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### Muslims, race and equality in Britain: Some post-Rushdie affair reflections

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# Muslims, Race and Equality in Britain

## Some Post-Rushdie Affair Reflections

**Tariq Modood**

'Fight racism, not Rushdie': stickers bearing this slogan have been worn by many who wanted to be on the same side as the Muslims. It was well-meant but betrayed a poverty of understanding. It is a strange idea that when somebody is shot in the leg one says 'Never mind, the pain in the elbow is surely worse'. That South Asian Muslims in Britain form a virtual underclass in Britain there cannot be much doubt. Throughout the 1980s, of the nine non-white groups identified in the Labour Force Survey, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have suffered the highest rates of unemployment, have the lowest number of educational qualifications and the highest profile in manual work; and this is true in each respect not just for women but also men, and not just for the middle-aged (the first generation) but also the young. They have had the most adverse impact from immigration laws and rules, they have the worst housing and suffer from the highest levels of attacks on person and property. Of all groups Pakistanis are least found in London and the South-East for they came mainly to work in the run-down mills and factories of the North and Midlands and have in consequence suffered most from the 'shake-out' of the early '80s and benefited least from the recent growth. The plight of the Bangladeshis is perhaps worst of all. The scope for improvement is circumscribed by the fact, as a recent European Commission survey showed, that while Muslimphobia has not yet reached French proportions, Asians are the single most disliked minority in this country.<sup>1</sup> How can it be that the most socially deprived and racially harassed group should bear all this and explode in anger only on an issue of religious honour? While some commentators have

<sup>1</sup> *Today*, 14 March 1990.

2 Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1990, pp 97-98.

3 See my 'Colour, Class and Culture: the 3Cs of Race', *Equal Opportunities Review*, March 1990.

4 Not surprising in view of the fact that in virtually all Muslim countries, including India, colonised by European powers it was Islam not race nor even secular nationalism that mobilised the masses in the struggle for independence.

5 For an example of Muslim thinking on race see M. Aman Hobohm, 'Islam and the Racial Problem' in Altaf Gauhar (ed) *The Challenge of Islam*, Islamic Council of Europe, London, 1978, pp 268-283.

invoked the presence of politically motivated manipulators there is little evidence in fact that the demonstrations and the book-burnings were anything other than spontaneous working-class anger and hurt pride.<sup>2</sup>

The root of the failure of understanding is that contemporary anti-racism in Britain defines people in terms of their colour; Muslims — suffering all the problems that anti-racists identify — hardly ever think of themselves in terms of their colour. And so, in terms of their own being, Muslims feel most acutely those problems that the anti-racists are blind to; and respond weakly to those challenges that the anti-racists want to meet with most force. And there can be no way out of this impasse if we remain wedded to a concept of racism that sees only colour-discrimination as a cause and material deprivation as a result. We need a concept of race and racism that can critique socio-cultural environments which devalue people because of their origins but also because of their membership of a cultural minority and, critically, where the two overlap and create a double disadvantage.<sup>3</sup> Such a concept should help us to understand that an oppressed group feels its oppression most according to those dimensions of its being which *it* (not the oppressor) values the most; moreover, it will resist its oppression from those dimensions of its being from which it derives its greatest collective psychological strength. For this and further reasons, I shall come to below, Muslims cannot easily, confidently or systematically assume the moral high ground on the issue of colour-racism; their sense of being and their surest conviction about their devaluation by others comes from their historical community of faith and their critique of 'the West'. Authentic 'anti-racism' for Muslims therefore will inevitably have a religious dimension and take a form in which it is integrated with the rest of cultural concerns. Anti-racism begins (i.e. ought to begin) by accepting oppressed groups on their own terms (knowing full well that these will change and evolve) not by imposing a spurious identity and asking them to fight in the name of that. The new strength amongst Muslim youths in, for example, not tolerating racial harassment owes no less to Islamic re-assertion than to metropolitan anti-racism: people don't turn and run when something they care about is under attack. The racist taunt 'Rushdie!' rouses more self-defence than 'black bastard!'<sup>4</sup> British anti-racists see the racism but are happy to be ignorant of the living identities that racism obscures. They thus substitute the outsiders' perception for that of the subject's, turning the contingent fact of racism into the essence of being. South Asians who experience racial discrimination are reduced to discriminated beings ('blacks') who happen to be Asians.

