Earlier this year, Harold Pinter delivered a public lecture entitled, ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ It had not been written by Pinter, but by Salman Rushdie who, for security reasons, was unable to deliver it himself. Here was one of those charged moments in which we felt the inescapable clash of two cultures: modernity and tradition in the shape of an iconoclastic novelist and an outraged Islam. At stake was not only the rarefied issue of blasphemy, but even the most fundamental question of what words mean, and what a book is. Throughout the controversy, Rushdie had argued that *The Satanic Verses* was, after all, just a novel, in which words are intended neither to cohere with reality nor to represent the views of their author. Muslims, raised in a tradition of sacred texts, saw the written word as altogether more freighted with significance: a sentence is an entity in its own right and an author cannot escape responsibility merely by invoking the conventions of the modern novel. Who was right? There was, of course, no answer. Not because the question was difficult but because the two cultures that addressed it excluded one another.

In his lecture, Rushdie spoke directly to the theme of the novel in contemporary society. It was, he said, a privileged arena; born, in Carlos Fuentes’ words, ‘from the fact that we do not understand one another, because unitary, orthodox language has broken down’. He went on to tell this parable. Imagine you are imprisoned in a large, rambling house. It is full of strangers and friends. At some point you realise there is no way out. Then one day you discover a room full of voices, talking about the house and everything and everyone in it. You find solace in this room; without it, you would go mad. That, said Rushdie, was the function of the novel. ‘Literature,’ he said, ‘is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way.’

It was a provocative definition, both of literature and of sanity. Because we might well reply that listening to voices talking about everything in every possible way is not sanity but the quickest route to madness, and that it is precisely the condition not just of high literature but of the whole of our fragmented culture. For sanity, the inhabitants of Rushdie’s house might well gather together, first just a few, then in growing numbers, to listen to someone who could tell them the story of the house, and why they came to be there, and what lies outside, though no one has ever returned. This religious narrative might seem to them the one thing that made living in the house tolerable, and when, one day, their gathering was interrupted by a stranger with a radio from which poured voices talking about everything in every possible way, they might feel that some privileged arena had been intruded on. The two parables, like the two cultures, exclude one another. And conflict of this kind is buried like an explosive charge in one of the great under-examined words of our culture: pluralism.
What is a plural society and how did we arrive at it? It is worth remembering that not long ago the phrase might have seemed a contradiction in terms. In 1959, Lord Devlin argued that ‘what makes a society of any sort is community of ideas, not only political ideas but also ideas about the way its members should behave and govern their lives.’ He added, ‘If men and women try to create a society in which there is no fundamental agreement about good and evil, they will fail.’ He was, of course, speaking about morals rather than culture. But there is little doubt that he had in mind a relatively unified society, shaped not only by moral teaching but by a broad set of common traditions, what Hegel called Sittlichkeit: the shared symbols and civilities that made England so quintessentially English.

It was an elevated view of this culture that, for example, inspired John Reith in the early days of the BBC. Reith believed that broadcasting has a responsibility to reflect and strengthen what he called ‘that spirit of commonsense Christian ethics which we believe to be a necessary component of citizenship and culture’. The voices speaking on John Reith’s BBC might talk about everything, but not in every possible way. They were recognisably speakers of a common language, members of a cultural establishment. In fact, as late as 1955, when a Mrs Margaret Knight delivered a radio talk suggesting that there could be morality without religion, one daily newspaper complained that the BBC had allowed ‘a fanatic to go on the rampage beating up Christianity’. And one of the governors of the BBC asked whether the broadcast constituted seditious libel.

It was this shared culture that underlay the liberalism of the 19th century. During that century, civil rights were extended to Catholics, members of the Free Church, and Jews. And a clear distinction was made between the public and the private domain. Religious confession became a matter of private conscience. And access to the universities, professions and public office was open to all. But there remained a distinctive language of society, and whoever wished to enter had to learn it. Irishmen, Jews and other new arrivals had to pass through what John Murray Cuddihy called ‘the ordeal of civility’ and acquire the accents, nuances and intricate codes of polite society. One of the rules was that religious nonconformity was permitted, so long as it was private. And Jews learned to hide their identity so well that Sidney Morganbesser once defined their creed as incognito, ergo sum.

