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What is This?

Commentary

Multiculturalism and religion:
A three part debate. Part one
Accommodating religions:
Multiculturalism's new fault line

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Abstract

This extended commentary engages in debate about the place of religion within multicultural social structures and the perceived risks and benefits of the incorporation of this within state and social policy. If social policy has indeed been extended from ethnicity to include religion, what are the implications of this? Key issues within the debate include the relationship between secular and religious identities and the kind of secularism that should inform the way in which the state is seeking to accommodate religious demands and identities in its engagement with particular communities, particularly ethnic minority communities. The commentary takes as its starting point an article published in 2011 in *Critical Social Policy* 31(3) by Singh and Cowden on 'Multiculturalism's New Fault Lines' and a response to this by Tariq Modood.

In Gurnam Singh and Stephen Cowden's discussion in this journal of the recently formed fault lines in multiculturalism, besides a preoccupation with

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segregation they identify a parallel development (Singh and Cowden, 2011). This is a focus on 'religious *as opposed to* secular identities' (2011: 353, my italics). In respect of the latter they make reference to my book, *Multicultural-ism: A Civic Idea* (Modood, 2007), and some other writings. I am pleased that my work has stimulated an engagement and would like to clear up some misunderstandings. The first and most elementary is that as far as my discussion of multiculturalism is concerned, the focus on religious identities is not opposed to secular or non-religious identities but is additional to them and is not meant to suggest any inherent superiority in or desirability of religious over non-religious identities – or vice versa. It is an acknowledgement of the importance of religious identities to some non-white ethnic minorities, especially but not only in Britain, and of their centrality to some forms of ethnic minority self-assertions, mobilizations and political claims-making. I show how these are central to current minority–majority relations and spell out some of their implications, including reformulating multiculturalism in Britain and Western Europe more generally. While I do argue that the primacy of religious identities is more authentic of some minorities, especially South Asians, than earlier impositions, such as 'black' (Modood, 1988, 1994) and so more consistent with racial equality and minority empowerment, that this is the case is just a contingent fact about the minorities in question and how things have developed.

    The ideal of multicultural citizenship is a critique of the cultural assimilation traditionally demanded by nation states of migrants and minorities, as well as of liberal individualism that has no space for groups. Multicultural citizenship is based on the idea that citizens have individual rights, but citizens are not uniform and their citizenship contours itself around the varied identities of citizens. In other words, citizenship is not a monistic identity that is completely apart from or transcends other identities important to citizens. These group identities are ever present and each group has a right to be a part of the civic whole and to speak up for itself and for its vision of the whole. Seeing citizenship as a work in progress and as partly constituted, and certainly extended, by contestatory dialogues, or better still, 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 the dropping of a self-deluding 'colour-blindness' and the addressing of racialized statuses through citizenship. To be a citizen, no less than to have just become a citizen, is to have a right not just to be recognized but to debate the terms of recognition. Multicultural citizenship is the project to make citizenship-inclusion or integration possible on terms that respect all and in particular those who are racially excluded, culturally stigmatized and whose subjectivities are marginalized or

dismissed in similar ways. 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 of a one-sided 'fitting-in' of new entrants or the new equals (the ex-subordinates). This is the conception of multiculturalism that political philosophers such as Iris Young (1990), Charles Taylor (1994), Bhikhu Parekh (2000) and Will Kymlicka (1995) have argued for and I extend the argument from race and ethnicity to religion, and in particular Muslims and I argue that the development of democratic citizenship to fully include Muslims is the key contemporary challenge for multicultural equality.

