

Multiculturalism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Everyone seems to be attacking multiculturalism nowadays. It is true that different groups of immigrants in Europe are huddling together in voluntary ghettos, but there have always been enclaves of class, region, and background.

Matters are worse at the moment because so many Muslim immigrants oppose Western ideals whilst living off of them. Indeed, there are plenty of Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians who also think liberal Western values are corrupt. But thankfully, they do not normally resort to violence. The real problem is that, for the first time since Guy Fawkes, a significant minority of extremists actively want to violently destroy open and free societies.

But that is no reason to throw the baby out with bathwater. We didn't tell ourselves our society was flawed, or bring in laws against the Irish because of the I.R.A.

I have lived in Britain before multiculturalism came into vogue and after, and I feel a lot happier and more relaxed as a Jew since we stopped feeling the pressure to become good little English clones. The Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of Britain has just published a book in which he argues that multiculturalism has failed, and that it threatens liberal democracy. He contrasts the Jewish experience in the United Kingdom with that of minorities who have come into the UK since the Second World War and suggests that we Jews did a better job of integrating and our example should be followed. He is completely wrong on so many levels it's hard to know where to begin.

Anglo Jewry suffers from a Diaspora Inferiority Complex. Far too many British Jews are still so insecure that they try to hide their Jewishness. The contrast with Israel, on the one hand, or New York on the other, where even the non-Jews are "Jewish" is such that you actually feel a sense of relief and normality when you come from Britain. It is true the assimilation levels in the USA are almost the same, but the experience of being Jewish is felt less as a handicap. There is not the same feeling that we ought to lie low and not make waves, the old German Jewish "delusion" of being a Gentleman in the street and a Jew at home!

For hundreds of years, Jews in Britain were encouraged to play down their Jewishness. Their heroes were the assimilating "Jewish" aristocracy. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, even Jewish charitable institutions actively connived in denuding new arrivals of their religious differences. A lot of what happens in Britain, specifically, had and has to do with the relics of the class system. As much as this has changed, it still remains a profound influence on the British psyche.

But it also has a lot to do with the history of Jews settling in Britain. We

were made to feel unwanted guests. We were the butt of constant anti-Semitism, overt and covert, in institutions and the street. We put up and shut up and got on with it. Slowly making our ways as best we could, down whatever channels were open to us, because however bad it was, it was better than where we came from.

The result? I used to be the rabbi of a venerable and long established Orthodox synagogue in London called "The Western", founded in 1799. It owned a cemetery in the Fulham Road that was closed when it was full, nearly a hundred years ago. At one stage it considered moving the bodies to Israel and redeveloping the site. To do this it had to trace the descendents of the 300 bodies that were there. Do you know that in 1975, when they did it, there was not one fully Jewish descendent alive? Is that an example we should recommend to other religious minorities?

The US is a good example of multiculturalism. It, too, has changed and evolved. Racism and anti-Semitism were still rampant fifty years ago, and continue today in isolated pockets. It is not a melting pot. It's rather like a stew in which here are identifiable pieces of different kinds of food that resist disappearing, and at the same time there is plenty of dissolving matter that goes into the general gravy.

The American culture recognizes and values differences, from Amish and Hassidim, to Scientologists and New Age Kabbalists. So long as you abide by the law, you are left alone to do, think, and live as you please. Change comes from democracy (or, alas, pork barrel and lobby politics). But no one feels the need to apologize for difference. And everyone feels they have a right to belong and succeed.

This is crucial—the potential for success. In Europe this is much harder for the under classes, and in some circumstances it is effectively squashed by the entitlement mentality of overprotective and massively abused social welfare. In this world people are conditioned to expect, rather than earn. As a former mayor of Antwerp told me recently, "You know why there are no race riots in Belgium, like France, even though proportionally we have as many young Muslims? Because we start paying them unemployment benefits at 17, whereas in France they have to wait till they are 25. Sure, it costs—but it keeps them quiet." Whether he's right or not is irrelevant. It's the attitude that is so instructive and ultimately destructive!

It is not multiculturalism that is at fault, but the fundamentalist attitudes of those in all religions who fear outside influences and fight against them. The answer is not to strip them of their differences, but to encourage them to feel confident enough to relax and reach out beyond their castles' keeps.

We Jews had several hundred years to adjust, to make serious mistakes, and then to adjust and come back from the brink. Minorities in a multicultural world do not have to go through the debilitating humiliations we did, the refusal of Parliament to pass bills giving us equal rights for hundreds of years and even then against massive religious, commercial, and social opposition.

Nowadays immigrants can, and do, and should fight for their rights. What is wrong with Europe at the moment is that the majority, and indeed the state, is not fighting for its rights. It is capitulating. If one wants to live in Britain, or wherever, one needs to accept certain a priori principles. This, after all, was the Biblical condition for giving equal rights to non-Jews living under Jewish government. Accept the Seven basic Noachide principles and, Bob's your uncle...equal civil rights. Learn the language, find out about its culture, and accept its democratic processes.

But this takes time. It is a shame that Islamofacism has muddied the waters, and the natural tendency of Europe is to appease instead of standing firm for what it requires. It is not multiculturalism that has failed, but political will. But that has always been the case.

Recognizing and valuing differences does not mean you have to lose your own. But to go back to a society in which general values are specific religious values, or cultural norms are imposed, is to return to the Bad Old Days. We need patience and determination and, above all, good governance, not retreat.