
ought to be in genuine community development practice). In contrast
there are many occasions when wider alliance in a common cause are

necessary. For example a recent successful anti-deportation campaign in Newham centred around an African woman and drew together Christians from her own Methodist church, many other churches and Marxists from her trade union. The victory celebrations included a worship service to which a number of the Marxists came, and where the woman gave testimony of how she had come to a committed Christian faith in the course of the struggle. Such a case was an easy one for Christians to be involved; but would an equal injustice inflicted on a Muslim family draw our support in quite the same way?

There is always a danger that community work and politics in a place like Newham will degenerate into inter communal wrangling. Already within the Labour Party, and sometimes in opposition to it, we are seeing religious and ethnic associations organising as power bases for ambitious individuals and/or in an effort to enable ethnic minorities to be represented on the Council. Christians in their concern for racial justice should probably welcome some of these trends. But we should not be so naive as to assume that minority leaders who emerge are necessarily benevolent or representative. Perhaps Christians, if we can divest ourselves of self seeking and tribal loyalties in politics, are in a unique position to be peacemakers and workers for the Shalom of our plural community.

Equal opportunities policy.

One area which needs a Christian understanding and input is that of equal opportunities and anti racism policy. Fundamentally Christians should be behind the concept, given that God has no favourites, and that while all have sinned, God wants all to be saved and sends his sun and rain on the just and unjust alike. Surely therefore Christians would look for justice and equal rights to citizenship, employment, housing, and education for all people be they black or white, old or young, male or female, Muslim or Christian, straight or gay. There should be no problem for Christians to accept this policy in the public sector, since we can easily admit that all these people are fellow citizens and (poll) tax payers.

In Church based community work however, the details are problematic as the press report on the Mayflower Centre shows. (For once the Newham Recorder has presented a fairly balanced and factual report). In this case a Christian voluntary agency which has a clear equal opportunities policy, a track record of anti-racism activity and social service delivery which passes every equal opportunities test, has declared that it feels unable to let rooms to hypothetical groups promoting Muslim beliefs or lesbian lifestyles. Ironically it is almost inconceivable that a Muslim group would tolerate the advocacy of lesbianism or that a lesbian group would support Islamic teaching, although the Council has not actually asked such groups these questions. It has been argued in an officer's report and suggested by some councillors that such scruples contravene the borough's equal opportunities policy. As a result there is a possibility of withdrawal of funding as well as an end to the Council's hiring of the centre's premises. At the present moment extensive lobbying by Christians, and coverage in the local press has forced the Council to enter further

negotiations under the chairmanship of the bishop and to delay
decisions, until after the May elections.

In theory an amendment or clarification of the equal opportunities
policy on the following lines should satisfy all concerned (and in
fact some of us Christians in the Labour party have been working to
achieve this).

"It is recognised that religious groups of many different faiths are a
valuable part of the borough's voluntary sector, and the Council will
not discrimnate against or between them in funding applications. Their
wish and need to appoint staff sharing their own religious views will
be respected. They must, however demonstrate that Council funds are
not being used for religious propaganda and that the services they
provide from public funds are available to all".

However, we have not as yet told the whole story. Equal opportunities
policy is capable of being cynically manipulated from many directions.
It is not impossible that the situation at the Mayflower is being
exploited by council officers and members who have prejudiced
positions or even grudges against Christianity or these particular
Christians. It is also likely that the enemies of equal opportunities,
for example the right wing local press are keen to pour petrol on the
flames in order to make the policy look silly and damage the Labour
Party in election year. If the equal opportunities policy were to be
overturned by political pressure the losers in the long term could
well be the people the policy is designed to help.

A number of local Christians by their knee jerk reactions on the issue
of gay rights and their naive handling of politicians and the media
have made contributions to the debate which are counter productive to
the Mayflower's case. Some Asians would say they have had their
suspicions confirmed that Christianity is basically on the side of
racial oppression. The evangelical Christian community is in danger of
division over the issue as one group argues that the the greatest sins
are in the realms of sexuality and false worship, and another that
they are racism and social injustice.

