

Speech by Trevor Phillips at the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture in November 2010: Inclusion and Diversity

Introduction

Thank you for that kind introduction. I am delighted to be here today at Regent's College to talk about an issue that is at the heart of this college's history, and so fundamental to the world we find ourselves in today.

This college's history is intertwined with the path of promoting opportunity for all.

I was brought up in the Nonconformist tradition myself; my father was a Methodist lay preacher. My earliest significant act of rebellion was to join the Salvation Army at the age of eight - probably because the music was better, and the church or citadel was closer to my house and it had a uniform. What more could a boy want.

But both the Methodists and the Salvationists taught me early on that what animates the truly righteous is education, the relief of poverty and change in this world. The original name of the Army was, of course, the

Christian mission - before William Booth decided that one could literally be a Christian Soldier.

That tradition is reflected here in the Regents College. In the 17th Century, the Test and Corporation Acts excluded Nonconformists from holding civil or military office and prevented them from studying at either Cambridge or Oxford.

Others might simply have folded their hands in quiet resignation, or spent their energy weeping and wailing at the exclusion. The founders of this college did something important; they did something about it, and Regent's offered these students a high quality University education in the Arts and Law.

Now, I think this is a salutary lesson in how to respond to injustice; one that today's reformers would do well to heed. There is a great deal of value in contesting injustice as loudly and vividly as possible; I am myself a veteran of student occupations through the 1970s - I used to be able to say before the expansion of the Higher Education system that I had picketed every single university the in Britain apart from Stirling in

Scotland - and that was because the campus is just too beautiful and tranquil for any serious anger.

But what I learned then is that protest should never be an end in itself. What the Nonconformists showed us, and Regent's is an example of this – was that true revolutionaries do not just aim to make a noise - they exist to make a change.

Change is, of course the purpose of the many people in our society who work towards what we would call, in the jargon of today, greater inclusion, and fairness; and who combat inequality and discrimination.

So, tonight I want to say a few words about the stage that we are at in that battle, socially and legally; and I want to consider a question which is perhaps more relevant than at any moment in my adult life : how do we ensure fairness in a time of austerity?

There are two reasons why this matters.

First, as we've seen throughout the twentieth century, it is at times of scarcity of resources that societies become fractious; when solidarity is

threatened; when competition for jobs, homes and services put the bonds of neighbourliness and community under strain.

But as the Chancellor frequently says, we are all in this together; we all contributed to a greater or lesser degree to the situation we are in and we all have to make some contribution to digging our way out of the hole. But we are unlikely to do so together if we don't feel that the burden of rescue is shared fairly - that we are all doing some digging - and perhaps that those who got the most out of the good times put in some extra effort to get us out of the bad times.

Second, it's not going to be like this for ever. The economy will recover; jobs will return, businesses will grow, and prosperity will bloom again. But should it be an aim of policy to return our country to exactly where it was before the crisis? I don't think so. The Deputy Prime Minister today has said that this is an opportunity to rewrite the story and to rebuild a different sort of Britain. To coin a phrase - I agree with Nick. And surely, above all this is a moment to inscribe for good in British life, the values of fairness and equality which most people in this country now say that they believe in.

We've shown over the past three decades how quickly and decisively we can change in this regard.

We've Come A Long Way

As recently as 1968 it was legal to refuse housing, employment or public services to people because of their ethnic background. Today that would be unthinkable.

Frankly, if you've been to a civil partnership, you'll know that it has the same features as a heterosexual marriage, drunken aunties included.

A generation ago we used to imprison gay men. Today same sex-couples can celebrate their civil partnership.

Up until 1985, pregnancy discrimination was not recognised. Today every working woman has the legal right to maternity leave.

We now have stronger equality legislation than ever before, in the form of the Equality Act, which came into force at the end of the last Government's tenure. This legislation consolidated and strengthened protection against all of the seven protected characteristics: race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion and belief.

