Mixed identities: Religious diversity in the U.K.

by Amy Frykholm in the October 6, 2009 issue

London is the world's most diverse city, with more than 30 percent of its residents hailing from outside England. This diversity is abundantly evident on market day in East London, as thousands of people crush into Petticoat Lane, and the trendier Up Market at the far end of Brick Lane, speaking dozens of languages. Women in short skirts brush shoulders with women in full-length burqas. Jamaican men discuss watches with a Cockney-speaking vendor. African CD sellers play a mix of gospel and Johnny Cash. Muslim students strategically place a table to offer books and conversation to passersby, while shoppers gather at an outdoor café to hear a man and a woman perform a hip-hop duet.

As in other European countries, it's the arrival of Muslims that takes center stage in the debate over immigration. The United Kingdom has 2.4 million Muslim immigrants, concentrated in urban centers like London, Manchester and Birmingham. While Muslims account for only about 3 percent of the total population, their numbers are growing at a rate ten times faster than those of any other segment of society.

Britain has a strong tradition of tolerance for religious and cultural difference. A live-and-let-live orientation is pervasive. Many Britains take the view that all cultures are equal. "I shouldn't force my culture on anyone else," they say. "As long as they leave me alone, I'll leave them alone."

At least they did until the day Brits refer to as 7/7. On July 7, 2005, Muslim British citizens carried out coordinated attacks on London's transportation system, killing 52 people and injuring 700. The attacks not only rattled the nation's sense of security but sparked a new debate about the response to religious diversity. The attacks were planned by people who had been born and raised in Britain and yet saw themselves as distinct from British culture and were deeply hostile to it. What had happened to the nation's tradition of tolerance?

Religious leaders have played a prominent role in the soul-searching that followd 7/7. This is partly because Britain has a lingering understanding of itself as a Christian nation, and it is institutionally Christian in a tangible way. The archbishop of Canterbury pledges allegiance to the queen, who is held to be the “Supreme Governor of the Church.” The queen approves the appointments of bishops and deans. Bishops have 26 positions in the House of Lords; they are called the Lords Spiritual.

Yet a strong skepticism about church and religion pervades British life. Editorials appear regularly in the London *Times* elaborating this skepticism. In December 2007, for example, a column by Peter Watson argued that the West should spend less time promoting democracy and more time spreading secularism. “The West’s advance was chiefly related to the decline in the influence of religion that sought the truth by ‘looking in’ to see what God had to say, and its replacement by looking out, deriving authority from observation, experimentation and exploration,” he explained. Many Brits share Watson’s view that peace, freedom and prosperity go hand in hand with the rise of secular society.

Meanwhile, immigrants from Poland, Bangladesh, Pakistan and several African nations have brought to the U.K. their vibrant religious beliefs and their own expectation of a close relationship between church and state. Many Brits are responding to their country’s new religious diversity by calling for confining religious identity to the private sphere. Some want Britain to follow the lead of France, which insists that public religious expression inhibits the creation of a shared cultural identity and a shared understanding of French citizenship. The French government therefore restricts the wearing of any religious symbol in schools or in public institutions. The injunction applies to crosses and emblems of the Star of David, and it restricts the wearing of the Muslim headscarf. While the state cannot control what people believe, leaders insist that for the sake of national unity it can and must control how people behave in public places.

Most of the U.K.’s religious leaders take a different view. They don’t want to eliminate religious expression from the public sphere. The want somehow to encourage both visible religious difference and a shared sense of social identity. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has called this model “integration without assimilation.” His view is widely held by leaders in the Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities and by such public figures as Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Oxford lecturer Tariq Ramadan and King’s College lecturer Maleiha Malik.

Some in the “integration without assimilation” camp think that the rise of Muslim extremism in the U.K. is a result not of too much religious identity but of too little. Tim Winter, author of *British Muslim Identity*, argues that extremists lack “cultural embeddedness.” They turn to violence precisely because they are alienated from family traditions and scriptural study that would bind them to their religion more firmly. An alienated Muslim identity looks backward and becomes a “religion of the gaps, a kind of void . . . a list of denials, of wrenchings from disturbing memories.”

Sacks attributes this alienation to the live-and-let-live philosophy of an earlier generation, which he labels the ideology of multiculturalism. The practical result of this kind of multiculturalism is, in Ramadan’s words, “mutual ignorance.” In such an environment, suspicion and fear thrive.

Sacks, Williams and Ramadan all want to enhance the role of religion rather than suppress it. Religion, they say, provides a concrete history from which to forge an identity. If people are allowed to bring their various religious identities visibly and truthfully into the public square, debate will be enriched and identity will be enhanced.

This perspective undergirded Williams’s musings on the role that Shari‘a courts might play in Britain. The national press was largely uninterested in the nuances of his argument, however (“Archbishop wants Muslim Law in U.K.,” the headlines blared), and many felt that he ended up hurting rather than helping the cause of interfaith conversation.

As Williams and his colleagues see it, it would be a mistake for the state to attempt to scrub the public sphere of religious identity, for that would foster the very conflict it seeks to combat. Muslims (or Hindus or Sikhs) would feel forced to choose between being true to their religion and being British.

What is it to be British? That question is now shaped in part by the activities of the British National Party, which offers an isolationist, anti-immigrant platform. To become a member of the BNP, you have to prove a genetically British lineage. (For the first time this spring, the BNP elected representatives to the European Par liament.) The rise of the BNP is ironic, historians note, given that British identity has been for a long time an amalgam of the competing ethnic, regional and religious identities of Scotland, Wales and England.

The BNP fosters its view of identity through a sense of victimhood. It suggests that true Britains are victimized by the influx of immigrants. This compels immigrants to point to their own mistreatment, which leads to an escalating argument that, some religious leaders point out, has no winners, only losers.

The path toward enhanced religious identities and social tolerance is marked by many awkward moments. Bishop David Gillett tells of his time serving as a parish priest in the diocese of Bolton, which has large populations of Christians, Muslims and Hindus. The city of Bolton started a program to give £5,000 to religious groups for a yearly celebration, and gave the money to Muslims for the celebration of Eid and to Hindus for the celebration of Diwali. Christian clergy had to petition the city to receive money for a community celebration of Easter. Apparently it had not occurred to city leaders that Christians were also a part of the city's diversity.

The issue of women's dress is one focus of debate in the U.K. Many Brits think that communal religious identity should not trump individual choice, so to them the Muslim headscarf and burqa are symbols of oppression, not tolerance. But Professor Malik says that Muslim women who choose to adopt the veil in Britain want both to affirm their religious identity and to "enter the public sphere as full and equal citizens." These women are choosing to identify themselves as religious in an environment that they perceive as indifferent or hostile to that choice.

Creating a shared public sphere that honors and appreciates religious difference will not be easy. But freedom, Sacks argues, "allows people to live out their deepest commitments without oppression and fear." Bishop Gillett believes that ordinary Christians in the U.K. have a crucial role to play in creating this possibility. For one thing, religious people share a common bond through religion. Christians can reach out to their Muslim, Hindu and Sikh neighbors with a shared understanding of what might draw them to a traditional religious identity.

In addition, Christians have built-in mechanisms for education that could contribute to mutual understanding. Christians in Britain run multiethnic schools and teach children through Sunday schools, and they could spread tolerance and understanding of religion through the nation's pulpits. Ironically, Christian schools are a significant tool in the hands of those who would move beyond multiculturalism toward a public sphere in which religious identity is vibrant—and tolerated.