

# A defence of multiculturalism

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*Tariq Modood argues that multiculturalism is not a politics of separatism; on the contrary, it is a politics of diversity and pluralism.*

The New Labour government sought in its first term to emphasise the plural and dynamic character of British society by speaking of ‘Cool Britannia’, of ‘rebranding Britain’, of Britain as a ‘young country’ (Tony Blair), a mongrel nation (Gordon Brown) and a chicken tikka masala eating nation (Robin Cook). There was a turning-point for the idea of multiculturalism in Britain in 2001, however, when in rapid succession over a few months David Blunkett became the Home Secretary, there were riots in some Northern cities and the attacks of 9/11 took place. These events, especially the riots and the global ‘arrival’ of a certain kind of armed, messianic jihadism - which, some feel, too many Muslims in Britain (secretly) support - have led to not just to a governmental reversal, but to a new wave of criticism of multiculturalism from the centre-left, including from some of its erstwhile supporters. Of course, there have been left-wing critics of multiculturalism from the beginning, from way back in the 1970s when it was ridiculed as ‘saris, somosas and steelbands’ by anti-racists, not to mention those who thought it was a distraction from class struggle or even a scam on the part of global capitalism. But I am talking about a new form of criticism, one which comes from the pluralistic centre-left. These are people who do not see everything in two-racial or two-class terms, and have in the past been sympathetic to the rainbow coalitional politics of identity, and the realignment and redefinition of progressive forces. Examples of savage attacks on multiculturalism from those who have long-standing anti-racist credentials

include an article by Kenan Malik published by the Commission for Racial Equality, which argued that 'multiculturalism has helped to segregate communities far more effectively than racism' (*Connections*, Winter 2001). The late Hugo Young, a leading *Guardian* columnist, went further and wrote that multiculturalism 'can now be seen as a useful bible for any Muslim who insists that his religio-cultural priorities, including the defence of jihad against America, override his civic duties of loyalty, tolerance, justice and respect for democracy' (6.11.01). And Farrukh Dhondy, an Asian one-time Black Panther radical who pioneered multicultural broadcasting on British television, wrote of a 'multicultural fifth column' which must be rooted out, arguing that state funding of multiculturalism should be redirected into a defence of the values of freedom and democracy (*City Limits*, 11:4).

It is now a commonplace that the cultural separatism and self-imposed segregation of Muslim migrants is a challenge to Britishness today, and that a 'politically correct' multiculturalism has fostered fragmentation rather than integration. This is the public view now of Trevor Phillips, Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, who has declared that multiculturalism was useful once but is now out-of-date, because it makes a fetish of difference instead of encouraging minorities to be truly British (see *Times* 3.4.04). In 2004 a swathe of civil society forums and institutions of the centre- or liberal-left held seminars or produced special publications with titles like 'Is Multiculturalism Dead?', 'Is Multiculturalism Over', 'Beyond Multiculturalism', etc (e.g., *Prospect*, *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, the CRE, openDemocracy, Channel 4, the British Council).

I would like to contribute to this debate by offering a brief restatement of multiculturalism, with the purpose of showing that it is not about separatism, fragmentation, anti-integration or anti-British nationality. I also argue that some key current trends and developments are broadly consistent with a moderate, pragmatic and, inevitably, uneven multiculturalism. In particular, the domestic political claims-making of many Muslim organisations should be seen as consistent with the array of broadly supported equality measures that have been developed in relation to non-religious groups. My purpose is to offer a defence of British multiculturalism.

My first point is that counterpositions such as difference versus unity, or multiculturalism versus Britishness, are not in fact mutually exclusive choices.

Leading political philosophers of multiculturalism - such as Bhikhu Parekh, Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor or Iris Young - are not advocates of separatism. Thus, for example, the best recent public policy statement in Britain on multiculturalism, the Commission for Multiethnic Britain report *The Future of Multiethnic Britain* (Profile, 2000), is quite clear that there is no inevitable incompatibility with national identity. Equally, not all advocates of the politics of difference/diversity/multiculture share the same general positions - and some are hostile to the term 'multiculturalism'. What I am offering here is my personal understanding of political multiculturalism, though of course I am conscious that it is shared by and influenced by others.

My understanding of political multiculturalism is that there are three key ideas at its centre: Equality, Multi and Integration. Each of these is explored further in the next sections of this article.

