INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Social Cohesion: Is Religion a Help or a Hindrance?

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Abstract

This paper offers a theologically informed reflection on how religious diversity may be a matter of contestation in society, noting the need not just for reflection on this as a social issue, or one that focuses on ethics, but needing a sustained focus on the teachings of religions. It is largely based in the UK context, using the city of Leicester as a key case study, but offers thoughts and reflections relevant to policy makers, religious leaders, and interfaith practitioners more widely. The paper draws from a lifetime of experience and frames this within academic debates but is also a personal reflection of experience and what such praxis has taught one particular priest and interfaith practitioner. It looks at both the dangers and potential of religious traditions in seeking social cohesion.

Introduction[1]

I would argue that all political governing powers, whether centralised or dispersed, set a premium on the necessity for social cohesion, for governance is not possible without it. The principle of cohesion might be imposed, as in totalitarian rule, or bargained for, as in more liberal democratic settings, but its centrality remains key for the stability of any society or nation. A similar necessity pertains also in religious traditions. Without cohesion the community of faith falls apart, hence the violence that has often accompanied attacks on movements labelled as heretical. Unity may cohere around belief, liturgical ritual, scriptural authority, guardians of tradition, or charismatic leaders, but cohesion remains the treasured possession. Given these dimensions of societies the world over, the ownership of the language of cohesion,[2] oscillating between governing powers and religious conviction, remains contested. At times religious conviction is co-opted for the sake of strengthening political governance, at other moments religious conviction withdraws its cooperation. Hence religion can be a help or a hindrance in achieving a cohesive society, and often it is a mixture of both.

For the purposes of this paper, the British context will be taken as a baseline, and one city, Leicester, will be used as a particular case study. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this will be relevant to wider contexts in terms of the principles and good practice elucidated herein. It should also be noted that the paper, while presenting something of a policy relevant analysis, is based within a theological and faith-based worldview that stems from the author's own location as a priest (Anglican, in the Church of England) as well as a longtime promoter of interreligious understanding and dialogue. As such, its aim is not a neutral and dispassionate bird's eye analysis (as though this were possible in any case), but views the subject matter from a lifetime's work in faith and interfaith activism and belonging.

Under the pressures of globalisation – international travel, trade, migration, and so on – a new ingredient has emerged, complicating the picture even further. If societies once enlisted the cooperation of single religions for the purposes of enacting cohesion, they are now faced with multiple religions, and those religions bring with them their own histories of antagonism, confrontation, and suspicion of those who are different.[3] In other words, difference has usually been received as an issue to be dealt with, even an inherent threat to cohesion, and this means that the presence of religions in multiple configurations is likely to increase the "hindrance" side of the balance and struggle to be received as a "help". "Us" versus "Them" becomes magnified.

All traditions have a sense of the unity of reality, whether that is under God, the Dharma, or some immanent sense of transcendent reality – all of which provide a religio-philosophical basis for cohesion.[4] On the other hand, religions not only exhibit principled differences between them, but might also disagree on how those differences are to be manifest in social and political policy decisions. Of course, all governments would prefer to have religions on their side, but religions also have grounds for wariness about being excessively instrumentalised for cohesion purposes. So, there is a challenge to religions from government concerning religions' express intentions towards the harmony of society, and there is a challenge from religions to government in their concern that government does not trample over different identities for the sake of a false or tenuous harmony.

In multireligious environments – in city, nation, or region – whether or not religions are a help or a hindrance to cohesion will depend on a) the status of interreligious relations in any one locus, and b) the understanding of the role of religious identity in its centralised or dispersed political setting; in other words,

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[1] This article was first presented as a speech at the seminar "Social Cohesion – Is Religion a Help or Hindrance?" on 10 September 2022 at the Buddhist College Singapore (BCS), organised by BCS and the Studies in Interreligious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, RSIS, NTU. It has been updated and edited for publication in a written format.

[2] In particular times and places, other language may be used, which may be around harmony, community integration, etc. However, social cohesion has become today the standard marker for this range of discourses.

[3] This context relates to the British environment, and of course in places such as Southeastern Europe or across Southeast Asia religious diversity has been the norm. Nevertheless, to some extent, the Westphalian principles of the modern order define many global discussions which link nation and religion. This discussion goes, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Equally, the term "religion" and its history could be debated, but speaking into the contemporary context, religions have become the means by which various traditions are organised within state polities. For some reflection on these dynamics, see Anna Halafoff and Paul Hedges, "Globalisation and Multifaith Societies', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 25.2 (2015): 135-61.

[4] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

whether religion is merely tolerated or valued as a partner in the creation of the good society. This essay explores both sides of this observation.

