The Spiritual Identity of *Britishness*

Believing in
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*Disappearing
and Reappearing Identities*

Britain is in danger of disappearing. I am not thinking here of the threat of long-term flooding and coastal erosion posed by global warming but rather of the demise of Britishness as a concept, an idea and an identity. Opinion polls and census returns show that fewer and fewer of the long-term inhabitants of the British Isles regard themselves as British. The General Household Survey carried out by the Government in 2000 found that less than a third of adults living in the United Kingdom chose to describe themselves simply as British, with half preferring to see themselves simply as English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish and the rest opting for a hybrid or combined identity. Among Scots, only twenty-seven per cent described themselves in any way as British. For those living in Wales the figure was thirty-five per cent and even in England just forty-eight per cent of the population identified themselves as British, ten per cent fewer than in 1992. Other recent studies confirm a waning sense of Britishness among the long-term inhabitants of the United Kingdom. The 2001 census revealed that for the first time a majority of those living in England marked their nationality as English rather than British.[1]

The word 'British' has disappeared from a number of major national institutions in recent years, thanks largely to the effects of privatization, the driving political ideology of the 1980s and 1990s. British Rail disappeared in

1993 to be replaced by more than thirty different train-operating companies. British Steel merged with a Dutch rival, Koninklijke Hoogovens, in 1999 to become Corus. British Telecom has become simply BT and British Gas has transmogrified into BG plc, Transco, Centric and House.co.uk. British Leyland and British Road Services are more distant memories. Other icons of Britishness have gone – the Royal Yacht *Britannia*, which perpetuated the Roman name for Britain and the female figure who long personified the nation, was decommissioned in 1997. Britannia herself, who once appeared wearing her helmet and carrying her Trident on several coins of the realm, was demoted with the decimalization of the currency in 1971 and now appears only on the fifty pence piece. Mainstream political parties increasingly adopt a narrower national rather than UK-wide identity, presenting themselves as Scottish Labour or Welsh Liberal Democrats. Even the Conservatives have dropped their Unionist tag and followed suit.

Britain has largely disappeared from school history lessons. When I was at school in the 1960s, history involved a chronological progression from the Normans to the Victorians, fortified by a little red book entitled *Outlines of British History*. In their history lessons through the 1990s and early 2000s, my children have studied virtually no British history but rather endured a somewhat repetitive diet of twentieth-century world history focusing primarily on the USA in the 1920s and 1930s, the Russian revolution, Germany under Hitler and South Africa during apartheid.

The extent to which Britishness is disappearing as both a concept and a category came home to me when I reached the end of one of those interminable questionnaires which are among the hazards of modern working life, especially in the public sector. The last question in this particular university staff survey was on ethnic origin and provided boxes to tick for Scottish, English, Welsh, Irish, Caribbean, African or mixed race but none for British. This reflects how many young people feel now. When I asked those students in my 'Monarchy, Church and State' class who were born in the United Kingdom how they would describe their national identity, just thirty per cent identified themselves as British against seventy per cent who identified themselves as English, Scottish or Northern Irish (there was no one from Wales in the class). When I asked a further question as to which term best represented the country they felt that they belonged to, seventy per cent again responded England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, twenty per cent the United Kingdom, five per cent Britain and another five per cent gave a dual answer (UK and England or UK and Scotland). A more general survey of young people in Britain carried

out by *The Face* magazine in 2002 revealed that most subscribed to the view that 'We don't know what British means and we don't care,' and sixty-five per cent said that they felt ashamed of being British.

Commentators have been chronicling the disappearance of Britain for some time. Much has been made of the effects of the erosion of the four historic pillars of British identity – the Empire, the monarchy, Protestantism and the parliamentary union of England, Wales and Scotland. Tom Nairn's *The Break-up of Britain* appeared in 1977, with the author subsequently writing a book entitled *After Britain* in 2000, the same year that saw the publication of Andrew Marr's *The Day Britain Died*. These authors have had in mind especially the growth of nationalist sentiment and the constitutional changes that have come in its wake, especially in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament which first met in Edinburgh in 1999 effectively ended the constitutional settlement of the United Kingdom set in train by the 1707 Act of Union.

