Fractured identities: the post-colonial world

I studied theology at Cambridge in the late 1960s. I already had a degree in English Literature and was aware that Cambridge was home to two luminaries whose works I'd long greatly admired. Basil Willey was one, the King Edward VII Professor of English Literature, successor to Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and author of a number of important books like for example, *The Seventeenth Century Background.* He always described himself as more of a historian of ideas than a master of literary criticism. His mind roamed across the intersecting territories of literature, philosophy, history and theology. He'd had to establish himself within the Cambridge faculty at a time when his colleague F.R.Leavis was high priest for an approach to literary works that focused narrowly on the texts. Willey who much preferred to look at literature within the context that had produced it, developed the English degree course at Cambridge under the general title: 'Literature, Life and Thought', specialising in the 'Life and Thought' parts himself. He often quoted a phrase of Sir Thomas Browne, one of his own seventeenth-century heroes, to describe himself. Browne claimed that he'd sought to live in 'divided and distinguished worlds', keeping a foot in each of the rapidly diverging camps of religion and science. Willey too, a contemporary of C.P.Snow whose *Two Cultures* had made a huge impact when it was delivered at the Rede Lecture in 1959, wanted an interdisciplinary approach to culture. He deemed it necessary to develop an educational system that allowed and encouraged young people to move between disciplines rather than get tied down by the tendency towards specialisation then becoming so oppressively prevalent in our schools.

Then, at Jesus College (just over the wall from where I was living) was Raymond Williams whose *Culture and Society* had appeared in 1958 and who was offering a Marxist analysis of literature and society that was attracting a great deal of attention. In the event, it was a protégé of Williams, a young research fellow named Terry Eagleton, who succeeded in drawing my own eye and firing my imagination. About my age, Eagleton was a Roman Catholic who launched the magazine *Slant* during my years at Cambridge. Here was a brilliant young academic attempting to hold together Marxism and Roman Catholicism in the spirit, as he understood it, of the recently concluded Vatican Council. It was audacious and I fell in love with it all. Eagleton later moved to Oxford and then on to be professor of cultural theory in Manchester before migrating to do similar work in Dublin. His writing has always been of great interest to me since those early days.

It was a book review written by Eagleton that drew my attention to a collection of essays by Homi Bhabha entitled *The Location of Culture* [Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge 1994]. I was grabbed by the very first line of Eagleton's piece: 'Post-colonial theory,' he wrote, 'is written on the hoof, a language of migration and displacement, of split locations and fractured identities.' I went out the very same day, bought the volume and devoured it. It is, indeed, as fine as its reviewer claimed. As I read, I found myself making an index of what seemed to me to be the key words in Bhabha's analysis, and the results were fascinating. The post-colonial world is fractured and fragmented all right. Our cities are wonderfully yet bewilderingly multi-ethnic. The London Borough in which I live has over 100 different language groups living within its borders, all needing education, health care and social services. Bhabha urges us to beware of responding to multi-culturalism simply by admiring its exoticism, loving its food, its carnivals and its colour. Nor should we view the diversity of cultures around us with too dispassionate an eye, comparing and contrasting them while keeping them in hermetically-sealed compartments. It's the *hybridity of culture* that matters to Bhabha, that's what needs to imprint itself on our minds and hearts. The challenge of post-colonial societies, according to his argument, should evoke a response beyond the merely aesthetic (or academic); it should rather create an awareness of how the various elements within a cultural matrix overlap, are interdependent, belong together. It's the idea of 'cross-over' that permeates Bhabha's book and the index I'd compiled turned out to be a veritable thesaurus of words and metaphors to illustrate this. Beyond, side-by-side, in-between, negotiation, the Third Space, hybridity, split, mimic man, displacement – all these words and phrases suggest in one way or another the fundamental mixed-upness of contemporary society.

Terry Eagleton's praise for Homi Bhabha has the practical aim of bringing an agenda of great importance to the awareness of the more general reader. 'Few post-colonial writers,' Eagleton writes, 'can rival Homi Bhabha in his exhilarated sense of alternative possibilities – of a world in which hybridity, in –betweenness,' a culture in permanent transition and incompleteness, may be embraced without anxiety or nostalgia. The very process of Bhabha's writing – intricate, thickly layered, veering from poetry to theory to rhetoric – enacts this dissolving of familiar co-ordinates.'

