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New Neighbours, New Opportunities
The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility

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Response to the lecture by John Denham MP

It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to attend this ICCJ conference and to respond to John Denham's thought-provoking address. The ICCJ has been close to my heart, ever since I attended my first conference in Rome, nearly 15 years ago.

John, I'd like to pick up and explore two many points, firstly, the temptation for the media/public perceptions to sweep aside the complex differences of identity and secondly, your comment about the 2001 Northern riots which identified communities as 'barely meeting, let alone talking'

Identity

You stated, rightly in my view, that the issue of identity is always a complex and multi-dimensional problem. Traditionally, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, or Christians, defined themselves in terms of their shared laws, values, and beliefs. If and when they had to move, they would take their laws, values, and beliefs with them. It was not so much territory that defined their identity but values and a way of life, a role often played by religion.

However, the modern nation-state is defined by a distinct geographical territory. To live within this territory is to be within the jurisdiction of the nation-state and thus to be a member of the community of people who equally live within its borders. It is difficult to be a

citizen of more than one nation-state. At one point, it was impossible to carry more than one passport. Today in Britain we are allowed to carry two passports, i.e. we are allowed to be citizens of only two nation-states and this only recently. Still, we have very serious difficulties moving around and settling in a new country.

Yet it is quite common to have multiple identities such as religious, cultural, ethnic and social. Often these identities cut across various geographical and linguistic boundaries and so it was common to move freely between one territory and another alternating between languages without significantly loosing any sense of belonging to the same community. Our modern nation-state is unique in history for its privileging of territorial identity and (normally) a single language.

The modern nation-state is also unique in defining itself as an association of separate individuals. In the past, one belonged to a tribe, a clan, a cast, an ethnic group, a religious community, etc…To possess rights solely as an individual irrespective of any other affiliation is a modern invention. As such, people are treated equally by the state and consequently other forms of collective identity such as ethnic, cultural, or religious that associates the individual with anything other than the state can at times be viewed as problematic. This is perhaps why the modern nation-state can feel threatened by demands made by cultural or religious groups for separate rights or recognition (consider the demands made by the Basque and Catalan people in Spain, etc).

A common national identity does not contradict multiple sources of identity. People belong to different religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups and this is a fundamental feature of any society. It does not go against a shared common over-arching identity to possess multiple identities. There is no reason why a person cannot be Québécois and Canadian at the same time or Scottish and British, or Muslim and French, or Catholic and British. This is not to say that conflicts between these identities do not arise, they often do. But usually they emerge when one's identity is defined so tightly as to exclude the other. For example, if being British means being Anglican, then Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus etc will feel excluded.

Perhaps for the first time in world history, Muslims and Jews are living together as minorities. (As an aside, one of my Christian colleagues suggested to me that Christians also are a minority.) In the UK, one result of immigration, especially from the former colonies, is changing social and

economic conditions of ethnic groups. This leads to a change in an individual's identity or the now more common notion of hybrid identity, when one's identity is constituted by a multiplicity of distinct identities, —cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, national—that were once considered distinct identities. This is a relatively new development in Europe but has a longer history and is more common in the USA. An example of hybrid identity is an American-born citizen of Irish origins. With the increased communication and ease of travel today, many American citizens of Irish origin can participate in the cultural world of Ireland while simultaneously participating in the cultural world of the US. If asked about one's identity, this person would most probably reply with a hyphenated response such as: American-Irish. Pushed further, one might find out even deeper layers of identity such as American-Irish-County Mayo. **Jew from 19th c. Warsaw…**

A consequence of hybrid identities is that people regularly cross boundaries that divide insider from outsider, thus blurring identity boundaries that were previously more clearly defined. Boundaries being remade, redefined, and re-imagined thus creating new identities, new cultures, and new relations. In the process of such changes collective identities of groups change and their collective memories are reinterpreted.

In times of change when people have to readjust and redefine who they are, identities can be quite fragile. It is no easy task to redefine one's identity, the fragility of which can lead to prejudice as a defensive mechanism. The reaction against rapidly shifting boundaries of identity, especially when one or more identity is 'perceived' to be under threat inevitably leads to an over-rootedness in one's identity and a subsequent decrease in a desire to engage in dialogue with the 'Others.' This is one of the challenges of living in multi-cultural society. Our common over-arching identity needs to allow sufficient space for other identities all of which need to be open and inclusive.

