

Christian Responses to ‘Living with Difference’

Outline of discussion at a symposium on the Report published by the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

Tuesday 17th January 2017
Westminster College, Cambridge

This symposium was the first of two comprising the project ‘Living With Difference – Deepening the Conversation’, co-organised by the [Woolf Institute](#) and the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics ([KLICE](#)) and co-sponsored by [Cambridge Theological Federation](#) and [Von Hügel Institute for Critical Catholic Inquiry](#). The event was kindly hosted by Westminster College and financially supported by [Westhill Endowment](#). The symposium drew together Christian contributors, while the second will be multi-faith.

INTRODUCTION

Convened by The Woolf Institute in 2013 to explore the role of religion and belief, the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB) published a 100-page report with 37 recommendations in December 2015.

Using the sub-title, ‘community, diversity and the common good’, the Commission sought to stimulate national debate about the place of religion and belief in public life. The Report received wide media coverage and vigorous responses from faith communities and secular groups. Reactions from the Christian community were decidedly mixed.

The symposium, taking place one year after the Report’s publication, gave an opportunity for Christians with various ecclesial and theological perspectives to reflect on the report process, recommendations, the reaction and where we go from here. Participants came from the evangelical, liberal and Catholic branches of the Church of England, from the Free and Pentecostal Churches, and from various sides of the Roman Catholic community.

The purpose of the day was to explore two themes which have remained at the centre of national debate since the publication of the Report:

Theme 1: Religiously diverse Britain

What can Christians affirm, from their own theological traditions, about religiously diverse Britain and about the form that Christian presence should take in its public life?

Theme 2: A shared ‘national narrative’

To what extent can Christians affirm and commend a national story and shared commitments in a society that is less Christian, more diverse and less religious than ever before?

For each theme, the following draws together the main points and insights in participants' discussion. It seeks to give order to them and, at a few places, develops points beyond the letter but not, I hope, beyond the spirit of the symposium.

Double inverted commas are used to quote participants' actual words.

THEME 1: RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE BRITAIN

What can Christians affirm, from their own theological traditions, about religiously diverse Britain and about the form that Christian presence should take in its public life?

Introductory points on context

The Report was written for the whole UK public, not for any one religious or non-religious group, but with (it was intended) nuance in relation to the range of potential readers. It describes a changing religious landscape: the decline in Christian identification, the rise in non-Christian faith identification, and the rise in 'no religion' designation. This gives the Report "a basic level of realism".

During cultural transition, often people "look in the wrong direction", i.e. expect one change when in fact another is about to happen. (In the late nineteenth century, Londoners expected to have to deal with rising quantities of horse dung, but then came the motor car.)

The Report says, 'step back a bit'. Society is not becoming secularist; rather the secular voice is only one among many. Nor does it advocate secularism – far from it – or disestablishment. What it does is help people to recognise what it can be hard to recognise: the complexity of transition taking place.

What can we draw from the Christian tradition?

The following orders and summarises several main points from the conversation.

- 1.1 To start with, we should recognise that there's been a very long debate about Christian participation in the wider or "ambient" society. At any particular moment of cultural change, many tend to think that the

circumstances are unique. But not only have Christian communities existed in widely diverse public contexts, but there is a wide spectrum of views about faithful Christian participation in them. This can be characterised as from Byzantium at one end (where there was a close identification between political authority and church) to Anabaptism at the other (in which there is a sharp, even total, separation of those).

So Christians don't need to assume that any one 'settlement' of this question, for example that reached in the Tudor and Stuart periods, is the only imaginable or acceptable one.

1.2 Beyond that, there is valuable breadth/diversity within the current experience of British churches. For example,

(i) Many local churches, especially in major cities, are very culturally diverse and give many Christians a more direct experience of this than many others citizens have.

(ii) Many Christians, especially in historic denominations, experience cognitive dissonance in public discussion now: we think we are normative but find we are not. In some contrast, black-majority churches (for example) don't bring a legacy of either establishment assumptions or European state-church conflict to issues such as religious plurality.

(iii) In summary, there is no monolith of Christian identity. Moreover, Christian communities are linked to non-British identities (not least the universal church in one or other manifestation).

