

EDITORIAL

The Big Society, Social Cohesion and Education for a Multicultural Society

The idea behind the Big Society agenda is for social good. ‘The big society is about putting more power in people’s hands’ so that they are able to ‘play a more active role in society.’ Power will no longer be concentrated in the hands of the politicians but will be given to people. Not everybody is convinced though. Indeed some people have expressed grave doubt that it will achieve its intended goal, and some even believe that it can be ‘tribal and divisive’ (*The Guardian*, Tuesday 13 November 2012). Gradual decentralization of power, giving opportunities to faith-based organizations to have more active roles in social welfare, expansion of the voluntary sector, and getting people involved in new state-society relationships are all part of ambitious plans. It is most likely that reduced central control coupled with spending cuts will lead to a state that is shrunken and impoverished. However, how far the progressive social transformation will take place as a result of voluntary activity, especially without the financial means to achieve the ends, remains to be seen.

When Baroness Warsi declares that the government seeks to ‘help people of faith do even more to build the Big Society’, results of various polls show that an increasing number of people in Great Britain describe themselves as having no religious affiliation, and the number of people who call themselves Christians have also declined. Although Christian organizations in general have found opportunities in the idea of the Big Society to promote religious values in the public sphere, the reactions of minority faith groups have been rather muted. The worries of the minority faith communities, particularly Muslims—who have been already subjected to anti-terror measures—are that they would not be able to work in all areas of public life without restriction. If there is a clash between certain religious values and particular aspects of equalities legislation, the Big Society programme will certainly be undermined. It is quite possible that there will be rivalry within and between religions, which might threaten to destroy greater social cohesion, unless they come to an agreement to work together within a common faith-framework.

As a result of globalization, immigration, blurring of boundaries of cultures, loss of traditions, and weakening of faith, values of both the immigrant and the indigenous communities are going through some kind of transformation, with increasing possibilities of transcultural understanding as well as cultural conflict. Many in Great Britain think that the presence of diverse cultures has enriched the British society while others feel that this has diluted British traditions and values that are under threat as a result of a gradual rise in the influence of certain religions and cultures, exacerbated by the current economic situation of the country. What we should realize is that, rather than being a British phenomenon, the transformation of cultures is global, now taking place at a pace greater than ever before. This has led to reactions in the opposite direction in some places. There are groups in many countries that feel with suppressed anger that their cultures are being changed by

‘others’ among them, and such deep-rooted feelings can sometimes give rise to extreme behaviour resulting in conflict and bloodshed. The reality is that communities are changing due to migration, internal diversity, cross-cultural borrowing, weakening of their mother tongue and adoption of ‘foreign’ languages, their understanding of their own religion in a different light, and their stance with regard to the wider society. But slow gradual acculturation is one thing and the imposition of other cultures on an established community is quite another. Communities must be allowed time to reorient themselves after assessing and reassessing the impact of other cultures in the light of their own values and aspirations. Amidst all these changes there are values that are permanent and rooted in dearly held faiths and convictions that provide anchor to our civilization. The universal principles of love, caring, sacrifice, tolerance, negotiation and reconciliation enshrined in revealed religions can provide the most effective force to keep a diverse society together. Commitment to such shared values and intercultural encounters will contribute to mutual enrichment of societies.

The imposition of extraneous cultures on a community will be deemed as a calculated attack on their norms of values, designed to displace them in the name of integration. No nation is homogeneous: diversity can provide the basis for solidarity and mutual understanding. For example, Islam, with its emphasis on *Shari‘ah* that dictates the boundaries of social and moral codes, never attempted to attain cultural uniformity among people who lived under its influence. This can be attested by the fact the vast stretch of land that is inhabited by Muslims embrace people of diverse cultures and traditions. What unites the Muslim *ummah*—a multiethnic, multicultural community—is their worldview enshrined in the Qur’ān and the teaching of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Extending this concept to other religions makes the situation more complicated but I believe, with goodwill prevailing on all sides, it is possible to come to some amicable agreement, especially with Britain having a long-standing tradition of cultural diversity. One example where this actually happened is Ottoman Turkey where people of different faiths were living together with freedom to practise their own religion.

The debate now is about the nature of the British society. Is it liberal or plural or nationalistic? Which way is it going or, indeed, which way *should* it go? Different social scientists hold different views as the best solution in the emerging world of the twenty-first century, some emphasizing one aspect instead of others. The situation is complex and there is no ideal solution. The crucial question is—what values should be shared by people in a plural society, and how to maintain social cohesion? A cohesive society is one that respects the culture of other people and does not hinder its expression unless the latter poses dangers to common good.

Globally we are interdependent and becoming more so with the passage of time. With the progress in science and technologically, the world is shrinking and we are getting closer both physically and temporally. Issues which have always been taken for granted as basic human rights are now being viewed differently. In order to coexist harmoniously we need to learn to negotiate these contested issues—we cannot build a cohesive society and coexist without mutual toleration. Recognition of other people’s culture and celebration of multiculturalism is a prerequisite for harmonious coexistence. Quite often the real threat is not the presence of immigrant cultures but the tendency of certain indigenous people to be independent from the rest of the country in order to assert their identity and not to be subsumed by the dominant group.

Social cohesion can be achieved when people are willing to work for the common good and even ready to sacrifice their personal interests in times of crisis and to fulfill the perceived needs of society. A coherent and caring community is based on the commitment of its members to certain moral and spiritual values. What binds the members of a society together is not an externally concocted social norm but one that evolves from the rich religious traditions of the human race and fervently guarded in the enlightened recess of our souls. Despite cultural differences there is more or less a universal moral code to which human beings adhere. This sense of morality is ingrained in human character, which is why the Prophet asked his followers to consult their conscience for ascertaining the propriety of their actions.

A form of education that creates opportunities for people of all backgrounds can help to promote societal trust and harmony. As education plays a central role in promoting mutual respect and tolerance, projects have been undertaken in some countries to promote tolerance and social cohesion through education. ‘War against terror,’ primarily directed against Muslims, has created international tensions, increased terroristic activities and mistrust among communities—making the world more insecure than before. Many have recognized this unjust treatment meted out to Muslims, and different steps have been taken at local levels to counter this. One international initiative is the publication of *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims: Addressing Islamophobia through Education* (2011) by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Council of Europe and UNESCO. These guidelines aim to assist educators in countering intolerance and discrimination against Muslims through education. Subsequently, a meeting on ‘Globalization, Diversity and Social Cohesion in Educational Settings’ was held on 5 November 2012 at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris which sought to ‘provide a forum for educational authorities to discuss how the Guidelines can be used to promote appreciation of diversity and social cohesion in the era of globalization.’ Educators and policy makers would do well to pay heed to these guidelines and contribute to the attainment of peace and security in the world.

Together we can build a better society where members are given the opportunity to make a contribution in accordance with their ability. It is through sharing and caring that we can build a good society—a society that is inclusive, where all cultures are valued and people can genuinely feel a sense of belonging.

Shaikh Abdul Mabud