Personal Encounter

John, you also mentioned the 2001 riots when you identified communities as 'barely meeting, let alone talking' – the need then, as it remains today, if not more so, is for increased examples of personal encounter. The Woolf Institute, as I'm sure the ICCJ and other partner organisations, are committed to encouraging mutual understanding between people of differing religious perspectives. We are also deeply aware of the lack of understanding and the resulting mistrust that abounds in our world. We share a conviction that education is the key to building stronger ties between our traditions and between the

religious and secular world, thereby providing a framework for the constructive engagement of disagreement.

Across the world people are persecuted because of their beliefs, or because of other people's misconceptions about them. Ignorance breeds fear which lies at the heart of religious and all other forms of discrimination. Fear fosters hatred and conflict. It is easier to dehumanise those we do not know or understand. We can no longer afford to avoid these issues. The key to addressing the perceived gulf between different people and their community's experience must lie in education, and particularly in personal encounter – in other words, meeting one another in a safe environment. In our work with the Cambridge Theological Federation the Woolf Institute has identified 4 key features:

Positive Attitudes to Difference
1. Through personal encounter, shared values will be affirmed and trust will be established, thus developing skills which will help people to accept difference, and to address contentious issues more positively.

The Value of Personal Encounter
2. Personal encounter is vital to a good education. In particular, meeting and interacting with people from different religious backgrounds enables us
to move beyond just learning about each other's traditions to helping the listener to see beyond their own experience.

The Complexity of Identities
3. The process of personal encounter helps us to appreciate the complex of identities - racial, ethnic, religious, secular and others – as well as to recognise the tensions that exist between these identities.

From the Individual to the Community
4. Encounter begins with the individual, and is never less than personal, but can develop in such a way as to be extended to a group and even to communities.

Encounter moves beyond simple 'learning about' other traditions. Although many are already persuaded that 'learning about' other faith traditions is important, it is not sufficient as a basis for mutual understanding for we can only understand the other by interpreting what we encounter in the light of our own experience. At the heart of encounter lies the sharing of personal stories which help the listener to see beyond their own experience. It is

in hearing, we listen; it is in listening, that we start to understand. And it is upon understanding that we should base our education.

Finally, let me give you one brief example of how personal encounter and identity might be explored as we move beyond the traditional framework of 'multiculturalism'. The Woolf institute, in partnership with colleagues at the University of Cambridge, is beginning to explore how Jewish, Christian, (and Muslim) community responses to the economic crisis are influencing perceptions and practices of cultural unity, differentiation, and tension. In other words, we are investigating changes in faith-based identity as the UK is undergoing austerity. We are asking whether the economic crisis and retreat of the State from social intervention are pushing faith-based conceptions of solidarity and otherness to transcend normal boundaries. For instance, analysing interaction within a tangible act like running a church-based food bank used by Muslims challenges traditional conceptions of solidarity and distance between communities. Do such activities reinforce boundaries and tension between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, or cut across them and create new inter-communal or associative spaces of moral identity and meaning? At a time of dwindling state resources, we are seeing discourses of commonality and trust, which are shaped by an intensified pragmatic need to cooperate in the sphere of social action.

We hope to announce initial results when Cardinal Koch and the Chief Rabbi speak at the Woolf Institute on 26th February, 2013. Keep the date in your diary!

Thank you

1) 'Barely meeting, let alone talking' 2001 riots – the need for personal encounter

2) 'belonging' shapes behaviour more than 'believing'. The issue of relations is always a complex and multi-dimensional problem in which faith is but one important element. The temptation, as outlined by JD, is for the media/public perceptions to sweep aside the complex differences of identity and to view 'the other' as a universal single (primarily Muslim) identity….

   Hybrid identities…

It is the personal encounter, combined with awareness of hybrid identities which will enable our society to be better able to welcome that our varied national identities are always changing, or in JD's words, 'they are never fixed'.

As developing the 'social responsibility that is needed to develop community and nation', the Woolf Institute…austerity workshop

The reason for some places not having riots in 2001 is because 'community leaders already knew and trusted each other' – Trust project