

ISLAM AND MULTICULTURALISM: SOME THOUGHTS ON A DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP

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We are living through a particularly difficult and delicate period in the development of Britain as a multicultural, multiethnic and multi-faith society. Even before the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005, racial, ethnic, and religious tensions had led to the beginnings of a re-evaluation of ‘multiculturalism’ as a viable discourse for British society. Following the riots in Oldham and Bradford in the summer months of the year 2001, the Cante Report introduced into public discourse terms such as ‘parallel lives’ and ‘separate communities’ which profoundly shifted the terms of debate about cultural diversity away from ‘multiculturalism’ and towards ‘integration’.¹ The question of what ‘integration’ actually means – integration into what? – is left open, however, and is filled with a silence that is all too eloquent a testimony to the absence of the mythical ‘common values’ to which we should all supposedly subscribe. Nevertheless, politicians, journalists, and public figures from all backgrounds and political persuasions have increasingly fallen over themselves to attack multiculturalism as a divisive and devastating failure.

This failure is premised on the belief that multiculturalism encourages ‘separateness’ and ‘cultural segregation’ and is in turn responsible for a situation in which, according to Ruth Kelly, the communities minister, ‘some communities [are] living in isolation of each other, with no common bonds between them.’² This rhetoric attaching multiculturalism to tropes of *apartness*, conflating diversity and difference with separation and isolation is axiomatic in all articulations of the new consensus. The recognition and celebration of cultural diversity, it is argued, is having real material consequences on the

ground in the form of ghetto communities and ‘parallel lives’. Diversity of culture is adduced as the *cause* of division in life. But is there any substance to this charge? Has anyone joined the dots to test this hypothesis? Is it not, in fact, a culturalist argument which is based on a logical leap that denotes multiculturalism as a kind of scapegoat for social problems and issues which our government and society are unwilling and/or unable to confront? Why are clusters of minority ethnic communities living together in inner cities believed to be closing themselves off into ‘ghettoes’ but super-rich people living in gated communities are not? Why should ‘culture’ be especially responsible for social tensions between communities over and above other factors such as racism, class, economic deprivation, inadequate housing and social infrastructure, welfare dependency, white flight, and the importance of social networks in the construction of local neighbourhoods (i.e. the tendency to congregate with others who share similar cultural and class backgrounds, languages, beliefs and social practices). Fingering multiculturalism as the culprit occludes these other factors.

This occlusion is in turn reinforced by confusion over the meaning of the term ‘multiculturalism’. Multiculturalism signifies differently in different contexts. As a concept within philosophical discourse, for instance, it refers to the recognition, acceptance and respect for ‘culturally embedded differences’.³ In sociological and policy circles, however, it refers to a particular mode of state behaviour informed by a more general notion, which circulates within what we might term the ‘public’ context, that multiculturalism means ‘separate and distinct’ cultures. This is indeed the governing principle within dominant public discourses of multiculturalism, which Sivanandan traces back to the Race Relations Act of 1976 and Lord Scarman’s inquiry in the racial disturbances of the early 1980s.

‘Official’ multiculturalism, writes Sivanandan, emerged as particular response to the ‘ethnic disadvantage’ identified by Scarman, and ‘the orthodoxy grew that the disaffection of Britain’s black communities could be dealt with by funding a wide variety of ethnic and religious groups and projects. Meeting their cultural or ethnic needs would somehow stave off protests about inequality and injustice.’⁴ As it is filtered through the machineries of state bureaucracies, this discourse of multiculturalism has manifested itself in state policies and bureaucratic behaviours that have, ‘set different communities against one another in a bid for funds...[and] began to entrench a dangerous ethnicised patronage in local politics.’⁵ But whilst multiculturalism as state policy may indeed have helped define and construct ‘interests’ in a manner that distinguished between groups based on ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’ it does not necessarily follow that it is therefore singularly responsible for the larger claim that it is responsible for ghettos, isolated communities and, as recently suggested by the Conservative Shadow Home Secretary, ‘voluntary apartheid.’

