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The Changing Nature of Policy Discourse in Britain: multiculturalism to nationalism

ABSTRACT

The European Union was originally formed to ensure that, amongst other objectives, Europe would 'pull together' as one nation – being stronger in unification, and would also become secure within a 'common identity'. These objectives gave rise to a number of policies that influenced every aspect of European society; politics, economics, social structures, social mobility, education, cultural and religious identity etc. Multiculturalism spread across Europe, including Britain – Britain becoming a diverse pluralistic country interested in new ideologies and beliefs. Multiculturalism values difference and celebrates diversity, thus supporting the pluralistic nature of the British population.

Following civil un-rest in Britain during 2001 and subsequent terrorist's attacks of 2005 multiculturalism was seen as an unworkable policy; the government reasoning that the multicultural policy had encouraged ethnic minority and faith communities to segregate themselves from society as a whole. As a consequence, the government focus turned to the promotion of a national identity, highlighting commonality and citizenship as being fundamental to community cohesion. The focus and discourse on community cohesion and citizenship became policy, which was also embedded within school curricular.

This paper discusses the implications of policy changes in Britain; why multiculturalism suddenly became the culprit for societal problems despite the policy's emphasis on equality and tolerance, and why it was re-placed with the community cohesion agenda – seemingly a nationalist approach. The paper considers the contradictions of this development in light of the pluralistic nature of British citizens, and also examines the possible link to emerging policies. There is an exploration of the influence these policies have on religious education syllabuses and the implications this might have to religion as a subject in general.

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Religion itself provokes discussion, debate and often conflict. The fact that we communicate on a global scale means that we are also influenced on a global scale. This includes the acknowledgement and appreciation of religious cultures, traditions and ideologies – pluralism is simply a part of globalisation. The introduction of multicultural policies came about in direct response to the emergence of mass-migration and the development of pluralistic societies, and the need to support diverse communities across Europe (Modood: 2008a).

Calo (2010) believes that pluralism is about:

- accepting difference
- acknowledging diversity
- acknowledging and accepting that there is difference in religion, culture and practice in society
- engaging in inter-faith dialogue
- discussing ways of living together
- relating & connecting with each other
- supporting & promoting religious freedom

These aims and objectives are clearly foundational to multicultural policies. Multicultural policy aims to maintain and value the various cultures and communities living within society; fight against discrimination, promote individual and communal participation in social life and be inclusive to all ethnic groups and all origins (Abdourahamane, 2011).

There are basically four managerial approaches to multiculturalism:

- The assimilation
- The valuation of difference
- The recognition
- The multiculturalism

The assimilation model holds to the laws, policies, rights, traditions and customs of the dominant majority – the host country. The government protects the nation's majority, the national culture and the status of citizenship. Immigrants, although allowed to practice individual and community traditions, are therefore expected to comply with the host country's national systems – blend in with the rest of society. However, state law can be contradictory and/or in direct conflict with faith, belief or religious doctrine.

The valuation of difference promotes different religious and cultural values and the expressions of cultural diversity. It caters for cultural diversity within public policy, avoiding (as far as possible) hierarchical structures of cultures within the host country. The expression of difference model must not, however, hinder the rights and liberties of the state.

The recognition model is situated between 'assimilation' and 'value of difference'. This model tries to maintain a balance between the two poles. It attempts to maintain a political balance within the state for all minority groups whilst maintaining good social and economic conditions for all groups.

The multiculturalism model describes a cultural 'mosaic', where all cultures are recognised and every cultural community is connected to the other equally. The state recognises the foundation, practice and traditions of all cultures; cultural diversity is catered for within the public arena – laws, policy, education etc. However, in radical or dogmatic

multiculturalism there is a danger of toleration that goes beyond justification. For example, the state tolerating cultural practices that are harmful to individuals such as abuse of children and young women (Lester, 2010).

Multiculturalism in Britain has become defined by immigration, basically working within the remit of the ‘recognition’ model. Indeed, Modood (2008a: 2) understands multiculturalism in Britain to be “the recognition of group difference within the public sphere of laws, policies, democratic discourses and the terms of a shared citizenship and national identity”.