Status of Interreligious Relations

Let me begin by recalling two experiences of my own as an initial introduction into the status of interreligious relations in relation to cohesion. The first recalls a Hindu-Christian dialogue on the topic of collaboration for the purposes of social cohesion. In the middle of the session, a Hindu young man blurted out to the Christian speaker: "It's all very well working on collaboration for the common good, but what I really want to know is 'What do you think of my religion?'" For this young man, the challenge of forging a sense of shared ethical purpose was unlikely to be deeply effective if the theological perspective of one religion on another is not honestly faced. Without such honesty, if inherited theological suspicions between communities were not addressed, ethical co-operation alone would quickly unravel.[5] This was a sobering lesson to learn: that in every shared project there comes a point when the theological question of the legitimacy, truthfulness, and validity of the partner religion(s) comes to the foreground, "How am I received by 'the other'"? Without a solution at this level, social cohesion remains fragile.

My second example concerns a visit by a rabbi from the Jewish reform tradition to a class of seminarian students training for Christian ministry. The rabbi informed the group that he had cancelled his synagogue sermon on the previous Friday evening and instead asked his congregation what they would like him to say to the Christian seminarians. He reported that overwhelmingly they had said, quite simply: "Tell them, we're alright!" What followed was a quizzical silence among the Christian seminarians. What could such a message mean? Surely Christians did not feel that Jews were not "alright"? Further discussion revealed that the Jewish congregation wanted to convey that they did not feel "unfulfilled" or "deficient" in their Judaism; there was no need for any "Christian extra," which was often the Christian response to Jews in dialogue. God had called the Jewish people into being, and this congregation was part of a long line of tradition, existing in the present, no doubt with its own mix of proud achievements and lamentable failings, but in this respect they were no different from devout believers of any other tradition. "Please hear us," they urged, "for sooner or later you will start getting at us with your 'good news.' Only for us it will be bad news, because we know where it leads. We're alright. Christians, get over it!" The lesson to come to terms with here is contained in the affirmation, "We're alright." Is that really the case? In other words, is self-sufficiency in religious allegiance really "alright" in today's pluralistic environment? It seems to argue for a society of parallel religious existences, each respectful of the others, if also potentially defensive of what intentional interaction/co-operation might amount to. But are "parallel religious existences" enough?[6]

The genealogy of social cohesion

In the British context, the language of social cohesion arose out of conflict, as has much dialogue language in religious contexts. This partly explains why dialogue and social cohesion often get yoked together.

The language of cohesion in Britain came to prominence initially with the facts of immigration, beginning seriously in the 1950s and continuing in the decades following.[7] The first wave of immigration brought people from the Caribbean, and the second wave brought people from the Indian sub-continent; some of whom came via East Africa when Idi Amin began expelling South Asians from Uganda in the early 1970s.[8] Localised civil unrest followed each wave, most of which I would argue manifested as a result of the fear of difference experienced as threat and by the gift of scapegoats to be made the butt of racist anger because of other social realities, such as unemployment or poverty.

What is interesting to note is how the language around conflict and cohesion evolved. So, at first, conflicts were described as being about skin colour, then they were about "race relations", later they were

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[5] As I have argued elsewhere, we must see interreligious dialogue and the theology of religions as "twin tracks" not separate paths, see Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue*, London: SCM, 2001.
[6] See Alan Billings, *God and Community Cohesion: Help or Hindrance?*, London: SPCK, 2009.
[7] John L. Chapman, *Reading Development and Cohesion*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., 1983.
[8] Anneeth Kaur Hundle, "1970s Uganda: Past, Present, Future," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 53.3 (2018): 455-475.

"ethnic" conflicts, and eventually conflict and cohesion was framed as an issue of "cultural strangeness". It is possible, moreover, to observe these shifts, notwithstanding the fact that these distinctions are incapable of neat categorisation.[9] But for the purposes of this essay, it suffices to note that the failure by political authorities and academic commentators to acknowledge the foundational role of religion in the lives of believers was lamentable.

The event that confirmed that attention needed to be paid to religion was the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1988.[10] The novel unleashed a storm of protest among the Muslim community, as Rushdie was perceived as pouring needless scorn on Islam and demeaning the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Protests erupted on the streets of Britain's cities where Muslims were a significant presence, and then across the world. Suddenly it seemed that religion, which according to secular orthodoxy was assumed to be a private affair between the individual and God, was not content to be so marginalised. But we do have to say that this was angry religion.[11] People lost their lives, publishers were intimidated and threatened, and Rushdie received his infamous *fatwā* from Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, who decreed he could be killed.[12]

Although that was over thirty years ago, the impact of the cultural moment has persisted, with the result that Rushdie was finally and openly attacked on 12 August 2022 on stage in Chautauqua, New York, before he was due to give a major lecture, ironically, on the need to provide writers with safety and protection from disapproving states.[13] Much of the commentary in 1989 and then in 2022 as a result of the Rushdie affair has been framed as a dispute between freedom of speech and religious intolerance. But is there more at stake? My question here is: what have we really learned in more than thirty years since about religion in relation to cohesion-talk? Religion was meant to be a private matter, but here it is refusing to lie down quietly.

