

Multiculturalism

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Throughout history and in the world today, humans have belonged, and do belong, to groups. There are an enormous variety of these, depending among other things on their purpose and size. The earliest human societies to have left traces in archaeology, some 70 thousand years ago, show signs of the need to differentiate between members and outsiders by means of symbols such as ornaments. One reason for this was scarce resources; another was competition between rival groups for the same territory and resources. Nowadays contested areas range from land and water to money and the economy. The question of how to migrate from one society to another, and of how to treat newcomers, is a very old one.

Members of groups affirm their identity in many ways, notably ritual and religion. These bond people together so that, when times are hard, they fight or labour for each other. It is important to have a sense of the enduring nature of the group over time, so that people are motivated to work for the future, not only of their immediate kin but of other fellow-members. This is also achieved by, for example, ancestor worship. For all of these reasons humans seem to have an almost instinctive sense of 'us' and 'them'. This sometimes serves us well, at other times not so well.

Human groups include kin groups (both extended and nuclear families), groups based on common economic interests (such as a firm or union), self-defence. Then there are groups based on a shared culture, religion or ideology; and groups which people join to pursue particular interests, such as sport (voluntary associations). One should never forget that except in tribal society most people belong to more than one group.

The nation-state, which figures so large in our world today and takes so many different forms, is based on common economic interests, self-defence and shared culture. There is usually also an element of shared kinship, real or fictitious. This is why it evokes such a powerful sense of loyalty: it is part of who we are, what we stand for, we learn its values in school or the law-court, it protects us from thieves and invaders, and ensures that the money in our pockets retains its value. If it fails in any of these key areas, there will sooner or later be a crisis of legitimacy.

Religious communities have sometimes been identified with a nation, but over time have in most cases become supra-national. They include the teaching and sharing of values and of a view of the world, than which nothing may be more important to the human being.

Both nations and religious communities involve belief and values transmitted across generations and passed on to our descendants. Nowadays most religions derive part of their identity from core documents, such as the Bible or Quran. Nations derive part of their identity from their constitution, which defines who governs, how they are chosen, who makes and enforces the laws. Constitutions are by the nature based on, and reinforce, certain values, such as equality, liberty and democracy. It is at this point in particular that nowadays there can be tensions between a nation-state on the one hand, and a religious community on the other. Both proclaim values – but not necessarily the same ones.

This too is not a new problem. In the West, the problem of 'church and state' goes back to the beginnings of Christianity, when Jesus was famously supposed to have issued the following guideline: 'give to Caesar (the state) the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'.

This brings us to the issue of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has several distinct but overlapping meanings. First, it refers to the simple fact that there is more than one culture in a particular society. Secondly, it means that people of different cultures within the same society should each be able to practise and nurture their own culture within that society. In other words, there should be toleration of groups other than one's own. This is one aspect of the liberal principle of toleration so famously spelled out in J. S. Mill's *Essay on Liberty* (1859). People should be able to get along with those of different backgrounds, and different cultural groups should be allowed to 'do their own thing'. Thirdly, there is equality of opportunity, meaning in this case that people from different backgrounds should be given equal access to education and jobs. This is, quite simply, once again an application of a more general principle, that of equality among persons. Fourthly, one may argue that this diversity should be positively supported and promoted by central and local government, businesses and the press. Finally, there may even be a territorial dimension in cases where cultural minorities have possessed their own lands prior to the arrival of the now majority population, for example Eskimaux and American Indians.

The example of multiculturalism which most people would first think of in our society is probably the coexistence of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and unbelievers. But this runs the risk of overlooking the enormous varieties among each of these groups, from the ardent believer to the indifferent to the disenchanted; and also – and even less often noticed – that in reality people derive their 'culture' (in the sense of values, way of life, what really matters to them) from a much wider variety of sources than this supposes. One may express this by noting the obvious fact that the same individual may at the same time be a mother, a daughter, a friend, an artist and a believer or non-believer. Being an artist or doctor usually brings with it certain values, some sense of beauty or the importance of suffering. If one's hobby is gardening, one acquires a sense of nature denied to most people. If one is a climber, one acquires a sense of comradeship denied to many. These are not insignificant facts about our daily lives: do not all religious systems and views of life have something to say about nature and comradeship? We would be very boring if everything we thought and valued came from the same source; fortunately this is never the case.