But fundamental challenges remain. And we ignore them at our peril.

The Challenges of Today

As I see it, the challenges of the 21st century can be broken down into two big questions: how can we live sustainably on the planet and how can we live with each other?

Our business – the Commission's business, is the latter – how do we find ways of living together graciously? It's difficult at the best of times but how do we do it successfully in a time of rapid change and austerity?

One of the most obvious signs of change, and one of the most symbolically potent, lies in the perception of who constitutes the British people. Sixty-two years on from the arrival of the *Empire* Windrush,

which heralded the start of post-war immigration from our then colonies, we have become a very different people.

In the early 1950s my parents arrived to a country that was literally cold to them, as well as socially hostile. They were fortunate enough to find a church - Finsbury Park's Methodist Church - that welcomed black worshippers. Many others were forced to worship at home; and thus was founded the infant black church movement.

That church, by the way, the one in which I myself was christened, has come full circle. Today, the Methodists share it with the Chinese Church in London, a congregation of relatively new migrants, and the families of children who have been adopted from China. And, by the way, I always find this rather touching and I wonder if it's why my parents chose it: for anyone who claims that God doesn't have a sense of irony, the church's address is Number One, Wilberforce Road.

But today's immigrants enjoy a warmer welcome, and are joining a society which is far less racially antagonistic. That doesn't mean that there aren't anxieties about immigration. We've heard a lot about that

today, and will no doubt hear more. But unlike most Western European countries, our anti-immigrant parties are no longer electorally successful.

The BNP is nearly bankrupt, and may be compelled to abandon its policy of racially exclusive membership in the next few weeks. The emergence of the anti-Muslim English Defence League is not a sign of the far right's resurgence - it is, if anything a retreat to the streets.

The fact is that we now grasp that in this modern world, just as money and communications have become free to roam the planet according to the dictates of the global economy, so too will people.

Globalisation has seen a 200 million people living outside their country of birth, that's more than at any other time in history. If international migrants all lived in the same place, they would now constitute the world's fifth most populous country – after China, India, the United States and Indonesia.

There have been big changes to the economic world as well.

Remittances now make up an unspoken part of the global economic structure. An estimated \$450 billion US dollar is sent home by migrants worldwide.

But the changes, in our country and in our world, haven't just been about who lives here. How we live has also changed.

All sorts of things that we assumed would be a constant part of our lives have also shifted: we have largely moved on from the traditional 'mother' and 'father' roles; the position of women in the labour market has strengthened; and we now recognise lesbian and gay civil partnerships.

Families have changed too. When I reached the age at which I was allowed to vote in 1971, just one child in 12 lived with a single parent - probably more likely than not to be the result of a parent's death. Today, that figure is one child in four. Then - 8% of births were outside marriage, today it's 46%. Then - children of multiple heritage were described as half-caste, they were routinely regarded as objects of such shame that they were given up for adoption. Today - one in ten children

are themselves of multiple heritage or live with a parent whose ethnic background is different to their own.

I am not making any judgements about the merits of these changes – all can be contested - some are clearly a mark of progress and some may not be. What I am saying is that they are all big challenges to society as a whole.

There are more comings and goings. And the comings and goings are more different than before.

What does this all mean? For some, this is a picture of vibrancy, cosmopolitanism and energy, but for many, it's unsettling. Old certainties and networks have crumbled – and the danger of a society divided by the barriers of inequality and injustice has emerged.

Now, what I have been describing presents itself as change issue. Not an equality problem. But our failure to cope with the pace of change all too often accentuates differences in opportunity and life changes.

Rapid change means that establishing a collective ability to accommodate other peoples' world views is more difficult, yet more important than ever before.

Religion

Nowhere is this more evident than in the emerging challenge of accommodating Britain's flourishing diversity of religious beliefs. Again, this is less about equality, and more about how we manage difference.