An even greater impact on cohesion was manifested, of course, by the 9/11 attacks in the USA in 2001. More than ever, religion came to be seen as an unreliable contributor to the social good. Religion, it was assumed, is the problem and not the solution. In fact, I would argue that the discussion on the place of religion in modern societies and especially on religion as a force for social cohesion was hijacked by angry religion, and we are still living in the aftermath of this.

The Muslim protest over the Rushdie affair was not a protest against dialogue and cooperation but against a socio-political mood which seemed indifferent to the cherished beliefs and practices of Islam and, by extension, other religions too. Yet it did nothing to dampen feelings that the management of interfaith relations was going to be difficult in Britain's multifaith and multicultural cities.

Developing Interfaith Relations

Notwithstanding the observation that the cohesion agenda had been hijacked by examples of religiously-motivated violence, there were other more positive currents of interaction in the air, beginning in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Alongside angry religion (and I might add intransigent, even angry, secularism) there have also been experiments in interreligious collaboration and dialogue on a kind of parallel track.[14] I will now outline a few examples from the history of the British city of Leicester, a difficult history that I lived through between 1994 and 2011. I wish to outline three broad phases of development in interfaith relations, all of which were focused on building the "good city".

A body named the Leicester Council of Faiths was formed in the wake of violence. In this case, the assassination of India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, on 31 October 1984.[15] This was an event occurring elsewhere in the world but with obvious local repercussions. There were no violent riots between Sikhs (a Sikh

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[9] Billings, *God and Community Cohesion*.

[10] Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, London: Viking, 1988.

[11] Kenan Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: How the World Changed From The Satanic Verses to Charlie Hebdo*, London: Atlantic Books, 2017.

[12] Akeel Bilgrami, "Rushdie & the Reform of Islam," *Grand Street* 8.4 (1989): 170-184.

[13] Parveen Akhtar, "Salman Rushdie Attack: The Legacy of the Decades-Old Fatwa on the Author, Explained," *The Conversation* (August 16, 2022), available at: https://theconversation.com/salman-rushdie-attack-the-legacy-of-the-decades-old-fatwa-on-the-author-explained-188756.

[14] Alan Race, "Interfaith Relations in the Context of a Multifaith City," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 25.2 (2015): 222-239.

[15] Stephen H. Jones, "The 'Metropolis of Dissent': Muslim Participation in Leicester and the 'Failure' of Multiculturalism in Britain," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38.11 (2015): 1969-1985, 1974-1975.

nationalist, one of her bodyguards, was responsible for Indira Gandhi's killing) and Hindus but there were tensions amid an atmosphere of unrest. It was a Church of England Archdeacon who took the initiative and said: "It was clear to me that Leicester needed a simple instrument to serve as a forum for the faith leaders to meet, to talk together as equals and to become friends."[16] Such forums later became the norm everywhere but at the time the simple goal of friendship was revolutionary.[17] The Archdeacon also invited the mayor of the city – a public figure, neutral in respect of religious conviction – to inaugurate the forum of faith leaders. Although these were strategic decisions, they were not without theological ramifications. Belief systems were counted as secondary to the development of social good; an ethical grounding in trust between separate communities was thought to be sufficient to satisfy the agenda of cohesion.

It was agreed that neither syncretism nor proselytisation would be permitted in dialogue at the Council of Faiths. This allowed members from different faith communities to learn from one another, as it were, from the inside: the inside of working for a city, and the inside of faith so as to generate the basic values of respect and trust. Let me clarify this. Non-proselytisation is a basic for interfaith dialogue organisations, and as many groups fear syncretism, stating that this would not be condoned gave a number of groups the comfort of explaining to their communities that this was not entailed. This then provided a comfort level where people believed they could learn from the other faiths without compromising their own values, especially as this was all done within a setting where there was a clear aim of each community and citizen working to benefit Leicester as a city.

Another feature worth noting was that the Council decided to respond to all news of international atrocities involving religious identity multilaterally. Nothing was a Christian-Muslim, or a Hindu-Sikh issue only. It was held that an attack on one community should be treated as an attack on all communities. If Muslims became objects of vilification after the Rushdie affair and then after 9/11, it was important for the life of the city that all communities expressed an appropriate solidarity with Muslims, and likewise any other group that was under fire. A parallel group – the Family of Abraham Group (Jews, Christians, and Muslims in dialogue)[18] – adopted the same principle, especially when it came to responses to the Israel-Palestine conflict. On reflection, this was a progressive turn when it is considered that that conflict is possibly what a colleague at the time in Leicester called "the mother of all conflicts." A further important initiative emerged, which was to advocate for an indicator of trust, friendship, and value between communities by asking the question: "Do you know what causes me pain?" Such questions get under the skin of most parties to a conflict: the invitation to view the world as others view it.