The majority of multicultural models have been developed with the aim of addressing inequality to greater or lesser degrees. Those policies aiming to simply celebrate diversity or recognise difference neglect to address issues of social, political and economic equality, particularly for ethnic minority groups. To the other extreme, multicultural policies that focus solely on the construction of political and/or civic relationships neglect to recognise notions of identity – both cultural and religious.

In the wake of 9/11 and subsequent radical extremist attacks in Britain, such as those during July 2005 – where the culprits were British citizens – multiculturalism was perceived as a non-workable goal in attaining British solidarity (O’Donnell, 2007). Government reports (see Cantel, 2001; Ouseley, 2001) suggested faith communities self-segregated, creating an “uncivil atmosphere of mistrust, jealousy and intolerance” (Chan, 2010: 34). Whether the attacks and the riots that followed were caused by self-imposed segregation by faith communities or by injustice, inequality, and economic factors forced by ethnic minority groupings is disputable. Arguably, this indicated a need for further discourse regarding the perceived segregation of minority and faith-based communities. The government and policy makers responded by focusing their attention on national identity, highlighting the importance of developing intercommunity relationships and accepting common British values (Pilkington, 2008). The immediate response and political solution was to promote cross-cultural contact, integration, common civic identity and a common political allegiance (Chan, 2010). Blunkett (the then British Home Secretary) abandoned multiculturalism and replaced it with the promotion of citizenship and community cohesion. This was based on the premise that a greater allegiance and loyalty to Britain would ensure a more integrated management of immigrants (ibid). According to Blunkett’s view, the multicultural policy had fostered fragmentation and segregation of and within communities rather than promoting cohesion and integration (Modood, 2005). Basically, celebrating diversity and accepting difference seems to be something that is no longer worth while. Apparently, too much emphasis on celebrating diversity erodes solidarity (Pilkington, 2008). I would argue against this, following Modood (2005) in seeing multiculturalism as an integral part of a process of integration. In any case, the Community Cohesion Agenda was born.

The original Community Cohesion Agenda (2003) advocated the promotion of; a common vision, a sense of belonging, an appreciation and positive value for diversity, equal life opportunities for every citizen, positive relationships for every citizen in the workplace and support for the nurturing of strong and positive relationships across different cultures, ethnicity and faith. At this stage the political agenda seems credible, albeit vague. However, the subsequent Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) furthered the original agenda to include:

- Shared future’s – binding communities together
- A model of rights and responsibilities

- Visible social justice to build institutional trust
- Ethics of hospitality
- Social capital
- Communitarianism

There are obvious contradictions here; certainly there seems to be a direct conflict between the ‘hospitality’ and ‘communitarianism’ agenda’s – hospitality between communities v. civic control; arguably a political mismanagement governing diversity. Kundnani (2007) highlights the possibility of a slow elimination of the multicultural dimension of earlier policies – favouring assimilation and state authoritarianism. Indeed, the amended 2007 Community Cohesion Agenda moves towards civic identity above everything else. As a consequence, politics that celebrated and supported diversity (see the 1999 MacPherson Report; the 1998 Human Rights Act; the 2000 Race Relations Act) have become policies of integration. Community cohesion and citizenship take precedence over individualism and diversity; as such pluralism, multiculturalism and diversity are replaced by solidarity, a common identity, shared values – citizenship now being the core of British values – hence the current prioritisation on citizenship, particularly in schools (Kundnani, 2007).

Joppke (2004) argues that the multicultural policy has been re-placed across most European countries with political agenda’s of assimilation. Seemingly, the cohesion agenda aligns citizenship with the state, focusing on specific nationalised goals, and abandoning any recognition of diversity (Burnett, 2004). Community cohesion and citizenship, therefore, regulates ‘Britishness’, and as such marginalises ethnic minority groups and multicultural identities (ibid).