Singh and Cowden concede that my argument has some validity but it suffers from certain problems in their view. Firstly, they say that I do not distinguish between different religious views and ideologies. Some are fundamentalist, inegalitarian and authoritarian and I do not make clear that my arguments for multicultural accommodation do not apply to them. They acknowledge that 'Modood is clear in his irrevocable opposition to extreme and reactionary elements within Islam' but go on that 'the problem is that these groups are able to utilize the same arguments as he does against secular definitions of civil society' (Singh and Cowden, 2011: 355–356). They do not spell out this problem. While it is true that I do not in detail go into acceptable from non-acceptable religious groups (any more than I do in relation to any other (non-religious) groups or specify limits of recognition or discuss hard cases), it is not the case that extreme and reactionary elements can utilize my conception of citizenship (without giving up some of their extreme and reactionary views). Those religious – or secular – groups that are not able or willing to be part of a conversational citizenship, willing to work to achieve multilogical respect for fellow citizens (religious or secular) are not groups that can use my argument about multicultural citizenship. Moreover, I do specifically state one kind of religious politics that my notion of multicultural citizenship is not able to accommodate and indeed is existentially vulnerable to. In a section entitled 'The danger of ideology' (Modood, 2007: 128–132) I point to an ideological tendency in contemporary politics, this being for me a generic problem for which religious fundamentalisms are a subset. I try to be even-handed in seeing the dangers of certain absolutist modes of thought and politics, whether they be religious or non-religious, and so eliminate a misguided animus against religion per se. I characterize ideology as social perspectives that oversimplify the world they are engaging with. Commonly, this is done by totalizing society or humanity into a single discursive system and within it presenting an over-arching dichotomy (Modood, 2007: 129). This may be workers and capitalists, nation and aliens, male or female, black and white and so on. Each of these dichotomies has a certain validity but an ideological working of them totalizes them so that each member of the pair is totally different – and usually opposed – to the other and all possibilities of overlap, hybridity and plurality are deemed secondary and minor; and the

paired identities are said to have a sociological primacy which lends support to claims that for members of these groups the relevant identity should always trump all others. Such totalized dualistic perspectives are not conducive to fostering dialogue, to respect for difference, to seeking common ground and negotiated accommodation, in short to citizenship in general and above all to multicultural citizenship (Modood, 2007: 130).

In my book I go on to highlight that the current ideologies which are the greatest danger to multiculturalism are those formed around a totalistic dichotomization of West–Islam/Muslims. On one side is Islamophobia or anti-Islamism as a set of attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes which is being developed into an ideology in the context of a geo-political strategy to dominate Muslims. On the other are discourses which simply see the West as decadent compared to the civilizational superiority of Islam and its products, or characterize the West as a colonial overlord (Modood, 2007: 131). The two sets of discourses are asymmetrical in being sustained by quite unequal intellectual, political, economic and military forces but each has a similar dichotomizing, distorting logic which undercuts the efforts to build cross-cutting connexions, syntheses, alliances etc. which multicultural citizenship facilitates and needs. Just as earlier exclusivist dichotomies of British/alien, or even the political blackness that divides the British people into black/white, had to be challenged, so similarly some versions of Islamism are not sufficiently respectful of fellow British citizens and the aspiration of a plural Britain and have to be challenged even while the legitimate grievances of Muslims are being addressed (Modood, 2007: 131). Indeed, attending to the latter is necessary to any effective challenge.

So it is not accurate to say that my concept of multiculturalism does not distinguish between different kinds of religious groups but is equally hospitable to all religious groups or my argument could be used by fundamentalist religious groups. What is true, as should be apparent from the above, is that as far as multicultural accommodation is concerned, for me the key distinction is not between religious and secular but between ideological and non-ideological. Perhaps I could bring out what is at issue by briefly comparing the positions of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Habermas has recently revised his earlier views and argued that religious citizens and discourses must be welcomed into the public sphere for they hold a normative critique of contemporary materialism and injustice that secular people need to learn from (Habermas, 2006). He thinks that this can be done if secular people 'translate' or extract what is of value in religious discourse into the secular. He sees this translation as being uni-directional (secular citizens do not need to translate their discourses into another idiom) because he identifies the secular with rationality. Rawls too seeks to impose a public reason requirement on what he calls 'comprehensive conceptions of the good' by which he means perspectives such as utilitarianism, liberal perfectionism as well

as say Catholic conceptions of the common good. This involves all appeals to such moral doctrines in politics to be expressed in terms consistent with liberal democratic constitutional values. Such arguments can be rationally resolved and the bigger more ultimate disputes about the good life or the good society are deemed irresolvable by, and so not appropriate for, legal and political deliberation. While I think there are flaws in Rawls' view of public reason which I cannot go into here, my reason for evoking it is because he expressly says he is not asking for 'secular' reasons (Rawls, 1997: 775) and so is not singling out religion. He sees secular and religious philosophies equally as sources of liberal democratic laws and policies, but neither are necessary to liberal democracy and so do not need to be defended or rejected, believed in or disbelieved in by liberal democrats, and so neither the secular nor the religious is superior to the other in terms of liberal democratic rationality. Habermas by contrast, despite his new appreciation of religion, works with a reason–religion dualism. He assumes that religion is in some way sub-rational and so in need of translation. Non-religious ethical philosophies such as utilitarianism are not in need of translation. For Habermas the universal language is not where religious and non-religious perspectives and philosophies meet; it is the 'secular' language.