The disappearance of Britain has been accompanied by the growth of separatist feeling on the part of the four nations that make up the United Kingdom. Partly thanks to the re-establishment of the Edinburgh Parliament, there has been a distinct flowering of Scottish identity and self-confidence, manifested as much in economic performance and cultural vitality as in the political sphere. Although Wales is notably less self-confident and buoyant, Welsh identity is also becoming more marked. After a long period of decline, the number of people speaking the Welsh language increased from 18.7 per cent to 20 per cent of the population between 1991 and 2001, thanks partly to the 1994 Welsh Language Act which gave Welsh and English equal status wherever appropriate and reasonably practical. Even in Northern Ireland, home of the most conspicuously pro-British and Unionist-inclined inhabitants of the United Kingdom, relative peace in the last few years has brought a growing sense of Irishness and a waning of Unionist sympathies. Official moves to appease nationalist sentiment and make the province less 'British' have included the renaming of the Royal Ulster Constabulary as the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

England remains in many ways the nation with the least clearly defined identity in the United Kingdom but this too is changing. Leading Conservative politicians have floated the idea of establishing an English Parliament and of having an English rather than a UK passport. St George's Day, which for long had little appeal or impact, is gaining in public profile and observance. Clinton Cards, the greetings card retailers ever on the look-out for new marketing opportunities, introduced St George's Day cards in 1995

and within two years were selling more than 50,000 each April. During the European football championships in 1996 several English fans began painting their faces with a red cross rather than the traditional Union Jack. By the time of the World Cup matches in 1998 those adorned with the English national emblem outnumbered those with the British one. Perhaps the clearest sign of a growing English consciousness is the appearance of St George's flags not just on church towers but on pubs, and on flagpoles in front of houses and lorries and cars. Indeed, the increasing presence of the St George's flag, the Scottish Saltire and the Red Dragon of Wales is one of the most visible indicators of the rise of more distinctive English, Scottish and Welsh identities. It is not so much that they are replacing the Union Jack, although that is happening, as that their appearance in so many places and situations betokens a whole new enthusiasm for flying flags which has not, except in Northern Ireland, been a noticeably British trait.

It is interesting and ironic that these trends coincide with a growing interest in the concept of Britishness on the part of academics, journalists and politicians. A whole new school of history has arisen in the last thirty years to examine the 'British question' and the formation of the United Kingdom out of its long-existent component parts. It has spawned a number of important books, notably Linda Colley's *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1992), Steven Ellis and Sarah Barber's *Conquest and Union: Fashioning a British State, 1485–1725* (1995), Alexander Grant and Keith Stringer's *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History* (1995) and Keith Robbins' *Great Britain: Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness* (1997). In some ways, this 'British project' reached its culmination in Norman Davies' massive work *The Isles: A History* (1999).

British history is also appealing at a more popular level. *The Pocket Book of Patriotism*, a slim book published at the expense of its author, George Courtauld, proved an unexpected bestseller in the run-up to Christmas 2004. It begins with a forty-page chronology outlining the major events in British history, includes a series of 'speeches, commandments and charters' drawing on Shakespeare, Elizabeth I and Churchill, and a selection of songs and hymns including the National Anthem, 'Rule Britannia', 'Jerusalem' and the metrical version of the 23rd Psalm, and concludes with a list of Britain's colonies and dominions in 1920 and a guide to imperial weights and measures. The author, a City headhunter, wrote the book for the benefit of his own children and out of a more general concern at the level of ignorance about British history among the young, prompted by overhearing a boy on his commuter train to Essex who clearly thought Lord Nelson was a character in *Star Trek*. Rejected

by publishers as being old-fashioned and inappropriate for today's market, it sold 26,000 in its first week of publication. Perhaps because it has been so neglected in schools, there does, in fact, seem to be a huge popular appetite for British history and a pride in British achievements, as suggested by the considerable success of recent television series like Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*, broadcast at the turn of the millennium, David Starkey's detailed portrayal of the lives of British monarchs and Niall Ferguson's revisionist and highly sympathetic treatment of the British Empire. Programmes celebrating the British landscape, wildlife and coastline have also drawn large audiences.