The case of the Mayflower is not unique. A number of other Christian
organisations have been refused or had to decline local government
funding because they have wished to set boundaries which do not comply
with an equal opportunities policy. There are also cases of white
professional Christians, who are fully committed to anti-racism who
have been accused of racism because of disputes with individuals over
say planning permission, or honest advice given in a welfare rights
advice centre.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that these unfortunate cases are
the majority experience. It is still far more common to find Christian
individuals and organisations colluding with, or deliberately
practicing policies which are racist to the core. There are for
example many respected Christian organisations which have no interest
in developing good equal opportunities policy in employment, and worse

still those who pay lip service to the idea, but continue to behave as
they always have done. Access to jobs and power still depends to a
large extent on who you know rather than on merit or God's calling.
For example a recent survey of theological and Bible colleges revealed
that there were less than 50 black British students (out of 3571), and
only 4 black lecturers at 48 (white led colleges). Only two or three
of the colleges had made any effective attempt to recruit black
British students and nearly half saw equal opportunities policies as
irrelevant or something to be resisted.

Racism awareness training or anti racism training is another difficult
area for Christians involved in a plural society. The aim in this is
to expose and confront attitudes and behaviours in individuals and
organisations which lead to discrimination against minorities. Again
in theory it is something to be welcomed, as Christians above all
people should be aware of the reality of sin and the possibility of
redemption via the education of conscience leading to repentance.
Unfortunately some models of RAT, based on non-Biblical presuppositons
are sometimes proving counter productive as they tend to heap personal
guilt on white participants, stifle the honest expression of their
opinions and fail to allow them constructive ways of dealing with
feelings and modifying behaviour. In addition when certain forms of
RAT have focussed on emotive symbols such as the golliwog they have
become easy prey for ridicule as outrages of the "loony left". There
is a need for more black and white Christians to be working together
in this field of adult education, so that a new honest approach based
on a Biblical understanding of common humanity, combining justice with
mercy can be developed.

### Thatcherism and the underclass(es)

The biggest contemporary political and ideological struggle in which
Biblical Christians are called to take a stand at the start of the
1990s is that against the idolatories of the new right as epitomised
by Thatcherism. Here is not the place to undertake a detailed analysis
of the government's world view. However it is demonstrable that New
Right ideology is unchristian in it's erection and worship of at least
three false gods.

1) Mammon: the growth of the economy is to be pursued in an
unrestrained free market with no real concern for social justice and
equality, and little concern for the environment.

2) National Sovereignty and Security: as illustrated in the Malvinas
/Falklands conflict, Trident, the negotiations with Europe and the
unresponsive approach to the aspirations of Scotland.

3) The encouragement of selfish individualism and the doctrine that
there is no such thing as society.

Clearly under Thatcherism there is no desire to develop a just and
pluralist society. Even though economic freedom and individual freedom
of choice is encouraged and this seems to support pluralism, contrary
forces such as the increase in poverty and inequality, and the growing

power of the national state actually take liberty away. Legislation such as the Housing Act 1988, the Poll Tax, the Nationality Act continues to flood through Parliament and bear down heavily on the underclasses in our society. The ideology of Britain as a Great Nation again carries a clear message that only those who accept the dominant world view can belong. Despite some talk of mediating structures, it is clearly undesirable for the Right (or for the Left when in power) to have any organised political or community groups challenging the hegemony of the state. The radical removal of power and funding from local authorities and voluntary organisations in recent years makes this very clear.

Biblical Christians who understand that God has consistently acted in history to bring justice to the poor and oppressed (and they are still a minority) can have no grounds for supporting the policies of the present regime. Sadly the strategies for opposition and constructive alternatives are far from clear cut. Socialism too is in crisis, collapsed in Eastern Europe and sold out to the pressures of the market in the West. The centre parties in Britain have collapsed and the radical alternatives such as the Greens lack credibility or are tied to single issues. The prospects for specifically Christian political action are limited for anyone who seriously desires power. In our diverse society and church Christian individuals and groups (to say nothing of non-Christian allies for justice) will inevitably act or refuse to act politically in diverse ways. Short of a massive change of attitude and transformation of social structures, which is only conceivable as a result of a mighty outpouring of God's Holy Spirit, there is not much chance that Britain will progress towards being a just pluralistic society in the near future.

Perhaps there is a little more hope that in our urban churches we will find ways of modelling the values of the Kingdom of God in our life together as just pluralistic countercultural communities.To achieve that would provide a powerful witness to Christ in the context of a plural society.