In relation to the particular features of Christian-Muslim relations, it is easy to get sidetracked into historical dilemmas and falsely view the present through the prism of the past. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 being a case in point, when it was portrayed as an echo of the medieval Crusader mentality.[19] On the other hand, a multilateral outlook allows the present bigger picture of interfaith relations to frame the approach.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslims in Leicester felt themselves supported by this multilateral approach from faith leaders and others. But, of course, solidarity cannot be offered in a wholly uncritical manner. In some areas of the city, in the early days after 9/11, there were Muslims who were pleased with what had happened: a blow had been struck at the might of US world hegemony. So a fissure opened up: was there a balance to be struck between general support for the mainstream Muslim world and condemnation for those who sponsor or perpetrate violence conveniently labelled as terrorist or extremist?

This balancing was tested further with the bombings in London on 7 July 2005.[20] Here, the United Kingdom was the victim, this time of its own home-grown acts of terror. The country was compelled to ask what had been going on under its nose. Then, in Leicester, something quite ground-breaking happened: the Christian

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[16] David Silk, "A Short History of the Leicester Council of Faiths", in *20th Anniversary Brochure for Leicester Council of Faiths*, Souvenir Brochure 1986-2006, 10, available at: https://www.lcof.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/20th_anniversary_brochure.pdf.

[17] Vivien Lowndes and Rachael Chapman, "Faith, Hope and Clarity: Faith Groups and Civil Renewal," in *Re-Energizing Citizenship: Strategies for Civil Renewal*, eds. Tessa Brenna, Peter John, and Gerry Stoker, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 163-184.

[18] Ahmad Faizuddin Ramli and Jaffary Awang, "The Practices and Approaches of Interfaith Dialogue at Leicester, UK," *Journal of Techno-Social* 7.1 (2015): 1-32, 29.

[19] Robert Schutze and Martin Hirst, "Duckspeak Crusader: Greg Sheridan's Unique Brand of Seculo-Christian Morality," *Overland* 176 (2004): 18-25.

[20] Robin Goodwin and Stanley Gaines Jr., "Terrorism Perception and its Consequences following the 7 July 2005 London Bombings," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 1.1 (2009): 50-65.

representatives responsible for interfaith relations were approached by Muslim friends requesting assistance with the issue of how to help alienated (mainly) young men reintegrate into the mainstream Muslim community. In the light of 7 July 2005, Muslims were being pushed further into a corner by the government, the media, law enforcement, and the public, but it was the history of trust in Leicester that provided the access needed for the approach that was made. It led to frank discussion of the issues of vulnerability and feelings of helplessness in the Muslim leadership in the face of the felt enormity of the problems.

Now trust, of course, requires visibility, and public trust requires visible tokens. In Leicester, four of these tokens were developed:

> i) Taking a common stand. For example, a joint gathering of shared prayer outside the Town Hall in solidarity on the eve of the invasion of Iraq and in anticipation of a backlash against ordinary Muslims. It was a gathering to pray for peace, but some will have seen it as a demonstration against war. Inevitably there is the risk of not being able to control all public perceptions. Some see a demonstration; some see prayer. Some make a connection between the two.
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> ii) Raising funds jointly. For example, funds raised in mosques and churches were dedicated to Christian and Muslim charities – a Christian hospital in Gaza and a Muslim project in Bosnia, or Christian and Muslim projects in Africa and India.
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> iii) Sharing food. For example, following Ramadan and Easter, each community invited the other to a celebratory meal.
>
> iv) Sharing fun. For example, a football match between the Diocesan clergy and Imams of the city captured the imagination of the media and one of the city's MPs. Mention of it was even made in the House of Commons.

Although these are four simple tokens of trust, it is important to note that establishing basic trust is not an anodyne pursuit. It is costly work requiring endless patience. Moreover, this trust and working base must be established in times of goodwill. As Michael Amaladoss has duly noted, interfaith dialogue is more like a health promotion scheme and not an emergency or disaster mitigation tool.[21]

Social Cohesion and Interfaith Relations

How does the building of interfaith trust feed into the agenda of social cohesion? Local and national government is keen to enlist the support of faith-communities. This was evident in a 2002 report from the UK's Local Government Association, which stated that faith-communities are vital for "good health, as providers of pastoral care, promoters of citizenship and community development, voices for social justice, and as a locus for gatherings of people in varying economic and social positions, of differing political views from a range of ethnic backgrounds with shared concerns."[22] This is quite a list, even if essentially aspirational. But it is a far cry from the view that insists on keeping religious conviction as a private matter. However, it was good news for faith-communities, because in recognition of this social capital, central government made sums of money available for the pursuit of interfaith activities which it deemed would improve social cohesion. In Leicester, there were some significant achievements in social cohesion as a result of this funding. Research revealed that volunteering within the faith-communities was extensive, and it concluded that faith groups are trusted organisations rooted in local areas, and able to cater for hard-to-reach citizens by offering religious and culturally sensitive environments for their spiritual and social needs.[23]

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[21] Michael Amaladoss, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: A View from Asia," *Landas* 8 (1994): 208-218.

[22] Greg Smith, "Faith in Community and Communities of Faith? Government Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Urban Britain," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19.2 (2004): 185-204, 195-196.