Nor should we imagine that multiculturalism is an exclusively modern phenomenon. In the ancient and medieval worlds, most empires were multicultural, whether we look at ancient Rome or the medieval Islamic Caliphate. In such cases, people coexisted in various ways, formally and informally.

We have noted how the same person may belong to several different groups at the same time. He or she is a member of a family and of a state, usually also of some group concerned with economic activity and some religious or cultural group, quite possibly also a sports or leisure club. This should be reassuring because much of the time people conduct their lives in this way without noticing any particular problem.

But we have to remember that membership in the groups we have so far discussed still leaves out crucial aspects of people's lives: whether they are poor or rich, sick or healthy, what kind of personal relationships they do or do not have. These are things which seem generally speaking not in any way connected with one's membership of a particular nation-state or religious community. And yet, as we all know, there is hardly anything more important in a person's life (except perhaps the fact that s/he is alive, and the same is true of that too).

There may, indeed, be positive advantages in having more than one culture in a society. Not only does it enable the British person, for example, to sample Indian food; more importantly, it enables people from different cultural backgrounds to encounter spiritual and aesthetic values that would otherwise be denied to them. I cannot say how much Chinese poetry has meant in my life. It can broaden people's perspectives.

But we all know that there are problems. In fact no multicultural society of the past found a 'solution' that pleased everyone. We should not imagine that there is one single blueprint for the coexistence of cultures, and we should always recognise that solutions have to be sought on the ground, at the individual and community level.

The most obvious problem is that there is usually a 'hegemonic' culture, in the sense of a set of values and a way of living that is already entrenched in a particular society, and trumpeted by its rulers: for example, Islam in most of the Middle East. This is characteristic of any political organization or state, because no organization or state can be value-free. And you can only have one state in one place at a time.

This problem may appear to be mitigated by the existence of an international community with a wide variety of states, so that if someone is radically discontented with the state they live in they may be able to emigrate. Many European religious minorities immigrated to America for just this reason (where they are now very much part of the hegemonic culture). But we all know that this is much less easy than it used to be in most cases.

Even in the US, which was founded on and still proclaims equal liberty for all and an unprecedented variety of ethnic and religious groups have for centuries lived side by side, each 'doing their own thing' (whether Amish or Poles), a newcomer is immediately confronted by a host of established ways of doing things and of living, which they may find strange and even repellent; but which every 'American', whatever their descent group, follows (indeed often with almost 'religiously' zeal): for example shopping malls and the use of the private motor car for every single journey. How much more intrusive is the hegemonic culture in some European countries, and how much intrusive still it is in some Middle-Eastern and Asian countries. When did you last try being a Christian or Jew in Saudi Arabia or parts of Pakistan?

In Britain and elsewhere, the hegemonic culture is especially important in areas such as politics and the law. What is needed is a hegemonic culture which all the different groups in the society can sign up to. This may be true for 'democracy'; though many would disagree that, for example, the right to take an unborn human life can be decided by a majority vote.

It may be true for 'liberty'; but what this means is notoriously open. One person's 'liberty' to reveal large chunks of raw flesh in public places may be another person's 'licence' (or immorality). It may be true for 'equality'; but we all know that what goes on within the four walls of a family home is not always subject to legal scrutiny.

There are certain points of tension between cultures within the same society. Variations in minor everyday habits, such as eating, may be unproblematic. Variations in dress may cause minor problems. Much more serious is variation between fundamental moral and philosophical ideas, for example about the status of women or what children should or should not be taught in schools.