For even in policy terms, multiculturalism’s effects must be weighed in relation to its provenance within specific areas of policy. It is particularly important, for instance, in arts and cultural policy in setting the terms and priorities for funding but even the wildest critic of multiculturalism would surely be hard pressed to sincerely insist that arts funding is directly responsible for ethnic segregation and ‘parallel lives’. Multiculturalism also informs educational policy but is it possible to advance an argument that the teaching of different cultural traditions – usually in a very attenuated form – is more likely to be responsible for community segregation than the tendency, for example, of white middle class parents to congregate in gentrified and expensive neighbourhoods so as to access good quality schools (or opt out of state schools altogether) leaving many schools in inner

city areas with a preponderance of minority ethnic pupils. Here race, class and culture articulate into a dynamic that does indeed result in racial, cultural and, importantly, *class* segregation but this has little to do with multiculturalism. Moreover, the existence of faith schools pre-dates multiculturalism so to suggest that multiculturalism is responsible for the divisiveness engendered by the burgeoning of faith schools is only a half-truth. Whilst the claim for the extension of state-funded faith schools to non-Christian religious groups is made within from within the terms of multiculturalism, it is nevertheless the case that it could just as well be advanced independently of it on the basis of *equality*, redressing a clearly visible imbalance in educational provision.

The dominant public discourse of multiculturalism is indeed flawed but critics of multiculturalism tend to inflate its effects and to conflate this flawed public discourse with *all* definitions and discourses of multiculturalism. In throwing the baby out with the bathwater they thus question the *very possibility* of multiculturalism. In other words, by setting the terms of debate in relation to the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism, and in failing to distinguish between different kinds of multiculturalism, the solution is already anticipated as being something *other* than multiculturalism rather than a better multiculturalism. If multiculturalism is ‘fatally flawed’ the ‘unflawed’ alternative logically points towards a species of monoculturalism. What is apparent in the discursive strategies adopted by critics of multiculturalism is that it represents an ideological claim for a return to some form of assimilation. As Sivanandan perceptively notes, ‘There’s a new ballgame here...the government’s thinking this time [as opposed to the 1980s when multiculturalism emerged as an official discourse] was not along the lines of “ethnic disadvantage,” as Scarman had it, but of (too much) ethnic advantage, too much multiculturalism...Cultural pluralism has

gone too far, it threatens our values and our very national safety. A line has to be drawn on difference.⁶

The silence that accompanies the call to ‘integrate’ does not merely denote the absence of the common values that define ‘Britishness’, nor does it suggest merely the deferral of the response to the question ‘integrate into what?’ in the absence of a suitable answer, but rather it also suggests a response that dare not speak its name (yet): integration is equivalent to assimilation. This is encoded in the use, for example, of the trope of ‘allaying’ majority (read: white, native) fears about ‘change’ and ‘globalisation’ – a polite form of pandering to racist and nativist prejudices in the name of ‘community cohesion’.⁷ This particularly deft dialectical manoeuvre figures the anxieties of the white majority as a legitimate object of concern whilst pretending these have nothing to do with racism; at the same time, it suggests that only white native Britons’ fears and anxieties need to be addressed, and, conversely, that minorities do not have fears and anxieties of their own (which are usually related, of course, to the anxious and fearful prejudicial behaviours of white Britons). Finally, a veneer of political correctness is added to imply that all of this is being done in the service of cultural diversity. In other words, the rhetoric of ‘community cohesion’ is deployed so as to obscure the implications of this new attitude towards multiculturalism: the addressing of the white majority’s ‘concerns’ is another way of saying that *they* need not change but all ‘others’ must.