In the case of modern Islam, this issue is being argued out across Europe and there are anti-Islamic parties across the continent. We hear of disputes around religious garments and the building of minarets. I'm not so much concerned with the rise of the far right parties themselves. I am more concerned about the impact the rise has on the overall political and cultural ecology. Put bluntly, extremists of either side aren't going to take over the pitch but we have to keep a keen eye out to make sure that they don't move the political goalposts.

There is some good news here. Last month we published the first ever comprehensive Review of equality and human rights in Britain - the first time such an exercise has been conducted on a whole nation, anywhere in the world. *How Fair is Britain? – as it's entitled-* shows that British tolerance is remarkably resilient. Still, it would be wrong to deny that people are worried about how we manage religious diversity: 60% of the British public believe that religion is a more divisive issue than race.

So what is the issue for society when it comes to faith? The kinds of problem which demand resolutions come in three levels forms:

Firstly, there is the trivial and absurd. Each year at about this time I find myself in a weird media *Twilight Zone* in which I am invited to take a view about the legitimacy of Christmas in a multi-ethnic society.

Everyone knows that this is a non-argument, and that arguing about celebrating Christmas as a Christian festival, with the story of the birth of Jesus at the centre of it, is about as pointless as arguing whether Anne Widdecombe should still be on *Strictly*. Whether you like it or not, whether you think it's absurd, a danger to health and safety, or an affront to Terpsichore, get over it.

Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews like Christmas if only because it reasserts the place of religious belief as one of the cultural anchors of our national life; and yes, I know Christmas has become commercial and materialistic, and coarsened in many ways - but it is in itself a miracle that the essential message of hope and promise is renewed through this festival every year - and you don't have to be a Christian believer to be uplifted by the prospect that there can be a better world.

Christmas is a fact of British life, and most of like it that way. This year's controversy by the way is a decision by a company to define Christmas Day as a normal working day because other religious festivals are not public holidays. The excuse is that this might violate equality law. As the guardian of that law - let me deliver my considered judgement: its rubbish. This is a policy that owes more, I would say, to the spirit of Ebenezer Scrooge than to respect for a multi-faith nation. Christmas is a bank holiday because it is a historic, traditional holiday in this country. This is no more discriminatory than those in Saudi Arabia celebrating Ramadan. So can I make a plea? Could we make 2010 the year when this sort of nonsense stops?

Secondly, there are the arguments between secularists and non-secularists. This is more serious. Here, we get onto the real, underlying problem, which is about the place of faith and faith identity in the state. It's not my place to start a row with the secularists' views but the law says quite clearly that faith is a protected characteristic of human identity. As such, there is no ground to squeeze it out of the public sphere.

One example of this is the controversy about faith schools. People will no doubt continue to argue about these schools, and that's fine if the school is not providing the basics – say if the teaching is bad. But people should not criticise these schools on the grounds of their very existence. We did some work on this about two years ago and found that the Church of England and Catholic schools in this country tend to be more ethnically diverse than typical state schools. Therefore, the evidence suggests that there is more integration across lines of ethnicity in religious schools than in other schools. There are real reasons for that, typically they draw from wider catchment areas – because they are allowed to.

Here too there is a need to make the distinction between how the law applies to *individuals* and how it applies to *public bodies providing public services*. For me, the freedom of conscience for individuals does not automatically equate to freedom for an institution or a congregation to do as it likes. Let me give you an example. An individual may decide that they don't want to live in a house with their homosexual relative and that's their own personal choice. But when they provide a publicly licensed or funded service - a bed and breakfast hotel let's say - they cannot extend that personal prejudice. In another example - a man may agree with his wife that she will walk five paces behind him, but that does not translate into a public body discriminating against women.

Finally, there's the trickiest issue, the most difficult one; how do we negotiate the everyday frictions between different world views? This is where we see the symptoms of difference showing up every week in the work place. For example:

- How should we regard the nurse who offers to pray for an atheist patient? Is this a kindly gesture? Or unwanted harassment?
- How should we treat the employee or school student who insists that a bangle or a cross is an essential expression of their religious identity, and a requirement to remove it is an assault on conscience?