Muslims need to be part of the re-thinking I speak of and at the same time must admit that they have something not only to teach but to learn from the anti-racist, for Muslim thinking too is inadequate to the current situation.<sup>5</sup> The Quranic teaching is that people are to be valued in terms of virtue not colour or race. Muslims insist that there is no divinely favoured race and that the Quran is God's message to the whole of mankind. They take pride in their belief that Islam is a genuine multi-ethnic religion and point to the fact that one of the first converts to Islam was Bilal, a black slave (Arab trade in black slaves having pre-dated the same by Europeans) and that in Muslim history there have been several black rulers and generals in racially mixed societies. This then is the standard Muslim view of racial equality. Like all 'colour-blind' approaches it has two weaknesses.

Firstly, it is too weak to prevent racial and ethnic prejudice. While it was strong enough, unlike its Christian and secular Western counterparts, to prevent the development of official and popular ideologies of racism it is not

the case that ethnic bigotry does not exist in the Islamic world. Asians have no fewer racial stereotypes about whites and blacks than these groups have about Asians or about each other.

The second weakness flows from the first. A 'colour-blind' approach is unable to sanction any programme of positive action to tackle the problem once it is acknowledged to exist. The 1976 Race Relations Act has provisions for, say, employers to identify under-representation of racial minorities in the workforce and to target within certain limits those groups for recruitment. It is not obvious that strictly Muslim thinking can consistently support this. Some very recent Muslim position statements seem to express a reluctance for, what is essential to positive action, heightening racial categories. Indeed, one goes so far as to say that "we believe that it is very unhelpful to look at human relations in Britain on the basis of race",<sup>6</sup> while another asserts "there is only one race, the human race".<sup>7</sup> This is, as I have said, because Muslims (and indeed most other minority communities) do not see themselves in terms of colour and do not want a public identity that emphasises colour. The way out is a concept of race that not only allows minorities a purchase upon their mode of being but, equally importantly, also upon how British white society defines them — that is to say upon their mode of oppression. While radical anti-racists are as it were religion-blind and culture-blind it would be foolish for a non-white group not to recognise the existence of colour-racism and how it, as well as culture-racism, affects them and their life-chances. For that would rob them of effective strategies as well as alliances with other non-white groups to oppose the various dimensions of racism and its effects. To develop such thinking one cannot — *pace* fundamentalism — rely solely on Quranic concepts.

Relevant here also is the weakness of fundamentalism in dealing with the cultural dimensions of religion. It seems to have escaped many people's attention that the anger over *The Satanic Verses* is not so much a Muslim response as a South Asian Muslim response. If Rushdie had successfully attacked fundamentalism as I believe he intended, many Muslims would have cheered and certainly there would not be the present lines of confrontation. It was not the exploration of religious doubt but the lampooning of the Prophet that provoked the anger. This sensitivity has nothing to do with Quranic fundamentalism but with South Asian reverence of Muhammad (deemed by many Muslims, including fundamentalists, to be excessive) and cultural insecurity as experienced in Britain and even more profoundly in India.<sup>8</sup> For leaving aside Teheran (which in any case came late on to the scene), the demonstrations, whether in Johannesburg or Bradford, Bombay or Islamabad, have all been by South Asians. Not only have there been no major demonstrations in other Muslim countries but the only country in Western Europe or North America to have seen ongoing protest is Britain. This cannot be because of the size of Britain's Muslim population (just over a million), for there are more Muslims in France, Germany and USA (two to three millions each). Rather, Britain is the only western country to have a significant Asian Muslim working class. And while fundamentalism is primarily a movement of the educated middle class, the devotionism of the Prophet is strongest among the rural peasantry from which Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants to Britain, unlike those to the USA, originate. Khomeini's uninvited intervention was purely political. A *fatwa* is a learned legal opinion, it is not a trial, not a verdict, not a sentence. By turning it into a sentence Khomeini placed himself outside Islamic law, and though by doing so he spoke to the hearts of many Muslims who felt despised, powerless and without recourse