It is not just right-wing historians and nostalgic traditionalists who have become excited about Britishness. The topic has engaged and enthused many on the left. This is clear from the most cursory perusal of *The Guardian*, the Bible of the liberal chattering classes, which has devoted pages and pages in the last two or three years to discussing and defining British identity. The Fabian Society devoted its New Year conference in 2006 to the topic 'Who do we want to be? The future of Britishness' and subsequently ran a national competition in conjunction with *The Guardian* for an essay on the theme of Britishness. Left-leaning academics are rallying to the British flag. In *Britishness since 1870* (2004), Paul Ward, a former member of the Socialist Workers' Party, while conceding that 'since the 1970s there has been a sense of crisis about what it means to be British', celebrates the continuing strength of Britishness and argues that, decoupled from whiteness and embracing diversity and the potential for multiple simultaneous identities, it offers a much more open and inclusive future than a radicalized Englishness.[2]

No one has sought to promote and redefine Britain and Britishness with more alacrity than senior members of the Labour Government first elected in 1997. It could be argued that, in implementing the programme of devolution which gave Scotland its Parliament and Wales its assembly and dismembering classic British institutions like the House of Lords and the office of Lord Chancellor, this administration has done more to break up the United Kingdom than any previous British Government. There is, however, a counter-argument that the policy of devolution was essential to save the United Kingdom, taking the sting out of the nationalist threat and promoting a more equal feeling among the different constituent nations. It is too early to say whether the constitutional reforms unleashed by the Blair Government will have the long-term effect of weakening or strengthening the United Kingdom. It may well be that they ultimately prove less inimical

to fostering a sense of shared British identity than the privatization agenda promoted so vigorously in the Thatcher and Major years. What is certain is that no previous government has made a more concerted and self-conscious effort to define, promote and redefine the concepts of Britain and Britishness as the three elected since 1997.

Notions of national identity have been a key part of Tony Blair's New Labour project since its inception. Among his first priorities on becoming Prime Minister in 1997 was a personal crusade to re-brand Britain as a new, modern, forward-looking and self-consciously young country. This project, which gained the soubriquet of 'Cool Britannia', involved, among other things, a close flirtation with the short-lived Britpop movement, epitomized by Blur, Oasis and the Spice Girls, a somewhat ill-judged engagement with Formula One racing cars and the building of the Millennium Dome. This rather frenetic and overly cosmetic exercise has been followed by a more carefully thought-out and historically rooted attempt to define and promote British identity in the interests of social cohesion, inspired partly by evidence of deep-seated social alienation and fragmentation manifested in 2001 when riots broke out in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley. The Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Act 2002 required that UK residents seeking British citizenship be tested to show sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Gaelic and of life in the United Kingdom. As part of its aim to raise the status of becoming a British citizen, it also provided for the taking of an oath and pledge of allegiance at official civic ceremonies bestowing citizenship. A 'Life in the United Kingdom' advisory group under the chairmanship of Professor Sir Bernard Crick was appointed to deliberate on the appropriate curriculum, tests and ceremony for those seeking British citizenship.

At the same time as initiating a public debate on the nature of Britishness and the extent to which it should be explicitly taught to immigrants, the Government introduced compulsory citizenship classes in schools. Following the report of the Crick working party in 2003, it announced that those seeking British nationality would face tests in the English language and in British history, institutions and values. The first of the new civic ceremonies to bestow British citizenship took place in Brent Town Hall in North London in February 2004 with an oath of allegiance to the Queen and both the Union Jack and the National Anthem figuring prominently. In the summer of 2004, the Government launched a strategy to reclaim the Union Jack from extremists, encourage its flying from public buildings, make more use of it on official documents and generally promote it as a branding symbol.

In a significant shift from the emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity that had hitherto been New Labour talismans, community cohesion and pride in being British became the Government's new watchwords. The Home Office consultation paper, *Strength in Diversity*, which launched the Union Jack initiative, proclaimed:

> We need to ensure that all citizens feel a sense of pride in being British and a sense of belonging to this country and to each other, and to ensure that our national symbols, like the Union flag and the flags of the four nations, are not the tools of extremists, but visibly demonstrate our unity, as we saw through the Golden Jubilee celebrations.[3]

In November 2004, the Labour Party screened a party political broadcast under the title 'Proud of Britain'. A website subsequently launched with the same title made much use of Union Jack imagery and urged those who logged on to it to talk up Britain. The Home Office then issued a 145-page *Journey to Citizenship* in December 2004, hailed as 'the first ever official government history of Britain' and covering a huge range of topics ranging from an explanation of Christmas festivities such as kissing under the mistletoe to strictures on the importance of cleaning up dog mess and keeping front doorsteps rubbish free. In August 2005, a Home Office minister, Hazel Blears, told *The Times* that the Government was proposing to rename ethnic minority groups in an attempt to strengthen and highlight their British roots, so that they would be described as 'British Asian' or 'Muslim British' rather than 'Asian' or 'Muslim'.

