

Affirming Identity to Create Community.
*(a presentation given to the All Ireland Churches Consultative Meeting on
Racism, 19th November 2005)*

(Rev) Philip T Sumner

These days, after her journey from the Guardian to the Daily Mail, one might expect Melanie Phillips to denounce multiculturalism as antithetical to the notion of society, but what of Trevor Phillips? It was a shock to many when, last year, the current chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality called for the abandonment of outdated policies on multiculturalism. When, nearly a year later, the same Trevor Phillips called for black boys to receive some lessons in classes separate from their white peers in order to address their particular needs, the shock, for some, turned to confusion. Surely, the thinking behind such an approach would be classed as “multiculturalism”? For Trevor Phillips, however, what makes a policy on multiculturalism outdated and unacceptable is clearly not that it addresses and affirms a particular cultural identity, but that it leads to segregation rather than integration. What I hope to show in this article is that affirming cultural identity, far from being antithetical to society, is the very glue that will hold society together when it has become diverse.

The Nobel prize-winning novelist, Toni Morrison, in her first novel, “The Bluest Eye” told the story of a young girl growing up, in 1930’s America, in a dysfunctional family. This girl, an African American, was subjected to physical and sexual abuse and her self-esteem was desperately low. The spoken and unspoken messages from the world around her were that people of her own cultural identity were not valued. On the contrary, it seemed to her, from the adulation given to film stars, that the person most valued in the America of her day had to have blue eyes and look like Shirley Temple. She thought that, if only she had blue eyes, her own parents would love her. Because the syndrome, spoken of here, significantly affects the self-esteem, it also affects motivation for learning and ability to form healthy relationships with others.

Chamoiseau, another prize-winning novelist (Prix Goncourt), explores, in his book “School Days”, the effect of this “Bluest Eye” syndrome (though he doesn’t call it that) on a child’s ability to learn. His story is of a young Creole speaking child, who goes to school in a French colonialist education system. He had been an enquiring child searching for knowledge. But, as he enters school, Creole is frowned upon and only Parisian French is accepted. In other aspects of what he is taught, he hears the message that not only is Creole frowned upon, but also that everything

coming from France is superior to that which can be found in his own culture. Gradually his self-confidence takes a dive and his desire for education wanes.

The well-known clinical psychologist, Carl Rogers, wrote about the “self-concept” and of its importance for education. He spoke of how this “self-concept” is affected, both consciously and subconsciously, by the myriad of messages that spark off a process of self-comparison and self-evaluation, simply by living in a particular society. Imagine, for example, a black child in British society. That child, as he walks down the street, as he goes to school or watches the television, sees images of people of his cultural identity in situations that express a value judgement about those people, and consequently about himself. If it is clear from those images that people of his cultural identity are all too often in unskilled jobs (if they have jobs at all), or disproportionately represented among the prison population, or perceived as potential muggers, his self-esteem will be significantly affected. A black British clinical psychologist, Jocelyn Maxime, has often spoken about children of her ethnicity, who, when asked to draw self-portraits, draw themselves with European features. This is the “Bluest Eye” syndrome. Interestingly, the journalist Nasreen Suleaman, in a recent programme on the BBC, referred to the eldest of the July 7th bombers, M. Sidique Khan, as being integrated into British society, even to the point that he wanted to be an American! It would seem, therefore, that the messages coming from British society too suggest that white European culture is valued most. Melanie Phillips and Norman Tebbit would argue that there has to be a dominant culture or we risk creating an ethos of competing cultures that will destroy society. But a dominant culture suggests superiority. A young Muslim like M. Sidique Khan, who adopts British culture as if it was something superior, thereby risks damaging his self-esteem and adversely affecting his ability to develop healthy relationships that create society. The results, as you can see, are potentially devastating.

For a person to enter into healthy relationships requires the ability to believe that he is loveable. If a person’s self-esteem is significantly low then he either avoids entering into a relationship or he tries to control the relationship so that he believes he cannot be hurt. The same applies to cultural communities. For there to be good relations between communities, each community has to believe that it is highly estimable. Then, as bridges are built, there have to be good foundations on each side. People from both cultures need to know who they are and be proud of who they are. Sometimes, in multicultural settings, one community can become too fearful of expressing its own identity for fear of upsetting other communities.

Again, people do not build good relationships by hiding their real personalities.

The mixing of cultural communities is often complicated further in that it takes place in the domain of one of those communities. People refer to themselves, for example, as being British Bangladeshi or Black British. This does not mean that “British” is the superior, or even dominant, culture but that people can choose an over-arching culture that becomes a common factor for a group of cultures in a particular context. Then, for example, a common language and legal system between those cultures simply helps communication and integration. It is not that the common language or legal system is superior *per se*, but it is essential for good communication or order in that context.