6 UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs, *The British Muslim Response to Mr. Patten*, 1989, p 11.

7 Shabbir Akhtar, *Be Careful With Muhammad!*, Bellew, London, 1989, p 7.

8 See my 'British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie Affair', *The Political Quarterly*, 61, 2 April 1990, pp 143-160.

in law, he nevertheless in one stroke jeopardised community relations in Britain.

One important aspect of this has been the division that Muslim anger has caused in the race equality constituency and confusion over whether Muslim demands are or are not examples of assertive anti-racism of the kind which are okay if made by or on behalf of Jews\* and blacks. It is therefore important in the context of current thinking to reiterate that, despite some confusion and naivety in their understanding of race, Muslims are wiser here than radical anti-racists: in locating oneself in a hostile society one must begin with one's mode of being not one's mode of oppression for one's strength flows from one's mode of being. British thinking on race, following the American lead, has regarded the descendants of African slaves in the New World as the paradigm of a racial group. The claim is that this group is what white society has made them: its mode of being has become virtually identical to its mode of oppression. It is notable, however, that one of the significant strands of the movement by black Americans to achieve dignity and self-respect has been what is understood as at least a partial rediscovery of an ancestral culture, in particular Islam. Not only is there the Nation of Islam, which is not regarded by most Muslims as part of the *Umma* (the global Muslim community), in addition there are half a million black American practising Muslims and the rate of conversion is growing.\*\* The disowning of slave names is a simple but effective illustration of the point I am making: Cassius Clay is the name of the mode of oppression, Mohammed Ali is the name of the mode of being.<sup>9</sup> If dogmatic anti-racists continue to define racism and anti-racism in terms of the primacy of the mode of oppression they will shut out Asians and other minorities, fail to understand them and cut them off from the sources of their group pride.<sup>10</sup>

I believe that we in Britain are slowly learning that our concepts of racial equality need to be tuned not just to guaranteeing that individuals of different hues are treated alike but also to the fact that Britain now encompasses communities with different norms, cultures and religions. Hence racial equality cannot always mean that our public institutions and the law itself must treat everybody as if they were the same — for that will usually mean treating everybody by the norms and convenience of the majority. Local authorities have been discovering this, especially with regard to schools, where some

9 I hope I will not be mistaken for arguing for some absolute preference for ancestral identities. On the contrary, identities change and develop and it makes as much sense to be proud of a change or self-chosen identity as a historically received one. In any case, my objection is to the anti-racism which refuses to value existing identities.

10 For a discussion of how the anti-racist concept of Black harms Asians see my 'Black', Racial Equality and Asian Identity', *New Community*, Spring, 1988.

\* The French government, in contrast to the British, was praised for being robustly libertarian and taking a firm stand against Muslim demonstrators in February 1989. It is interesting then that in May 1990 a law was passed in France, following a law of many years standing in W. Germany, prohibiting, by punishment with a prison sentence, statements denying 'crimes against humanity' committed by the Nazis against the Jews during Second World War. This in a country which is currently experiencing intense Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism and yet which has no anti-discrimination legislation to speak of.

\*\* M. Ali Kettani, *The Muslim Minorities*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 1979, p 24. Interestingly, it has been reported that Muslim leaders in Birmingham "suggested that if the West Indians had any equivalent of the mosques they would be more likely to gain employment and less likely to not. There was indeed some interest in converting West Indians and a small number have in fact become Muslims", John Rex, 'The Urban Sociology of Religion and Islam in Birmingham' in Thomas Gerholm and Y. G. Lithman (eds), *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, Mansell, 1988, p 215.

attempts have been made, usually in the glare of adverse publicity, to make provision for minority religions and languages, celebrate non-Christian religious festivals and even to adjust school holidays to coincide with some of them.