These are the very factors that have led to the emergence of a body of literature for which the only adequate descriptive tag would be 'world writing.' People such as Toni Morrison, Peter Carey and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have been among the leading authors in this development. They have written out of a

close (or even direct) relationship with the experience of migration. Morrison was part of the black diaspora that saw millions of Africans transported to the Americas in the era of slavery and she has written powerfully about it. Carey was part of a barely less dramatic population transfer that saw large numbers of European people settle in countries all over the world. And Ngugi, exiled from Kenya since the early 1980s, wrote directly from an experience of displacement, a fate shared with millions of others who have had to leave their homelands for political or economic reasons.

Writers such as these have explored global themes where it is precisely the dissolving of familiar co-ordinates that opens ups up a rich vein of human experience for consideration. Hybridization and cross-fertilization offered a template for much this writing.

No one has wrestled longer or harder with these factors than Salman Rushdie. Writing in defence of *The Satanic Verses*, which had aroused such strong feelings when it appeared in 1988, he declared that the novel:

> "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world* (the author's italics). It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves." [Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books 1992, page 394]

Rushdie's 1999 novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* develops this post-modern agenda still further. It tells the life story of two rock stars, Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama, and describes their love for one another and their near deification during the 1970s and 1980s when, as the founders of a band called VTO, they became the most famous rock and roll act in the world. The tale is told by Umeed Merchant, a photographer who has loved Vina since they were both children.

The novel is saturated in Greek myth, steeped in allusions to Homer, Virgil and Ovid: the story of Vina and Ormus is in part the story of Orpheus and Eurydice; Ormus descends to a kind of hell and loses Vina at the end. Vina is in part Helen, over whom men start battles and in part Persephone, lured by her father's brother to the underworld. This is a novel that asks us to compare new

myths and old ones and to test each for their groundedness. Greek myth mingles with the mythology of India and the whole is spiced by the easier mythology of contemporary celebrity.

The teller of the tale, the photographer, is a world-renowned master of an art that, as is stated from the outset, can both capture reality and falsify it. A photographer is someone who sits on the side-lines and observes life rather than participates in it. Umeed Merchant is indeed an outsider. His work places him on the outside but this position is further emphasized by the fact that he belongs to the Muslim branch of a Bombay family with impeccable Hindu credentials. The Hindu relatives, three generations later, still consider their Muslim kinsfolk to be apostate. As well as turning their back on their Hindu religious beliefs, we learn that Umeed Merchant's family have taken the further step of rejecting the Muslim faith too. They've become 'non-religious Muslims'. With all this in mind, it can hardly be surprising that 'outsideness' becomes a recurring theme that runs right through this kaleidoscopic novel.

This is given full play in the theories of Sir Darius Xerxes Cama, Vina's father. He holds that 'in every generation there are a few souls … *who are simply born not belonging* (author's italics), who come into the world undetached, if you like, without strong affiliation to family or location or race.' They are pushed to the side-lines because, on the whole, the world is organized in favour of those who value stability and who fear transience and feel threatened by uncertainty and change. They erect 'a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness, that disruptive, anti-social force, so that we mostly conform, we pretend to be motivated by loyalties and solidarities we do not really feel, we hide our secret identities beneath the false skins of those identities which bear the belongers' seal of approval.' The truth lies deeper than that, of course. It's in our dreams and literature that we celebrate difference and honour those who have the courage to stand outside conventional expectation.

There are more such people than can be imagined. They long to be free. Invoking the metaphor of 'the road' that seems to crop up again and again in any study of contemporary culture, he spells out the dream of post-modern men and women. 'No sooner did we have ships than we rushed out to sea,' he writes, 'sailing across oceans in paper boats. No sooner did we have cars than we hit the road. No sooner did we have airplanes than we zoomed to the furthest corners of the globe. Now we yearn for the moon's dark side, the rocky plains of Mars, the rings of Saturn, the interstellar deeps …. [It's got to the point where] we hunger for warp space, for the outlying rim of time. And

this is the species that kids itself it likes to stay at home, to bind itself with – what are they called again? – *ties*.'