The key word in this process was assimilation. As new arrivals entered still traditional societies, they were expected to dissolve from groups into individuals and absorb the dominant culture. By any earlier standards, this was a benign procedure. Before the 19th century, religious and ethnic minorities had been barred from at least some civil rights. But it was not without its traumas, particularly for the transitional generation. The Jews of Central Europe felt them acutely. Having broken away from their parents’ faith, they found themselves still regarded as outsiders in the new society whose manners they had so carefully cultivated. They were in that psychologically devastating no man’s land between an excluded past and an excluding present; so that an observer like Jacob Klatzkin, writing in the early 20th century, could speak of a whole generation of ‘rent and broken human beings... diseased by ambivalence, consumed by contradictions, and spent by restless inner conflict’. It was the intellectuals of transition, double outsiders, who helped shape the modern mind: among them Marx, Durkheim, Freud, and Kafka. Salman Rushdie is, I suppose, their Islamic counterpart.
Assimilation was painful. But it seemed to be the only way a society could sustain its coherence while admitting large numbers of newcomers. It was in America in the early 20th century that a quite different idea began to take shape. By then, vast numbers of immigrants had entered the United States, too many and too varied to suppose that they would rapidly merge in the melting-pot. It was in 1915 that a young philosopher called Horace Kallen proposed a new model of a culturally diverse society. He made a clear distinction between the state and what today we would call ethnicity. And he regarded it as a misconception that each new immigrant group should undergo assimilation to the dominant culture. Instead, he envisaged that while there would be a common language of America, each group would have for its emotional and involuntary life, its own peculiar dialect of speech; its own individual and inevitable aesthetic and intellectual forms. It was the first argument for cultural pluralism. What Kallen saw was that liberalism would have to move one stage further. It had emancipated minorities as private citizens, but it had not yet made space for them as public cultures. The next step was inevitable. America should become cosmopolitan.

That was pluralism in theory. In practice, though, it was not until the 1960s that a whole series of developments in America and Western Europe shattered the idea of a single public culture. It was then that the civil rights movement in the States announced that black was beautiful Local identities began to be asserted, Welsh and Scottish nationalism among them. There were large new immigrant communities in Britain. There was talk of resurgent ethnicity. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan stated bluntly that the point about the melting-pot was that it did not happen. Grandchildren of immigrants developed a fascination for lost family traditions. Marcus Hansen propounded the law that the third generation labours to remember what the second generation strove to forget. The secular city had rediscovered what Harold Isaacs called ‘the idols of the tribe’.

And it was not only ethnicity that began to tear at society’s seamless robe. There was the youth rebellion against moral conformity. There were communes and counter-cultures and alternative lifestyles. And for once, the guardians of the older order had no reply. The idea of a strong national culture had, after all, served as the foundation of the century’s greatest evils, fascism and communism. The past seemed to have used up its moral capital. The future was best left in the hands of those who would inherit it. Theologians spoke about the death of God and the shaking of the foundations. Liberals argued successfully that law could not be used to enforce private morality. And with remarkable speed that set of fundamental agreements which Lord Devlin spoke of as the basis of society had been dissolved. The lines between private and public were redrawn. Political opinions, which were once not discussed at dinner, were now emblazoned on T-shirts. Sexual language and imagery which had been sheltered behind a code of reticence now became publicly sayable and showable. It was not long before that George Bernard Shaw had shocked audiences by his use, in Pygmalion, of the word ‘bloody’. We had become restless with the Victorian ideal of civility—being one thing in public, another in private. Within a decade, society had taken on the character of Rushdie’s definition of literature, voices talking about everything, in every possible way. Pluralism was liberalism carried through to the public domain.
But in the process there was a dramatic change in our social ecology. Precisely because liberalism gained power in the 19th century, it was able to take for granted a high degree of shared morality and belief, without having to reflect too carefully on the institutions that sustained it. Pluralism takes much further the idea that there is no such shared basis of society. Public policy should be neutral in matters of religion and morality and should merely adjudicate impartially between conflicting claims. The problem is that pluralism gives rise to deep and intractable conflicts while undermining the principles by which they might be resolved. It disintegrates our concept of the common good.