Kundnani (2002) argues that community cohesion is the government’s new model of multiculturalism. Where multiculturalism encouraged tolerance, respect and celebrated difference, community cohesion seemingly attempts to merge everything and everybody into one civic community. For example, Blunkett initiated a Community Cohesion Task Force, which encouraged immigrants to “take an ‘oath of allegiance’ to the British state and adopt British norms” (ibid: 69), whatever they may be. Further, the multiculturalist agenda encouraged the expansion of faith-based schools based on the premise that they are likely to produce responsible, respectable and active citizens. In contrast, the community cohesion agenda, according to Kundnani, suggests that “Muslim schools are dangerous breeding grounds for separatism”, and therefore faith schools should not be encouraged (ibid). Kundnani emphasises that community cohesion is very closely bound to the citizenship agenda, which is a government aim to foster a change in attitude towards difference. Kundnani (ibid: 68) further argues that ‘community cohesion’ is simply new terminology used by the government to control, institutionalise and redefine ethnic minority groups “from a living movement into an object of passive contemplation”. For Kundnani, community cohesion “is about networks, identity and discourse, rather than [addressing real issues of] poverty, inequality and power” (ibid: 71). Kundnani has highlighted a real contradiction between the two government policies.

Pilkington (2008) supports Kundnani’s discussion, suggesting that the current emphasis and discourse on community cohesion is seemingly contradictory to the promotion of racial equality and respect and tolerance of cultural diversity advocated within the government’s previous multiculturalism policies (see Macpherson, 1999; Cantel, 2001; Parekh, 2001). The introduction of multiculturalism was in supportive response to the

infusion of immigrants in the 1950s to Britain. Immigration to Britain on such a large scale invariably augmented plurality in social, cultural and religious traditions (Jackson, 2004). Britain is without doubt the home to a very diverse population. Multiculturalism recognises and supports the accommodation of ethnic minority groups, in particular, promoting respect for difference, tolerance of religious distinctiveness, the right for equality, and the diversity of cultural heritage and identity (Pilkington, 2008).

The adoption of common values within the remit of the citizenship and community cohesion agendas is not a bad thing, even if it is based on a confused and somewhat unsubstantiated reasoning. Citizenship education aims to ‘bond’ the nation’s population within a common values system. Community cohesion seeks to integrate all peoples into a national identity (Pilkington, 2008). However, personal identity with a national agenda overlooks the fact that Britain is a nation with multiple faith communities who should be afforded the courtesy of retaining their distinctiveness. For me, the term ‘*integration*’ smacks of attempted assimilation, and this is a concern. Why not simply accept and live with difference? Community cohesion should ideally support and complement multiculturalism – not replace it.

The tension between the values of supporting multiculturalism and promoting community cohesion is obvious. That all British citizens should hold some common values is a legitimate argument, and this can be achieved through citizenship education and the promotion of community cohesion without detracting from individual faith traditions. A national identity for all citizens is achievable within a pluralistic society. However, religious and cultural difference and distinctiveness are essential components of personal identity, and citizenship alone does not give anybody a sense of belonging. Perhaps, as advocated by Modood (2005), multicultural citizenship would be a better policy to pursue. Multicultural citizenship engages communities in dialogue, understanding of differences, respect, and tolerance, and advocates sensitivity towards distinctive faith traditions and practices, yet also promotes a national identity. Surely this is a more realistic goal to pursue.

Despite Kundnani’s concerns and Pilkington’s observations, community cohesion is a focused part of the educational curriculum for all schools. Although I do not agree totally with Kundnani’s view expressed above, I do agree that the community cohesion agenda is too closely linked to citizenship – and this is central to government policy. The issue for faith-based schools, and indeed for religious education, is how far the community cohesion/citizenship agenda will go in absorbing religion as opposed to its remaining as a subject discipline in its own right.

The role of religious education (RE) within the education system is important, particularly in fostering social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy within young people. Religious education underpins the community cohesion and citizenship agenda, fosters social morality, ethics and justice and aligns to the European Union’s position on supporting pluralism and multiculturalism (DfES, 2001a; DfES: 2001b; QCA & DfES, 2004; DCSF¹, 2007; Ofsted 2010; REC, 2011). Indeed, Ed Pawson, Chair of The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) argues that the study

¹The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is now the Department for Education, but will be referred to throughout the thesis as DCSF to align with the referencing of document sources. This will also apply to all other government agencies that have been re-named or re-categorized.

of RE, more than any other subject, requires “high standards of knowledge and evaluation of evidence. It explores religious and cultural topics and engages in debates over issues of diversity and conflict, ethics, philosophy and social change” (Pawson, cited in REC, 2011: 1).