This unquenchable thirst for new experience, the drive to keep exploring new frontiers, to celebrate 'outsideness,' is a risky business. It takes people beyond the realm of recognizable landmarks; it's another example of Michel Foucault's 'limit experience.' For all the dangers, one can only become aware of one's own potential when living at (or even beyond) one's known limits. As Vina's celebrity increases so she is drawn into a globe-trotting life with all the demands that accompany such a life. There are gigs and long hours in recording studios, interviews and parties and photo opportunities. Her life becomes more and more a public commodity. And all of this is sometimes hard to sustain, especially for a self-made person who invented her own name and developed an identity for herself through sheer will power and an almost insatiable hunger for life. When it becomes too much for her, in a search for solace, she sometimes seeks the consolation of religion. But Umeed, the great observer, is never taken in. He has no time for systems of belief, which he dismisses as examples of 'unreliable narration.' To him, faith is irony, he puts his trust more in the creative imagination, in fictions that, not pretending to be fact, end up telling the truth. 'All religions have one thing in common,' he declares, 'namely that their answers to the great question of our origins are all quite simply wrong.'

Umeed recognizes that from time to time he has recourse to the use of religious language but won't allow that to suggest the possibility of religious belief. He puts that down to a 'pre-religious' love of metaphor and the need sometimes to express the inexpressible and to describe our dreams of otherness. But religion, to his mind, far from being a vehicle to help the imagination deal with such material, does the opposite. 'Religion came and imprisoned the angels in aspic,' he declares before adding, 'the god of the imagination is the imagination. The law of the imagination is whatever works. The law of the imagination is not universal truth, but the work's truth fought for and won.'

He is deeply suspicious of religion in general and monotheism in particular. Indeed, he dismisses monotheism as just another despotism. To his mind, the only value of religion lies in its 'stories,' but these can be enjoyed only when we stop believing in the gods they tell of. If, one day, we woke up to find that there were no more devout Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews on earth, then (and only then) could we enjoy the beauty of their stories because they

wouldn't be dangerous any more. The only truth they'd now contend for would be that contained within the limits of the 'well-told tale.' Religion would have given way to literature.

This flight away from belief in stories that are held up to be 'true' and towards belief in those stories merely as fictions of the imagination seems to be a good description of Rushdie's own path and position. It moves the question of any response we might make from the realm of ethics to aesthetics, from the 'I ought' of a moral imperative to the 'I like that' stimulated by any work of the imagination.

Vina Apsarar's religious consolations turn out to be consumer durables; they rarely last very long. Her lover, meanwhile, seems to resort to an altogether different resource. He clings to the 'vision of a literally disintegrating world held together, saved and redeemed, by the twin powers of music and love …. I envied its off-the-wall coherence, its controlling overview.' The novel puts popular music forward as having real binding force for our postmodern world. It crosses over ethnic and other cultural differences and has a following in every continent of the globe. It's virtually become a universal language; it's certainly a vehicle that carries the messages of the day.

This strikes the same note as a comment by Steven Connor in his book *Postmodernist Culture* [Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture*, Blackwell 1997] where he describes the place of rock music in the contemporary world. '[It] has a claim,' he writes, 'to be the most representative of postmodern cultural forms. For one thing, it embodies to perfection the central paradox of contemporary mass culture, in the fact of its unifying global reach and influence on the one hand combined with its tolerance and engendering of pluralities of styles, media and ethnic identities on the other.' A little later in his narrative, he makes a strong case for rock music's 'capacity to articulate alternative or plural cultural identities, of groups belonging to the margins of national or dominant cultures.'

Popular music is a component that runs through so many narratives seeking to describe present-day culture. It seems that any consideration of the globalized nature of our contemporary culture must move beyond the worlds of finance and technology, politics and power, and deal also with the pervasive influence of the music that is purveyed by social media and which carry so many of the most important and determinative messages of our era.

