



A basis for and two obstacles in the way of a multiculturalist coalition

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There is a deepening crisis between oppressed and disaffected religious groups such as Muslims in western societies and some of the principal sources of anti-oppression doctrines and movements. The centre-left seems not only to be dividing between those who see the contemporary minority–majority relations challenge to be the egalitarian inclusion of groups like Muslims, and those who see Muslim political claims as a threat to the legacy of the Enlightenment and to the Left itself; this division seems to be becoming one of the defining cleavages of contemporary European politics. One of the expressions of this dynamic are some of the uses of feminism; while it is mainly the Right for whom it has become a missionary ideology to express the supremacy of the West and the backwardness of the Rest, the tendency is not absent on the Left. Another manifestation of the above tensions on the Left is how the ‘war on terror’ and the problematizing of Muslims have become features of some of the Left as well as the Right. I am therefore in profound sympathy with Judith Butler’s contention that this growing cleavage must be reversed and in particular that we need to think of the coalitional possibilities between sexual politics and religious multiculturalism (Butler 2008: 1–23).

A basis for a coalition

In the brief space available here I would like to suggest a basis for such an alliance and some problems in progressing it. I believe that this alliance can be developed around the concept of multicultural citizenship (Modood 2007). I will sketch this concept by referring to the concepts of equality and of citizenship that are being appealed to. In relation to the former I have in mind Charles Taylor’s ‘politics of recognition’, specifically the suggestion that when we talk about equality in the context of race, sex, ethnicity and so on, we are appealing to two different albeit related concepts – *equal dignity*, and *equal*

respect (Taylor 1994). Equal dignity appeals to people's humanity or to some specific membership like citizenship and applies to all members in a relatively uniform way. We appeal to this idea in relation to anti-discrimination policies where we appeal to the principle that everybody should be treated the same. But Taylor, and other theorists in differing ways (cf., Parekh 2000), also posit the idea of *equal respect*. If equal dignity focuses on what people have in common and so is gender-blind, colour-blind and so on, equal respect is based on an understanding that difference is also important in conceptualizing and institutionalizing equal relations between individuals.

This is because individuals have group identities and these may be the ground of existing and long-standing inequalities such as racism, for example, and the ways that some people have conceived and treated others as inferior, less rational and culturally backward. While those conceptions persist they will affect the dignity of non-white people, above all where they share imaginative and social life with white people. The negative conceptions will lead to direct and indirect acts of discrimination – they will eat away at the possibilities of equal dignity. They will affect the self-understanding of those who breathe in and seek to be equal participants in a culture in which ideas of their inferiority, or even just of their absence, their invisibility, is pervasive. They will stand in need of self-respect and the respect of others, of the dominant group; the latter will be crucial for it is the source of their damaged self-respect and it is where the power for change lies (Du Bois 1999 [1903]). The imperative for equal respect, the turning of negative group identities into positive ones, then, flows out of a commitment to equal dignity.

Citizens are of course individuals and have individual rights but they are not uniform and their citizenship contours itself around them. Citizenship is not a monistic identity that is completely apart from or transcends other identities important to citizens; in the way that the theory – though not always the practice – of French republicanism demands. The plurality is ever present and each part of the plurality has a right to be a part of the whole and to speak up for itself and for its vision of the whole. As the parties to these dialogues are many, not just two, the process may be described as multilogical. The multilogues allow for views to qualify each other, overlap, synthesize, modify one's own view in the light of having to co-exist with that of others', hybridize, allow new adjustments to be made, new conversations to take place. Such modulations and contestations are part of the internal, evolutionary, work-in-progress dynamic of citizenship. Moreover, we perform our citizenship and relate to each other as fellow citizens, and so get to know what our citizenship is, not just in relation to law and politics but also civic debate and action initiated through our voluntary associations, community organizations, trades unions, newspapers and media, churches, temples, mosques etc. Change and reform do not all have to be brought about by state action, laws, regulation, prohibitions etc but also through public debate,

discursive contestations, pressure group mobilizations, and the varied and (semi-) autonomous institutions of civil society.

There is, then, deep resonance between citizenship and multicultural recognition. Not only do both presuppose complementary notions of unity and plurality, and of equality and difference, but the idea of respect for the group self-identities that citizens value is central to citizenship. Moreover, seeing citizenship as a work in progress and as partly constituted, and certainly extended, by contestatory multilogues and novel demands for due recognition, as circumstances shift, means that citizenship can be understood as conversations and re-negotiations, not just about who is to be recognized but about what is recognition, about the terms of citizenship itself. At one point, it is the injuries of class that demand civic attention; at another there is a plea for dropping a self-deluding 'colour-blindness' and of addressing racialized statuses through citizenship. The one thing that civic inclusion does not consist of is an uncritical acceptance of an existing conception of citizenship, of 'the rules of the game' and a one-sided 'fitting-in' of new entrants or the new equals (the ex-subordinates). To be a citizen, no less than to have just become a citizen, is to have a right to not just be recognized but to debate the terms of recognition.