[23] Ibid., 199-201 and Riaz Ravat, *Embracing the Present, Planning the Future*: *Social Action by the Faith Communities of Leicester*, Leicester: Leicester Faiths Regeneration Project, 2004.

The potential for faith involvement in working for social cohesion was substantial across all sectors of the social world. Yet, in my view, this was not fully recognised by government debates.[24] At the 2006 launch of the Institute of Social Cohesion, a collaborative project between four universities (Leicester, De Montfort, Warwick, and Coventry), analysis tilted in the direction of wanting "to provide a new approach to race, diversity and multiculturalism." The view was emerging that "multiculturalism" was now a more complex matter than so-called "racial integration," which was language from a previous generation. There needed to be a balance, it was said, between, on the one hand, drawing up categories that define the commonalities of belonging in society and, on the other hand, respecting private areas such as cultural and religious belonging. The question posed was: Is cohesion in society a function of religious identities, or is it really about the distribution of power and resources? The Institute of Social Cohesion opted for the latter in its central analysis. In other words, in basic sociological secular mode, politics and economics were the areas which determine our common belonging, while diversity remains a function of other more optional (private) spheres, such as race, culture, or religion. What still seemed absent from official debate was a robust acknowledgement of the significance of religious affiliation in public and social life. Putting this another way: the language of cohesion might group issues of race, culture, ethnicity, and religion under a single umbrella, as a sort of instrument of soft power in the cohesion game, but it would represent a fiction in terms of lived experience. The fiction is that religions and cultures are content to remain privatised. Acknowledging their potential contribution to cohesion needs to transcend the confinement of religious and cultural identities to the private or voluntary sphere – and this in turn triggers a much bigger debate about the relationship between religion and secularity in modern societies.[25]

The Fragility of Social Cohesion

Before turning to that debate, it is worth taking further account of the fragility of social cohesion talk and practice. My brief account of the origins of religious involvement in social cohesion in Leicester sought to highlight some positive features at the early stages of an inevitably ongoing story. However, there are two further concerns relevant to that story deserving of attention. The first is the co-option by the city authorities of cultural diversity as a promotional benefit for a city searching for a new identity beyond the decline in its industrial manufacturing base; and the second is the impact of international religio-politics on local landscapes and identities in the twenty-first century. I will comment briefly on each.

First, following the onset of industrial decline in many English towns and cities, from having been "one of the wealthiest in Europe,"[26] Leicester sought to reinvent itself as a city of cultural diversity, attractive for a younger generation, for tourism and business alike. Symptomatic of this trajectory was the creation of the marketing slogan "Leicester city of surprises" in 1993,[27] which suddenly appeared on billboards throughout the city and as the first visual announcement for any traveller alighting at Leicester's rail station. For locals, this seemed mildly amusing, but for visitors perhaps it had the potential for attracting and arousing expectations. The "surprises" of course related to the sights and sounds of "exotic multiculturalism": different foods, dress, temples, festivals, shops, and human faces. The value of promoting diversity as a positive good was illustrated as follows in Leicester's Race Equality Scheme of 2002/3:

> Leicester City Council exists to promote the integrity and sustainability of Leicester
> through cultural diversity, social justice, community cohesion, economic prosperity,
> and environmental quality. Its vision for integrating Britain's most diverse city

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[24] Home Office, *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team Chaired by Ted Cantle*, UK: Home Office, 2004, also referenced in Jonathan Burnett, "Community, Cohesion and the State," *Race & Class* 45.3 (2004): 1-18. The report, undertaken following some city riots in the summer of 2001, had little to say about religion.

[25] This debate goes beyond the scope of this paper, but in the UK context and in global debate on this, see e.g. Tariq Modood, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019, and Paul Hedges, "The Secular Realm as Interfaith Space: Discourse and Practice in Contemporary Multicultural Nation-States,' *Religions* 10.9.498 (2019), available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/9/498.

[26] Ben Beazley, *Post-War Leicester*, Cheltenham: The History Press, 2006, 4.

[27] Inès Hassen and Massimo Giovanardi, "The Difference of 'Being Diverse': City Branding and Multiculturalism in the 'Leicester Model,'" *Cities* 80 (2018): 45-52, 47.

> depends on developing sustainable communities, where diversity is cherished as a unique asset and people of all communities feel at home.[28]

As an exercise in formulating "vision aspiration", this promotional statement might be considered laudable, even if a distant prospect in reality. From the point of view of this essay, the diversity it celebrated remained housed in a "Race Equality Scheme" and the language of diversity continued to be labelled as "cultural." Religion is tamed if it is viewed through the lens of being purely a "cultural" phenomenon. Put another way, the exoticising of religious expressions through their "foreign" appearances fails to pay due respect to the religious life of believers and ignores one source of anguish for the agenda of cohesion, namely, the struggle to recognise and negotiate religious difference in any meaningful sense, a negotiation that lies at the heart of religious identity.

