

*29<sup>th</sup> March, 2024*

# Integrity and Integration-- A Balanced Approach to Diversity

Amid rapid changes in British society and culture, there is much confusion about what our commitments to tolerance, inclusion, and diversity actually entail. Faced by populist nationalism on the right and a fixation on structural injustice on the left, Britain must chart a middle course, securing its time-honoured values of religious freedom and genuine moral pluralism, while balancing civic integration with the right of minority communities to uphold their cultural traditions when these do not conflict with civic values.

## A changing society

The 2021 Census confirmed that Britain's society has become more religiously, culturally and ethnically diverse than ever before. For the first time, less than half the population identified as Christian, while the percentage identifying as Muslim reached 6.5%, up from 4.9% in 2011.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the percentage of the population identifying with one or other ethnic minority groups rose to nearly 20%.<sup>2</sup>

The extent and pace of change pose challenges to Britain in coming to terms with its identity, but also present us with great opportunities to forge a stronger, more plural, and freer society.

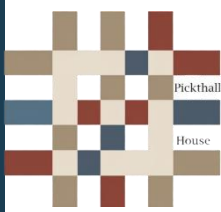
## Integration, not assimilation

In the past, many conservatives and right-of-centre groups called for immigrants to assimilate into a dominant British culture and set of values represented by John Major's romantic invocation of "long shadows on county cricket grounds... and... old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the

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<sup>1</sup> [\(Roskams 2022\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [\("Ethnic Group \(detailed\) Variable: Census 2021" 2021\)](#)



morning mist”.<sup>3</sup> Immigrant and minority communities were expected to shed their distinctive religion and cultural traditions and assimilate to the folkways of the majority. Even if it were desirable, this approach is no longer possible, not least because the traditional dominant culture and its religious, social, and moral values have substantially collapsed, for reasons having little to do with immigration.

A newer variant on the assimilationist ideal instead demands that minorities conform to the secular, progressive norms increasingly dominant among the ethnic majority,<sup>4</sup> expecting minorities to abandon traditional values that conflict with contemporary views of family, gender, and sexuality.<sup>5</sup> This is equally unhelpful and represents a political dead-end. Whatever one’s view on Britain’s liberalisation of social attitudes over recent decades, it is a deep part of our tradition to tolerate diversity and moral pluralism. As traditional conceptions of freedom enshrined in the Equality Act have always held, affirming the equal citizenship of women and sexual minorities does not require adopting the same set of views on personal conduct.

Critics of multiculturalism are right, however, to point out that minority communities need to integrate into Britain’s civic culture in order to contribute to our collective political and cultural life. As a nation of many diverse communities, Britain can and should expect a commitment from all communities to a common set of civic values and ideals including tolerance, respect for difference, and cultural and religious pluralism. Where these ideals are not lived up to, minority communities should call out members who fall short. Equally, however, where appeals to civic values are weaponised by political actors to stigmatise and securitise minorities, this must be resisted as inconsistent with those very values. Britain does not need to police the political and religious opinions of law-abiding citizens.

## Religious freedom requires viewpoint diversity

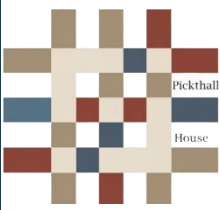
Britain’s commitment to religious freedom is one of its proudest achievements, having been established (albeit imperfectly) over three centuries ago. It is

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<sup>3</sup> [\(Ratcliffe 2016\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [\(“BSA 40: A Liberalisation in Attitudes?” 2022\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> E.g. [\(Murray 2017\)](#)



inseparable from the 1688 constitutional settlement that still shapes our institutions today. The British state does not make windows into its citizens' souls so long as they accept its civic values.

Religious freedom should be distinguished from the freedom to follow a minority cultural tradition. Both are vitally important British values, but religion should not be equated with culture. Religion, like philosophy, involves beliefs about meaning, existence, the universe, and the mysteries of human life that can be changed and chosen by individuals seeking to follow the truth to the best of their ability. Culture is primarily a matter of lifestyle, language, and family tradition. The two are often connected in practice but should be dealt with separately. The right to religious freedom must include the right to proselytise and to spread one's beliefs. Dealing with religious rights under the heading of minority communities' cultural rights obscures the human interest in being able to seek, explore, and challenge one's beliefs.

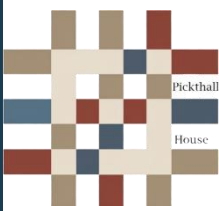
Unfortunately, the laudable intention to protect the citizenship rights of sexual minorities has sometimes been confused in recent years with a sectarian effort to enforce uniformity of opinion on personal relationships.<sup>6</sup> Politicians and public figures should not be pressured into renouncing association with faith or other communities that hold traditional beliefs. The so-called 'cancel culture' associated with such intolerance should be rejected and fought, and the rights to freedom of speech and religious freedom defended in law and also in the background culture of our communities and our academic, media, and cultural institutions.

Even more damaging are incidents where the police appear to misapply hate speech laws and arrest individuals for expressing socially conservative beliefs.<sup>7</sup> While in nearly all such cases, no further action is taken by the police because the individuals arrested have not broken any law, they have a deeply chilling effect on culture. Individuals whose religious freedoms and free speech rights are threatened should be protected, and the correct legal position should be made wide public knowledge so that the chilling effect such frivolous arrests can have been countered.