Multiculturalism, as I understand it, however, does not require us to hold that every culture is of equal value. As a person’s context changes a different lifestyle may become more appropriate. From a religious point of view also, a person may believe that his/her particular faith is the true one but may still have tremendous respect for other faiths and see them as *the* route to salvation for other people. The recent “Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church” recognises this from the Roman Catholic standpoint: “...the inchoate (*sic*) reality of the Kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church, among people anywhere to the extent that they live ‘Gospel values’ and are open to the Spirit...”(*Op. cit.* par. 50). This is a similar position statement to one made in 1991: “It will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition...that members of other religions respond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ”(Dialogue and Proclamation, par. 29). It is, however, clear from these position statements that not all cultural groups would reflect those ‘Gospel values’ and, therefore, would not all be “highly esteemed”.

So as to affirm individual identities in Church life we have to be aware of the dynamics that can either undermine or aid the process. The first of these dynamics, clearly an undermining one, is Institutional Racism. Both MacPherson and Scarman, in their now well-known reports that refer to this dynamic describe three common expressions of it: “colour blindness” (Scarman par. 4.97 & MacPherson par. 6.18), “stereotyping” (MacPherson 6.17) and “established groups in the exercise of power”.

As a Parish Priest and a governor of several schools, I have, over the years, interviewed hundreds of teachers for their jobs. I have asked every teacher, whatever the position being applied for, “How will you use your role in this school to respond to the particular needs of the African descent

or Asian descent child”. I could count on one hand the number of good responses I have received to the question. Indeed, many will say, “I don’t see colour; I treat everybody the same!” If you don’t see colour then you would tend to treat everyone in the way that you would expect to be treated. This may respond to your needs but not necessarily to the needs of people of Asian or African descent.

Bishop Braxton, an African American Bishop, once wrote about visiting a church building with a group of young African American children. After a while, one of these children tugged on his coat and asked if there were no black people in heaven. When the Bishop asked, “why?” he was told that all the saints portrayed in the church and all the angels were white! In one of the parishes in which I was involved, we commissioned some local black secondary school children and a black artist to produce a large mural. This was then displayed in a prominent position in the church and was specifically intended to proclaim and celebrate black presence. Because I was also the chaplain to the Chinese community, I asked if that community wanted to do something similar. They produced a triptych of the three prayers, “Our Father”, “Hail Mary” and “Glory be” written in Chinese. This too was displayed in a prominent position.

Liturgical expression can also be very mono-cultural with music and movement (or lack of it) from one tradition. In the parish where I now serve as Parish Priest, we have three choirs, a “folk” choir, an African choir and a Filipino choir. The Filipino choir sings at the main Sunday service on the second Sunday of the month and the African choir on the last Sunday of the month. There would always, however, be at least three hymns in English on those days.

This aspect of affirming identity needs to be mainstreamed so that it pervades all that we do. For example, during a recent “Teacher day” in Oldham, all the secondary school teachers in the authority went to a local school that was focussing on their curriculum area. During the day, they were given specific examples of lesson plans, using the national curriculum, to demonstrate how they could affirm individual identities through the delivery of their curriculum area. This was not to be something just for Religion and PSHE but for every subject.

Stereotyping takes place when someone thinks he knows the particular needs of a community but has failed to check his ideas in this regard with the community itself. We all have a responsibility to engage, as soon as possible, with people of other cultural identities entering into our localities. Real engagement helps to dispel any myths and to discover the particular needs of those communities. This takes time and there are no short cuts! We

have to learn how to communicate in a way that demonstrates our esteem for those with whom we engage. In this process, we may discover that some of our language with regard to other communities may be inappropriate. We may make mistakes and have to seek forgiveness. But fear of using language that might be deemed inappropriate, fear of entering into someone else's culture and being thought foolish, should not be dressed up as justifiable disdain for "Political correctness".

In the same way that many people would criticise "political correctness" others would show disdain for multiculturalism as if it was all part of a liberal experiment that went wrong. Some, who think in this way, would, however, mistakenly understand multiculturalism as what is often termed "the Saris and Samosas approach". This approach treats other cultural communities in an overly simplistic, superficial and, therefore, "stereotypical" way. It treats them as if they are exotic but does not suggest that they "belong" or are understood. A Caribbean "theme" evening once a year, for example, hardly addresses the particular needs of the African descent members of a community. Each cultural grouping has to feel that it is somehow part of the very fabric of the wider community and not an exotic decoration that can easily be discarded at whim.