My second comment on the fragility of cohesion talk, and one reason why it is easily prone to being dubbed as "mythological," can be highlighted when disturbances – violent or otherwise – along religious, ethnic, or cultural lines emerge on the streets. In Leicester, this happened in late August and early September 2022, and it profoundly fractured the city's projected sense of itself as a place where different cultures, ethnicities, and religions live harmoniously as "One Leicester."[29] This was not one of the surprises envisaged in the slogan "a city of surprises."

The disturbance was quickly framed as a confrontation between Hindu and Muslim young men. The immediate cause seems to have been a cricket match between India and Pakistan on 28 August 2022, in which India was victorious. This led to Hindu young men gathering and chanting antagonistic remarks about Pakistan, which, in turn, initiated responses from some Muslims. Over the next days, violence erupted, property was damaged, people were injured, and offenders arrested, though initially the police were caught off-guard. At the heart of the confrontations was a march by a group of Hindu men in a predominantly Muslim area and along a street with several Muslim-owned businesses, who chanted the Hindu mantra "Jai Shri Ram," which translates as "Hail, Lord Ram," a chant associated with anti-Muslim sentiment and violence in India.[30]

A cricket match, it seems, was merely a trigger, as it is accepted that tensions between the two communities had been simmering for much longer. This leads directly to the questions: "Why now?" and "What are the causes behind such unrest?" In the past, different religious groups had united against a common enemy, notably different far-right groups such as the English Defence League, and the police had successfully prevented potential violence. That was in October 2010, so what had changed since then? Causes of unrest are bound to be complex, and the report of the enquiry launched by the city's Mayor, Sir Peter Soulsby, is scheduled to be published in the second half of 2025, a substantial period of delay since 28 August 2022, raising suspicions of contestation in relation to the processes of production. But two factors have been identified by much of the commentariat.

First is the increase in Hindu and Muslim migration to the city from India at a time when Indian politics has been shaped substantially by the ideology of Hindutva, which is the nationalistic populist politics promoted by Narendra Modi, the leader of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and India's Prime Minister.[31] It is no secret that such politics is strongly anti-Muslim and is promoted as such. Previously confined to India, the Hindutva ideology, it seems, is now being intentionally exported, such that the policy aims to shape the idea of a "global Indian family."[32] More than this, Hindutva sits alongside other movements identified as fascist across the world, as has been pointed out by Omar Suleiman:

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[28] Ibid., 49

[29] "One Leicester" was developed in 2008 as part of branding the city by a consortium of public and private stakeholders called the Leicester Partnership. See Hassen and Giovanardi, "The Difference of 'Being Diverse,'" 49, for more.

[30] For some surveys of this, see Christophe Jaffrelot, "Narendra Modi between Hindutva and Subnationalism: the Gujarati Asmita of a Hindu Hriday Samrat," *India Review* 15.2 (2016): 196-217, Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context*, London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 181-194, and Prashant Waikar, "Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva: An Analysis of Narendra Modi's Political Discourse," *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 4.2 (2018): 161-180.

[31] Jaffrelot, "Narendra Modi."

[32] Nimo Omer, "Wednesday Briefing: What's behind the violent clashes in Leicester," *The Guardian*, September 21, 2022, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/21/wednesday-briefing-whats-behind-violent-clashes-in-leicester.

Modi's Hindutva is part of a wider rise in fascist movements across the globe. Masked as ultraconservative nationalism, modern fascism has developed as a racist and anti-immigration identity, rooted in ignorance and moral decay. In many places, it includes a virulent Islamophobia. India's ethno-nationalism has created bonds with other states, such as Israel.[33]

Added to the promotion of Hindutva, in India and around the world, is the second development instigating a change in context, and this is the ubiquitous presence and influence of social media. In Leicester, the disturbances were fuelled as much by Indian instant social media connections as by local factors. Leicester's city mayor was clear on BBC's Radio 4 Today programme that social media bears a good deal of responsibility for stoking misinformation, deliberate lies, with influences emanating directly from India. Soulsby described the content as "very, very, very distorting."[34] One effect of the influence of social media was the fact that some young men came to Leicester from elsewhere in the UK to join in the fray, in response to what they had seen on WhatsApp groups. One report considered that almost half of those arrested came from outside the county of Leicester itself.[35] If this was the case then the oft-repeated observation that in Leicester global events always have local repercussions and effects has been dramatically upgraded.

Two factors in relation to Leicester's disturbances are worthy of further analysis from a religious point of view. The first is that while there have been interfaith responses to the violence, appealing for calm and respect for interfaith differences, these seem to have made little impact. Since the earlier days, beginning forty years previously when the emphasis on building good relations was championed, for example, through the Council of Faiths and other bodies such as the St. Philip's Centre,[36] it may be that with the passage of time commitment to the cohesion cause has waned, or perhaps the eye has simply been taken off the cohesion ball. It is possibly the case that faith leaders are less collaborative with one another than used to the case, as earlier motivations for common action have become less urgent. But secondly, the authority of religious elders for second and third generation young citizens has less of an appeal in an increasingly secular environment. This means that an understanding that elders possess the religious wisdom that is reputed to be needed for survival in a "foreign land" has much less traction than was formerly the case. Values, beliefs, and ethics are now dispersed, and if this results in a sense of lost identity then there are always more definite substitutes, of which Hindutva is one example, to fill the void.