6) A Biblical Response

Finally it is appropriate to point to a few theological issues which are raised by living in the diverse society which has been described above.

contextual hermeneutics

As Biblical Christians we are rightly concerned about the authority of Scripture, yet our view of Scripture must not be a narrow fundamentalist one. Our Christian understanding (in contrast with Islamic understandings of the Quran) is that the word of God was given, and indeed made flesh, in a particular social and historical context, through the minds as well as the spirits of particular human beings. We need to make ourselves aware of the context of the writers and also of our own context before seeking to interpret and apply the word to our lives. We need to do this in humility for history abounds

with people who have jumped to conclusions from Scripture which were
just plain wrong.

One of the great advantages of living in an international and plural
world is that we can have multiple reference points for our
interpretation of Scripture, a type of triangulation. By using a
communal reading from the church in Nicaragua or Brixton rather than a
highly individualised pietistic framework from the armchair of our
Oxbridge College we can to an extent step inside the life experiences
of others. In particular we need to free ourselves from the ideologies
of the powerful and look at the text and the world from the underside,
with the eyes of the poor.


### relativism or revelation

Immediately we are confronted with the question of the absolute
authority of Scripture in a world where cultural relativism abounds.
What does the traditional claim that God has spoken once for all in
His word mean as we live in a plural society? Indeed the whole
philosophical and hermeneutical tradition on which evangelical
systematic theology is built rests upon a Western world view deriving
from Greek philosophy. So much of it is based on "either/or" thinking
about propositional truths. Yet the Bible itself is plural and
contextual in its revelation of the nature and acts of God. Is it not
possible to maintain a Biblical world view and move on to "both /and"
thinking which manages to live with contradictions? I feel it should
be, but would like to see more theologians and Christian philosophers
from a variety of cultural backgrounds working on this issue.


If we were to abandon the authority of Scripture as an article of
faith we would seem to be drifting rudderless in a perilous sea. Yet
scripture itself promises that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all
truth. Is it sufficient to trust ourselves to His guidance and what
are the implications of doing so? I am not suggesting that we make the
often repeated error of charismatic enthusiasts throughout the ages
and rely entirely on prophesies and visions. But are there ways in
which we can take the Bible seriously and submit ourselves to the Word
of God which are not limited by the assumptions of a monocultural
theological system. I think that Lesslie Newbigin (in so far as I
follow him) is on the right track in his recent book.


### Christ in culture or Christ above culture

Inevitably our approach to pluralism in society will be shaped by our
understanding of the theological tension between incarnation and
holiness. In John's gospel this centres around the notion of being in
the world but not of it. God loved the world and redeemed it but
commands us to love not the world. How are we to interpret the
statement "my Kingdom is not of this world" when Jesus is clearly
condemned by Pilate as being subversive to Caesar's rule? (see
Rensberger) The Messiah Jesus who was born into a particular human

culture at a particular point of history, thus affirming humanity and
culture is also the risen Lord who is the righteous judge of all human
activity. The plural society we live in presents us with many test
beds on which to work out this tension.


### Individualism & community

Another tension which is pointed up by living in a multicultural area
is that between individual freedoms and group loyalties and rights.
Many minority groups have much to teach us about family, fellowship
and solidarity. Yet there is still much value in the Christian (and
wider) tradition of individual responsibility before God. All of this
has to be worked out in respect of individual morality, corporate
worship, social responsibility and evangelism. Perhaps the doctrines
of the Trinity, the elect covenant people of God, and the body of
Christ are keys to some of our practical dillemmas.


### the servant King

I have argued throughout this paper, I hope consistently, that the
notion of liberal pluralism in Britain is not much more than a myth
used to obscure the structures of dominance and elitism. It becomes a
smokescreen under which the powerful can play the game of divide and
rule and thus maintain their economic and political privileges.
Minorities are tolerated only so long as they do not disturb the
status quo.

Too often the Christian church has taken the side of the powerful and
fought for control and privilege. How different from the behaviour of
Jesus Christ, our servant king, who although he was from the beginning
in the form of God did not grasp at equality with God, but emptied
himself and took the form of a servant... though he was rich he became
poor for our sakes..

In our day to day life in a plural society may we have also "this mind
which was in Christ Jesus."




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