Critical Social Policy

Part three The fault lines of multiculturalism: A rejoinder

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What is This?

Part three
The fault lines of
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Have recent British governments exhibited, as Drs. Singh and Cowden put it 'a dangerously uncritical attitude to the growing influence of religious absolutism and fundamentalism particularly in the UK' (Singh and Cowden, this issue)? Singh and Cowden believe this to be the case and argue that to hold this view is not suggestive of radical secularist assumptions. This identifies a core area of our disagreement as I believe them to be mistaken on both points. I appreciate the constructive tone of their response to my critical comments on their article (Singh and Cowden, 2011) but, notwithstanding some areas of common ground, their response further illustrates our disagreement.

Singh and Cowden say that I misleadingly characterize them as 'radical secularists' because they 'do not see religion, religious ideology or religious "leaders" as inherently good or bad'. But that is only one aspect of radical secularism. What I mean by 'radical secularism' more centrally includes the idea that religion is essentially 'private' or non-political and ought to be so maintained by government and law; that the state should determine under what conditions, if any, religion may have a political character. This is a radical form of secularism because it uniquely problematizes religion; typically, most other activities and attributes are thought to be 'private' only in so far as the individual or group in question chooses to make them private or non-political. For example, a homosexual man may choose to be 'in the closet' or not, or to not make his sexuality a basis of his politics; but if such men

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choose to be a part of an assertive gay pride movement, then that is their democratic right. It is not for others to say what they should keep private or non-political. The same is true of most if not all contemporary identities that are important to their bearers, especially if they have till recently experienced or continue today to experience marginalization, inferiorization or stigmatization. This general rule of 'publicity' or identity assertiveness and mobilization seems not to be extended to religious groups, hence religious groups are exceptionalized. A further related feature of radical secularism is that religious groups are overly identified with their extremists or absolutists, and in public discourse and in relation to policy matters the reasonable political claims of religious groups can be dismissed because of the voluble and unruly presence of the extremists. In short, radical secularism restricts and rules out of court claims of religious groups simply because they are religious groups; when other groups, e.g., those mobilized around 'race' or ethnicity, seek similar forms of group representation or resources, they are not treated by the same criteria of impermissibility.

Let me illustrate how this radical secularism is present in their latest contribution. For example, their discussion of the Shabina Begum case, relating to Muslim female dress, leads them to conclude that the UK governments and/or those encouraging them in a multiculturalist direction are 'abandoning secularism as the terrain on which these issues are dealt with' (op.cit). As their own example shows, some of these decisions are being made in the impeccably secular terrain of High Courts and Appeal Courts, including the European Court of Human Rights. In any case, the broader field of political claims-making and activism or public affairs is also broadly non-religious, and those who give political significance to their religious identities are a minority within this terrain and do not dominate it. That at least sometimes such minorities' religious needs and identities require political representation and become contentious is because the existing socio-political norms and institutional practices do not already meet their non-political religious needs (compare the way that Christmas is a public holiday in the way that Eid is not and so, for example, (secular) organizations such as the government, the BBC, employers, universities, schools and so on adjust their work accordingly, 'recognizing' Christmas and acknowledging the right of employees to take a holiday on Christmas Day but not on Eid). The need for Muslims to campaign on such issues, to mobilize themselves politically, arises out of Christian privileges and legacies within our secular order, not by multiculturalists abandoning secular terrain.

Another example of their radical secularism is their question, 'where the distinction between simple faith and "ideology" is drawn? The whole point we were making about the Shabina Begum case is that it isn't that clear where one starts and the other ends' (op.cit) I am as uncomfortable with the Shabina Begum case as they are but a difficult case should not lead us to under-

mine the legitimacy of public claims-making by conservative religious groups
per se. To see religion in the dichotomous terms in the quote is redolent of a
particular view, noting as we also should that the above is expressed just after
endorsing a quote which distinguished between fundamentalists/extremists
and the ordinary Muslims 'who do not create any problem' (op.cit). Just as
a view which employs a distinction between simple female good sense and
feminist ideology cannot sustain a claim to be neutral in relation to women,
so similarly, a view of religion in terms of ordinary believers and fundamen-
talists cannot be said to be merely descriptive about religion.