Wider debates about the Religion-Secular divides

I want now to turn to wider debates in the context in which interfaith relations are set, as these debates too have a bearing on social cohesion and the role of religions.

The world generally has moved into a very polarised phase – politically, with echoes of Cold War stand-offs in the background, and culturally, with angry debates in the foreground, for example, over how to deal with colonial legacies. We have witnessed in recent years some bad-tempered polarised debates. These debates are variously portrayed as ones of religion versus secularism, multiculturalism versus integration, and political liberalism versus theocratic traditionalism. However regardless of how we frame these debates, I think that much of the rhetoric has involved reactions to the enormous impact, mainly in western countries, of political liberalism in theory combined with secular pragmatism in policymaking. There is a feeling now that secular liberalism has not brought all the benefits it perhaps once promised. For example, it has not had the strength to confront the corrosive effects of unrestrained economic globalisation or it pays only half-hearted lip service to

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[33] Omar Suleiman, "India: Hindu Nationalism Is Exporting Its Islamophobia," Human Rights Without Frontiers, 6 October 2022, available at: https://hrwf.eu/india-hindu-nationalism-is-exporting-its-islamophobia/. The reference to fascism is not simply rhetorical, as the movement which the BJP comes from actively took inspiration from Europe's Fascist and Nazi parties, see Hedges, *Religious Hatred*, 137-138.

[34] Omer, "Wednesday Briefing."

[35] Rajeev Syal*,* Aina J. Khan and Geneva Abdul, "Half of those arrested over clashes in Leicester from outside county," *The Guardian,* 19 September \2022, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/19/half-those-arrested-over-clashes-in-leicester-from-outside-county.

[36] The St Philips Centre is a Church of England interfaith dialogue centre attached to the church of the same name that has engaged in both community cohesion projects and academic research and teaching. See Race, "Interfaith Relations," and https://www.stphilipscentre.co.uk/.

demands for an ecologically sustainable future. More than that, in separating the material bases of living from spiritual longing, many wonder whether it has any convincing answers to the basic question of what purpose we should be pursuing in human societies, over and above the satisfaction of individual self-expression for its own sake.[37]

My own conviction in these areas acknowledges that political liberalism has brought many benefits, not least of which is the end – in theory, even if not in practice – to the over-weaning power of political and religious institutions and the opening up of a new sense of dignity for individuals. Nevertheless, wholesale accommodation to the processes of secularisation which accompanied political liberalism was bound to remain problematic for the religious mind. The dispute is mainly with what is sometimes termed the Rawlsian contract theory of liberal democracy, taken from the American political scientist, John Rawls.[38] Theoretically speaking, and hugely over-simplifying, Rawls proposed that our reasoning over public policy should be based on that which no reasonable person could reasonably reject. It is a sort of highest common factor or pragmatic approach: put simply, decisions are made according to what works and what citizens will accept.

From a similar point of view, the philosopher Richard Rorty has said that when religion enters public political debate, it acts as a "conversation-stopper". So, when the religious person says that God commands this or that policy, it is difficult to know what sense can be made of it by citizens who do not subscribe to that particular framework. Therefore, the argument goes, religious believers ought to keep God's commands for their private selves.[39] This is a familiar secularist argument, for how else can pluralist societies hold together other than by secular politics and pragmatic policymaking?

The difficulty for many believers is that this immediately rules out religious beliefs as a basis for moral decision-making in relation to public policy. (Something similar could be said for ideological secularists whose worldview extends beyond policymaking based on simple secular pragmatism).[40] Religious voices want to ask questions of purpose and meaning in the making of public policy, but a government shaped by Rawlsian assumptions has no mechanism for answering those questions. In the debate between "human goods" and "human rights", the religions are likely to be on the "goods" side and the governing powers of a liberal democracy on the "rights" side of the equation. Finding a decent balance between the two seems continually precarious, to say the least.

Furthermore, there may be a contradiction at the heart of the social contract theory. If the social contract is meant to allow freedom of expression and argument for all citizens and yet cuts out the reasons a great number of citizens give for arguing the way they do, then how can the social contract facilitate proper freedom? There is a feeling, therefore, from many educated religious voices, that public debate requires deepening. Liberty is good but there is liberty "for" as well as liberty "from." Liberal democratic governments have no answer to what our liberty is "for." This might be a standard religious riposte.