### **Equality: of dignity but also of respect**

Charles Taylor argues that when we talk about equality in the context of race and ethnicity, we are appealing to two different concepts - *equal dignity*, and *equal respect*. Equal dignity appeals to people's humanity, or to some closed membership, such as citizenship. But it applies to all members in a relatively uniform way. A good example of this is Martin Luther King Jnr's civil rights movement. Black Americans wanted to make a claim upon the American dream; they wanted American citizenship on the terms that the constitution is theoretically supposed to guarantee to everybody. We appeal to this universalist idea in anti-discrimination work when we appeal to the principle that everybody should be treated the same. But Taylor (and other theorists in slightly differing ways) also posits the idea of *equal respect*, and it is this, I would argue, that is the key idea of multiculturalism or, as Taylor puts it, of the politics of 'recognition'.

**A**s Iris Young has argued, any public space, policy or society is structured around certain kinds of understandings and practices, which prioritise some cultural values and behaviours over others. These are open to contestation, but usually in limited ways. The cultural structure of the public space and particular polity or a society that we are members of will have developed historically, and will have come from a dominant group. And when subordinate groups claim equality within the society, they are claiming that they should not be marginal, subordinate or excluded; that they too - their values,

norms, and voice - should be part of the structuring of the public space. Why, they ask, should we have our identities privatised, while the dominant group has its identity universalised in the public space? The argument becomes one about the public/private distinction, and the question of what is 'normal' in that society - and why some groups are thought to be abnormal or different.

**S**o, for example, many gay people argue that they do not want simply to be tolerated by being told homosexuality is no longer illegal, and that acts between consenting adults done in private are fine. They want people to know that they are gay and to accept them as gay; and for public discussion about gayness to have the same place as discussions about heterosexuality. And when public policy is made - for instance on widows' benefits or pensions - we should not assume an exclusively heterosexual model of society. This kind of argument for equal respect is central to multiculturalism.

This approach has two major implications. Firstly, it takes the concept of equality beyond and into conflict with liberal citizenship, which is based on a public-private identity distinction. This distinction prohibits the recognition of particular group identities; it does not recognise that any groups of citizens are treated in a more or less privileged way, or are divided from each other. Secondly, this approach takes race, sex and sexuality beyond being merely ascriptive sources of identity, merely categories. Race is of interest to discourses of liberal citizenship only because they hold that no one can choose their race, and people should not be discriminated against on something over which they have no control. But if equality is about celebrating previously demeaned identities (e.g. taking pride in one's blackness rather than accepting it merely as a 'private' matter), then what is being addressed is a chosen response to one's ascription. Exactly, the same applies to sex and sexuality. We may not choose our sex or sexual orientation but we choose how to politically live with it. Do we keep it private or do we make it the basis of a social movement and seek public resources and representation for it?

Muslims, a religious group, are currently utilising this kind of argument, and making a claim that Muslim identity, just like other forms of identity, should not just be privatised or tolerated, but should be part of the public space. In their case, however, they come into conflict with an additional third dimension of liberal citizenship, that of secularism - the view that religion is a feature, perhaps uniquely, of private identity and not public identity.

One response to this is to argue that 'woman', 'black' and 'gay' are ascribed, unchosen identities while being a Muslim is about chosen beliefs; and that Muslims therefore do not need the same level of legal protection as the other kinds of identities. But this is sociologically naive - and a political con. The position of Muslims in Britain today is similar to the other identities of 'difference'. No one chooses whether or not to be born into a Muslim family. Similarly, no one chooses to be born into a society where to look like a Muslim or to be a Muslim creates suspicion, hostility, or failure to get the job you applied for. Having said this, the ways in which different Muslims respond to these circumstances will of course vary. Some will organise resistance, while others will try to stop looking like Muslims (the equivalent of 'passing' for white); some will build an ideology out of their subordination, others will not. Some Muslims may define their Islam more in terms of piety than politics.

**B**ut whatever the different possible responses to being positioned as different may be, it remains the case that the argument for the reconstruction of public space and public norms is not an argument for separatism, but for exactly the opposite; it is an argument for the renegotiation of the terms of integration. It is a call for the dominant cultural values in a society to change so as to better represent all groups within the society.

Equal respect, then, is an important part of the idea of equality. Commitment to it is what distinguishes multiculturalism from non-multiculturalism. It is the interpretation of equality as meaning that non-assimilation is ok; that minority identities ought to be included in the public sphere. One way to achieve this is to make some space for group recognition and autonomy in shared public institutions - not separatism but, for example, having a black section in the Labour Party, or women-only policy meetings in a trade union.