1.3 Similarly, Baptist and other non-conformist voices speak from a long experience and tradition of being at the margins of church engagement in UK public life (cf. point 1). This helps them to recognise that the rule of God takes different forms in religious community and political society – and this insight is increasingly pertinent given the changed and changing landscape the report outlines. They also recognise that God does not need to be defended, and that opportunities to participate, however minimal, should be taken.

1.4 The Report's nature means it could not be theological, but the question it raises is theological: Christians can and have to bring our story of *the rule or reign of God* to the public discussion. People of at least some other faiths can bring comparable stories. Through mutual story-telling, "we can find a story to share". In this way the report invites a kind of widening of the 'national' story.

- 1.5 But there is a hard question about whether Christians or others are able really to cope with radical difference: is it not naïve to suppose that mutual story-telling can generate “a story to share”? For example, Shahab Ahmed’s excellent *What is Islam?* (Princeton UP, 2015) helps to show how deep differences are between Islam and Christianity; Muhammad was a state-builder, Jesus was not.

In response, however, could not this idea specifically of the rule/reign of God give a language in which to speak about exactly such deep differences? This is a seminal theological concept in at least Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

- 1.6 Yet reference to ‘the rule of God’ immediately points up the UK’s religious illiteracy that the report highlighted: in most public discussion this terminology would be strange or alien (and probably seem threatening).
- 1.7 In apparent contrast to that language, the form that Christian presence properly takes in the life of society is *service*. “This has to be *service to all*”; while this emphasis on service of the whole society might seem a Church of England perspective, it assumes no entitlement. Rather it is the nature of Christian practice to serve others – and only by this will the church “earn its place at the table”.
- 1.8 Moreover there is a historical story to be told about the many practices of Christian service that have helped to make the UK what it is. (See the 2016 report by Theos, *Doing Good*.) To attend to this story (as opposed to one of Christians having power), an imaginative shift is needed.
- 1.9 But that contrast between *the rule of God* and *service* is only apparent: it is basic to faith in Jesus Christ that the very form that the God’s reign takes is service. Jesus’ mission fused the Jewish ideas of *hope for Messianic rule* and *God’s people represented in God’s servant*. This fusion remains definitive of Christianity.

There need be no dichotomy between Christians telling the story of God’s rule (and engaging with others about this) and our service in society. In relation to what Christians can bring to the UK’s religiously plural public life, here is a powerful nexus of language and practice.

- 1.10 But a further challenge remains: how can Christians (among others) move beyond the language of our own self-descriptions to find ways to address who ‘*we*’ are who together make up the UK? What can Christian sources offer here? One source is language about the *human person* – as bodily,

having dignity, as fulfilled in relationship (and so so). This language can help to get us beyond the fragmentation of plural ‘we’s and enable many issues of controversy to be addressed. People of different faiths might agree, say, to oppose certain legislative proposals about working life or days of rest because they would prevent humanness: ‘here is something we together hold about humanity under God’.

- 1.11 A related language is that of the *common good*, which expresses that idea that persons are inherently relational: we are fully human in the multiple relationships that society gives us. The Report uses this language – but does it do so adequately? Christian voices can bring a fuller understanding of this to public discourse, both of the concept and of what it means in practice, for example what a “common good school” looks like.

Conclusion on Theme 1

On what Christians can bring from our own theological tradition to religious plural public life in the UK, the symposium pointed towards three main ‘resources’:

- A paradoxical combination of language about *the rule or reign of God* and *practices of service* of all, a fusion exemplified in Jesus Christ himself.
- A way of speaking about *human persons* and *the common good*, together with corresponding practices. This can enable shared discourse with those of other faiths about what threatens human oppression and makes for human fulfilment.
- Distinguishing those two of course raises the question of how they are related. Putting this differently, what does the reign of God mean for society as a whole? Or again (to pick up a formulation used earlier), what are the different forms that the rule of God takes in religious community and the whole of society? There is rich reflection on this too in the Christian tradition (albeit not monolithic, but giving a range of perspectives, as noted earlier), and this forms a third ‘resource’ that Christians can bring to public discussion.