    Again, they say that my attempt to resolve issues of fundamentalism
'through a distinction between the simple believer and the "ideologist" is
untenable' (op. cit). This is not my distinction. I distinguished between mul-
ticultural citizenship and the ideologist; between let's say the equivalent of the
social democrat and the Marxist, or between Muslim identity politics and politi-
cal Islamism. Another instance of the underlying radical secularism I am point-
ing to is in their reference to 'the fundamentalist attack on Rushdie' (op.cit) in
relation to *The Satanic Verses*, which seems to imply that everyone or all Muslims
who attacked the novel were 'fundamentalists'. A non-radical secular approach
would recognize that all political and social movements have their 'extreme'
or 'absolutist' elements and phases. In my original reply to Singh and Cowden
I instanced Islamism as a prominent example but one can also think of non-
religious examples – the history of socialism in the twentieth century is a good
example and a more recent one is Afrocentrism (Howe, 1998).

    I would like to deal with three more points. Singh and Cowden write:
'Modood's idea that these forms of religious identity can be understood *simply
as extensions of secular identity …*' (op.cit, my emphasis). I have never said that.
To interpret my ideas on religious identity in that way is a bit like saying that
to note that religious organizations have an aspect which is similar to that of a
pressure group or a trade union is to imply that religious activism is an exten-
sion of trade unionism. Some forms of religious identities do have similar
aspects to secular identities such as those of an ethnic identity or an economic
identity but I have never suggested they should be reduced to any of the latter.

    My response to their claim that I 'fail[s] to recognize hegemonic struggles
taking place in religion' (op.cit). I do not think so but in any case my point is
that multiculturalism can embrace groups organized around religious identi-
ties no less than ethnic, racial or other identities. It's not a carte blanche or
uncritical acceptance of these identities but in relation to the democratic ide-
als of personal freedom, social equality and national inclusivity it expects no
more – and no less – of religious than of any other groups. I specifically argue
against monolithic representation as an ideal and welcome the emergence and
continuing evolution of a pluralistic British Muslim politics, which I charac-
terize as 'a democratic constellation of organisations and networks, alliances
and discourses in which there will be agreement and disagreement, in which

group identity will be manifested by way of family resemblances rather than by the idea that one group means one voice' (Modood, 2007: 145).

Singh and Cowden conclude their reply by asking; 'When we talk about integration, why aren't we talking about class, poverty, unemployment, gendered violence or the lack of decent education, *rather than* furthering a preoccupation with religious and cultural identities?' (op.cit, my emphasis). I am in agreement with them that there are different kinds of oppression and we should try to bring them together into 'a viable and acceptable framework for developing analysis, policy and social action to defend the oppressed' (op.cit), but the way to do it is not by reducing the variety of oppressions, including the harms of 'misrecognition' and disrespect, into a materialist or radical secularist framework. This '…rather than…' either–or approach is reminiscent of what old-fashioned socialists and Labourites used to say to those who wanted to highlight gender inequality or racism. Now it is part of a shallow, prejudicial, knee-jerk 'anti-fundamentalism' of groups such as the National Secular Society and Women Against Fundamentalism.

I am not so much ignoring fundamentalism as insisting that anti-antifundamentalism is central to multiculturalism and to the moderate secularism of countries like Britain, and have sought to argue for ways in which moderate multiculturalism and moderate secularism should be mutually supportive. I would not deny the presence of religious extremism but make two points. Firstly, it is not peculiar to religion and can easily be instanced in various times and places in relation to 'race', class and nation. Secondly, one needs to distinguish between dealing with extremism and rejecting a mode of organization altogether. For example, casting our minds back to the kind of disruptions that Barbara Castle's White Paper, *In Place of Strife* was a response to but failed to check, most people agree that the trades unions in the 1960s and 1970s were exhibiting extremist behaviour, but reform of such behaviour could be and should be within a framework that was broadly supportive of trade unionism and above all that did not equate democratic trade unionism with trade union 'fundamentalism'. It is an approach of this kind that I am arguing for in relation to the place of ethno-religious communities within political multiculturalism. Its alternative – to take my trade union analogy further – is a kind of Thatcherism which, in a panicky reaction to fundamentalism emasculates a form of democratic participation.

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