A key role in this reassertion of British patriotism and pride has been played by leading ministers in the Labour Government. Responding to the report of the Commission on Multi-Ethnic Britain in 2000, Jack Straw, then Home Secretary, said, 'Everyone should stand up for Britain and for British values and celebrate the nation's diversity. I do not accept the arguments of those on the nationalist right or the liberal left that Britain as a cohesive whole is dead.'[4] His successor as Home Secretary, David Blunkett, argued in a series of significant academic lectures that, in an age of migration, it is essential for a society to debate and define its foundation values and to inculcate them in its own citizens and newcomers. Like other senior Labour politicians, he sought to articulate distinctive British values and to argue that the time had come to make much more of these in preparing immigrants for naturalization and

UK citizenship, a process which in the past had gone by default. As well as putting much more emphasis on shared citizenship and on markers of national identity and social cohesion such as a command of the English language and a commitment to British values, Blunkett also made a more emotional and visceral appeal to patriotism. In a fascinating lecture to the Institute of Public Policy Research in 2005 entitled 'A New England: An English Identity within Britain', he grasped the specific nettle of English identity and encouraged its reassertion within the context of an overarching British identity. Calling for the greater celebration of St George's Day, he produced a list of what made him proud to be English which included the urban landscape of his home town Sheffield, English poetry, the music of Vaughan Williams and Delius, Fabianism and the National Trust and a pantheon of radicals from the Levellers through Tom Paine to the Chartists. He also made clear his conviction that a sense of Englishness can thrive within an overarching British identity. Indeed, for him this overall British identity is strengthened by the celebration of the national identities within the United Kingdom: 'I would like to be English and British, just as the Scots are Scottish and British'.[5]

No politician or public figure has thought and spoken more about Britishness, nor defended it so passionately and eloquently over the last ten years, than Gordon Brown. The proudly Scottish Chancellor of the Exchequer in Tony Blair's three governments, Brown is increasingly seen as the Prime Minister in waiting. In his youth a strong and fiery advocate of devolution, Brown is now regularly castigated by Scottish Nationalists for ignoring the country of his birth. His budget speech in 2005 was attacked by Alex Salmond, leader of the Scottish National Party, for mentioning Britain forty-four times and Scotland twice. Britishness is the central and recurrent theme of a series of major speeches delivered by Brown in 2004, 2005 and 2006, which exhibit a level of detailed argument, scholarship and passion rare in the utterances of modern politicians. Starting from the premise that 'We have not been explicit enough about what we mean by Britishness for far too long,' he calls for a 'recognition of the importance of and the need to celebrate and entrench a Britishness defined by shared values strong enough to overcome discordant claims of separatism and disintegration'. Like Blunkett, Brown emphasizes the shared values that shape British identity. In contrast to Blair's 'Cool Britannia' project, his vision of Britain is much more rooted in history – in the words of the perceptive political journalist Matthew d'Ancona, 'The Prime Minister posed with Oasis; the Chancellor quotes Cobden and Bright.' Brown has called for the establishment of a new Institute and Forum for Britishness

bringing together politicians, academics and journalists to look in depth at 'how the ideas that shape our history should shape our institutions in the future and what effect that might have on policy' and set his Treasury aides and advisers on the task of assembling a database of quotes on British identity, characteristics and values culled from a wide range of literary and historical sources. In a widely reported speech to the Fabian Society conference on Britishness in January 2006, he floated the idea of Remembrance Sunday being turned into a day to celebrate Britain and even suggested that the British should emulate the practice of the North Americans and fly the Union Jack in their front gardens.