The irony is, of course, that the assimilationist model which many Britons are now slyly advocating in response to 7/7 and all the rest of it would, just a few months afterwards, go up in smoke in the *banlieus* of France. Despite this the momentum is growing; the chorus is getting louder. ‘Community cohesion’ – the new favourite term –

requires a 'new and honest debate' about the 'value' of multiculturalism.⁸ But the debate, far from being 'honest' is in fact characterised by silence, evasion and euphemism at every turn. Just as there is no mention of assimilation, so too is it deemed correct not to single out Muslims even though it is quite obvious to all that the 'problem' of integration is being addressed, first and foremost, to Britain's Muslim communities. The failure of multiculturalism is, in fact, a displaced way of talking about the failure of the Muslim community (almost always spoken of in the singular) to integrate. In other words, the critique of multiculturalism is a means by which to talk about the 'problem' of Islam in Britain without appearing to be Islamophobic. It is not coincidental that the shift in attitude toward multiculturalism should have begun in 2001, following the Oldham and Bradford riots and 9/11. Since then, the 'crisis' of cultural diversity has been adduced with reference to a depressing series of increasingly hysterical reactions to Muslim 'issues': the French debate about the *hijab* overlaps quite nicely with the controversy in Britain concerning the veil; the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh and the Danish cartoons echo the furore over *The Satanic Verses*; and then there are the terrorist plots: 9/11, 7/7, the alleged plot of July 2006, each reprising the previous one in an echo-chamber of associations.

Each controversy is figured as in some way a threat to a 'way of life': the French republic stands or falls on the choice of headwear by Muslim schoolgirls; the Dutch model of liberal tolerance needs to be reappraised; Danes ask if Danish values are being undermined. Here in Britain we ask if it is possible to integrate fully if our faces are covered, and we are asked to consider the implications for community relations and the obstruction to 'communication' it may represent. These are legitimate issues for debate, of course, and were initially raised in a sensitive and thoughtful manner by Jack Straw before

the subsequent brouhaha engulfed it. As it has since developed, the increasingly hysterical tone of the press coverage seems to carry with it the suggestion that a small number of women wearing the *niqab* threaten the basis of an ‘open’ society by – and the tropes are very important – ‘closing’ themselves off.⁹

Although there is considerable and legitimate debate about the conceptual validity, scope and definition of Islamophobia it is surely appropriate to denote the persistent figuring of Islam and Muslims as a ‘problem’ as Islamophobic. In this incredibly multi-faceted, ambiguous, evolving and flexible discourse, Islam and Muslims are positioned as a ‘limit’ – both in the sense of being *at* the limit of (and therefore ‘beyond’) a putative ‘way of life’, and in the sense of *being* a limit on (i.e. obstructing: cf. the veil controversy) that way of life. Islam tests these limits – of freedom of speech, of tolerance, of diversity – and it thus *represents* the limitations of multiculturalism.

It is easy enough to recognise all this when it is articulated from the right by John Bull nationalists, racists and xenophobes. More troubling is the way in which liberal and leftist critiques of multiculturalism silently and euphemistically articulate these positions. In the ‘new ballgame’, those who had hitherto espoused multiculturalism as an axiom of contemporary political discourse now see a crisis and failure of that multiculturalism and encode within their arguments the unvoiced assumption that this has been largely, if not solely, brought about by the ‘problem’ of Islam. They conclude that multiculturalism has failed precisely because they cannot see beyond Islam as a problem. And yet, there is another possibility that leads to a very different argument: that the presence of ‘Islam’ as a problem within the discourse of multiculturalism does not so much reveal *Islam* to be a problem, nor does it demonstrate the failure of multiculturalism *per se*; rather, it illuminates

the failure of *liberalism* and a liberal political culture to articulate a multiculturalist discourse that is able to accommodate religious as well as ethnic and cultural diversity. *In order to demonstrate this, I want to perform what might be termed an anatomical reading of the prevailing public discourses of multiculturalism, dissecting it so as to show how and why, as a body of thought about cultural diversity, it finds Islam somewhat indigestible. This indigestion is itself a symptom of a deeper crisis of secular knowledge – and of those discourses that have emerged from it, such as liberalism – in the fraught and paradoxical context of globalization.*