THEME 2: A NATIONAL NARRATIVE

To what extent can Christians affirm and commend a national story and shared commitments in a society that is less Christian, more diverse and less religious than ever before?

Introductory comment on context

The current context is clearly one of revived nationalism, in the UK and some other Western countries. (This is more obvious in early 2017 than when the report was written in 2015.)

It raises the question: does a national narrative have to be nationalist, and to think of relations among different nations as a ‘zero-sum game’? For Christians this raises, in turn, whether our theological tradition can give us insights that, while counter to nationalism, can help us think about national identity.

The symposium’s discussion of Theme 2 focussed on two topics.

2.1 A diversified national narrative

That we have and think we need a national narrative shows humans are not pure rational animals who don’t need a history. Similarly, nobody is *just* a citizen or an abstract subject of the law, but we come with affiliations that are wider and deeper than that.

At the same time, nobody is only a member of a faith community.

In fact we all have stories of how we came to be this way – so they are “bumpy and plural”. They mean we have “a diversified national narrative”. To illustrate (in relation to just one distinguishing factor), being educated specifically in Wales or Northern Ireland means to grow up learning a partly different national narrative that complicates the bigger picture (as, of course, in Scotland or England).

But what the Brexit debate has shown over the past year is that we in the UK “don’t know each other” (and perhaps especially not in England). We don’t know or understand the particular narratives of others, and this fosters social division.

Against both a narrow rationalism *and* nationalism, we need to tell the plural stories; “otherwise there is oppression”. (Perhaps we may interpret 2016 as manifesting a shift from a kind of individualistic rationalism straight to a revived nationalism, bypassing the plurality of ‘thick’ narratives within national life.)

This is where the CORAB Report can greatly assist, as its vision of national life is neither narrowly rationalist/secularist nor nationalist. It recognises that such plurality must be accommodated and makes many proposals for how to secure it.

What might Christians bring to a ‘diversified national narrative’?

A full answer to this question would be a *Christian theology of living with difference*. This could, in turn, enable a Christian theological reading of the Report. The points below pick up from the discussion some elements of such a theology.

Yet an objection to the project should be noted: granted such plurality, can there be a national narrative at all? Should we relinquish the idea and just leave it to each faith and other community to tell their particular stories?

In response, so long as the UK exists, there will always be a UK national narrative because the historians will write it and the journalists write the first draft. This means that the challenge for Christians (as for others) is, not to tell the national narrative or to try to control it, but how to live the faith in ways that turn out to contribute well to how it is told.

2.1.1 The biblical narrative of Israel’s history (in both Testaments) is very challenging because it is not self-congratulatory. It must provoke willingness to recognise both successes/achievements and failures/wrongs in a people’s past and present. This gives one way in which Christian faith challenges nationalism, by insisting on the distinction (made by Orwell among others) between patriotism and nationalism: we are to be “honest patriots”.

This assists us to see a broader point: history is something in which we have learned – a story of how we have learned what we think we know.

2.2.2. Recalling an emphasis in the first half of the Symposium (1.7), the answer to the second question “is still service”. What we can learn from Jeremiah 29 here is critically important.

It is in the context of the people’s sin and failure, which Jeremiah has repeatedly castigated, that he writes, “Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile... for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*” (v.7). Despite their failure, God’s people are to seek a mutually beneficial relationship with the wider society (in this case, their oppressor). This means a commitment to being “mutually built up” – so, in our context, against a zero-sum game among national identities.

More generally, that means public service: this alone can give Christians “an authentic hook” to speak into the national narrative.

- 2.2.3 In this context, an understanding of ‘the common good’ expressed in Catholic Social Teaching makes sense: the set of conditions in which everyone in the community can flourish. Only as *people act together* can they establish the common good, at the same time holding to related principles, including the dignity of the person, religious freedom, the dignity of labour, subsidiarity and the preferential option for the poor. Together these enable “common good thinking” and “the practice of the common good”. These can give Christians a robust identity as we participate in public life, without triumphalism.

Such principles can also help to enable society as a whole to find “certain things that unite us”. They have the potential to form a ‘thicker’ conception of ‘shared values’ than the focus of rationalist liberalism gives on only equality and individual freedom.