My purpose then in referring to Habermas and Rawls in this brief way is to underline that in identifying Islamist ideologies as one of a set of ideologies (another being Islamophobia) that multicultural citizenship must challenge, there is no special problem with Islam let alone with religion as such; it is religious ideologies, not religion, that can threaten the free, healthy working through of multicultural citizenship. It is actually central to the contention of my book that one of the current dangers to multicultural citizenship is a radical secularism that seeks to destroy the historic compromises with organized religion which are a characteristic of twentieth century citizenship, especially in Western Europe, and a promising basis for the accommodation of Muslims in those countries (Modood, 2007: Ch. 4; elaborated further in Modood, 2012a).

In treating religious and non-religious ideologies even-handedly and abjuring a certain rationalism it may be thought that I am espousing, or at least utilizing, a certain kind of cultural relativism. Indeed, this is exactly the second charge that Singh and Cowden (2011: 355) make against me. The problem with this charge is that I expressly reject cultural relativism and am unwilling to use it. I say that my argument is for political multiculturalism and so independent of any epistemological or moral relativism that may characterize some philosophical multiculturalisms (Modood, 2007: 6–7, 124–125). More fundamentally, I state quite clearly that the kind of multiculturalism that I am arguing for rests on a dual conception of equality, which is a universalist idea (2007: 51, 52–53) and that more generally the arguments of the book presuppose (without uncritically endorsing) a liberal democratic context (e.g., 2007: 7–8).

This takes me to the third issue and the one that may be the most critical. Despite appealing to it throughout their article, Singh and Cowden do not say what they mean by 'secular' and I believe they have too simple a view of political secularisms. They think that I have a tendency to homogenize religions (Singh and Cowden, 2011: 354); in turn, I think they do the same with secularism. They do not note my argument that there are different kinds of secularism that draw the state–religion and politics–religion boundaries in different ways; and that in the context of Western Europe, the fundamental distinction is between moderate and radical secularisms (Modood, 2007: 72–86; see also Modood, 2010). While radical secularism insists on an absolute separation between the state and religion or justifies the control of religion by the state, as in France, moderate secularism seeks in various forms to accommodate organized religion so that it may serve the public good and so those with an attachment to that religion or those religions are not alienated from the polity on grounds of religion. Singh and Cowden's reading of my text here fails to note that I believe that the latter is a resource for contemporary multiculturalism and so I am explicitly defending a pluralized version of moderate secularism. In my opinion, multiculturalist developments have made political secularism a central issue of contention and moderate secularism an important facet of contemporary multiculturalism in Western Europe (Modood, 2012a). So, I distinguish ethno-religious communitarianism from a more individualist, hybridic multiculture or cosmopolitanism (and argue that the two should not be opposed to each other: Modood, 1998; Modood and Dobbernack, 2011) and indeed from other ways of integrating 'difference' (Modood, 2012b). I have made it abundantly clear in the texts that Singh and Cowden refer to that this multiculturalism is highly compatible with the dominant version of secularism in Western Europe, if it is pluralized, which I believe is possible and necessary (and indeed is happening to some extent, especially but not only in Britain). Singh and Cowden's failure to appreciate this I suspect may be because they do not regard moderate secularism as a form of secularism. Thus they write that their concern with my argument is 'the apparent ease with which the concept of a secular public space simply disappears' (Singh and Cowden, 2011: 353). For those who do not accept my conceptualization of accommodating religion as moderate secularism, there are only two alternatives: offer an alternative and superior model of egalitarian accommodation; or refuse religions' accommodation. As there is no hint of the former in their article, then perhaps their position is that organized religions should be refused accommodation. While this is not stated, I think this actually is their position. That would explain, despite the qualified words, the underlying hostility to religious accommodation in their article.

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