In June 2003, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), a government advisory body, published a report calling for, amongst other things, the termination of an exemption clause in animal welfare legislation that allows Jewish and Islamic butchers to practise ritual slaughter methods known as *schechita* and *halal* respectively. Arguing that the exemption from stunning an animal prior to its slaughter – an act which contradicts both Jewish and Muslim edicts that the animal in question should be absolutely uninjured before the commencement of the ritual – causes extreme suffering, it argues that Jews and Muslims, if they want to continue their ritual practices, must submit to the necessity of partially stunning the animal first. This, argues FAWC, would be a more ‘humane’ way of conducting *schechita* and *halal*.

What we have here, in a condensed form, is that clash of moral and cultural values which probes deep into the heart of what it means to be a multiculturalist society.¹⁰ The FAWC report is especially interesting for two reasons. Firstly, because it is sensitive to the multicultural context of modern Britain and so it implicitly considers how best to promote a

sense of multiculturalism that makes it compatible with what it sees as universally valid norms concerning ‘humane’ behaviour towards animals. Second, these norms are premised upon secularist notions of value and of state. Part of the problem, it feels, is that the exemption is a state intervention that is contrary to the secular ‘humane’ values that the state should be upholding. In order to be consistent with itself, the state should remove such an exemption. The report espouses a kind of secularism similar to the republican models in France and Turkey. The state should be absolutely neutral and separate from religious involvement (hence the exemption should be removed); but in so doing it should promote secularist values over and above religious values. This is supposed to guarantee greater religious toleration in a multicultural society.

The ambiguities, hesitations and contradictions in the report’s recommendations illuminate a distinct problem when current discourses of multiculturalism are deployed in assessing the validity or otherwise of specific religious practices (as opposed to vague inanities about the value of pluralism etc.). It did not actually call for a proscription of ritual slaughter; on the other hand, it leaves no room for doubt that it considers such practices ‘inhumane’. The resulting compromise neither satisfied its own secular humanist logic nor did it assuage the offence felt by Muslims and Jews.

The discomfort arises from the fact that until recently, multiculturalism rarely addressed the issue of religious diversity. This may sound strange to us now, after the Rushdie affair and September 11, and after the rhetoric that surrounded both wars in the Gulf, or the war in Afghanistan, or the euphemistic ‘war on terror’. However, it should be borne in mind that the ‘western’ history of thinking about cultural relations has been profoundly shaped by secularism so that religion is not something that was, until recently,

spoken of as something ‘cultural’ in the sense that, say, ethnicity or nationality was. Philip Lewis has observed in his book *Islamic Britain*, that as recently as the mid-1980s, ‘the majority of those concerned with race relations in Britain....still thought of the religious identity of the country’s ethnic minorities as a somewhat marginal issue’.¹¹ He goes on to say that the issue was subsumed under ‘multiculturalism’, which was emerging then as a new way of talking about cultural relations that explicitly rejected the earlier ‘assimilationist’ discourse. Assimilation had seen immigrants as more or less free-floating individuals, whose ‘difference’ was not culturally embedded but racially determined. Assimilation and the discourse of ‘race relations’ thus shared the same genealogy. The logic was that the problem of ‘race’ could be, if not resolved completely (for race was seen as a ‘natural’ and not cultural difference), then at least attenuated if everyone – ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘brown’, ‘yellow’ – shared the same culture. It was, perhaps, a well-meaning but misguided attempt at addressing racism that was itself prejudicial and culturally, if not always racially, arrogant.¹²

Multiculturalism shifted this discourse on race relations towards acceptance of diversity as opposed to its rejection. Emerging from a liberal discourse, however, early multiculturalism adopted the liberal distinction between public and private spheres. Unlike the individualist liberalism that underwrote the assimilationist doctrine, it accepted that individuals were culturally embedded and that these cultures should be accepted in the public sphere. However, only certain aspects of culture were seen as *publicly* important: in particular, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender and sexuality. Other differences, such as religion and language, were to be reserved for the private or domestic sphere. In other

words, only the secular aspects of culture were recognised within the discourse of early multiculturalism.