These questions go to the heart of the way in which we negotiate the everyday frictions. And as I suggested earlier, we may now be entering a period in which those frictions become more common and more abrasive. This is why we urgently need a new agenda for living together to find a way of managing these tensions.

So what might this agenda look like? Well, I really don't know what the rules should be and happily, no-one's going to trust me to decide. I would say that this is matter for a serious national debate, about the principles on which we build a society which is diverse and subject to constant change.

Such a debate would have to be unencumbered by the strident zealots of religious and anti-religious fundamentalism, and based in the good old Anglican values of pragmatism, compromise and fudge. But so that no-one thinks that I have come to this point in order to cop out, let me advance a few tentative ideas of what such principles might look like.

The first principle is of practicality. Religious tradition cannot and should not get in the way of getting the job done. The key question here is: what is the nature of the job in hand? A blanket ban of wearing the Burqa in public places could not be supported but, if you are teaching English, it is hard to see how you can do this – especially for children - if your face is covered; if you are working in a secure environment – such as the college I came from, Imperial, which held high grade Uranium - it is hard to see how security can be maintained if you are not willing to reveal your face.

The second principle is transparency. This entails everyone being clear about the job they will be expected to do. In the example of the Islington Council and the Christian wedding Registrar who refused to officiate civil partnerships, there should have been clarity on the expectations of both sides before any agreement was signed. The Registrar needed to know upfront that conducting civil partnerships were a part of everyday business in that borough. But the council also needed to be clear that she would object to carrying out that aspect of the job.

The third principle is of proportionality. Again, in the case of the wedding Registrar, it may well have been possible to organise the practicalities in some way to ensure that the public body could continue to provide that service, even if that particular individual was not offering it due to her personal beliefs. I want to say, by the way, that I myself would not personally endorse such an arrangement, but the law would I think probably allow it

These are just three possible principles; there will be other - maybe better expressions of our historic commonsense approach,

Faith institutions can help enormously here. Maybe this is my own prejudice, but Anglicanism has tended to be a very precise reflection of the best British attitudes to integration. Anglicanism as an approach is like a cloak. Though it has something real at the core, it's hard to see that something - and even harder to draw a picture of it. We use words like decency, fair play and so forth as proxies. But its virtue is that the lack of precise definition makes it open and flexible: it is easy to become an Anglican; you don't have to believe in much; it is malleable; and up

until now it has even accommodated world views most folk would think of as incompatible.

It sometimes gets itself into difficulties with the modern world but so far it has always muddled through.

And the British are good at muddling through. But maybe the Church's current travails are teaching us a lesson about how the world we live in has changed. The truth is that we're discovering that muddling only works if you have a long time to get to your destination; and probably you also need a dominant elite interpreting the rules - and a submissive majority deferring to their wisdom. Our problem today is that we don't have that time. And we no longer have the deference. The speed and complexity of change mean that sometimes we are left struggling to find answers.

Fairness

So how in this contemporary setting should we pursue our aims?

It's hard to imagine us facing these challenges successfully unless there is a sense of fairness.

But what is fairness?

Well, one thing is clear, it is a concept that is much in fashion today I don't think that's such a bad thing. But it's actually been a core value for Britain for centuries. Some have even called it a quasi-religious obsession. Breaches of the fair-play principle provoke indignation. We know it when we don't have it. British 'fair play' is not rigid or unrealistically egalitarian – it acknowledges that there will be winners and losers, but posits that everyone should be given a decent chance. If you ask people what the institution that best describes the British is, they are likely to mention queuing – it's all about fair-play. Buying your round is also about fair-play. Fairness is a prevalent theme in our language – sometimes irritatingly so the 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand's – the 'well, to be fair' - '; the 'fair enough'; and the 'firm but fair'.