In the face of the horrors of our contemporary world, so dominated by fears generated by climate change and so threatened by war and terrorism, music alone seems able to shape and carry an adequate response. 'In this dark time,' Rushdie's narrator declares, 'it's rock music that represents the country's most profound artistic engagement with the death of its children, not just the music of peace and psychotropic drugs but the music of rage and horror and despair …. [There is] a humane democratic spirit-food fullness in its response.' The importance of popular music is not limited to its angry outbursts. It also seems able to introduce a notion of love or peace into so much of the ugliness and strife of a world at war with itself. It has a unique capacity to cling to beauty and innocence in a time of death and guilt. It alone seems able to give people faced by destruction a continuing appetite for life The *Manic Street Preachers* (a favourite of mine) would have been happy with that. And pop music is presented as possessing the vitality and binding capacity previously to be found in faith and religions. They, it's claimed, are now defunct, empty, bankrupt. For the generations who belong to a globalised age, exposed to messages that have been set free from the particularities of local or even continental cultures, values and attitudes are formed instead by the skilfully packaged and commercially marketed messages that come from popular music. In terms of giving the world a sense of unity, the job done in the past by Latin and English, or by Christendom and Islam, is now increasingly falling on the shoulders of angry, often alienated, singing groups whose music can be heard throbbing from personal music devices on trains and planes, blaring from open car windows in a busy street, deafening the sardine-like hordes who throng in to the bewilderingly large number of nightclubs to be found in all our cities, or streamed through personal smartphones or i-players in kids' bedrooms around the world.

These are cross-over times all right and there is undoubtedly something exhilarating about the freedom to move between sectors and groups that were previously sealed off from each other. But there are dangers too. When all the landmarks go, then people sometimes discover they are lost. In the search for new experience, wider horizons, further shores, people might just forget who they are or where they belong. *The Satanic Verses* begins by showing two characters falling on to an English beach from a hijacked plane from India that's been flying at the height of Mount Everest. Two passengers, who can easily be understood as two aspects of the same character, survive and live adventure-packed lives in England. The novel ends by re-uniting these characters, in effect bringing both sides of a divided self back together again. It is in India, where the novel began, and where both these characters grew up,

that the healing takes place. Only by going home is this wholeness rediscovered. All of which simply underlines the angst that often lurks below the apparently joyous, certainly surrealistic, fast-moving narrative of Rushdie. Just as Jack Kerouac was warned by William Burroughs about the dangers of self-delusion in looking to Buddhism for meaning, so one feels that Rushdie too deceives himself from time to time. His racy prose throws up a smokescreen behind which anxiety lurks.

A long passage in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, a passage that looks at rootlessness, outsideness and the nature of happiness, ends with a rather bleak statement: 'One must simply overcome, always overcome. Pain and loss are "normal" too. Heartbreak is what there is.' As the Latin poet Virgil put it: *Sunt lacrimae rerum* ('there are tears at the heart of things'), or as the pop singer Beck declared in one of his songs, 'All alone is all you are.' The cry is as old as time. And if religion is rejected, it is not always apparent where solace will come from.

Later in the book, quoting Euripedes this time (rather than Virgil), the message is equally bleak:

> May the gods save me from becoming a stateless refugee! Dragging out an intolerable life in desperate helplessness! That is the most pitiful of all griefs: death is better.

Statelessness has become, of course, precisely the experience of untold (and growing) numbers of people around the world since Rushdie's novel was written. And that really does seem both to be the rock-bottom message of much of his work and also his warning, intentional or not, to an age set upon enjoying hybridity, rootlessness, in-between-ness, the limit experience. Indeed, in the aftermath of the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie seemed himself the perfect embodiment of 'the stateless refugee' whose plight Euripedes pities.

Many of the themes treated by Rushdie are also to be found in the writings of his protégé and friend Hanif Kureishi. Kureishi's father, from a relatively affluent Muslim family in Madras, came to Britain in 1947 to read law. Most of the rest of his family, meanwhile, moved to Pakistan after partition and Kureishi's father discontinued his studies in London to take up a clerical job in the embassy of this newly founded Pakistan, a country in which he had never set foot. He met and married an English woman from a lower middle-class background and they lived in Bromley. Hanif was born there in 1954, one of

the first generation of children of ‘New Commonwealth’ origins born in Britain. All of which contributes to a feeling of ‘outsideness,’ a theme he reflects on a great deal in his writing.

Kureishi grew up in the London suburbs and attended the same school as David Bowie. Bowie became an immensely successful singer, an iconic figure indeed in popular culture who, unlike others in that business, maintained his position over a long period of time. Bowie was greatly influenced by a stepbrother who introduced him to the Beat poets and the music of the 1950s. He achieved his success largely by constant changes of image and identity, which allowed him to steer his way through the confusing 1970s. He spent time in a Buddhist monastery, appeared in drag, led the glam-rock movement, played on his ambiguous sexuality, went in for a bewildering array of fashion metamorphoses and led a number of avant-garde experiments in the rock industry.