### **Multi: recognition of plurality**

The second key idea is that the context and character of racial equality is not a dualistic black/white but a 'multi'. The groups for whom racial equality has to be won are multiple and have different identities, combining elements based on origins, colour, culture, ethnicity, religion and so on. Moreover, these groups have different socio-economic positions, (dis)advantages, trajectories in British society; it is not true that they are all worse off than white Britons. Indians and Chinese people, for example, are developing a more middle-class profile than

whites. This complication of an ethnic stratification model has got to be part of what we are talking about when we talk about multiculturalism.

The multi has to also apply to our analysis of racism: there is not a singular racism but multiple racisms. There are of course colour/phenotype racisms but there are also cultural racisms which build on 'colour' a set of antagonistic or demeaning stereotypes based on alleged or real cultural traits. The most important cultural racism today is anti-Muslim racism, sometimes called Islamophobia.

A multicultural approach, recognising the plurality of racisms and the distinctive needs and vulnerabilities of different groups, is therefore what is needed to tackle racial and religious discrimination.

### **Integration without assimilation**

The third key idea is integration. But integration here does not mean assimilation but something more pluralistic, a recognition that there are a variety of identities and positions. The kind of integration I am advocating would not try to deconstruct the identities that people say are important to them, or that they attach to certain kinds of communities or political projects. Nor is this kind of integration individualistic. It recognises that people have collective identities and not just individual identities, or identities based on citizenship.

**T**he traditional model of assimilation is one-way: here is a society, people come into it and they try to be like what already exists. The multiculturalist concept of integration is not one way but interactive. It is about fitting people together so that there is give and take, mutual change and the creation of something new. It also inevitably involves a redefinition of Britishness. An interactive idea of integration will clearly mean that we are always rethinking what it means to belong to this society, to be part of this country, to be British. Multicultural Britishness has to be an inclusive identity, not one that says to some people, well you are here but you are not British until you are sufficiently like us.

These three ideas - equality, multi and integration - together make up a widely shared view of multiculturalism. And it is a view that gives no credence to the idea that multiculturalism is opposed to Britishness; on the contrary, the two things have to go together.

For one can't just talk about difference. Difference has to be related to things

we have in common. National identities - British identity or English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh identities - are important forms of commonality - though of course we need to define them in a reformed way, one that is not exclusive or racially biased. Furthermore, in my opinion nationality is actually an important container for multiculturalism (though no country can be merely inward looking). Nationality is a very important part of the integrative dynamic, and British society is in fact demonstrating this capacity for pluralistic integration. Obviously, nothing is ever perfect and finished at any one time; new challenges always arise, and when they do some political conflict is inevitable. There will always be conflict, and indeed it is through political debate and political contestation that integrative processes often work.

### **The development of multiculturalism in Britain**

Out of an immigration process consisting primarily of the importing of (temporary) labour for jobs in the British economy which white people did not wish to do, there have now emerged new communities capable of and perhaps wanting to maintain themselves as communities. New cultural practices, especially to do with the family and religion, have become a feature of the British landscape and continue to shape the personal lives and relationships of even British-born individuals.

Ethnic identity - like gender and sexuality - has assumed a contemporary political importance, and for some migrants and their descendants it has become a primary focus of their politics. While 'ethnicity' is disdained on much of the European mainland, and minorities are excluded and cowed, Britain (partly as a result of its complex imperial legacy) is marked by an ethnic assertiveness. Ethnic minority groups have contested the lack of respect they have experienced, and their lack of access to public space.

Indeed, resistance to racism has come to be seen as an almost necessary path to citizenship and integration with dignity into British society. Some of these identities are sustained by communal practices - such as the high levels of endogamy amongst South Asians - but they are also sustained by socio-political conflict, which is especially evident at the moment in the case of Muslims. Hence there is very little erosion of group identification across the generations, though the *kind* of identity that is espoused may vary; 'colour' has more salience for Caribbeans, religion for South Asians.

These identities persist even when - as is in fact the case - participation in distinctive cultural practices is in decline. For example, compared to their elders, the young are less likely to speak to family members in a South Asian language, or to regularly attend a place of worship, or to have an arranged marriage. Yet they do not cease to identify with their ethnic or racial or religious group, though they may redefine what that group is (say, from Pakistani to Muslim).

For identity has moved on from a time when it was largely unconscious and taken-for-granted because implicit in distinctive cultural practices; it is now more likely to be based on conscious and public projections, and the explicit creation and assertion of politicised ethnicities. Shaped through intellectual, cultural and political debates, such identities are fluid and susceptible to change with the political climate. However, to therefore think of them as weak is to overlook the pride with which they may be asserted, the intensity with which they may be debated and their capacity to generate community activism and political campaigns.