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. [\(Rawlinson 2021; Huxley 2023; Vinter 2023\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> E.g. [\(Foley 2023\)](#)



As the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 acknowledges, society benefits from robust debate on “controversial or unpopular opinions”, and debate is threatened by both legal and cultural censorship. Viewpoint diversity is the basis of intellectual and cultural enrichment. All public institutions should do much more to acknowledge the difference between holding a moral belief and engaging in blameworthy discrimination, which has been acknowledged by leading campaigners for the rights of sexual minorities.<sup>8</sup>

## Identity and Immigration

While Britain’s identity as a nation and a state cannot be equated with the tradition of any one ethnic group, national identity is not a zero-sum phenomenon. Not all communities have to view their relationship to the nation in the same way. We can acknowledge that some people legitimately relate to their membership in British civic life through the mediating lens of their particular cultural tradition, while others may adopt a purely civic British identity that does not contradict their particular cultural values.

Those who are attached to traditional narratives of British identity, such as David Goodhart’s “somewheres”,<sup>9</sup> need not feel threatened by the growth of diversity. Nevertheless, many concerns about the pace of immigration in recent years are legitimate. Excessively rapid immigration can dampen the effectiveness of civic integration. A balanced, transparent weighing up of economic and social effects of immigration without accusations of xenophobia is the best way to diffuse anxiety on both sides and promote a calmer, less polarised cultural environment.

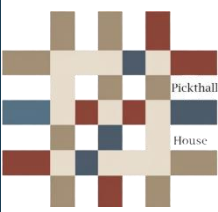
## The role of Muslim communities

As Britain’s rapidly growing second-largest religion, Islam has often received the spotlight when debates about multiculturalism, integration, and religion become heated. Policy-makers have acknowledged the resilient social

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<sup>8</sup> [\(Vektor 2019\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [\(Goodhart 2017\)](#)



conservatism of Muslim communities which increasingly makes them stand out from their liberal and often-secular neighbours.<sup>10</sup>

Muslims can and should transcend the politics of narrowly-construed communal interests and negotiation for a greater share of stretched national resources. The interests of Britain and the interests of British Muslims are one and the same. British Muslims should learn to speak with a prophetic register, witnessing the truths of our tradition and inviting other communities to listen and to share, and articulating a vision for Britain as a nation that is informed by our faith but sharable by citizens of all faiths and none.

Islam is not just the ethnic patrimony of Britain's South Asian communities. It is a vision and practice of an elevated conception of humanity's place in the universe: as vicegerents on Earth of the one Almighty God. As such it can take many cultural forms despite an irreducible theocentric essence; it has been compared to clear water coloured by the cultural bedrock over which it flows.<sup>11</sup> This is notably true of Britain's traditional cultural heritage: the traditional social and cultural forms of our country can be made fertile soil, making Islam a "logical next step" in our national story.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, both the progressive left and the nativist right share the perception that Islam is a destabilising Other that threatens British tradition. While the left celebrates the weakening of what they take to be the weight of an oppressive history, the right is alarmed by a perceived foreign threat. This perception of Islam as a cultural Other is bad for Britain, bad for Islam, and bad for the deeper interests of British Muslims. British Muslims should challenge this perception, and by doing so, adopt the stance of witnesses to a tradition that is relevant to and needed by the rest of our nation.

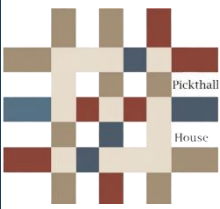
Part of this posture involves articulating Muslim interests in the right language. While prejudice and hatred against Islam and Muslims represents an uncivil and ugly blight on Britain's tradition of tolerance, not all criticisms stem from malice. Indeed, criticism of Muslims and Islam contributes to the diversity of viewpoints that strengthens Britain's civic life.

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<sup>10</sup> (Frampton, Goodhart, and Mahmood 2016)

<sup>11</sup> ("One God, Many Names —" 2004)

<sup>12</sup> (Murad 1997)

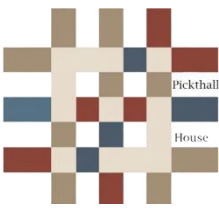


However, where criticism becomes policing of individuals and communities merely for holding unfashionable opinions, it undermines the pluralism and tolerance at the heart of Britain’s identity. The inherently slippery notion of “non-violent extremism” and its associated security apparati have been deployed to justify an oppressive enforcement of the orthodoxies of the moment. This tendency should be rolled back, restoring the traditional British practice where only persons who directly advocate for illegal activity are subject to censorship and investigation.

**The interests of Britain and those of British Muslims are aligned. When Britain is truest to its own traditions of tolerance and plurality, Muslims need not be an eternally marginalised minority but can proudly take their seat and help write the nation’s unfolding story.**

## Notes

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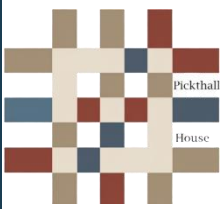
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