Things began to change, however, with the ‘Rushdie affair’. It is significant that the shift was initiated by Muslims, and it has been sustained since by developments, both domestic and international, that have circulated through the channels of a globalized media and shaped perceptions and positions on the nature of the relationship of religion (Islam in particular) to public life. Indeed, there is the risk in the current global environment that from being invisible within the discourse of cultural relations, religion has now become the dominant, if not only, determinant of it.

The Rushdie affair had followed on from the Honeyford affair in which a headmaster in a Bradford school that had a majority of Muslim pupils had challenged the parents’ insistence that certain aspects of their Muslim traditions should be respected within the public space of the school. *The Satanic Verses* controversy illuminated other areas in which Muslims struggled for *public* recognition of their religious identity. This struggle has been at least partially successful, though there is still a hesitancy and some confusion over how to accommodate religion (and Islam in particular) within the discourse of multiculturalism, as we can see with the FAWC report. In turn, there has been a slow displacement of race relations by religious relations. However, the older secularist tradition still makes itself felt in the continuing confusion over how to talk about religious identity. Firstly, the older influence of race relations is manifest in the popular assumption that Muslims are non-white, and in particular are South Asian. Two things follow from this: ‘race’ continues to be used to describe the ‘majority’ community (assumed, silently, to be Christian), but is increasingly being displaced by religion when applied to minority

communities – the term Asian, or South Asian co-exists now in public discourse with ‘Muslims’, ‘Hindus’, ‘Sikhs’ etc. On the one hand, this recognises some of the differences that fissure racial and ethnic classifications; on the other hand, religious identity substitutes the ethnic one. In other words, there is the worrying tendency within public multicultural discourse to speak of religious identities *only* in relation to ethnic minorities, which merely underlies secularist assumptions about the ‘majority’ community. This indeterminacy testifies to the difficulty British multiculturalist discourse is having in dealing with religion as a significant dimension of culture in an increasingly post-secularist social space.

The problem is not only historical but also theoretical. Multiculturalism as a discourse only makes sense in relation to the nation-state, that is, within the framework of a specific way of thinking about the relationship between the state, culture and territory. Multiculturalism can only exist as a concept within a certain defined space: it is the nature of that space that is important (if we take the space to be global, the obvious ‘fact’ of cultural diversity has given rise, in the age of nations, to another discourse of cultural relations, namely internationalism). Multiculturalism, like the concept of ‘nation’ which makes it possible, is therefore a spatial concept. The ‘multi’ is related to a social *space* that is territorially defined within the boundaries of a particular state. The significance of this fundamental relation to nationhood is that the nation-state emerged from an increasing secularism with respect to discourses of power, authority and culture. Intercultural relations were also accordingly secularized.

Prior to the emergence of nations, however, cultural relations were spoken of in largely religious terms, as sectarian difference or as a distinction between ‘believers’ and ‘pagans’ or ‘infidels’.¹³ It was from the 12th century onwards that medieval Europeans, their

world-view inevitably filtered through the prism of Christianity, first began that process of encountering cultures other than the Abrahamic religions, whom they were accustomed to seeing as heretical sects or heterodoxical versions of Christianity (especially Islam). However, the voyages which prefaced and then produced colonialism introduced them to differences which were not only religious and doctrinal but which encompassed the whole span of cultural activity. Two ideas of human diversity, which shadowed and coalesced with each other throughout, began to emerge to explain these more fundamental and comprehensive differences: nation and race. It is not surprising, therefore, that these became the two dominant explanatory paradigms of human differences in the western tradition and remain so even today.