Such minority identities do not necessarily compete with a sense of Britishness. The oppositional character of ethnic minority self-concepts has not been at the price of integration *per se* but - illustrating that integration can take different forms - it has been one of the means of integration. For political mobilisation and participation, especially protest and contestation, has been one of the principal means of integration in Britain. As activists, spokespersons and a plethora of community organisations come to interact with and modify existing institutions, there is a two-way process of mutual education and incorporation: public discourse and political arrangements are challenged, but then adjust to accommodate and integrate the challengers.

**O**ne of the most profound developments has been that, increasingly, 'ethnicity' or 'blackness' is experienced less as an oppositional identity than as a way of being British, and something similar is probably happening to 'Muslim' at the moment. The Caribbeans, who originally led the way with oppositional identities, are also ahead on the trend for 'hyphenated' British identities. This is related to the high level of social mixing and success in popular culture that they have achieved. Yet so far all this has brought those of Caribbean descent few economic dividends. This suggests that an alternative

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strategy might be to delay assimilation till entry into a middle-class environment has been achieved - as British-born African-Asians and Indians, who are now displaying high rates of intermarriage, have done. Similarly, the refusal of Pakistanis to assimilate into local white working-class cultures has helped to sustain the former's hopes of social advancement, and has produced a cohort of higher education entrants on a scale that is the beyond the hopes that the government has for the white working classes.

**R**ight-wing commentators have often worried about the threat that non-white migrants and their descendants posed to Britishness. It is clear now that many in these ethnic minority groups think of Britain, appropriately reimagined and restructured, as a unifying identity. In fact it tends to be those groups that have a national-territorial base in the British Isles, and a historical grievance with the British state, who today most shrink from the label 'British'. While Pakistanis in Bradford have been coming to an understanding of themselves as British, some Scots and Irish - both within and outside their territorial nations - are in denial about being British, and see one national identity as incompatible with another.

A characteristic of British culture, despite its self-image of insularity, is the readiness to borrow and mix ideas and influences, as supremely exemplified in the English language. The British, especially the English, may be less open than other Europeans to their European neighbours, but they are also less hostile to multiculturalism and to inter-continental exchange. Hence today London is not simply an English or a British or even a European city, but a world city.

Despite these integrative processes, there is evidence of continuing discrimination and institutional racism in most areas of British society. Sometimes reduction in one kind of racism is accompanied by an increase in another, or reduction of racism in one area of social life by an increase in another; for example groups that now have positive associations in accountancy may not in the entertainment industry and vice versa. There is accumulating evidence of differential prejudice and stereotypes, with anti-Muslim racism - often unable in practice to disentangle itself from anti-Asian racism - being on the increase, and the one most likely to be found amongst intellectuals.

Religion, indeed, has come to have an importance not anticipated by sociologists, with their Anglo-American focus on 'colour'. At a time when a third of Britons say they do not have a religion, nearly all South Asians say they

have one, and an overwhelming majority say it is of personal importance to them. The presence of the new ethnic minorities is thus not simply changing the character of religion in Britain by diversifying it, but is giving it an importance which is out of step with native trends.

Those who see the current Muslim assertiveness as an unwanted and illegitimate child of multiculturalism have only two choices if they wish to be consistent. They can repudiate the idea of equality as identity recognition and return to the 1960s liberal idea of equality as colour/sex/religion, etc, blindness. Or they can argue that equality as recognition does not apply to oppressed religious communities. To deny Muslims positive equality without one of these two arguments is to be open to the charge of double standards. This means that a programme of racial and multicultural equality is not possible today without a discussion of the merits and limits of secularism. Secularism can no longer be treated as 'off-limits'. This is not a matter of being for or against secularism; what is needed is a careful, institution-by-institution analysis of how to draw the public-private boundary, and further the cause of multicultural equality and inclusivity.

**W**hat is important, then, is to recognise the existence in Britain of different kinds of multiculture; for example, a mixing and style-setting hybridity, or an ethno-religious communitarian development. Minority groups have their own distinct character and so are likely to develop distinctive forms of integration. No one form of integration should be elevated to a paradigmatic status, either theoretically or in the area of policy.

International terrorism and neo-conservatism are putting extra strains on democratic, negotiated integration, but pessimism about British society's capacity to produce pluralistic (rather than assimilative) integration is premature. Talk of giving up on multiculturalism is therefore unnecessary and may well alienate the communities that need to be brought into the mainstream. Indeed, those who indulge in such talk may simply be denying Muslim claims to equality.