At times, Gordon Brown has come close to suggesting that Britishness provides the key to unravelling virtually every contemporary political and social problem:

> I believe that just about every central question about our
> national future – from the constitution to our role in Europe,
> from citizenship to the challenges of multiculturalism – even the
> questions of how and why we deliver public services in the manner
> we do – can only be fully answered if we are clear about what we
> value in being British and what gives us purpose and direction as a
> country.

> Our ability to meet and master not just the challenges of a global
> marketplace but also the international, demographic, constitutional
> and social challenges ahead – and even the security challenges
> facing a terrorist threat that has never been more challenging
> – depends on us rediscovering from our history the shared values
> that bind us together and on us becoming more explicit about what
> we stand for as a nation.[6]

Why is interest in Britain so high on the academic and political agenda when it seems to be waning among the populace as a whole? Is it simply nostalgia for an idea that is on its way out, or could it in fact be that Blunkett and Brown are right and that the whole concept of Britishness and what it uniquely encapsulates is in fact highly relevant to many of the key questions faced today not just in the United Kingdom but throughout the western world? Can a clearer assertion of and greater faith in British identity help us better to face our insecurity and instability in the face of globalization and the terrorist

threat, the rising importance of ethnic, cultural and religious identities at a time of mass migration, the challenge posed by fundamentalism to liberal, secular, democracy and the growing tensions between diversity, multiculturalism and pluralism on the one hand and social cohesion, a welfare state and society and shared values on the other?

This book will argue that the concept of Britishness does have something distinct, positive and helpful to offer as a working model of unity through diversity, overlapping multiple identities and the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is offered as a contribution to the current debate on the importance and nature of British identity and the need to reframe it in the light of contemporary trends and movements. A lively academic discourse on the whole subject of identity is increasingly engaging those from the disciplines of cultural studies, sociology, literature, anthropology, history and religious studies. Postmodernism has raised the profile of identity in all sorts of areas – personal, group, national, tribal and spiritual. For these reasons alone it is timely to focus on the fascinating if hugely fluid and slippery subject of British identity. Taken as a whole, however, that is too vast a subject for a single book and the focus of this one is narrower and more specific. It is particularly concerned with exploring the spiritual aspects of Britishness as they have been imagined and constructed in the past and as they are being re-imagined and reconstructed today. Its central theme and subject matter are the shifting and overlapping spiritual and religious identities, drawing heavily on myths, metaphysical and ethical values and religious principles and interpenetrating each other to create a unity through diversity which have gone into making up Britishness.

This is not to say that these are the only ways in which British identity has been imagined and constructed. But these particular elements have been somewhat neglected, particularly in the recent debate. It is true that academics working in the field of national identity are increasingly inclined to recognize the importance of the religious and spiritual dimension. Harry Goulbourne notes, 'The definition of "the nation" in terms of religion is of as much importance in our contemporary world as it ever was in the less "enlightened" days of yesteryear'.[7] Anthony Smith, Professor of Ethnicity and Nationalism at the London School of Economics, has pointed increasingly in his recent work to the seminal influence of religion and the sense of the sacred on national identity, which he usefully defines as 'the maintenance and continual reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of the nation, and the

identification of individuals with that heritage and its pattern'.[8] But too often, when academics study the national identity of supposedly secular, modern countries like the United Kingdom, as distinct from more 'primitive' societies in the Middle East or Africa, they give very little if any attention to spiritual or religious elements. As Clifford Longley observes in his recent study of British and American identity:

> We are never going to reach the bottom of these issues of national identity until we delve into the religious dimension and give it its proper weight. It has not been given its proper weight in the past – for a long time it was given too much, more recently (in reaction, no doubt), too little … Religion is a weightier ingredient in these national stories than most modern English people or Americans would expect it to be.[9]

Some of the politicians engaged in the current debate about Britishness do acknowledge its spiritual and religious aspects, at least in passing. Gordon Brown notes that the call to civic duty and public services that he sees as fundamental to Britishness is 'often impelled by religious conviction'. Arguing that political independence for Scotland would not necessarily spell the end of Britishness, the committed Scottish nationalist Margo Macdonald has said, 'There's enough Britishness to keep the people in these islands together because I think Britishness should be a thing of the spirit,' an intriguing recognition of the spiritual essence or zeitgeist of Britishness from an unusual source.[10] But on the whole, in the recent discussion of the topic, contemporary Britain is depicted as a wholly secular country, especially in relation to the challenge posed by the strong religious identity found among many Muslims, and therefore as badly placed to deal with the new world which is emerging where religious and cultural factors are taking over from ethnic and political considerations as the key determinants of group identity.