Indeed, both nation and race, but the former in particular, were means by which Europe could speak about difference in a new, secular register and thus overcome its own endemic religious conflicts. Throughout the medieval and early modern period Europe was riven by religious dissension which in turn overlapped with and sometimes fed into political strife. Secularism was therefore not just a means of dealing with cultural diversity; it was also a means of stabilising the state so that it could by-pass the problem of *religious* diversity. Political thinkers like Hobbes looked on in envy at the unrivalled religious tolerance within the Ottoman empire. His *Leviathan* was perhaps the most influential of a number of attempts to theorize the basis for a secular state embodied in the authority of an absolute ruler. The theory of the absolutist state began the process of abstracting the individual of any significant affiliations other than those owed to the state. In time it was to prove the basis for the modern nation-state. In the process, however, it was profoundly shaped by the rise of the other ancestor of multiculturalism, namely liberalism.

The modern state has been characterized by Bikhu Parekh as ‘a historically unique mode of defining and relating its members,’ to each other ‘as an association of individuals. It abstracts away their class, ethnicity, religion, social status and so forth, and unites them in terms of their subscription to a common system of authority...To be a citizen is to transcend one’s ethnic, religious and other particularities...Because their socially generated differences are abstracted away, citizens are homogenized and related to the state in an identical manner’.¹⁴ It was liberalism that worked out the place and status of the individual, his or her relationship as a citizen to the state, and the rights and obligations this enjoined.

Because of its abstraction of the individual, liberalism is popularly assumed to be culturally ‘neutral’ and therefore the best way of accommodating cultural and religious diversity. Liberals commonly arrogate a monopoly on tolerance and open-mindedness. They justify this on the basis of their theorization of the distinction between public and private spheres in which the rules of the public sphere are clear and which enable the individual to hold whatever views he or she likes as long as they do not break those rules. Similarly, an individual can, within the private sphere and domestic space, have any number of cultural affiliations, and perform any number of practices. Since these have no bearing on their relationship to the state or their public performance as citizens, they are perfectly at liberty to continue with them providing, once again, that they do not break the law as formulated by the society of citizens as a whole.

However, if we look a little closer, we find that liberalism is neither culturally ‘neutral’ nor is it able to provide a sufficient vocabulary or philosophical framework through which to resolve cultural differences. For one thing, liberalism finds it extremely difficult to account for culture at all. The individual, abstracted out of any form of cultural

affiliation, is related directly to the state. To this way of thinking, culture is a secondary matter. Liberalism is therefore not able to account for the importance individuals may place on aspects of their culture, an importance which at times may not seem rational at all. In part, this is due to the rather idealist notion within liberalism that the individual is a free-floating rational entity that transcends its particular environment and for whom history, tradition and culture are no more than raw material to be used instrumentally for the pursuance of his or her self-defined interests. It does not recognise that the individual is embedded in a culture through which he or she is able to construct the meaning of the world which they inhabit and of the 'identity' that constitutes their selfhood. It is precisely because of this that liberalism is, in fact, ill-equipped to mediate cultural difference because it provides no mechanisms by which to understand why or how those differences might be important and worth cherishing.

For another thing, although in theory liberalism sees only the relationship between the state and the individual as mediated through the law as important, in practice it *does* need to ground itself in a culture for the law cannot be an abstract body of doctrines but rather must reflect the values and sensibilities of those who create and adhere to it. In other words, the making of laws 'presupposes a shared body of values amongst the state's population such that the authority of the law is recognized as being generally valid.'¹⁵ The liberal concept of citizenship is not therefore merely a politico-legal concept but also a cultural one. Historically, nationalism has provided the cultural glue that binds together the liberal theory of state, that fastens the individual to the state. This is why it has been said that all liberals are, in fact, 'liberal nationalists', whether they admit it or not.

