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

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Multiculturalism and social responsibility – Response to Clive Lawton

Introduction: The Swedish context

I will speak as a member of the majority population and majority religion in the Swedish context, which is somewhat different from the UK. In contrast to Prince Charles, King Carl XVI Gustaf demanded that the Monarch should be obliged to belong to the Church of Sweden even after the church was disestablished in 2000. We were a very monocultural and monoreligious society up to the 1960's. As we have colonialist background: (to speak of) people from other parts of the world have no previous connection to Swedish society and don't speak the language, which makes integration more difficult.

Unlike some European countries, Sweden never had a "gastarbeiter" policy, but wanted immigrants to become citizens, and so launched an integration policy, which alas did not prove very successful – but the goodwill was there. To start with, integration was very much spelt assimilation, actually, the original name of what is now the Board of Migration, was "The bureau for Adjustment" (Anpassningsbyrå)! We later went for more "multicultural" policies (whatever that is), which are now, as everywhere, increasingly questioned.

Multiculturalism

Whatever that is? Multiculturalism seems to be one of these concepts that are thrown around, and are used with different meanings to propagate one's own views, as an ideal to strive for, or as a threat to avoid at all costs. For some, multiculturalism is a vision of a world where different cultures can live together, respecting and mutually enriching each other. For others, it is the cause of segregated societies with communal violence, high unemployment rates among immigrants etc. But is this really the *effect* of consciously implemented multiculturalist policies in the sense

that cultures should be kept apart, or is “multiculturalism”, as Swedish journalist Göran Rosenberg argues, made the scapegoat for the general failure of European societies to form inclusive communities? Rosenberg claims that “the weakening of common values and the emerging (ethno-religious) enclaves and re-awakened nationalism are not the result of a new and failed idea of how to organise society, but of an old and outdated one”, and he concludes “in that sense multiculturalism is not dead. It just hasn’t been born yet.”¹

That we haven’t really tried out the multicultural model yet was also asserted by Professor Moshe Halberthal at the Paideia conference in Uppsala last year. Unlike former ideals of a tolerant, open or pluralist society where different cultures don’t really interact, Halberthal claimed that in a multicultural society different cultures stand side by side, affirming the value of the other, they support them and allow them to flourish. This is the kind of society that we should strive for. In Halberthal’s words: “I have to explain myself and understand myself in the light of the other.”² However, what the last decades have taught us is that this benign multiculturalism will not come by default – it will take conscious efforts, and there will be many stumbling blocks along the way.

“Is multi-culturalism bad for women?” was the title of a very influential anthology published in 1999. The authors pointed out that the danger of multiculturalism interpreted as cultural relativism is that practices that are detrimental to women, such as Female Genital Cutting and “honour cultures” are not challenged but accepted as culturally specific customs. Others criticised them for lacking awareness of western cultural biases, denying women from other cultures agency. We should also be aware that there is an apparent danger that feminism is hijacked by the opponents of multiculturalism, and that feminism is used in islamophobic discourse. Because – we have to face that the resistance to multiculturalism is often a thinly disguised islamophobia, the fear that Muslims will “take over”: Anti-islamic propaganda frequently alludes to the allegedly low status of women in Islam, and the official motivation for legislation against wearing burqa or niqab is a concern for the status of women. I would rather understand the ban of burqa and niqab as making women targets in anti-islamic campaigns.