The truth is that much of morality as we know it is about fair play. A fair society is one in which our origins do not determine our destinies.

And sometimes, treating people equally means treating them differently.

Let me give you an example of this: if you are a wheelchair user and you want to go for a meal in a restaurant, it really doesn't matter if you have a million quid in your pocket. If there's no ramp, or they can't be

bothered to find the ramp, then you are still left sitting on the pavement in the rain. That's unfair. Rectifying it involves treating you differently to those customers able to climb the stairs.

Fairness sums up our belief in cooperation for the common good. And in an age of diversity, that's crucial.

The Highway Code - an Agenda for Living Together

I want to come back to the test I set myself about rules. We need to be able to influence human relationships that can never and should never be touched by law. No-one would argue that everything can be solved by legislation.

Some of the principles I set out above might be a start. But as I have said, more broadly, British identity, and in particular our preoccupation with fairness, provides a foundation for dealing with difference, whether those are ethnic or religious, based on gender or sexual orientation.

To make this clear, let me use a metaphor. I like transport metaphors. There are millions of cars on British roads. The vast range of vehicles

reflects our human diversity; and what we do with them reflects the myriad of different choices we make as individuals – evidenced by the everyday tasks we perform on the narrow streets that we all share. We all want to drive to our own destination in our car. Most of us want to get where we are going in the shortest possible time.

Given that, it's remarkable how smoothly things run. Why is it that we're not all crashing all of the time? That's because we have rules, encompassed in our Highway Code. Now, we all learn the Highway Code, but most of us can't remember ever reading it; we just instinctively know what is demanded of us when we interact with the other road users – at junctions, roundabouts and traffic lights.

Now in the old days, when cars were few, and pretty much identical, this code wouldn't have mattered so much. But numbers and diversity bring special challenges. They demand ways of managing our interactions. We stop at lights, we 'Give Way' at junctions, we drive on one side of the road.

That code is based on a set of values – the idea being that all road users have the same right to respect – irrespective of shape or size – Chelsea Tractor or Skoda. We take this for granted on our roads to today. But it wasn't always like that. We had to create the rules. This thing we take for granted isn't just the natural order.

Looking Forward – the Forensic Approach

The rules of community are no different in principle. Some of them are written down – I mentioned the Equality Act – but most people will never sit down and read that line for line. Most of the time we intuitively know.

But many people are still looking for guidance: we have taken nearly 2,000 calls to our Helpline on issues to do with Religion and Belief in the last three years. The majority of those calls are about dress codes, religious symbols and religious holidays in relation to employment.

The Commission cannot by itself address all these issues. We do not 'own' the principles for the Highway Codes. Part of this journey is the responsibility of government; but it will take the efforts of the whole of what we might call 'Big Society' to unlock these gates: people,

communities, and businesses. It is the Commission's job to promote, facilitate and monitor that change.

The way we do business is changing. As I have said before, making progress isn't necessarily about being noisy. Part of our journey is about moving from being a reasonably effective state sponsored pressure group, whose characteristic mode is protest; into an independent, non-partisan, creative regulator, focused on change, whose tools are measurement, monitoring, persuasion and critically – transparency.

Our job is to identify inequality and discrimination, to point in the direction of remedies; and where possible to help organisations and individuals to take the steps that will promote sustainable change. Or, continuing with the transport metaphor – we are helping society to Mirror, Signal and Manoeuvre.

Conclusion

The point is that living together graciously makes our lives richer, more secure and happier. Inequality makes life harder, meaner and nastier.

My message today has been that we need to find some new way of pursuing 'gentle integration' but of doing so at speed and in a time of greater economic restriction.

We do need some constants. A simple, set of principles that should run through our behaviour; which embraces us all; and which guides our actions in times of uncertainty. Those principles endure long after all of us, these discussions, this government, and our Commission have been forgotten. Perhaps it's the 'moral minds' of scholars such as you here at Regent's College who will provide tomorrow's answers to the questions being asked today.

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