Two problems

If one grants that this is a coherent, attractive and viable politics its use for a coalition of sexual and religious identity politics nevertheless has a number of difficulties. I would like to briefly identify two major problems. Firstly, the current position is not simply that the dominant group(s) has to come to respect others; not all non-dominant groups can easily be brought to respect each other (leaving aside that one can be a member of a dominant and a non-dominant group, as say in the case of a white woman). Homosexuality and Muslims are a case in point. While some Muslims and gays may be unable to tolerate each other in some contexts, when it comes to public transactions and policy it seems to be the case that most can tolerate the other (this is suggested by the interviews of Muslim activists in Britain discussed in Modood and Ahmad 2007). This is positive so far as it goes but it falls far short of multicultural recognition, for what each side seems to be saying is: we do not fully approve of you but as long as your sexuality/religion is not too much in our faces we will treat you civilly and do business with you, perhaps even support non-discrimination measures. This may be classical liberal toleration but it is not respect and would require homosexuals and Muslims to only project their respective identities amongst themselves and not in the shared public space of the classroom, business, politics and so on. So, while some in each group want to be recognized and not confined to the closet or the private space, they believe that such confinement is appropriate for the other.

A second problem, and in some ways more fundamental, is secularism: the view that religion is a feature, perhaps uniquely, of private and not public identity. One of the regular arguments occupying the public sphere in Britain against the ways in which some Muslims are choosing to represent themselves and which it is alleged the British government is accepting is that it is taking a religious form inappropriate to democratic politics. Public intellectuals as diverse as Amartya Sen, A.C. Grayling, Kenan Malik and Polly Toynbee and organizations like Women Against Fundamentalism, The Secular Society and the British Humanist Association make this claim. Now it might seem that the two problems so far identified are different in kind. The first might seem to be just the regrettable kind of prejudice that one associates with 'ignorance' and so one could hope to overcome one day, while the second seems to be a profound issue of principle. This may be deceptive. In some ways, this form of secularism seems to be not so much an additional problem but the first problem writ large. For the very essence of secularism is the public-private distinction and the view that certain activities, discourses, identities, organizations, authority etc, namely those and only those that can be categorized as 'religious', are not appropriate in the public sphere. This is exactly the kind of asymmetry that I was suggesting is to be found among some Muslim activists and spokespeople: they seek recognition for themselves but are only willing to grant toleration to homosexuals (Modood and Ahmad 2007). So, similarly, radical secularists seek public recognition for the identities on their approved list and want to insist that no more than toleration is granted for those identities on their religion list.

If this seems to be a gloomy conclusion we must note that while such an extreme interpretation of secularism can be what many secularists and anti-secularists think that societies like ours are committed to, this is not the case. Secularism is central to contemporary western political culture and extreme versions of it are being espoused by the moral panic caused by some Muslims' political claims but such versions are not accurate descriptions of our institutional arrangements. Liberal democratic societies that are rightly thought of as secular – e.g., Britain, Netherlands, France, Germany and so on – all have reached compromises with organized Christianity and Judaism which allows them exemptions from taxation, access to public resources, salaried appointments in relation to the armed forces, prisons, hospitals, schools, public holidays, prominence in state ceremonies and so on. Beyond that a Christian cultural identity permeates much of the public space in those countries. These arrangements do vary from country to country and what one country thinks appropriate another may not. Hence, American secularists think England is insufficiently secularist for it has an established church, while many Britons find it difficult to understand that a country which offers itself as model of a secular polity can regard organized religious groups as part and parcel of electoral politics, and think that it is British politics which are much more secular. The point is that secularism-as-is (as opposed to ideological secularism) is about varied

institutional compromises, not an approximation to a single template. Moreover, such moderate, institutional secularism not only need not be an obstacle to the accommodation of Muslims but is one of the resources, properly pluralized, for achieving it (Modood, Triandafyllidou and Zapata-Barrero 2006). It is ideological secularism that is the problem, not secularism per se.¹

Secularism of the right sort is therefore part of the solution but not a missionary secularism nor the transcendent one in which secularists see religious people as unable to live together and the secularists as standing Olympian-style above the fray and needed as the reasonable peace-makers. There is no transcendent perspective of this sort and it is clear that, perhaps not in the USA but certainly in Western Europe it is the radical secularists rather than the Christian Right that are in confrontation with assertive subordinate Muslim minorities and opposed to their accommodation. It is sometimes Christians that are the peacemakers; this is particularly true in Britain which has mature ecumenical and inter-faith networks. Butler rightly notes Pope Benedict's Regensburg Speech as an example of Islamophobia but there are other less hostile strands within the Catholic Church; for example a study of the British Catholic intellectual weekly, *The Tablet*, shows that discussion therein since 9/11 has been considerably more coalitional than to be found in the mainstream British press (Faimau 2007).

Judith Butler is, then, quite right to point to some of the difficulties within secularism, and taken in certain ways its capacity to be oppressive. Theorizing the possibilities of a coalitional politics under these circumstances is a most necessary and commendable task and which, to be furthered, must address difficulties as well as give us heart in these unhappy times.

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Notes

1. A third problem in the way of multicultural citizenship is ideology itself; I don't have the space to discuss that here but see Modood 2007: 128–32).

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