It will be my argument in this book that Britain is not a secular state or entity but rather an embodiment of unity through diversity with spiritual roots and foundations. I shall also argue that the extent to which Britishness, far from being a secular construct, is a matter of overlapping spiritual identities actually makes it particularly well suited to meet and respond to some of the very difficult challenges posed by the growing importance of religion in determining personal, group and national identity, especially noticeable in, although by no means confined to, Muslim communities. I will also be

arguing that as old collective, cohesive, solid loyalties give way to much more complex, fluid and hybrid ones, facilitated by globalization and migration, the overlapping nature of the identities which make up Britishness perhaps point to a possible future based on multiple, hyphenated loyalties predicated on the principle of diversity in unity rather than just a series of atomized, separate parallel lives which never meet or intersect.

At a time of growing nationalism, separatism, sectarianism, tribalism, individualism, niche marketing and ever more narrowly focused identities, Britishness offers a counter-model of unity through diversity, the sum being more than the parts and simultaneously held multiple and hyphenated identities. That is its particular distinctiveness and glory. This has been well articulated in political terms in relation to the unusual constitutional arrangement of the United Kingdom by Michael Wills, writing while a junior minister at the Home Office:

> I believe Britain has come to be a remarkably successful experiment
> in multinational and multicultural living. I believe that the union
> of four nations over hundreds of years has demanded a tolerance
> and openness to others that is the hallmark of a decent and dynamic
> society. The Union has accustomed all of us to a plural national
> identity. It is intrinsic in the nature of the Union that we have
> multiple political allegiances.[11]

What I hope to argue in this book is that it is not just political allegiance in Britain that is multiple, but also spiritual and religious allegiance, and that this particular aspect of the shifting, overlapping identities that make up Britishness is especially important to affirm, celebrate and refashion today.

As it is, given the levels of insecurity currently felt in relation to immigration, asylum seekers, terrorism and other perceived threats, there is a real danger that British identity will become increasingly narrow and filled with fear, hate and bigotry, defined in terms of exclusiveness and against the other. The only political party proudly to incorporate the term 'British' in its title is the neo-fascist and racist British National Party. The only political party that espouses the UK label is the narrowly xenophobic United Kingdom Independence Party, committed to bringing Britain out of Europe. They reflect not Britishness but a narrow Little Englander mentality (and it is predominantly from England that their support comes). In Gordon Brown's words:

> The issue is whether we retreat into more exclusive identities rooted
> in nineteenth century conceptions of blood, race and territory, or
> whether we are still able to celebrate a British identity which is
> bigger than the sum of its parts and a Union that is strong because
> of the values we share and because of the way these values are
> expressed through our history and institutions.[12]

History and institutions are of considerable importance in the task of
reconstructing Britishness along the lines which Blunkett, Brown and others
have been arguing – as inclusive rather than exclusive and providing an
overarching framework which allows many different identities to be lived
alongside each other and respected while yet providing a common focus
and shared loyalty. This book will point to the continuing relevance in this
regard of both the established churches and the monarchy and point to the
carnival atmosphere of Queen Elizabeth II's jubilee celebrations in July 2002
as a modern and vibrant celebration of Britishness. It will also argue for the
importance of myths and legends in creating the 'imagined communities' that
the American sociologist Benedict Anderson so rightly sees as lying at the
heart of communal and national identity. This point should hardly need to
be made in an age which has been so fixed on epic stories like *The Lord of the
Rings*, the Narnia chronicles and the adventures of Harry Potter and, indeed,
where there has also been a huge revival of interest in the Arthurian myths and
Celtic legends which have played so major a part in the imagining of British
identity. Icons, symbols and myths are hugely important in postmodernity
and in that process of discursive construct which identity theorists, following
Foucault, have identified as the performative language which brings into
being the thing that it names.