How then, shall we navigate between the Scylla of cultural relativism and the Carybdis of universalising Western cultural norms? Dutch scholar Sawitri Saharso suggests that we should develop concepts that enable us to recognise that women often live in contexts of culture and power that entail severe constraints for their capacity for autonomy, without denying their moral agency, and to reflect critically on our own position in cross-cultural dialogues.³

Christian approaches to the other

Clive Lawton raised the question of whether our religious traditions’ basic instincts help or hinder, and defined Christianity’s basic instinct as evangelism, it would be better if we all agreed, that all became Christians. Unfortunately I have to agree that

¹ Göran Rosenberg: *Jakten på den multikulturella syndabocken* Svenska Dagbladet 2011-10-31

² Michael Berenbaum: *PAIDEIA Conference Considers Jews in a Multicultural World* JewishJournal.com October 26, 2011

³ Sawitri Saharso: *Multicultural feminism: Finding our Way between Universalism and Anti-essentialism* IPW Working Paper No 3/2008, university of Vienna

this is a rather accurate description of at least one basic Christian instinct – especially coming from such a consensus-based culture as Sweden. Swedish society is built upon agreements, consensus and compromise – and it would be interesting to reflect upon to what extent that has to do with 400 years of Protestant hegemony... (and of course, before that 400 years of Catholic hegemony.)

By the way, I wonder if the “New Atheism” is not in many ways an heir to Protestantism. Both in its insistence on universal values that should be accepted by all, and in its adversity to outward expressions of religiosity, following the belief that religion is a matter of individual conviction rather than community belonging. Right now, it seems that the attacks on multiculturalism come from atheist activists rather than from religious people.

Even though probably the majority of the world’s Christians believe that God wants all to become Christians, quite a few of us are trying to reread our traditions to find other “instincts”. For example, what is the “great commission” to go out and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28) about? Well, obviously “the nations” need to hear the message – but as important is that the message needs to meet all nations to be fully understood! In that sense, it could be a great foundation for a Christian approach to multiculturalism. The Church of Sweden welcomes the nations gathering in our context to help us understand better what we are about!

Another inspiration is the rediscovery by my beloved late bishop Krister Stendahl, that the Christian scriptures are teeming with minority images. As he used to say, Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth – but no one wants the world to become a salt mine! In a multicultural society, we can be proud of adding a certain flavour to the casserole of the world, and at the same time appreciate the other spices.

Still, there is a long way to go to temper the evangelistic instinct, and to liberate it from its colonialist and crusader heritage. Repentance, to pick up another of Clive Lawton’s key words, is essential in inter faith dialogue. We need to be honest about the traits in our own traditions that contribute to hate and violence, and God willing, to help each other to deal with them.

I think that the most important reasons for Christians to engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue is exactly that we have a lot to learn from the Jews about appreciating diversity and disagreement, to rejoice in differing interpretations of holy texts and enjoy arguing about them! The Corinthians, who seemed to quarrel about everything had many problems, Krister Stendahl used to say, but there was never a dull moment! I think we are beginning to realise that the unified original Christian congregation that we dream of never existed. Even if they were “of one heart and one soul” as is written in Acts, they were not of one opinion. The growing consciousness of diversity in Christian beginnings, as well as the development of ecumenism this last century, could equip Christians to deal with multiculturalism.

What can/should we do?

I agree with Clive Lawton that repentance and frank analysis – and acting in accordance with this analysis – is called for. I would like to add a memento about the role Jewish-Christian dialogue might play in the issue of multiculturalism. Is there a danger that we create a new “we” versus “them” through Jewish-Christian dialogue? I think there are some, especially evangelical Christians for whom Jewish-Christian dialogue is a good and godly thing, because Jesus was a Jew – but they have no

interest whatsoever in engaging with people of other faiths and none – especially with Muslims.

Actually, when I engaged in the Council of Jews and Christians in Stockholm, I found to my dismay that I encountered more prejudice and negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims there than in many other contexts. I had naïvely assumed that people engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue were generally interested in inter faith encounters, and I am still trying to understand why this is not so. I don't know whether this is a typically Swedish phenomenon, but it still gives food for thought. I am adverse to all kinds of unholy alliances, whether it be "believers" against "secularists" or "monotheists" against other believers. Is there a danger that Jewish-Christian relations can become insular, "turned inwards on themselves" with Martin Luther's term? If so, I hope this conference might offer a remedy to that illness!