More interesting and less publicised are the ways that the law of the land has begun to take cognizance of the new cultural plurality. Occasionally this has been at the level of statute such as the 1976 exemption of turban-wearing Sikhs from the legal requirement to wear a crash helmet when riding a motor-bike,\* a principle which has recently been extended to exempt Sikhs from the new compulsory rule that persons on construction sites must wear safety helmets;<sup>11</sup> there is also the indirect provision for Sikhs to continue to be able to wear their *kirpans* (religious daggers) in public places without being guilty of an offence.<sup>12</sup> More often it is the judiciary that acknowledges the facts of cultural difference. Sometimes this is in the application of the Race Relations Act (1976) such as the House of Lords judgement that allows Sikh males to wear turbans in schools (and, by extension, places of work) regardless of the rules of the school (or employer);<sup>13</sup> or the Industrial Tribunal decisions which have allowed that in appropriate circumstances Asian women may wear trousers at work but not other women,<sup>14</sup> or that a Rastafarian cannot be refused employment merely because he is unwilling to cut off his dreadlocks.<sup>15</sup> In each of these cases an important aspect of a person's religious or cultural practice was protected by law and made a difference to his or her treatment by the courts. Such a principle can be sharply contrasted with the famous case in France last year which revealed the lack of rights of Muslim girls to wear the *hijab* in a state school in France; when a similar conflict arose in a Cheshire school in January 1990 the school was soon forced to back down by public opinion as well as the force of legal precedent. Yet it is important to note that this religious and cultural protection in Britain is far from comprehensive (the parochialism of the law of blasphemy is a case in point) and more importantly that it is indirectly derived from *race* legislation. It is not, for example, the right of Muslim women to wear modest dress at work but the right only of women from those ethnic groups in Britain in which Muslims are a significant number. White Muslim women, for instance, have no rights in this regard as some new young converts have discovered.<sup>16</sup> The cultural sensitivity of the courts does however go beyond merely deciding on cases of racial discrimination. In two cases, for example, the English courts have been prepared to enforce contracts for the payment of deferred dower (*mahr*) by Muslim husbands upon divorce.<sup>17</sup> In May 1990 a High Court judge awarded a divorced Asian woman £20,000 damages against her husband, who had slandered her by suggesting she was not a virgin at the time of her marriage, on the grounds that the insult was very grave in her community.<sup>18</sup>

Each of these examples of statute and judgement is small but taken together they offer an intimation of a policy approach that might be called equality

11 Employment Act, 1989, Section 11 and 12.

12 Criminal Justice Act, 1988, s. 139(5)(b).

13 *Mandla v. Dowell Lee* (1983).

14 *Malik v. British Home Stores* (1980).

15 *Dawkins v. Crown Supplies* (1989).

16 'Badge that marks us out as objects of Derision', *Today*, 24 January, 1990.

17 *Shahnaz v. Rizwan* (1965); *Qureshi v. Qureshi* (1972).

18 *Seemi v. Sadiq*, *The Times*, 3 May, 1990.

\* Motor-Cycle Crash Helmet (Religious Exemption) Act, 1976, Section 1. For a fuller discussion of legal pluralism see Sebastian Poulter, *English Law and Ethnic Minority Customs*, Butterworths, London, 1986; 'The Significance of Ethnic Minority Customs and Traditions in English Criminal Law', *New Community*, 16, 1 October 1989; 'Cultural Pluralism and its Limits: A Legal Perspective', *Britain: A Plural Society*, Commission for Racial Equality, London 1990, pp 3-28.

