



Essays on secularism and multiculturalism

by Tariq Modood, London, ECPR Press/Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019, 249 pp., £24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781785523199

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BOOK REVIEWS

Essays on secularism and multiculturalism, by Tariq Modood, London, ECPR Press/Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019, 249 pp., £24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781785523199

As early as the 1990s, Tariq Modood began drawing our attention to the frictions and possibilities surrounding ethnoreligious identities in western societies. If Britain was embedded in a race relations paradigm and most of continental Europe was focused on immigrants as the salient category, Modood's 1992 book *Not Easy Being British* displayed his prescience by emphasising the significance of culture as well as colour. While he was not alone in focusing on Muslims in the West, he was at the leading edge of a topic that has now become central to every country in Europe.

Modood's *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* is a rich assembly of chapters that reflect the last decade and a half of his intellectual development as he continues to deepen the discussion. Although virtually all chapters are republications of earlier work, the book is not simply a compendium of existing material. His original introductory essay makes plain that its purpose is to outline his view of the relationship between secularism and multiculturalism, primarily in Britain, but with evidence and extensions to the rest of Europe and beyond. The book therefore has a coherent organisational logic that connects it all the way back to Modood's earliest work.

He begins with the important point that Muslims are a racialised group in the West, subject to many of the same prejudices and disadvantages that have afflicted other marginalised groups, of which Jews are the closest parallel. In part because of this, Muslims have grown in their consciousness, and have become politically active. One might add that this has been easiest in Britain, where the race relations paradigm has facilitated analogies to other groups, but it has spread throughout Europe to varying degrees. For Modood, however, the central point is that if we believe that societal members should be permitted to develop a group consciousness and mobilise for equality, rights, or an end to discrimination, there is no obvious reason that Muslims should be treated differently than blacks, or gays, or women.

That observation brings Modood to the second half of the book, which focuses more squarely on secularism. In a series of interlocking essays, he stresses that secularism has taken on an almost hagiographic status among many writers. They err, he believes, in advancing a view of secularism as a coherent bedrock of neutral and egalitarian liberal democracies. For Modood, some forms of secularism constitute a choice to rule out religion as a viable form of mobilisation around identity claims. Radical secularism of this type is neither neutral nor egalitarian in that it privileges secularists over religious citizens in the public sphere.

Modood further points out that this type of secularism is extremely rare. Most European countries operate with much more moderate forms of secularism that are perfectly compatible with a multiculturalist approach. Modood advocates that Muslims' claims be carefully layered in to existing systems. For example, he believes that either disestablishing the Church of England or creating a parallel establishment for Islam is inadvisable, especially given that there is no evidence that British Muslims favour either approach. What he calls 'crude parity' is not the goal. Instead, he calls for steps such as the Church of England's advocacy of multifaith perspectives, compulsory religious education in schools that conveys a sense of the significance of religion to children of all faiths and no faith, and the extension of religious instruction

to everyone on an additive basis. The ultimate goal is to thicken rather than to thin national culture through a process of multicultural recognition.

The obvious societal resistance to Muslim mobilisation and claims-making (especially when most identitarian claims are not only the norm but are often celebrated), and the insistence on secularism as a core principle of liberal democracies (even when it is seldom honoured in its pure form) relate to Modood's perspective on Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism. This is a key lynchpin that ties together the two portions of the book. If we accept that group mobilisation can generate more robust citizenship, why can we not accept Muslim mobilisation? If we admit that secularism is not an all-or-nothing proposition, why can we not find ways to respect Muslims' claims in liberal democracies?

These questions are at the heart of the book, but summarising them this way also risks reducing Modood's complex, nuanced, multifaceted, and engaging writing to its most basic elements. He anticipates objections to his positions throughout his analysis, and thoughtfully and generously engages with his critics. His book also extends well beyond the core issues I have identified here. Perhaps most importantly, he embraces a context-sensitive stance on discussions of multiculturalism instead of a one-size-fits-all method. He acknowledges that what works at one time or in one place may not function in another.

For Modood, it is important for political theorists to engage with the real world rather than simply insisting upon abstract principles. His approach is one of 'normative sociology' or 'contextualised political theory' in the service of public intellectual engagement. Instead of embracing Edward Said's notion of the public intellectual being an 'exile' in permanent opposition to prevailing power structures, Modood aims to draw from and to influence society, because 'rootedness and commitments can be critical to giving voice to and addressing the concerns and protests of subordinate groups' (21).

Tariq Modood has long been one of the most insightful and original voices in discussions about multiculturalism. For those not familiar with his work, this book is an ideal point of entry into his thinking. Even for those who have followed Modood over a longer stretch of time, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* provides a rewarding overview of the central elements of his public political philosophy.

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Practicing Islam. Knowledge, experience and social navigation in Kyrgyzstan, by David W. Montgomery, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016, 272 pp., \$28.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780822964285

Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus since the fall of the Soviet Union, by Bayram Balci, London, Hurst & Company, 2018, 248 pp., £45 (hardback), ISBN 9781849049689

Among the growing number of academic books on Central Asia, two recently published titles – *Practicing Islam: Knowledge, Experience, and Social Navigation in Kyrgyzstan* by David W. Montgomery (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016) and *Islam in Central Asia and the Caucasus*