

# Of Teddy Bears and Other Diverse Matters

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The commentator Timothy Garton Ash said recently, 'A great debate of our time concerns how people with different religions, ethnicities and values can live together as full citizens of free societies'. He illustrated this by the news stories of one particular week: a school teacher arrested and charged in Sudan for allowing children to call a teddy bear Muhammad; rioting in Paris suburbs by the children of North African immigrants; a Jewish school in London criticised for insisting that for a child to qualify for admission the applicant's mother had to be born Jewish; angry scenes at the Oxford Union for giving a platform to a holocaust denier.

As globalisation washes over us and people are jumbled about many feel that they have lost a place or cannot find a place. Political movements can attempt to create a sense of place by scapegoating immigrants, and so on. At the extremes of lostness terrorists attempt to create meaning through violence. Ethnic and religious belonging powerfully provide a sense of place; the problem is that they are exclusive places. The belongings of liberalism – of being part of a universal human – are inclusive but too 'thin'. Human beings need particular belongings but we also need more general – and more inclusive – belonging. Ash's debate needs to be supplemented by the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sach's challenge to 'build our home together'.

Sach's challenge has the advantage that it helps to focus on important questions such as: what holds society together? What is the balance between particular belongings and general belonging to be? What are the rules for sharing the 'house' to be?

There are a whole series of challenges to public policy, e.g. faith schools, new mosques, the teaching of evolution, the hijab, the right to free speech. The way forward is not to push religion into the private sphere but to encourage religion to take responsibility, along with others, for the public sphere.

The public square is where robust conversation takes place and the pre-supposition is that everyone is entitled to be present. We should be very reluctant to remove someone from it, and of course the test is the holocaust deniers, the racists, the promoters of hatred, the advocates of violence. But, if possible, to expose the arguments of these people to debate. And exclusion criteria should be as tightly drawn as possible – we are back to the rules of the shared 'house'. The public square is a place where there is going to be offence and we cannot expect too much protection.

A diverse society needs go-between people, cultural interpreters and spaces and platforms to bring people together. We need to be able to share conversation and negotiate difference. The Chief Rabbi points out that Judaism developed two concepts of peace – the second *darkhei shalom*, the ways of peace: in the not-yet-fully-redeemed world peace means living with difference, even differences we dislike.

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