through pluralism.\* What I have in mind is not new, not peculiar to Muslims nor special to Britain. Indeed, integration through pluralism rather than assimilation, what has been called 'the ethnicity paradox', was observed and advocated in the first quarter of this century by the American sociologists, E. Parks and W. I. Thomas, in respect of the European and Southern black immigration to cities such as Chicago.\*\* The 'ethnicity paradox' refers to their conviction that allowing ethnic communities to take root and flourish in the new soil was the most satisfactory way of promoting long term integration and participation in the institutions of the wider American community. They argued that not only did immigrant institutions meet the special cultural needs of a community, but they provided a basis of continuity for people who were particularly caught in severe and destabilising change. Even more importantly, they were a source of an individual's self-esteem and status, which otherwise suffered from the devaluation that the immigrant suffered; moreover, they enabled a group pride and could lead to a rise in status and respect for the group as a whole and, therefore, stem the need to disown one's origins in order to succeed in the new society. They also recognised that ethnic group organisations bring control to areas of urban life that may lack it, and most importantly give immigrant groups some control over their own adaptation to the new society and, therefore, allows them to adapt in an atmosphere of relative security as opposed to one of rootlessness and powerlessness, each individual forced to come to terms with a new society in relative isolation and therefore, exclusively on the terms of the majority. Park and Thomas thus noted that immigrants

who began by deserting their group end by attempting to improve the status of these groups... seeking to make something with which a man may be proud to identify himself. The fact that the individual will not be respected unless the group is respected becomes thus, perhaps the most sincere source of nationalist movements in America. To this extent the nationalist movements represent an effort to increase participation in American life.<sup>19</sup>

This, then, is what has been called 'the ethnicity paradox' — allowing more space to ethnic minority communities to do their own thing enables them to become a feature of the new society, and creates a secure base from which participation in the institutions of the wider society follows. It is interesting that similar arguments surfaced amongst American black activists and young

19 Robert E. Park and Herbert A. Miller, *Old World Traits Transplanted* (Harper, New York, 1921), pp 143-44.

\* I appreciate that the term 'pluralism' in Western social science discourse usually refers to either: a) societies, as conceived by Furnivall, in which communities, socially sealed from each other, come together only in the market-place; or b) Robert Dahl's description of liberal democracy as choice between competing elites. I am using the term independently of a theoretical affiliation simply to mark out an area of social fact and discussion without wishing to pre-empt theoretical and political responses. I am using the term as used in Bhikhu Parekh, 'Britain and the Social Logic of Pluralism', Commission for Racial Equality, *op.cit.*, pp 58-76.

\*\* The term 'ethnicity paradox' is Barbara Lal's and I am indebted to her for my understanding of Park and Thomas. See her 'Perspectives on Ethnicity: Old Wine in New Bottles', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 6, 2 April 1983, pp 154-173, reworked as ch. 5, *The Romance of Culture in an Urban Civilisation: Robert E. Park on Race and Ethnic Relations in Cities*, RKP, London, 1990.

intellectuals in the late 1960s and 1970s when, after decades in which race egalitarians strenuously denied that there was any such thing as black culture, fearing that an acknowledgement of difference was the thin end of the wedge of inequality, blacks began to celebrate their African roots and what arose from them in American soil.