Sometimes we can witness this fragmentation at an early stage. Take, for example, the recent argument over religious broadcasting. It produced an unusual convergence of interests. Evangelicals and at least some secularists would both prefer a situation in which religious groups were able to buy time to deliver their message, if necessary on minority interest channels. To both sides, the move from broadcasting to narrowcasting, from a wide to a specialised audience, represented a clear gain. To the secularists, it would free mass audience channels from having to provide religious programmes. To the religious, evangelising on the air would mean not having to hold back from proclaiming the truth as one sees it. Both sides gain and no one, apparently, loses. But there is a loser. It is the idea of a shared culture at a level beyond entertainment and information.

Anyone who has ever delivered a religious broadcast knows how difficult it is to speak to an unknown and open audience. To our fellow believers, we can address words of fire; to a wider public, only the vaguest generalities. Broadcasting as opposed to narrowcasting is low on authenticity. But if we are to have a public culture, and one with a religious dimension, it is a discipline we have to undergo. We have to learn to speak to those we do not hope to convert, but with whom we wish to live. Narrowcasting frees us from that burden. But it moves us nearer a situation in which opinion is ghettoised into segmented audiences. And where the increase of choice means that we only have to listen to voices with which we agree.

There are more serious examples. Take the one with which I began. Liberals and religious minorities have both objected to a situation in which only Christianity is protected by the blasphemy laws. Instead, all major faiths should have equal protection. But how? One side argues that the blasphemy laws should be extended to cover them all. But that way conflict lies, because Christianity, Judaism and Islam have all at some stage been regarded as blasphemous by one another. Buddhists, for their part, opposed the proposal because their own rejection of monotheism might be construed as blasphemous by Christians, Muslims and Jews alike. Perhaps, then, blasphemy could be translated from an offence against religion to an assault on deeply held convictions. But if so, it is difficult to see why religious convictions should be especially privileged; and if all convictions were given equal weight, we would rapidly move to a situation where the beliefs of any might constrain the expressions of all. Liberals have therefore argued for an abolition of the offence of blasphemy altogether. But this would give equal protection to each religion by giving no protection to any.

Or consider the problem of religious education. For liberals, the answer seemed to lie in teaching all children all faiths. The problem is that giving many religions equal
weight is not supportive of each but instead tends rapidly to relativise them all. It produces a strange hybrid in which the primary value is personal choice, and we feel free to choose bits of one tradition and place them alongside pieces of another, disregarding the different ways of life that gave them meaning in the first place. A multicultural mind can use Zen for inwardsness, Hassidic tales for humour, liberation theology for politics, and nature mysticism for environmental concern. But that is a little like gluing together slices of Leonardo, Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Picasso and declaring the result a composite of the best in Western art. The simultaneous presence of voices talking about everything in every possible way degenerates rapidly into mere noise.

Parents might well conclude that the only way of passing on their values to their children was to choose a highly segregated education. And that, surely, was pluralism’s promise: that different religious and ethnic traditions could defend themselves against assimilation-in this case, assimilation into multiculturalism itself. The demand for segregated, denominational schools grows rather than diminishes in a pluralist society. But this offends against another principle of pluralism, the harmonious mix of different groups. As a result, the Commission for Racial Equality has recently argued for the end of all denominational schooling. A proposal to which all religious groups will be equally opposed.

These are conflicts in which pluralism comes down firmly on both sides at once. The reason is that at its heart are two incompatible views of a plural culture. One sees it as a place where many traditions meet and merge. The other sees it as an environment where distinct traditions can guard their separate integrity. At stake are two conflicting views of freedom, one which focuses on the individual, another which emphasises the group. Each side sees the other as a profound threat to its values. Liberals see religions as an assault on personal autonomy. Traditionalists see liberals as undermining religious authority. In both cases, non-negotiable values are at stake. Pluralism becomes a moral bank account that is always overdrawn. It endorses mutually exclusive visions of the good, and, by abandoning the concept of a common good, leaves us inarticulate in the face of cultural collision.