As I have already stated, liberalism has, historically and theoretically, been at the root of the assimilationist doctrine of cultural relations. Religion – as well as other forms of cultural affiliation – were seen as a problem precisely because they threatened to provide alternative foci of loyalty to that of the nation state, or alternative assessments of the body of values which underwrite its authority. This potential disturbance to the stability of the state and its laws is what underlies the assimilationist demand for cultural homogeneity as a corollary to legal equality.

Recently, however, some liberal theorists have attempted to account for cultural diversity whilst still preserving the spirit of liberalism by rejecting the doctrine of assimilation.¹⁶ They have done so by going back to liberalism's first principles, which posit a distinction between the public and private realms. Within the terms of this framework, the public sphere consists of the state and civil society. John Rawls has advocated acceptance of cultural diversity in the public sphere so long as it is confined to certain areas of civil society and other 'non-political' branches of the state. The one aspect of the public sphere that must remain reserved for liberalism is what he terms the 'political realm'. His liberalism is accordingly thinned down to the bare minimum necessary to conduct *political* but not necessarily any other form of life – those can be lived according to the cultural preoccupations of individuals. However, this kind of political liberalism merely reduces the more comprehensive assimilationism of previous liberal thought to a narrower, politically defined assimilation into liberal values which become the only legitimate and acceptable standard by which to conduct political life. Again, this might have been sufficient were it not for the rather awkward fact that since politics involves the contestation and regulation of different forces within society, and since such forces must be culturally embedded,

politics necessarily invokes culture and involves the negotiation of or conflict between the values they articulate. Rawls's political liberalism once again overlooks the fact that liberalism is itself a culture with its own set of values that are not necessarily those of everyone else. To reserve the political realm for this culture is to put all non-liberal cultures at a significant political disadvantage.

This kind of displaced assimilation generally goes by the name, nowadays, of integration. This is the kind of integration advocated by the current political consensus. It accepts 'plurality' but demands that ethnic and religious minorities in turn accept British 'norms and values'. It never quite specifies what these are but the structure of the demand makes it clear that, first, there *is* a set of British 'norms and values', and secondly, that in order to participate fully in the British 'way of life' people of other cultures, faiths or traditions must give moral priority to British 'values' over and above their own.

This prioritising of liberal values – though it is not easy to classify the current political climate as liberal – and the subsequent identification of nonliberal with illiberal is often justified on the grounds that 'since modern western society is liberal, it is entitled to ask its members to live by basic liberal values.' Bikhu Parekh, for one, has shown up the muddle-headedness of such thinking. He points out that there is no reason to accept even the premise that western society *is* basically liberal. For one thing, there are plenty of homegrown nonliberal groups all of which are unproblematically assumed to be part of the British 'way of life': conservatives, communists, socialists, certain Christian communities, and so on. Indeed, in the case of the conservatives, their political identity is based on the premise that they are the only true representatives of the 'British way of life'. As Parekh then goes on to say, 'The fact that its political and economic institutions and some of its

social practices are liberal does not make its entire way of life liberal any more than the fact that the state is largely secular entitles us to call the whole society secular.’¹⁷

This last analogy illuminates an interesting point about the nature of public and political discourse in Britain today, for it demonstrates that some nonliberal systems of thought *are* acceptable as legitimate political languages – conservatism, socialism etc. – whilst others are not. In other words, liberalism can accommodate those political languages that share its *secularist* logic; those that do not are entitled to participate in certain areas of the public sphere but are viewed suspiciously, even intolerantly, when they try to articulate a politics. The dominant discourse on multiculturalism shares this secularist logic. Whilst it has been acceptable to articulate a political agenda using the discourse of multiculturalism based on secular aspects of cultural identity such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, or nationality, multiculturalists have long been suspicious of religious politics. In recent times, the celebratory rhetoric of Britain’s multicultural fabric has accentuated such secular fusions as British Indian cuisine, or Afro-Caribbean dance music, but the calling of the faithful to prayer or the building of Hindu temples has been received less with suspicion than with muted indifference. It seems that whilst some things are worthy of celebration, others are not.

