

Awareness Roundtable

A digest of the discussion at the first Awareness Roundtable, held at St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, on Thursday 25th November 2010

Present:

The Rt Revd Robin Smith, Assistant Bishop in St Albans Diocese (Chair)
Joanna Cox, national adviser on adult education, Church of England
The Revd Canon Dr Ian M. Ellis, Editor, The Church of Ireland Gazette
Daniella Fetuga-Joensuu, Discipleship and Training Officer for the London District of the Methodist Church
Lord Griffiths of Pembrey and Burry Port, Superintendent of Wesley's Chapel
The Revd Canon Garth Hewitt, Director of the Amos Trust
Tim Holmes, Manager of the Programmes Department at a Christian international relief and development organisation.
The Revd Cindy Kent, priest and broadcaster
The Revd Rana Youab Khan, International Inter Faith Dialogues Assistant, Anglican Communion
Charles Longbottom, Chairman of the Awareness Foundation
The Revd Nadim Nassar, Director of Awareness Foundation
Charles Pitt, Senior Research Assistant, House of Commons
The Revd Cannon James Rosenthal, Communications Director of the Awareness Foundation (Reporter)
Chris Williams, Pastor, London Community Church
St. John Wright, Education Director of the Awareness Foundation (Secretary)

1. Do we live in a multicultural society?

It was generally felt that every society today is multicultural, and for young people this is the norm. Multiculturalism could be defined as a society in which different cultures co-exist peacefully and harmoniously. In London, this multiculturalism is visible in every high street; however, some cultural elements such as the veil can cause problems by generating fear of 'the other'. The perception of multiculturalism as 'good' or 'bad' depends on the age of the beholder, along with some regional differences.

2. The relationship between the host culture and guest cultures

There was a general reluctance to acknowledge the existence of a defined 'host culture'. British culture was seen as diverse in itself, containing Roman, Saxon, Viking, Norman, Huguenot, Jewish and other influences. Many felt that 'British' is an umbrella term, encompassing Scottish, English, Welsh and Irish cultures, so which is the actual host culture depends on the location.

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Those members of the Roundtable who were not culturally British readily identified a host culture, however. A distinction between the host culture and guest cultures was seen as a reality by those present who regarded themselves as coming from a guest culture; they said that they felt that it was their responsibility to become 'part of the family', just as it is the family's responsibility to make the guests feel welcome.

Members of guest cultures are aware that they are guests, and all visitors will attempt to construct a picture of the host culture and what it comprises. Many people who moved to the UK even 50 or 60 years ago still regard themselves as guests.

There can be a tension between the laws of the host country and the cultures of those who are its guests, such as over freedom of speech or what to wear.

The United Kingdom was seen to be briefly multicultural in its true sense but it has in places developed into cell-like cultures that keep themselves isolated from the host, preferring their own language, music, food, TV and community.

It was acknowledged that the United States has no 'host culture', but that each culture can remain somewhat isolated. The presence of Italian, Mexican, Jewish and Polish neighbourhoods shows that each culture remains strong and there is generally less mixing of cultures than in Europe. Class was not seen as a major factor in the growth of neighbourhoods. At work, however, class might be the defining factor rather than culture.

In discussion, India was described as having been multicultural for millennia; the result has been an enculturation of the disparate guest cultures, producing a unique Indian culture.

The group considered Angela Merkel's comment that, in Germany, multiculturalism has 'utterly failed', and believed that the lack of a common, shared language was much to blame as guest communities frequently rejected the German language and stuck entirely to their own language. An absence of a common language can divide a country, and sectarianism can set in.

Many of those present thought that host populations frequently take their own culture for granted; as a result, when confronted by guest cultures with a strong sense of identity, the host culture struggles to identify itself. In a test where members of different cultures were asked to choose from a large selection of adjectives to describe them, white people never chose 'white' as a defining adjective while ethnic minorities did select their own ethnicity.

The host culture, in an effort to be inclusive, sometimes suppresses expressions of their own culture out of a fear that it might 'offend' others. An added complication is that some atheists suppress Christian terminology and symbology by working on this fear of offending others – often they will justify banning, say, Christmas cards, by claiming that they will offend Jews or Muslims although the Jews and Muslims have never said that they were offended.

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There are believed to be several phases of host responses to the arrival of a guest culture, and three responses were discussed:

- I. Large influx of migrants: aesthetic/romantic response – pretty dresses, tasty food.
- II. The two cultures step back and study each other while preserving their differences: eg comparative religion
- III. Hybridity: ready to take risks with their own culture by getting to know the other culture.

It was felt that the host must be willing to risk its own culture and opinions if it is truly to be the host to new cultures. But many people in the host culture may feel threatened by the speed of change and they become fearful, with the result that political parties on the far right grow in popularity. It was agreed that we need to educate ourselves so that we can understand our neighbours and be confident without being arrogant.

3. Faith and Culture

Secular society can act as a safeguard for religions; it gives scope for people to journey in their faith as they wish. In the United States, for instance, everyone can explore their faith. This gives people confidence to relate to one another and shows the value of a secular society.

Today, many people still labour under the myth that ‘my faith might offend others’. In reality, the opposite can be the case; in Holland, the St. Nicholas festivities now offer Halal gifts with Arabic writing for all the Muslims that take part. Secularism and religion do not contradict by themselves. The myth is mostly propagated by those atheistic secularists who are aggressively anti-religious, shaming people into being feeling embarrassed about having a faith. The Pope highlighted this on his recent visit to Britain. Militant atheists have a lot in common with religious fundamentalists, especially an unwavering and total certainty. In the United Kingdom, this is exacerbated by a post-colonial guilt which brings embarrassment at the thought of ‘imposing’ one’s culture on others and a strong emphasis on individualism which encourages strict personal barriers. This contributes to European Christianity having become very private, and many Christians shy away from religious discussion.

Mainstream Christians must regain their confidence to speak out or we cede the discussion to the extremists. We must make our faith a part of our diverse world so that we can understand each other and build strong relationships in our communities. Understanding between denominations and between faiths is key to dealing with fundamentalism.

Summary

The host culture needs confidence – which should not be confused with arrogance – so that we can show genuine humility when making room for our guests, and the guests must make genuine efforts to integrate with the host culture. It must be a two-way process.