Kureishi’s 1995 novel *The Black Album* bore the same title as a record released commercially just a year earlier by pop singer Prince who was widely acknowledged to continue very much in Bowie’s tradition. A description of the singer offered by one of the characters in the novel relates that ‘He’s half black and half white, half man, half woman, half size, feminine but macho too … He’s a river of talent. He can play soul and funk and rock and rap.’ Like Bowie, Prince is the very model of modern adaptability and, once again, we see cross-over and hybridity, in-between-ness and negotiated space very much in evidence.

The natural place, in Kureishi’s view, for the working out of these themes is the inner city. He was critical of a number of costume-drama television and film productions that, focusing very much on the ‘heritage’ aspects of England, were almost always set lavishly within some sweet especial rural scene. To his mind, these productions aimed at giving an impression of a national unity that was radically dissociated from the facts. He looked to the inner city, and especially to London, as settings for his themes. Here the culturally and demographically hybrid nature of the city represents a space where new, non-hierarchical and pluralistic kinds of individual and national identity that reflect the reality of modern Britain’s increasing cultural diversity can potentially be forged. Indeed, within the inner city can be seen the ‘microcosm of a larger British society struggling to find a sense of itself, even as it was undergoing radical change.’ In a commentary on ‘Englishness’ in the inter-war period, Kureishi attempted to measure that struggle. He noted that J.B.Priestly had

observed the existence of three Englands. First, there was the guidebook England of palaces and forests; then nineteenth-century industrial England with its factories and terraced streets; and finally, contemporary England with its bypasses and suburbs. 'Now,' he concludes, 'there is another England as well: the inner city.' This England is a much easier context within which diasporic populations can discover themselves. By claiming to be Londoners, black people can express a 'national' identity that respects their cultural differences when set against mainstream society.

My Beautiful Laundrette, one of Kureishi's earliest works, a film of rare and tender beauty, tells the tale of two boys who'd grown up together in London's East End. Johnny is Caucasian, Omar Pakistani. As children in school, they were bosom pals before they got sucked into their own separate sub-cultures. Johnny became involved in National Front activities, shaved his head, joined demonstrations, became unemployed. Omar was soon drawn into the world of small business and surrounded by uncles and cousins involved in drug-dealing. He was given his own business to run, a laundrette, and it was while on these premises that he recognized his erstwhile friend Johnny marching in the street as part of a fascist demonstration. He made contact again and invited Johnny to come and work for him. The renewal of their friendship led to an awareness of love between them. This same-sex relationship, worked out against the odds and despite huge cultural obstacles, is held up as a thing of beauty against a backdrop of the eddying waters of racism, crime, drug-dealing and gangsterism so readily to be found in the inner city. It becomes a thing of beauty in its in-between-ness and hybridity, but something so tender and fragile that it risks being snuffed out at any time.

Again and again, Kureishi paints pictures that reveal just how difficult it is both to forge an identity and also to find something solid to cling to in the shifting sands of the inner city. *Black Album* tells the story of Shahid Hasan, a student at an inner London university who is being pulled in different directions by various forces competing for his commitment. The novel was written in 1989, the year when the Berlin wall came down and also the year when the Ayatollah issued his fatwah against Salman Rushdie. The ideologies behind both these events are strongly present on campus. A character named Brownlow is a communist party activist and another named Riaz gathers a group of radical fundamentalist Muslims around him. Shahid comes into contact with both and considers their claims carefully, but it is his relationship with Brownlow's partner Deedee Osgood that proves far more formative. She is one of his tutors and there are interesting discussions about the nature of the courses

she teaches. She wants to move the study of English literature away from the acknowledged canon in the direction of a globalized 'cultural studies' course. He resists this; for him, 'serious reading required dedication. Who,' he wondered, 'now believed it did them good? And how many people knew a book as they knew *Blonde on Blonde*, *Annie Hall* or even *Prince*? Could literature connect a generation in the same way? Some exceptional students would read hard books, most wouldn't, and they weren't fools.' For Shahid, Deedee's readiness to study anything that took her students' interest seemed a very 'post-modern' thing to do. Her willingness to consider anything from 'Madonna's hair to a history of the leather jacket,' interesting as these things might be in a short–term sort of way, did seem to represent a subtle new form of exclusion rather than empowerment of the minorities on whose behalf she seemed so interested.