The current Conservative-liberal coalition has, however, marginalized the teaching of religious education in the English education system, arguing that the National Curriculum requires more focus on science and technologies (REC, 2011). The Education Secretary, Michael Gove, recently stated that he wants more ‘facts’ in England’s National Curriculum, suggesting that the current curriculum is ‘sub-standard’. Social Science and Humanities subjects, including RE and Philosophy, are marginalized by Gove as they involve asking searching moral, ethical and spiritual questions - thus the ‘truth’ is peripheral to educators of these subjects as they encourage students to go beyond surface meanings and accept that “there are no rights answers” (Gates, 2006: 573). Moreover, the status of RE in schools is becoming increasingly vulnerable and is set to disappear from the curriculum of many secondary schools; this is precipitated by Gove’s decision to leave RE and Philosophy out of the 2010 English Baccalaureate (REC, 2011). In fact, the Arts and Humanities are increasingly under attack as spending cuts in these areas have taken place within the Further and Higher Education sectors.

Cush (2007) argues that religious education is more important than it has ever been and that despite the promotion of secular studies, there has been an increase in interest in religious studies. This, Cush believes, is due to the fact that “religion continues to be an important factor in human affairs” (ibid: 117). Indeed, Ofsted (2010: 4) report that “examination entries in religious studies at GCSE and GCE A level have continued to rise each year since 2006, reinforcing a key success of the subject in recent years”. Cush further argues in favour of achieving the aim of the United Nations in promoting “understanding and peace between diverse religious and cultural traditions” (2007: 217). More importantly, Cush (2007) believes that secularised plurality – as the government advocates – can, and in fact does, dilute traditional religious belief to the point of religious fragmentation. Jackson (1997) argues that religious pluralism can impact upon traditional belief systems to the point of dilution. Therefore, both scholars question the current religious education system and ask how education can best support students in understanding the complexity of religious diversity and multiculturalism. Indeed, Cush (ibid: 218) argues that there is “no consensus on the aims and purposes of [RE] education”; such a consensus is important, particularly in a world “in which religious beliefs and practices need to be comprehended” (ibid).

I would argue that religious education in England and Wales should encompass the diversity of faiths we find within pluralistic societies – simply because we live in one. Jackson (2004: 165) is a strong advocate for this on the basis that RE needs to “acknowledge the inevitable influence of plurality upon young people, and help them to engage with it” and that there needs to be “agreement on the scope of the subject and the processes for producing syllabuses that give close attention to pedagogical issues” (ibid: 180). Sadly, it seems the current government are in favour of finding ways to dilute, reduce or dismiss religion completely from school curriculums.

Jackson (1995) argues that too many assumptions are made regarding the impact of education, particularly that changes to religious education will actually influence change in attitudes. Jackson believes that an awareness and an understanding of different cultures, traditions and faith beliefs are important, particularly in reducing racial and cultural prejudice, but there is a distinction between religious education and religious nurture. Hulmes

(1989: 15) believes that “multi-cultural education does not reflect the variety of approaches to knowledge and to the acquisition of knowledge”. Hulmes (ibid) also argues that different cultures should be perceived as ‘wholes’ that are distinct from each other, not as a merged plurality. Religious belief is one of the main foundations of a faith community’s cultural traditions and practices, and the community needs the freedom to explore its individual beliefs in depth as well as studying other faiths. Jackson (1995: 284) argues that Britain is so “pre-occupied with the debate about the pros and cons of multi-faith education [that it has] diverted attention from a critical examination of some of the key concepts used in the debate”. He further argues that the ongoing debate concerning multi-faith education is conducted “largely [within] a fast-moving political context, with opposing parties seeking to influence legislation and policy” (ibid). What is not being considered are the “fundamental issues of representation and interpretation” (ibid: 287). Indeed, subjects like citizenship and community cohesion have been packaged with RE curriculums in order to comply with the requirements of policy; as a consequence they simply become a cobbled mix of confusion with no specific focus on any engaged learning or critical evaluation.

