

## Speaking Up For Ali: Considering Identity in the face of Palestinian statehood

By Jane Clements

Several things have focused my thinking on issues of identity and nationalism recently – major themes in the context of the UN debate on Palestinian statehood.



On the way to a conference on ‘Building a better integrated and resilient society’ in north London, I bought a copy of acclaimed author Caryl Phillips’ book ‘Colour Me English’.<sup>1</sup> Growing up in Leeds in the 1960’s, where he was for some time the only black boy in his school, Phillips also stood in Lower Manhattan and watched the passenger jet crash into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. In the week following the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “9/11”, it was especially thought provoking to read his account. Phillips has plenty to say on the issues of tribalism, identity and society.

Phillips’ book is a series of reflective essays – personal, literary commentaries which are immensely readable as well as shockingly thought-provoking. He writes of the shared American national horror in the days following 9/11 when time and everything else seemed to stand still. But in the aftermath, he reflects on how American Muslims and others were confronted by issues of what it means to be other than white and Christian.

The conference I was attending, concerned with a shared civic goal of an integrated and resilient society, was organised by British Muslim organisations. Launching the report on its ‘Mosques and Communities’ project, the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) brought together community leaders, politicians and inter faith practitioners to consider how mosques can be centres for what the Church of England calls ‘presence and engagement’; the need for Muslim communities both to engage with those around them but also to promote Muslim values and spirituality.

There are certainly communities doing just that. The Interfaith Director of a south coast mosque shared how their youth group discussed a planned march by the EDL in their area. The young people suggested that they provided packed lunches for the hungry marchers, many of whom would have come a long way. The Director was stunned: “but they’ll just throw them back at us”; “probably”, replied one youth, “but imagine the photographs in the local paper”. As a Christian, this whole idea challenged me – such a gesture towards one’s enemies is a central, difficult tenet of generous love. It may be worth reflecting that in the days following the massive coverage of events and 10-year commemorations of 9/11, the only mention of Muslims I saw in the newspapers were in the context of a few people burning a Stars and Stripes flag at Grosvenor Square. The positive contributions that many communities are making to our ‘better integrated and resilient society’ so often go unnoticed. It is up to all of us concerned for our shared future to ensure that this situation changes.

In his essay collection, Caryl Phillips charts both physical journeys and of his intellectual and emotional quest – a constant reflection on how to be a writer in a

society where one belongs and yet doesn't. It is often pointed out that we tend to stress the aspect of our identity which is most under threat or least accepted in any situation. I remember fondly a student I knew from a village in the Galilee, who had a tendency to talk in capital letters: 'I AM A PALESTINIAN AND A CHRISTIAN AND AN ISRAELI AND A WOMAN – but not necessarily in that order!' The question which needs asking now by all those of us concerned for the region is: how do we best recognise and affirm the identity of Israeli Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel and all Palestinians? How can each share in the citizenship of his or her own society? Where is he or she acknowledged to be 'at home'? It is small comfort from some Christian voices – and I have heard them at both ends of the political spectrum – who say, 'People of faith have a home in heaven; no earthly place can truly be home'. And yet God has placed us in communities, for mutual support and development, as equal partners in our shared future.

The opening chapter of Phillips' book describes how the first Asian Muslim boy, Ali, comes to the school. Like the author, he is physically different from the other boys but, Phillips points out, he himself is big, strong, sporty and church-going. Inevitably, Ali suffers ostracism, then casual teasing and finally full-blown bullying. Recognising something of a shared place, Phillips makes a gesture of support for Ali in dealing with this, but the system is against them both. He is, subsequently, deeply ashamed that he never again spoke up for Ali, but acknowledges that the differences between them were, in the end, greater than any perceived similarity.

Phillips considers that it is not simply a question of ethnicity or colour, but of traditions and backgrounds – and Islam is a major player in this, as Judaism was before it and Sikhism in the English heartlands of the 60's. Europe is not only changing – it *has* changed, says Phillips; this realisation is what drives the "racist Little Englander, angry because he doesn't understand why and how his society is changing" (p213). His rage is saved particularly for those of his 'tribe' who embrace and help steer change, although I believe this to have been the strength of British inhabitants over many centuries. This was brought home to me when I once went to the aid of two hijab-wearing women who were being abused in a South London supermarket. As the protagonists slunk away, one shouted at me, "*you're* what's wrong with this country!"

Although formed in part by his experiences in Britain, Phillips suggests that it is only in exile that we can truly discover ourselves. He cites examples of authors and novelists who made deliberate journeys to cultures where they could never pretend to belong. Since his parents came to Britain from St Kitts, Phillips also cites a journey which, although he didn't make it, has been a major – perhaps the most major influence on him: the slave trade crossings from West Africa centuries ago.

Both Israeli Jews and Palestinians know about issues of exile and displacement, of journeys and of the need to belong – to have a home. All their many collected and individual narratives deal with these same issues. As Phillips shows, one does not need to live there all the time, but it is where we feel we belong, where our identity is affirmed and celebrated.

Great changes have already happened in Israel and Palestine since 1967. The question now is how to embrace the changes positively and effectively for the good of the

majority – and there will undoubtedly be more than one answer to this; it is for the politicians and community leaders to decide. But in the long run, success or smooth passage all boils down to individuals, their responses to change and to each other, and these cannot be imposed from outside. Learning how to speak up for Ali – whoever and wherever he is - involves our engagement with issues of identity, nationalism and society. It involves listening and acknowledging how each person *feels* – and perhaps to understand ourselves more fully as we consider the needs of others.

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<sup>i</sup> Phillips, Caryl (2011) *Colour Me English*, pub. HarvillSecker, London.