But it is not just to the spiritual identities created in the dim and distant past
and woven into our collective national myths and history that we should look
to find Britishness today. In a very striking way British identity is now most
clearly and strongly felt and expressed by those who have recently arrived
in the United Kingdom. Those same surveys mentioned at the beginning of
this chapter that point to a weakening sense of Britishness among long-term
inhabitants also show a strong and growing sense of Britishness among more
recent immigrants. The fourth national survey of ethnic minorities in the
United Kingdom, published in 1997, found that over two-thirds of Indians,
African Asians, Caribbeans, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis feel themselves to be
British. A report published by the Office for National Statistics in 2004 found

even higher levels, with eighty-seven per cent of people of mixed race, eighty per cent of African-Caribbeans and seventy-five per cent of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis saying that they identify themselves as British. The 2001 census revealed that, while those from what it describes as 'the white British group' are more likely to describe their national identity as English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish (fifty-eight per cent) rather than British (thirty-six per cent), the opposite is true of non-white groups who are far more likely to identify themselves as British. For example, sixty-eight per cent of Pakistanis describe themselves as British, as against only ten per cent who identify themselves as English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish. Among Bangladeshis, these proportions are sixty-seven per cent and six per cent, among Indians sixty-four per cent and nine per cent and among African-Caribbeans sixty-four per cent and eighteen per cent respectively. Those least likely to identify themselves as British in any sense are in the group labelled 'other white', predominantly North Americans and Europeans, under forty per cent of whom describe themselves as British, English, Welsh, Irish or Scots.

There may, of course, be all kinds of reasons both negative and positive why members of the ethnic minority communities in Britain prefer to describe themselves as British rather than English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh. But it is clear from these and other surveys that they regard 'British' as an inclusive and generally appealing form of identity. Jeremy Paxman has acknowledged this in his book *The English*: '"Britain" has the advantage of being inclusive. It seems that you can be Nigerian, Moslem, Jewish, Chinese, Bangladeshi, Indian or Sikh British, a great deal more easily than you can be English and any of those things.'[13] Linda Colley, the historian who has worked so much on the forging of British identity, agrees if with a slightly more cynical sting in the tail: 'Britishness is a synthetic and capacious concept with no necessary ethnic or cultural overtones. Consequently, large numbers of non-whites seem reasonably content to accept the label "British" because it doesn't commit them to much.'[14]

This vote of confidence in Britishness on the part of relatively recent immigrants is manifested in other ways. They are often among the most enthusiastic and proud about being British, aside from members of the British National Party and the UK Independence Party, though theirs is, of course, a hugely different enthusiasm from the beleaguered fortress mentality of the BNP and Ukip. It is a positive attraction to a country which they have come to out of choice, or seeking asylum, and where they have found a freedom and opportunities which they did not find in the countries of their birth. There

is nothing new about this – throughout history some of the most moving panegyrics to the British way of life have been written by immigrants. It is also the case that it has often been relative newcomers who have done most to define and redefine Britishness and create its identity, and especially its spiritual identity, whether they be new arrivals to these shores like the Celts, Angles and Saxons in the early centuries AD or the Normans in the aftermath of 1066 or new entrants to the United Kingdom like the Scots after the Act of Union of 1707. This book will, indeed, argue that the future of British identity lies in considerable part with the new Britons, especially those who have come in the last fifty years from Asia and the African-Caribbean and their descendants, whose sense of 'Britishness' is often stronger than that found among many of the much longer settled white inhabitants. Many exemplify and champion traditional British values such as respectability, reserve, restraint and attachment to freedom rather more conspicuously and enthusiastically than a good number of white Britons.

This intriguing aspect to the whole subject of British identity, which has struck me more and more as I have worked on this book, does, of course, have to be set against the evidence of growing alienation from Britain and concepts of Britishness felt by many second- and third-generation immigrants. Much was made of this in the aftermath of July 2005's London bombings, which were carried out by young men who had grown up in Britain. By contrast, not enough has yet been made in current debate and discussion about integrating Britons of Asian and African-Caribbean descent of the fact that, on the whole, they feel more British than the white majority. The one commentator who has highlighted this point is the journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who herself came to Britain from Uganda. She notes:

> The irony is that black and Asian Britons today feel more deeply about their British identity than any of the indigenous groups. In the last few years we have embraced and transformed Britishness and by doing so redefined the British identity. Now Scottish, Welsh and English nationalists want to relegate us to those lesser beings who have no ancestral connections to this land.[15]