In a similar way, making references to, or displaying images of, Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King does not necessarily demonstrate respect for people of African descent. If they are the only people of African descent that are referred to with respect, then it is clear that they are seen to be exceptional, and, therefore, not typical.

With regard to "established groups in the exercise of power", how many times have the words, "We have always done it this way!" been spoken in Church communities? Immediately any change that might accommodate new communities becomes almost impossible. If people from different cultural communities have recently arrived to join a worshipping community and everything remains the same, one can almost guarantee that institutional racism is at play. There is the suggestion made that for a black person to join a so-called "mainline" Christian denomination in Europe or in the USA, he is in danger of losing his black soul. Lawrence Lucas, an African American Catholic priest, in his book, "Black priest/White Church" (Africa World Press 1989), spoke of meeting Malcolm X when he (Lucas) was on his way to seminary. Malcolm X asked him what he was doing. When Lucas told him, with some pride, that he was on his way to study to be a Catholic priest, Malcolm X said, "Are you out of your God damned mind?" Later, when he had become a priest, Lucas said that he realised the full horrible truth of what Malcolm X was suggesting. He claimed then that

the most devastating effect of Catholicism on Black people has been the loss of their “black” minds.

It is the dynamic of Institutional Racism that provides the horns of the dilemma facing many Christians of African descent. On the one hand, they are ideologically opposed to the very idea of segregation. On the other hand, pastoral neglect and a failure to enable religious expression with which they can identify leave them to seek out other sites for the development of their own spiritual life. Some would join the so-called “Black led” Christian churches, others would follow the likes of Malcolm X, who, in the early days of his conversion, saw Islam as the faith for Black people. Unfortunately, it is often a criminal, radicalised and extremist version of Islam that they then espouse because of their perceived rejection by the white Christian communities in particular and white society in general. Notably 70% of African Americans who go to jail come out having embraced Islam, or what they perceive to be Islam (Cf. Paul Valleley, in *The Tablet*, 12th Nov. 2005).

Thankfully, from my standpoint, a new ecclesiology has been developing in the Roman Catholic community over the last forty years. This is an ecclesiology of communion and it is here that we find a dynamic to support the affirming of individual cultural identities. This ecclesiology is based on the belief that each person is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19). With this ecclesiology there is much talk of “the inculturation of the Christian message”(cf. par. 532 of Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church), which is described as “the productive encounter between the Gospel and the various branches of knowledge”. From the same source, it is suggested that: “...every person, family and intermediate group has something original to offer to the community”(C. of S.D.C.). In this ecclesiology, people from every cultural identity are able to find something of themselves in the telling of the Christian story and they are able to participate in the retelling of that story from their own experience. For people of non-European ethnic groupings, however, brought up in a European expression of Christianity, it might take some considerable deconstruction and excavation before being able to reconstruct a theology that truly honours who they are.

With a communion ecclesiology, unity is found through respecting diversity and not through expecting uniformity. The model of the Trinity is the model *par excellence* for the Church and for any grouping that seeks real unity. Our involvement in the Trinity, however, calls us to hear and respond to that eternal prayer that proceeds from the Son to the Father. It is a prayer of absolute dependence. It is that same prayer that we are told, in St. Paul’s

letter to the Romans, issues from everyone that is moved by the Spirit and it makes us cry out “Abba”, “Father”. The place that we hear that prayer most clearly is among those who are in desperate need. A communion ecclesiology, therefore, also requires those involved to hear and respond to this prayer. There are often so many issues of inequality affecting incoming cultural communities. People from Church communities should be seen to be aware of those inequalities and to be addressing them with some success. Perhaps, for example, churches could make themselves even more aware of the situation affecting our asylum seekers. Destitution caused by the removal of support, affecting subsistence as well accommodation, even when cases are not fully determined, is causing a massive problem for Church and society alike. Immigration and asylum is a controversial area but church communities can all too easily follow the populist line and appear unwelcoming to people in desperate need. There are often concerns about worshipping communities becoming too political but if those communities are not seen to be involved in the struggle to create something of the Kingdom here and now, they will fail in their mission.

Conclusion:

The peace process in Northern Ireland and the significant economic growth in the Republic of Ireland have resulted in the arrival of many new immigrant communities into both places. Diversity is now a growing reality here for Church and society alike. A secularist or “colour blind” response that denies the relevance of religion or culture will undermine community cohesion. But some policies of multiculturalism are outdated in that they are stereotypical or bereft of judgement and, therefore, become destructive of society. It is only by affirming different identities that are indeed highly estimable that we create community.

(Rev) Philip T Sumner
November 2005.