Our thinking on equality and pluralism and what may be achieved in Britain is far from clear at the moment and many voices need to be heard. Some Muslims, for instance, believe that they have the answer. What is urged is some variation of the *millat* system, a form of religious-based communal pluralism which reached its most developed form in the Ottoman Empire whereby ethnic minorities ran their own communal affairs with a minimum of state interference. The British in India allowed the development of a Muslim family law with its own separate courts and much the same proposal was put to John Patten, the Home Office Minister with responsibility for community relations, by a Muslim delegation last summer. The idea, hardly surprisingly, was rejected out of hand and I do not wish to argue for it. Nevertheless, I do think Britain can usefully consider aspects of Muslim historical experience for it embodies a record of tolerance of religious and cultural minorities such as the Jews which far exceed that of Christendom and modern Europe.<sup>20</sup> Muslims indeed continue to have a concept not just of tolerance but of respect for the religious beliefs of others, for religion as such, which seems to be disappearing in the west where, as Michael Dummett, Britain's leading philosopher, observed, the assumption amongst intellectuals is "that religious believers may properly be affronted, indeed deserve to be affronted".<sup>21</sup> Once again dialogue, learning from a variety of traditions, is the way forward, for Muslim views of pluralism are not as they stand adequate either. They fail to confer equality of citizenship in some crucial respects. Islam insists on a fundamental equality between all Muslims; it insists on the rights of non-Muslims in a Muslim state to lead their lives according to their own norms and customs; it insists on the right of minorities to enjoy the full protection of the state; it does not however, even as an ideal, allow them to be senior members of the major branches of the state nor propagate an ideology which challenges that of the state i.e. Islam. \* Under Jamaat-i-Islami's influence Zia's Islamicisation in Pakistan went even further and created separate electorates so non-Muslims could not influence the election of Muslim legislators. Accordingly, Muslim minorities have historically sought a tolerance-cum-pluralism not formal equality; the UK offers its Muslims a formal equality but is not yet willing to acknowledge in its institutional and legal arrangements the existence of a Muslim community which for instance can be deeply hurt and provoked to violence by forms of literature that the majority of citizens have become used to tolerating. Is it not obvious that different cultural groups

20 India, of course, is the glaring counter-example to this historical record of toleration, the best examples of which are in the Middle-East, Central Asia, North Africa and Spain, where Christian and Jewish minorities flourished for centuries.

21 *The Independent on Sunday*, 11 February 1990.

\* See for example the account of the minimum principles of an ideal Islamic state agreed to by a 1949 conference of all major sects in Pakistan, Allahbukish K Brohi, 'Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi: The Man, The Scholar, The Reformer' in K. Ahmad and Z. I. Ansari, *Islamic Perspectives*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 1979, pp 296-299. Interestingly enough Mawdudi with his usual insistence on logical consistency argues that given that a 'Muslim society' is an ideological not a territorially based society full citizenship rests on affirming the ideology; moreover a Muslim, regardless of his origins, is necessarily a full citizen of any Muslim society he enters. Faultless logic — not quite though the experience of Muslim *gastarbeiters* in the Gulf.



will value irreverent literature in different degrees depending on their history and the vulnerabilities of their position? While some groups may be able to use irreverence positively, other may be demoralised and disabled by it. If so, equality cannot require everybody to be exposed to the same degree of irreverent literature. Equality, indeed, may best be served by giving a minority group a legal protection that the majority does not want for itself. The general point is that minorities have not merely negative but positive rights. Not merely the negative right of access to what is available to the majority but the positive right to some share of the public domain, including law, in order to live by their communal values even where these run counter to majority values and lifestyles. The question of the inter-relationship between equality and pluralism lies I believe at the heart of future British race relations and on which Muslim thought will and ought to focus.

For however appalled we might be by 'the hang 'em and flog 'em' interpreters of the Quranic verses that should not obscure for any of us, Muslims and non-Muslims, the long-term significance of the 'Rushdie affair'. What is at issue is not the life of Salman Rushdie for most Muslims rightly do not mean him physical harm and yet do not believe that the argument ends there. Nor is it about freedom of expression *per se* for, on the one hand, most Muslims do not seek to limit freedom of inquiry and, on the other hand, just about nobody wants absolute freedom of expression including incitement to racial hatred. It is surely not Muslims alone who oppose the libertarianism which sees the artist as a Nietzschean *ubermensch*, towering above conventional morality with perfect liberty to publish imaginative explorations regardless of social consequences. For, indeed, the artist without social responsibility who provokes anger instead of dialogue threatens the field of discourse itself. The ultimate issue, however, that *The Satanic Verses* controversy poses are the rights of non-European religious and cultural minorities in the context of a secular hegemony. It is a time for self-discovery. Is the Enlightenment big enough to tolerate the existence of pre-Enlightenment religious enthusiasm or can it only exist by suffocating all who fail to be overawed by its intellectual brilliance and vision of Man?