She is particularly critical of the rise of English nationalism, which she feels is a negation of the true character of the English, who among all European tribes, 'have been the most adventurous, open and promiscuous, wilfully and joyously appropriating, replicating and incorporating different cultures and

ideas and peoples from the world'.[16] The white retreat into Englishness will, she fears, leave Britishness as 'an inner-city area, a dejected, hopeless place for poor blacks left behind with nowhere to go':

> Just as many black, Asian and progressive white Britons were
> beginning to feel that the idea of Britishness was being broadened in
> a way that could also include them, we may be left rallying around
> the reclaimed flag, only to find that there is nobody else there
> – leaving us as some of the newest and yet also the last Britons left.[17]

There are other ways in which relatively recent immigrants are contributing disproportionately to the maintenance of British identity and institutions. The National Health Service, which as we shall see is regarded as one of the quintessential institutional expressions of Britishness, is kept going very largely by medical and other staff recruited from the ethnic minorities and from other countries. The corner shop, long regarded as another distinctively British institution and cherished as such, has largely survived in urban areas thanks to British Asians. If sport, and especially the track and field sports which dominate the Olympic Games, where the United Kingdom competes as a single nation, represent an abiding passion and talisman of Britishness, then its face is now predominantly and proudly black.

There is another very striking feature about the new Britons who have come to the United Kingdom over last fifty years or who have grown up here as the children or grandchildren of immigrants. As well as apparently feeling markedly more British than the long-term white inhabitants, they are also noticeably more religious and spiritually active. The census data shows that, with the exception of the Chinese, those in ethnic minorities are consistently more likely to say that religion is important to them than whites (see page 177). This is especially true of the predominantly Christian African-Caribbean population and the predominantly Muslim population originally from Pakistan and Bangladesh. While white churches are declining, African-Caribbean churches in Britain have doubled in size over the last fifteen years. In London there are now more black than white worshippers in church on a Sunday morning. The extent to which British Muslims put their faith into practice is even more impressive, and in even more contrast to, the indifference of the white majority. Calculations made on the basis of extrapolating past and present patterns of attendance at worship suggest that by 2013 there could be more Muslims worshipping in mosques in England every Friday

than worshippers in Church of England parish churches and cathedrals on Sunday mornings and that by 2039 the number of regular Muslim worshippers in the United Kingdom may outnumber the total of Christian worshippers each Sunday (see page 177). These and other developments seem bound to change the spiritual identity of Britain and a lot will depend on how, if at all, they overlap, intermesh with and relate to the other spiritual identities identified and explored in this book as traditionally lying at the heart of imagined Britishness: the Celtic emphasis on myth, heroism, land and prayer, the Anglo-Saxon/Gothic strain of liberal tolerance, openness and stoical pragmatism and the Scottish focus on muscular Christianity, moral uprightness, community and responsibility.

The contribution that the relatively new Britons drawn from ethnic minorities are already making and will make to the reshaping and imagining of British identity is hugely important. They are a significant element in the population and they are growing fast. Minority ethnic communities are projected to account for more than half of the growth of Britain's working-age population over the next decade. But even more important is the contribution which will come from the revival, rediscovery and reconfiguring of those other longer-term constructions and imaginings of Britishness which have been among the most important and distinctive contributions of the Irish, Welsh, English and Scots to their common identity. It is worth remembering that, according to the 2001 census, just eight per cent of the UK population belong to ethnic minorities, the same proportion (though not, of course, always the same people) as were born overseas, and five per cent to minority faiths. Ninety-two per cent of the population of the United Kingdom are white and seventy-two per cent identify themselves as Christians. The complex, overlapping and ever-changing set of myths, stories, values, heroes, customs and beliefs which have built up British identity over the last thousand years or so, and which are analysed in Chapters 3 to 5 of this book, are still going to remain a powerful determinant of Britishness in the future, but so too are the new (or perhaps not so new) set associated particularly with the more recent immigrants of the last fifty years which form the subject of Chapter 6.

Let me now come back to the current debate and flag up three very significant issues, confronting not just Britain but the western world, which this book seeks in some small way to address. First, there is the question as to how basically liberal and pluralistic societies respond to extreme religious conservatism and fundamentalism. It is in some ways an unexpected issue. We thought we were living in a secular age. Yet religion is becoming increasingly