

Britain should Celebrate its Success in Integrating Religious Identities

Professor Kim Knott

There's much too much doom and gloom about religion and the 'problem' of integration, argues Professor Kim Knott. We should acknowledge how much Britain has already achieved, and not be drawn back into wider European anxieties.

Since the 1980s I have been active in the study of religion at the local level in Britain. Much of that work has taken place in the Leeds-Bradford area. In 2004-6 one of my doctoral students, Mel Prideaux, was studying Christian-Muslim relations in the Beeston Hill area of Leeds. In July 2005 four bombs exploded in London, killing 56 people. One of the bombers, Mohammad Sidique Khan, came from Beeston.

Those attacks gave new life to concerns about social cohesion in the UK. They revived the worries which had been expressed by Ted Cattle in his report on the 2001 disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley that different communities in Britain were living 'parallel lives'.

Given the violence of these 'home grown' events, the reaction is understandable. There are many people in Britain who think we have become segregated, and who see the world in terms of 'them' and 'us'. Those who resort to violence in defence of Islam are amongst them. They believe that there is an ongoing war between the Christian west and Islam, a 'crusade' which has been played out for centuries.

In the course of my research with local communities and religious minorities in Britain over the last thirty years I have certainly encountered this view – the idea of 'them and us' and a 'clash of civilisations'. I do not for a moment deny that religion can be a source of division as well as unity (as can various secular commitments).

However, overall my work has led me to see the picture in the UK very differently. What happened in Burnley, Bradford, and Oldham in 2001 and in London in July 2005 was the exception, not the norm. We must not generalise from it to pronounce on community relations in Britain, nor to conclude that religion is a 'problem' for integration. Religion is much more often part of the solution than the problem, and Britain is the leader in Europe in recognising and supporting religious communities and organisations as important agents in integration. To neglect this truth is to undermine what has been achieved, and to promote the very divisiveness which is being bemoaned.

Religion and integration

This is what our study in Beeston showed. We looked at two flourishing community centres: a parent's resource centre and day-care nursery, and a healthy living centre which particularly focuses on the healthcare needs of the local Muslim community. There are several interesting findings, which are supported by much larger-scale studies carried out on the Religion and Society Programme, and by scholars like Margaret Harris.

First, religion plays a key role in these initiatives in supplying resources – particularly buildings, expertise, and an established role in the community. Established parish churches are particularly important in this role – for example, in our study the Anglican and Methodist churches provided the space for the parent’s centre, and a faith initiative lay behind both projects.

Second, although local faith leaders may be invaluable to these initiatives, they are not necessarily the key movers. The importance of a dedicated, enterprising, committed ‘cultural broker’ in getting many cohesion initiatives off the ground is shown in study after study. Often they are ‘ordinary’ people with no special qualification, but some personal experience which makes them committed to making a difference. They come from all faiths and none.

Third, religious and secular people work together very closely on projects like those in Beeston, and the line between them is often blurred. ‘Religious identity’ is often far less clearly-defined or dogmatic than critics assume. As one active participant in the Beeston work told us: ‘[T]he idea of faith is strong but it’s faith that, for most... takes the form of looking to see what good can be done in the community and how people can be brought together whether those people believe in God or not, or believe in each other really.’

Many successful initiatives are inter-cultural rather than inter-faith; in the Beeston examples Christians of various denominations, Muslims of various hues, and people of no faith work closely together. The projects seem particularly successful when people mobilise around a common cause, a common community need. It’s not a case of sitting around explaining their beliefs to one another, but of working together and coming to understand and respect one another in the process.

Integrating Religious Identities into National Life

There are many more examples of successful inter-cultural work in Britain which could be given. In some cases they involve whole towns – like Leicester, which is rightly held up as a model of successful integration. Some multi-cultural suburbs and regions of large cities have also been remarkably successful at building a common life over a relatively short space of time.

At national level too, Britain has been ahead of the European curve at recognising the need to work *with* faith in achieving social goods. Under New Labour, David Blunkett, Tony Blair, Charles Clarke and others put faith communities on the agenda (‘faith’ not ‘religion’ became the buzzword of choice). There was a new recognition that, in partnership with government, they could contribute to local urban regeneration, community cohesion, and – from 7/7 – to intelligence and faith-based advice on matters pertaining to local and national security.

Thus, over a relatively short space of time, Britain has allowed religious people from many different communities to become *agents* in national and local life in a way which was perhaps only possible for clergy and leading Christians and Jews in the past.

This is not just because government wills it, but because religious people and organisations of many kinds have a growing sense of their own power. Through studies and audits, they know what they contribute to the economy, understand the scale of their voluntary activities, and are better mobilised to intervene in public debates (as we saw in January in the House of Lords with the Health and Social Care Bill).

The Current Challenges

Of course there is still much to be achieved, and the agenda does not stand still.

There are two new buzz words around in Coalition-led Britain: ‘integration’ and ‘super-diversity’. There’s no need to get over-excited. Having seen the jargon of both research and policy come and go over the last 30 years, I think we should be wary of placing too much weight on these particular terms to offer long-term answers. But they point towards some interesting directions of thought and possibly of strategy.

Integration

‘Integration’ is a word which comes on the back of a succession of other terms that have one by one fallen out of favour – assimilation, accommodation, multiculturalism. It’s driven, in part, by a widespread and seemingly implacable anxiety about Muslims, religious extremism, and ‘European’ and ‘national’ identity and cohesion.

But a recent EU study (Dialogue for Integration: Engaging Religious Communities) confirms that Britain is further forward than many countries in addressing the integration agenda. It concludes that ‘The EU Member State that has devoted most efforts to the promotion of multi-faith dialogue and collaboration regarding integration is the United Kingdom’. We should resist being drawn back into wider European anxieties about religion, Islam, and multiculturalism, when are already so much further forward.

Thankfully, we seem to have realised the impossibility of pressing for shared values and of demanding a unified sense of ‘Britishness’, as it became obvious that there was simply no agreement on what those values and identity were and who should decide on them. Whatever politicians might like to say, a multicultural mindset – in the simple sense of active awareness that we are a multi-faith and multi-commitment nation and need to cut our cloth accordingly – is here to stay.

Super-diversity

And so to super-diversity. From a rather clunky conception of identity based on the discrete strands of gender, sexuality, race, class, and religion, we now have a much greater awareness of the places and times when different aspects of our identity intersect. No one wants to be identified solely on the basis of their age, sexuality or religion. As in Beeston, we’re all more complex and multifaceted than that, and so are the societies to which we belong.

The challenge is to formulate policies and deliver services on the basis of this knowledge. Does recognising multiple differentiations mean that a focus on ‘communities’ rather than individuals is problematic? And what about intercultural education and dialogue (I prefer that to ‘interfaith’)? Can that be put to work as a solution in the context of super-diversity and, if so, how? It may be necessary, but how can it be structured into the existing education system, and taken on board in other areas of public life? We are far from having a joined up strategy or strategies on these matters.

So these are the challenges still facing us, and they are serious ones. But we can meet them with a sense of confidence, aware of what Britain has already achieved, and unwilling to turn back the clock on a process in which religious organisations and individuals – as well as secular ones – are making an active and positive difference to Britain today.

Kim Knott is Professor of Religious and Secular Studies at Lancaster University. She is debating these ideas with Dr Therese O'Toole, the Attorney General, Dominic Grieve and Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in the Westminster Faith Debate to be held at 61 Whitehall, 5.30-7.00 on 8th Feb. Google 'Religion and Society' for more details.