



From Multiculturalism to Multifaithism? A Panel Debate

Tariq Modood

University of Bristol

Pragna Patel

Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism

and

Julia Bard

Women Against Fundamentalism

Tope Omoniyi

Roehampton University

and

Joshua A. Fishman

Yeshiva University and City University of New York

Stacey Gutkowski

University of Sussex

Introduction*

In a recent interview with *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Professor Nira Yuval-Davis (2009) discussed the ways in which nationalism research has developed since the original publication of her seminal contribution, *Gender and Nation* (1997). Yuval-Davis highlighted, with some concern, that a discourse around multifaithism has emerged in recent years and noted that, while other categories have been problematised and de-essentialised, faith has become ‘the only legitimised difference within the nation’ (2009:134).

Her discussion immediately raises several potential problems with multifaithism, but, in fact, the concept is a fairly new one, still used in a somewhat *ad hoc* manner and yet to be subject to theoretical discussion and scrutiny. The momentum of multifaithist practice and the perceived salience of the concept mean that, in a sense,

* This panel debate was chaired by Lois Lee, Features Editor of *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*.

critique has begun even before the notion has been established. Multifaithism is, therefore, often as opaque a concept as it is contentious.

In response to this, SEN has assembled an expert panel to review and consolidate understandings and critiques of this increasingly significant concept and to consider the reality and/or likelihood of a shift from multicultural frameworks to multifaithist ones. Tariq Modood, Professor of Sociology at the University of Bristol and founding Director of its Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship, opens the discussion with an introduction to and advocacy of multifaithism, but as an enhancement rather than a replacement of multiculturalism. Modood, one of Britain's most important scholars of multiculturalism, has played a formative role in the development of what he calls a 'moderate secularist' approach to multiculturalism. In opposition to Yuval-Davis, Modood looks to a multiculturalism that reflects on the multifaith reality of diverse societies and which uses this to redress some of the harder edges of its existing secular – and sometimes anti-religious – biases.

Modood's introduction provides a discussion piece for the other panel contributors, who commend, refine and challenge his conception from their diverse vantage points. Presenting an activist critique of multifaithist politics, the first response is a contribution from Yuval-Davis' colleagues at the Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism organisations. Pragna Patel (founding member of the Southall Black Sisters, Women Against Fundamentalism) and Julia Bard (Women Against Fundamentalism) detail areas they feel are of concern – and their worry that multifaithism might, in practice, lead to contraventions of the egalitarian and liberal agenda that they in fact share with Modood.

From a different disciplinary perspective, Tope Omoniyi (Professor of Sociolinguistics, Roehampton University) and Joshua A. Fishman (whose many Professorships have included Distinguished University Research Professor of Social Sciences, Emeritus, at Yeshiva University, New York) are nevertheless sympathetic to Modood's position. Omoniyi and Fishman pioneered work on the topic of multifaithism, and they have been developing and exploring the concept and the social reality they feel it uniquely describes since 2003. Here, they agree that attempts to recognise individual and collective religious identities can be developmental for theories and practice of multiculturalism, but they emphasise, too, the damage that might be caused if enthusiasm for multifaithism should distract attention from the significance of other cultural associations. We need to recognise, Omoniyi and Fishman argue, the exclusions that multifaithist frameworks can inculcate, even as they might ameliorate others.

Dr Stacey Gutkowski (International Studies, University of Sussex) explores Modood's framework via the issue of non-religion, with questions of how multifaithism can account for relationships, and engender dialogue, between non-faith and faith individuals and groups. Gutkowski is a Director of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network and one of the pioneers of an emerging research programme into what is one of Europe's largest populations: the non-religious. In fact, she argues, the boundaries between these groups – religious and non-religious – and the allocation to them of majority and minority status are complicated matters. Here, as elsewhere, the discussion raises as many questions as it answers – advancing questions of multifaithism that further research and collaboration will need to address.

References

- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2009. 'Interview with Professor Nira Yuval-Davis: After Gender and Nation'. Interview by Lois Lee. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 9 (1): 128–38.