From this deadlock, there is a way out. And that is to think of a plural society not as one in which there is a Babel of conflicting language~, but rather as one in which we each have to be bilingual. There is a first and public language of citizenship which we have to learn if we are to live together. And there is a variety of second languages which connect us to our local framework of relationships: to family and group and the traditions that underlie them. If we are to achieve integration without assimilation, it is important to give each of these languages its due.

Our local languages are cultivated in the context of families and communities, our intermediaries between the individual and the state. They are where we learn who we are; where we develop sentiments of belonging and obligation; where our lives acquire substantive depth. Pluralism should not simply be neutral between values. Rather, it must recognise the very specific value of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews growing up in their respective heritages. Traditions are part of our moral ecology, and they should be conserved, not dissolved, by education.
But this is only viable if we develop an equally strong public language of common citizenship, and it must have a richer vocabulary than the single word ‘rights’. It was Horace Kallen himself, the first advocate of pluralism, who argued the need for values which everyone must agree on ‘if they mean to live freely and peacefully together as equals, none penalising the other for his otherness and all insuring each the equal protection of the law.’

Our language of citizenship has a history. It belongs to what Felix Frankfurter described as ‘the binding tie of cohesive sentiment’ that underlies the ‘continuity of treasured common life’ of a nation. But like all languages, it evolves. And we must respect both the history and the evolution. Perhaps we would no longer say as confidently as John Reith that the ‘spirit of common sense Christian ethics’ is a ‘necessary component of citizenship and culture’. But that tradition remains a significant part of our national life, even if it has been joined by other voices, some religious, some secular.

We have tended to neglect that public language in recent years. We would be hard pressed to say what shared values today made us a society. Perhaps in this age of Europeanism and domestic diversity, we have moved beyond the whole idea of a national identity: our attachments are either larger or smaller than that. It may be only at times of conflict, like the Falklands War or, for that matter, the World Cup, that we are strongly aware of national belonging at all.

If so, I believe it is a mistake. The more plural a society we become, the more we need to reflect on what holds us together. If we have only our local language, the language of the group, we have no resource for understanding why none of our several aspirations can be met in full and why we must restrain ourselves to leave space for other groups. We begin to have expectations that cannot possibly be fulfilled. This creates sectarian leadership, the politics of protest, single issue lobbies, and sometimes acts of violence. Pluralism can lead to a contemporary tribalism and no one has painted a darker picture of it than Tom Wolfe in his novel, The Bonfire of the Vanities. In its pages, contemporary New York has become a society of conflicting ghettos-white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, black, Irish Catholic and Jewish-and to wander out of your own into someone else’s is to fall headlong into nightmare. That, surely, we must avoid.

The task of representing shared values traditionally fell, in England, to the established Church. Our current diversity makes many people, outside the Church and within, feel uneasy with that institution. But disestablishment would be a significant retreat from the notion that we share any values and beliefs at all. And that would be a path to more, not fewer, tensions. In a society of plurality and change, there may be no detailed moral consensus that can be engraved on tablets of stone. But there can and must be a continuing conversation, joined by as many voices as possible, on what makes our society a collective enterprise; a community that embraces many communities.

Keeping this first language alive means significant restraints on all sides. For Christians, it involves allowing other voices to share in the conversation. For people of other faiths it means coming to terms with a national culture. For secularists, it means acknowledging the force of commitments that must, to them, seem irrational.
For everyone, it means settling for less than we would seek if everyone were like us, and searching for more than our merely sectional interests: in short, for the common good.

We do not need to look far for a metaphor of our situation. The book of Genesis gives us our first description of what Salman Rushdie calls the breakdown of language, the confusion of voices talking about everything in every possible way. But the Tower of Babel is not the end of the biblical narrative, merely its beginning. In the next chapter, Abram is called to a faith that will not become the faith of everyone, merely the covenant of a single extended family. Other peoples will testify to God in their own distinctive ways. In a plural world, there are many paths to the divine presence; many languages in which faith is expressed. What, then, is the religious imperative after Babel? Simply this. That Abram is told: in you will all the families of earth be blessed. That necessary tension between local and public languages, being faithful to one tradition and yet a blessing to others, is one of the great themes of the Bible. As it deserves to be of our time.