What, then, can be done? We do not want to return to the theocratic state, yet a polarised stand-off between "religion" and "secularism" seems equally unattractive, not least because it oversimplifies everything and contributes nothing to cohesion agendas. Some years ago, the Yale law professor, Stephen Carter, advanced the view that liberalism needs to develop a politics based on "a willingness to *listen*, not because the speaker has *the right voice*, but because the speaker has *the right to speak*" (italics added).[41] This seems to me to be in line with the revised opinions of both John Rawls and the German philosopher and sociologist, Jurgen Habermas. As Habermas sums up his own revised outlook:

> The neutrality of state power vis-à-vis different worldviews, which guarantees equal
> individual liberties for all citizens, is incompatible with the political generalization of a

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[37] Such questions can be placed into a global political context where it seems that populisms, often based around religio-national and sometimes racialised narratives, are on the rise. This topic goes beyond the scope of this paper.

[38] Ryan Muldoon, *Social Contract Theory for a Diverse World: Beyond Tolerance*, London: Routledge, 2016.

[39] Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 31.1 (2003): 141-149.

[40] The distinction made here relates somewhat to Rowan Williams' drawing of a procedural secularism, its pragmatic basis, to a programmatic secularism that insists upon the removal of all religion from the public square in a dogmatic, or ideological ways, see, Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, London: Bloomsbury, 2012.

[41] Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, New York: Basic Books, 1993, 230. See also Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

secularized worldview. Secular citizens, in their role as citizens, may neither deny that religious worldviews are in principle capable of truth nor question the right of their devout fellow-citizens to couch their contributions to public discussions in religious language. A liberal political culture can even expect its secular citizens to take part in the efforts to translate relevant contributions from religious language into a publicly intelligible language.[42]

Habermas here is revising his former stance which supported a strong distinction between religion and political practice. If this view is adopted, however, does it mean that we must imagine a public square crowded with argument, a state of affairs which will be necessarily untidy and risky in terms of orderly debate, but where religious voices take their place alongside others in open exchange? In the best possible world, what might emerge from such an open exchange will be an outcome that is the fruit of listening and rational persuasion – rational, that is, in the desired sense of seeing the persuasive reasons for something, even if one disagrees with the comprehensive view of life lying behind them.

So, much is commendable. Yet there remains the increasingly unsettling issue of religious plurality. Political decision-making will have not one or two religious worldviews to contend with but a whole raft of contending views. This brings me to a positive proposal in trying to move beyond the stand-off between ideological secularists and convinced religionists.

What seems to be needed is a model of participation in public democratic debate – debate about social cohesion – which allows for the particularities of religious and secularist voices, and which relies on seeking common ground while respecting differences, and balancing compromise where necessary with critical solidarity for the sake of a greater good. As we cannot know what that greater good might look like in advance, such a model must surely be dialogical at heart if the religions are to develop their democratic political relevance. Most of all, the model must involve the religions self-critically if they are both to overcome their historic mistrust of one another and to learn the values of provisionality and humility that are necessary in the context of interpreting and negotiating plurality.

Therefore, for religion in public life to be healthy, what seems needed is not so much an empty public square, but what we might call a dialogically filled public square. We accept critical reasoning which means that we explain to one another the reasons we have for believing the things we do and why we want to act on them, whether we are confessionally secularist or religious. Why can we not come to mutually agreed decisions based on such mutual listening and mutuality of respect?

This is why I believe interreligious dialogue is so necessary. It is not only good for our own learning from one another; it could well pose itself as a kind of model for helping us to move beyond the stand-off between "religion" and "secularism". Yet the religions should only be allowed their voices if they transcend their historic antagonisms and mistrust, and in the process become aware of the limitations of different worldview perspectives even as we might cherish the diversity.

The public square should not be filled with theocratic religious voices or be left hostage to a liberal, secularist absence of religious reasoning but be occupied by a dialogical conversation where each values the other even as it might disagree with them. This seems to me to be the next step in the religious support for liberty and democracy in a plural society. There is, however, one major problem in taking such a step. It will likely require us to suspend, if not surrender, our religious senses of absolutism. And the trouble is, religions do not generally or easily embrace that. The same could be said for some versions of different secularist views.[43]

Concluding remarks

Religion has not disappeared in the way that many predicted would happen in the modern period. During this same period, we have also realised that pragmatism, which has served us well and is preferable to ideological or theocratic politics, too has limitations with regards to the plurality which stems from globalisation and increased immigration. The stage looks set for a change of direction. A politics of cohesion which upholds pluralism requires a dialogue built not simply on respect or hospitality, commendable as these values might be, but also on acceptance which affirms separate identities even as one might not approve of everything those

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[42] Jurgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge: Polity, 2008, 113.
[43] The work of Habermas could again be invoked here to discuss this, but would sidetrack from the main focus here.

belonging to any particular tradition want to pursue or promote. Recalling my two experiences near the beginning of this essay, co-existence is a staging-post on the way to a deeper grounding for cohesion; the cry to know what one tradition thinks of another has been a hidden part of the picture all along. Now is a ripe time to bring that to the foreground of interfaith relations and address the demand for social cohesion in society as such.

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