- 2.2.4 But there is no contradiction between that emphasis on public service and continuing to tell a distinctive story of the rule or reign of God: the Israelites in exile were to continue to worship JHWH the true king. It is this narrative that is the source of *hope*.

For Christians now, after centuries of division and more recent ecumenism, our own narrative is itself “bumpy and plural”. Perhaps the long experience of division and ecumenism can itself enable Christian service of the common good, in an increasingly a multi-cultural and multi-faith society. In this connection, there is “a paucity of safe spaces for difficult conversations”, but Christians have resources, including experience of local ecumenical initiatives and buildings, that can help to enable them.

- 2.2.5 As Christians tell their own distinctive narrative, and live it in many forms of service, they make ‘*civil society*’ – the rich fabric of human activities and associations that people freely form together, independently of the state, for example in education, business, the arts, charitable service and sport.

A retired URC minister in the Rhondda Valley gives an illustration: in quite a deprived community, his small initiatives over several years nourished local identity and new narratives. A Christian community telling its own story gives rise to other stories. This chimes with, for example, the current experience of evangelical social action networks

(such as the [Cinnamon Network](#)), and in a different way with that of [Westminster Abbey Institute](#) and the [Birmingham Conversations](#).

In the Christian narrative, civil society forms under the rule of God in Christ manifest first in church life, and, as Christians insist on the freedom of the church (in principle), so they insist on the freedom of civil society from takeover by the state (the principle of subsidiarity) – even as the state has to establish the conditions for the common good.

Here is something very important that Christians can offer to a ‘diversified national narrative’: local church-based activities that can become “multipliers” in social renewal, together with an insistence on freedom for such initiatives for all faith communities. This could mark a shift from “faithful presence” to “this is what we do”.

A renewal of civil society is especially important in those parts of the country that, after economic change and decline, are relatively “non-nourishing environments”. The Brexit debate has helped to draw attention to these.

But what are the aims of such initiatives: evangelism, cultural renewal (for example through the arts), economic renewal (for example through advice on debt), assisting with rethinking pluralism or citizenship, fostering inter-faith relations? They could be any of these – they’re not mutually exclusive.

As a bottom-up approach (that rests on the principle of the freedom of the church), this points to a need for “evolution of the Church of England’s establishment”, away from a settlement in which the Church of England “represents everyone [at the centre] even if the others don’t recognise the representation”.

- 2.2.6 But how can Christians communicate the church’s role in shaping civil society, whether within the churches or more widely? No doubt there are many ways in which this might be done, some familiar ones (including ‘showcasing’ efforts such as Steve Chalke’s *Faithworks* publications) and more innovative ones.

Conclusion on Theme 2

On the day’s second question, of the extent to which can Christians affirm a national story and shared commitments in a society that is less Christian, more diverse and less religious, the symposium gave attention to two main topics:

1. A ‘*diversified* national narrative’

The historical narratives that form the UK now are “bumpy and plural”. As such, neither a narrow rationalism nor nationalism can do justice to them.

2. What might Christians bring to this national narrative’?

In a context of willingness to face rights and wrongs in our history (Christian and national), what Christians can offer is still service. Jeremiah 29 offers a pertinent and powerful model for this, and Catholic Social Teaching or “common good thinking” gives a robust basis for practice. At the same time, the Christian gospel of the reign or rule of God can engender social renewal in multiple ways, and help to re-energise of ‘civil society’. Especially in ‘non-nourishing’ social contexts, this is a vital contribution Christian faith and practice can make to national life.

Regrettably the symposium did not make close connections between these points and the specifics of the report. This could now be done.

CONCLUSION: ST AUGUSTINE ON THE ‘TWO CITIES’

For St Augustine in *The City of God*, Jeremiah 29 was significant. The ‘earthly city’, the ambient society, has its own *shalom* or common good, and members of the City of God must see the goods that make this up as God’s gifts. It is better for God’s people to live in a wider society that has its own *shalom*, is at peace, than to wash their hands of it. If it has no ‘loves in common’, it will have ‘hates in common’. Yet in whatever context God’s people find they are, they are themselves to be held together by love.

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