Despite these disagreements, however, Deedee and Shahid were soon in a passionate relationship in defiance of so many conventions. It was a student-teacher relationship that crossed racial boundaries and, with it, it was the white woman who proved to have the voracious sexual appetite when the stereotype might have supposed that to be the characteristic of the black male. Kureishi seems to want to take a pot-shot at as many prevailing conventions as he can.

In this mixed-up world of make-over and cross-over, Shahid found it difficult to find his place. He was at sixes and sevens. He 'was afraid his ignorance would place him in no man's land. These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew – brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn't be human. Shahid, too, wanted to belong to his people. But first he had to know them, their past and what they hoped for.' He made serious attempts to learn as much as he could about the culture and spirituality of 'his people' and part of this effort was to seek to learn how to pray. In his attempts to do this, he:

> had little notion of what to think of what the cerebral concomitant to the actions should be. So, on his knees, he celebrated to himself the substantiality of the world, the fact of existence, the inexplicable phenomenon of life, art, humour and love itself – a murmured language, itself another sacred miracle. He accompanied this awe and wonder with suitable music, the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth, for instance, which he hummed inaudibly.

Kureishi is never as cynical or dismissive about religion as Rushdie as this imaginative and sensitive description of the meaning of prayer indicates.

Shahid and Deedee, after a tumultuous time together and many adventures, decide to try to make a go of their relationship. Shahid has thought hard about this and can cope with the idea by coming to terms with the necessity in the light of his experience to live in 'divided and distinguished worlds.' 'How could anyone confine themselves to one system and creed?' he asked. 'Why should they feel they had to? There was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily? There had to be innumerable ways of being in the world. He would spread himself out, in his work and in love, following his curiosity' And so, the story moves to its conclusion. The two of them take a train for Brighton where they intend to spend a weekend together. Once again, as with *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a loving relationship is held out as somehow offering a way to a meaningful and sustainable existence. But it is all so fragile. It will go on 'until it stops being fun,' Deedee says. Shahid agrees. And with that the novel ends.

Kureishi is an acute observer of suburban as well as inner-city life as his earlier novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows. The people who live on Acacia Avenue want spiritual experience tailored to their own needs. They don't, therefore, tend to expect anything from the churches or mosques with their predetermined and historically shaped liturgies but they turn rather to any peripatetic guru who'll come and offer his wares within their own front rooms. This is the essence of pick 'n' mix spirituality. The novel opens with an example of just such an occasion. The furniture in the front room is pushed back against the wall and middle-aged white people are sitting cross-legged on the floor. The lights are tuned down and people encouraged to observe some simple rules of relaxation. After the yoga, there is talk of yin and yang, cosmic consciousness, Chinese philosophy and following the Way. Those sitting there become hypnotized by the smell of incense and the general atmospherics of the event.

Karim, the principal character in this novel, is the son of the guru (an Indian from Bombay married to a white English woman). Karim sets about observing his father's religious practices and this generates some interesting conversation between the two of them. 'We live in an age of doubt and uncertainty,' the father declares. 'The old religions under which people lived for 99 per cent of human history have decayed or are irrelevant. Our problem is secularism. We have replaced our spiritual values and wisdom with

materialism. And now everyone is wandering around asking how to live. Sometimes desperate people even turn to me.' As he continues his discourse, he identifies happiness as the true object of life. 'I believe happiness is only possible,' he says, 'if you follow your feeling, your intuition, your real desires. Only unhappiness is gained by acting in accordance with duty, or obligation, or guilt, or the desire to please others. You must accept happiness when you can, not selfishly, but remembering you are part of the world, of others, not separate from them. Should people pursue their own happiness at the expense of others? Or should they be unhappy so others can be happy? There's no one who hasn't had to confront this problem.' This formula for life put forward by Karim's father is followed by a severe assessment of mainstream religion. 'So,' he avows, 'if you punish yourself through self-denial in the puritan way, in the English Christian way, there will only be resentment and unhappiness.'