The dictates of policy have, to some extent, seemingly impacted negatively on subjects like RE. Although the general aims and objectives of the current Framework for RE in the UK are in themselves good, there is increasing pressure to support and promote community cohesion and citizenship – the RE focus is being lost within the social agenda. The re-placement of multiculturalism by community cohesion affects education, community and society – and not necessarily in a good way. Multiculturalism is not just a model; it is part of a larger human-rights revolution involving ethnic and racial diversity contributing to a process of democratic citizenship (Kymlicka, 2012). Indeed, Kimlicker (2012: 21) “rejects the idea that multiculturalism has failed” and argues that there is considerable empirical evidence supporting the success and positive effects of such policies. He, like Modood (2005), believes that multicultural policies are “consistent with certain forms of civic integration policies” (Kimlicker, 2012: 21) and can work effectively when combined.

Kostakopoulou (2010: 829) argues that the “shift away from multiculturalism and the politics of difference towards integration, assimilation and a gradual ‘thickening’ of political belonging” in the United Kingdom represents a “politically dated and normatively deficient approach to ethnic diversity”. She believes ‘integration’ policies have “oppressive consequences and exclusionary effects” (ibid) on diverse communities within pluralistic societies. Indeed, she draws on a canon of literature evidencing the failure of assimilation models through forced social cohesion. Pluralistic societies are a fact, public drive towards recognising and accepting diversity, supporting equality and promoting individual freedom – ethnic, cultural and religious – facilitated through multicultural policy and RE has never been as important.

Cush (2007) argues that religious reaction to pluralism can be categorised into three distinct groups: exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist. Exclusivists believe that plurality of faith is so diverse within societies that children need to establish a firm identity with their own faith tradition. They argue that education within a religiously homogenous group prevents discrimination and that the state can guarantee civic cohesion at national level. Countries that have a dominant faith identity follow a confessional religious tradition. For example, Orthodox Christianity is the main component of the Greek religious education curriculum. Faith is considered to be a major part of national identity and an essential component of cultural heritage. Therefore, Orthodox Christianity dominates RE throughout Greece.

However, different faith traditions are also taught within the majority of confessional religious education, albeit constituting a small percentage of the syllabus.

Inclusivists “stress religious literacy and the ability to debate and evaluate religious claims intelligently” (Cush, 2007: 219). They argue that children from different faith traditions should relate to each other in “ways that allow learning from as well as about each other” (ibid). In the current pluralistic climate it is therefore important to understand the beliefs, practices and values of each faith community in order to be sensitive, tolerant and live together harmoniously. Inclusivists further argue that school is a ‘neutral’ space which encourages students to discuss openly their beliefs and ideas and develop an ability to express un-biased opinions. For example, England and Wales currently opt to include a non-confessional multi-faith religious education within community schools by way of an Agreed Syllabus. The aim is to promote multi-cultural understanding within a pluralistic society. Faith-based schools, however, have the freedom to utilise the Locally Agreed Syllabus or follow their own preferred curriculum. The majority of faith-based schools do follow their own curriculum, which is set out by the governing body of the faith community. As is the case with the confessional syllabus of exclusivists, faith-based schools also include a pluralistic perspective to their curriculum.

In contrast, pluralists seek to keep religious education out of the curriculum, believing faith is too sensitive to be discussed within a state school setting. They also argue that, even without intention, teachers’ personal opinions will influence the transfer of knowledge and understanding of RE. For example, education policies employed by France, the USA and China follow a ‘secularist view’— the state does not include religion in the school curriculum and faith remains a matter for the private sphere. The neutrality of RE within state schooling supposedly suggests that the state is being tolerant and considerate of religious pluralism and not wanting to promote one specific faith above another (Cush, 2007). However, a strong case could be made for the argument that excluding RE from the curriculum is tantamount to suggesting that religion and faith are not worthy of academic study. Children need a secure environment in which to explore their own beliefs and to discuss the values and practices of others. Further, children need preparation to live in a religiously diverse world – how will they learn about plurality without education? Cush (2007: 221) argues that the exclusion of RE from the education curriculum “is not a neutral stance but an anti-religious one”. It could be argued that this exclusion is surely in direct conflict with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees human rights to faith adherents of all religions (Article 2), and a right to freedom of thought, religious belief and practice (Article 18).

However countries respond to pluralism, multicultural policies have a role to play. The rights of minority ethnic/cultural/religious groups are secured within national and international human rights laws; therefore, multicultural policy is not only credible but essential in supporting and promoting intercultural and religious pluralism.

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