To a certain extent, differences in moral and philosophical outlook are encouraged in liberal societies, and specific provisions are made for robustly integrating them, and incorporating them into national life. A liberal society such as Britain, and most of Europe, does not particularly want universal agreement on such matters, at least in every detail. This works so long as there are values to which people of all cultures can assent, namely democracy itself, liberty, equality and human rights. If people cannot assent to these, there is probably no place for them in any civilized society.

A multicultural society depends upon dialogue between people of different views. As a US Supreme Court judge said a hundred years ago: 'constitutions are *made* for people of differing opinions'. Dialogue of course depends upon a willingness to listen to other people's point of view. And this assumes that other people have something worthwhile to say, that one does not already know everything worth knowing. Usually, as J. S. Mill remarked in *On Liberty*, tolerating different points of view makes sense because no one individual is right in every respect; the other side has something to say. This is indeed the only way that science or philosophy can progress. As Karl Popper points out in *The poverty of Historicism*, it is possible to shut down all laboratories, and this has been done. Societies who, whether by government action or popular demand, close themselves off from alternative viewpoints, quickly become stagnant pools.

It seems to me that everything depends upon how someone deals with disagreements. Two-party, or multi-party, systems of government are specifically designed to incorporate and manage disagreement, to ensure that different several points of view can be heard, taken into account, and even implemented. Differences of opinion about how to run the economy or distribute wealth have been managed in this way for more than a hundred years. The outcome is certainly not perfect, but moral disagreements in this area have, in Britain at least, been confined to the ballot box and the debating chamber. Major social breakdown and civil war have been avoided. This was not the case in Russia, where over this very issue they fought a revolution and endured 70 years of totalitarianism.

The same is true of the legal system. If two people each think they are right – about whether X committed a crime or whether Z was fairly dismissed from their job – the case goes to court, and *both sides are heard*. This may be expensive but it avoids bloodshed.

The one condition needed for this system to work is agreement about the method of public decision-making. Everyone has to accept the electoral and decision-making system. People might like to change these, often for reasons which have nothing to do with multiculturalism, for example by introducing of proportional representation. This creates no problem provided that, once again, there are agreed mechanisms for introducing such a proposal. Once again, these do not have to be, probably cannot be perfect or to everyone's satisfaction.

We need to bear in mind the overwhelming imperative of maintaining social harmony, because, if people take their disagreements into the streets (or onto the underground with a bomb, as anarchists did long before al-Qaeda) – or if people create a dictatorship to get agreement, the results are worse for everyone than if their opponents had won the day by argument. The novelist Joseph Conrad remarked a hundred years ago that civilized society is like a carpet spread over a lava field.

These ways of settling differences, and indeed democracy itself, can only function if everyone is willing to accept the decisions of the majority, and abide by these. Only then can there be civil peace. One can work to get the decision changed; one can demonstrate against it. But in the meantime you obey the law, and consequently everyone lives in peace.

A society and a government that is tolerant towards its own citizens is much better equipped to get along with other states and nations, and to promote world peace, because it is better equipped to listen to what other people are saying, and to try to reach agreement. All agreements are reached by some degree of compromise. If you are not prepared to compromise, the problems are much greater. It is in everyone's interests to do this, because without it the world will come to a speedier end than it otherwise would.

All of the problems raised by people of different cultures coexisting in the same society are—or should be—mitigated by the fact that we are, after all, all human. Despite cultural differences, we have an enormous stock of things in common. In this sense, we already live in a world state (cosmopolis). As an ancient writer said, 'I am a human being, and I consider nothing human foreign to me'.

Reading:

Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural citizenship* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1995)

Bhiku Parekh, *Re-thinking multiculturalism*

Amartya Sen, *Identity and violence: the illusion of destiny* (Penguin, 2006)

Antony Black, *State, community and human desire: a group-centred account of political values* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988)