This mention of the place of religion in our post-modern, post-colonial, culture leads me to draw this survey of the present state of our affairs to a conclusion by turning to the writing of Jonathan Sacks, a much respected religious leader and former Chief Rabbi, whose book *The Dignity of Difference* saw him struggling with the very questions we've been considering in this essay. How exactly do we live in 'divided and distinguished' worlds? How do we respect our differences while remaining loyal to the principles that shape our identity? How exactly do we open ourselves to the ideas of others, make ourselves vulnerable, accept the risks and learn (and even benefit) from such encounters? Can the notions of hybridity, in-between-ness, negotiated space make any sense in the case of religious beliefs? Or do they lead inevitably to relativism or syncretism or chaos?

Sacks makes a powerful case for tolerance and sensitivity. He argues that the world as for too long been dominated by what he calls 'universalist cultures' whose sway was marked by the extinction of weaker forms of life and the diminution of difference. Local customs and ancient traditions were swept away. Thus, in his view, the ancient empires of Greece and Rome, medieval Christianity and Islam, as well as the Enlightenment, imposed themselves with monolithic effect. 'They were to cultural diversity,' he argues, 'what industrialization is to biodiversity.'

He isn't blind to the great legacies of these cultures but he regrets the loss of difference that was a consequence of the way they imposed themselves. He goes on to plead for 'a theology of difference.' Unity, he insists, creates

diversity and the time has come for people of different groups, different faiths, to make more of an effort to heed and hear each other.

> Any proposed reduction of that diversity through the many forms of fundamentalism that exist today – market, scientific or religious – would result in a diminution of the rich texture of our shared life, a potentially disastrous narrowing of the horizons of possibility.

Sacks knows as well as anyone, of course, that there will always be a tension between the legitimate and precious characteristics of groups, races, tribes and nations on the one hand and the need to build community relations and a global order on the other. And he himself understands fully that the dignity of difference must always fit in alongside the need to transcend difference for the common good. He understands it and has committed himself such a wide view of the big picture in his own writing. “God is only partially comprehended by any faith,’ he writes, ‘he is my God but also your God. He is on my side but also on your side He exists not only in my faith but also in yours.’ This is a remarkable sentiment from such a quarter. And it’s an idea he pursues even further:

> God is universal, religions are particular. Religion is the translation of God into a particular language and thus into the life of a group, a nation, a community of faith. In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to Jews, Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. Only such a God is truly transcendental – greater not only than the natural universe but also than the spiritual universe articulated in any single faith, any specific language of human sensibility ….. Only such a world view could reconcile the particularity of cultures with the universality of the human condition.

Here, subsidiarity (the notion that all our actions and decisions need to be generated as close to the level at which they are implemented) undergirds a solidarity (where our differences are subsumed in a transcendental unity that lies beyond our particularities). This is a brave attempt to assert people’s rights to enjoy their differences without losing the common good to which we must all, somehow, remain committed. Sacks makes a seemingly incontestable case. And yet, however important we judge difference to be, and however passionately we argue our case to create space within our social order for people to act with freedom and to enjoy being just who they believe themselves to be, there will always be another side to the coin.

It may well be true, as Jonathan Sacks argues, that unity creates diversity, but an equally compelling case can be made that diversity begs the question of unity. Can we, while dignifying difference, identify the kind of unity we aspire to? Indeed, can we possibly stop at the level of mere aspiration? We need surely to make as strong a case as we can, fully aware of the importance of all that makes us different, for the necessity of finding ways in our daily lives of living out the realities of our (human) bio-diversity while at the same time identifying the values and goals that unite us beyond difference. The parts, important as they are, must come together so that they release energies in each other: the product must be more than the sum of those separate parts. This has to do with synergy where groups catalyse each other and bring a greater reality into view. This is more than a matter of mere arithmetic.

All this may, of course, lie beyond the realm of the possible. Jonathan Sacks himself discovered that his own community refused to accept his ideas on this matter. Indeed, they demanded that such views be retracted. The original book was withdrawn from publication and destroyed. Sacks was asked to rewrite the offending passages in a less radical way. He duly obliged. The will to pursue the path he'd chosen needs to be very strong if it's to succeed politically. There will always be those who want to stay in the womb, safe from contact with a wider world, insistent on keeping things as they have always been, fearful of contamination if their culture is too closely in contact with others. And yet there will always be others who are ready to be radical and pragmatic, capable and desirous of working at the compromises needed to live in divided and distinguished worlds and to advance the cause of the unity of the human family.

So much of our future depends on how the interaction between those forces plays out. We can only hope.