



CHAPTER 2: THE CHANGING FACE OF BRITAIN

This chapter looks at the mix of religions and cultures in Britain, the impact of world events, and the position of Christianity. It assesses the challenges of pluralism and describes some of its pastoral consequences.

Summary : In Britain today people of different religions and cultures live alongside each other. They are visible through their places of worship and their religious, cultural and ethnic identities.

Modern British society can be a challenge to the accepted codes of conduct and traditions of people of other religions and cultures who need to protect their identity and traditions while at the same time adapting to their surroundings.

Mass communication and globalisation mean that world events have both a positive and a negative impact on us all. Natural disasters can remind us of the unity of the human race and promote solidarity, whereas violence and terrorist attacks can inflame negative feelings and prejudice against people of different religions, refugees and asylum seekers.

The Catholic Community in Britain has experienced persecution and prejudice although Catholics have now been assimilated into mainstream British culture. Today the world wide Catholic Church is a multi-racial community which is reflected in the make-up of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. This diversity has greatly enriched the Church.

The Catholic Church recognises that the pluralism of society in Britain today and her vision respects diversity and, therefore, freedom from prejudice and persecution and equal civil status for all. It does, however, reject a relativism that judges all religious beliefs to be equally valid. The Church holds that truth is one and universal created by the one God although glimpses of this one truth can be found in different religions.

Pastoral Consequences: Christian love of neighbour demands that we face our own negative attitudes and reach out to our neighbours, particularly when they face hostility and prejudice. Where we have common interests and values we can work together for the common good. Our beliefs may differ but our common humanity enables us to share our joys and sorrows.

Honesty demands that we acknowledge and face the difficulties that exist. Christians too can encounter prejudice and hostility and there are those who wish to harm our society and its values. We must support our authorities in protecting our citizens and values. But these difficulties can never excuse prejudice and hostile attitudes.

Catholics are equipped for dialogue because:

- They have themselves suffered persecution and prejudice in the past.
- They have had to safeguard their own religious beliefs and traditions and have done so by forms of separation (e.g. education).
- They have learnt to adapt and integrate into mainstream culture.
- The Catholic Church is a multi-racial community and understands the need to inculturate the gospel.
- The Catholic Church has benefitted from its diversity.
- The Catholic Church holds that truth is One. There are glimpses of the one truth in other religions. Pluralism does not mean relativism.

What should Catholics do?

- Face up to their own negative attitudes.
- Give a lead in reaching out to others, especially those suffering from prejudice.
- Give particular attention to the needs of migrants and asylum seekers.
- Work together with all people on shared concerns such as upholding life from conception to death, justice and peace, and protecting creation.
- Deepening our own faith in order to share it with others in appropriate ways including simple gestures of friendship and support.
- Never allow the difficulties arising from those hostile to British culture and society, and from those who merely seek to exploit what our society offers, to be an excuse for prejudice or even hostility.

Glossary:

Pluralism: 'the co-existence in one society of many cultures, religions, philosophies and outlooks on life. In this sense of the word the Catholic Church does not only recognise pluralism as a fact but also respects it, in the sense that it supports everyone's right to freedom from persecution and prejudice, to an equal civil status within society, and to liberty and self-fulfilment within the constraints of the common good.' (p20)

Relativism: The belief that all religious paths are equally valid. Truth is what the believer believes; it is not universal. There is no absolute, objective truth that holds good for all.

The Common Good: acting for the benefit of all in a community or society so that all can flourish and live in peace and justice from conception to the natural end of life.

Inculturate: expressing belief in a way that appropriate to a different culture

The Catholic Church's promotion of dialogue, and its respect for the freedom of all to practise their religion ... stems from the conviction that truth is one and universal, that there are glimpses of that one truth and supreme good in other religions, and that it is the one God who, in his loving Providence, is the Creator of those elements of truth and goodness.
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We are right, therefore, to rejoice at the great diversity of peoples within the universal Church and we respect the religious diversity of modern Britain, seeing it as an opportunity for dialogue. #36p24

Questions for discussion:

On the text

- What is the difference between pluralism and relativism?
- Why is a clear understanding of one's own religious faith important in dialogue?
- What is the purpose of dialogue with other religions?
- How can dialogue be compatible with the belief that truth is one and universal?
- What events or initiatives could help create an atmosphere of dialogue and partnership?

From your experience

- What experience do you have of prejudice against people of other religions, cultures and races? How did you deal with it?
- What experience do you have of prejudice against Christianity, the Church, Christians, and how did you deal with it?
- The bishops talk about the challenge of pluralism. What do you find challenging, and enriching about living in a multi-cultural society?
- How welcoming is your parish to people from other cultures? What benefits and challenges does their presence bring?
- What concerns do you think people of all religions have in common, particularly in your area, and which are the occasions that can be marked together?

Ideas for Action:

To begin with

- “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who has loved another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8) – try and let your love for friend and stranger shine through your daily interactions.
- How multi-cultural is your parish? Can you find out where people in your parish come from?
- Find out what religious and ethnic groups and associations are present in your area.
- Find out about the care of migrants and asylum seekers in your area. Consider ways in which you might be able to get involved.
- Find out what other religions in your area are doing to promote social cohesion.
- Find out what your local Catholic school is doing to raise awareness of other religions.

To go further

- Reflect on the Gospel of Luke Ch 10: the parable of the Good Samaritan. Look for more Bible passages that are an encouragement to see beyond prejudices, and to be helpful to one another. Share them with others in your parish.
- Suggest and help organise a multicultural Mass in your parish.
- Read one of the Church’s documents on social teaching, economic policy, migration, or other religions (e.g. *Caritas in Veritate*, *Nostra Aetate*, or *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, Mission of the Church to migrants in England and Wales, all of which are available online)
- Join a multi-faith forum in your area.