Increasingly, many religious groups, but especially Muslims, are challenging this secular multiculturalism, and perhaps the general Islamophobia still pervading many areas of British life can be attributed to a visceral response to this challenge. Nevertheless, it is having an effect on the formulation of multiculturalism, and many thinkers are beginning to grapple with the problem of incorporating a religious dimension into multiculturalist discourse.

It is being increasingly recognized that the liberal theory of a neutral state is a ruse. As we have seen, liberals implicitly equate ‘neutrality’ with liberalism, which disadvantages non-liberal and especially non-secular groups. It is now recognised that the state itself, if representing a multicultural society, must be shaped by it so that multiculturalism becomes the definitive principle of the state and its institutions. This must be accompanied by what Parekh calls a ‘weak’ secularism in which the political machinery of the state remains separate from religion whilst certain branches of the state, such as education, embrace religious diversity. The logic of these positions demands a certain nonliberalism in order to contest prevailing social and cultural inequalities in the form of ‘positive’ or ‘affirmative’ action – and this is deeply resented in some quarters on both liberal and nonliberal grounds.

Moreover, this multicultural demand for positive action flows not only from the logic that the state should be representative of its multicultural society but also from the fact that the liberal division of the public from the private spheres is fallacious. The state penetrates deep into the private realm, shaping subjectivity and making demands of cultures, communities and individuals that, in classic liberal theory, it should not. It is not surprising that cultural communities should, in turn, make demands of the state (and other parts of the so-called public sphere). The problem now is not that they should do so, but *how* this is to be done. It is a problem that centres on the incommensurability of the languages in which these demands are articulated – between, say, liberalism and nonliberal religious ones. Some languages may perhaps be more convergent than others. What concerns us here is the problem that Islam poses in this respect.

I would argue that it is no coincidence that of all the religions that have challenged the secular-liberalism of both the state and the multiculturalism, it is Islam that has been the most visible, radical, controversial and determined – a list of adjectives to which some may also add confrontational. Islam poses specific problems for secular-liberal multiculturalism. In part, this is due to a rather surprising and ironic parallelism between the structure of the modern state and that of the Islamic concept of the state on the one hand, and between the concept of the individual in Islam and liberal individualism on the other.

Let us return to Parekh's concise definition of the modern state as one that recognizes only 'individuals are bearers of rights and [seeks] to create a homogeneous legal space made up of uniform political units subject to the same body of laws and institutions. It set[s] about dismantling long-established communities and [reunites] the "emancipated" individuals on the basis of a collectively accepted and centralized structure of authority.'¹⁸ Insofar as Islam theoretically envisions all Muslims as equal, this characterization of the modern state could, with a little modification, also be applied to the Islamic theory of state.¹⁹ Moreover, the Islamic conceptualization of the individual possesses remarkable similarities to that proposed by liberalism: in both the individual possesses a primacy over and above other categories. This parallelism between Islamic individualism and liberal individualism rests, in turn, on the ambiguous nature and place of culture – in both systems of thought – as a mediator/medium in which and through which the individual lives his or her life. Theoretically, in Islam the individual has a direct relationship to Allah regardless of the specificities of his or her cultural affiliations. However, it is only within the culture of Islam itself that this is possible, or, to put it another way, the relationship to Allah is

mediated through the divine law, the sharia.²⁰ This is what ultimately guarantees Islam's tolerance of cultural and (in attenuated form) religious diversity.²¹

Similarly, liberalism sees a direct and unmediated relationship between the individual and the state and also discounts cultural affiliation. Once again, this indifference that is the basis of its tolerance of cultural diversity is guaranteed by the culture of liberalism itself and mediated through the law. In both cases, the foundational culture is not seen as a culture at all but is seen instead as the 'truth'.²² In both cases, the foundational culture is the universal ground against which cultural diversity can be measured and within which cultural difference is both embedded and transcended. Both liberalism and Islam are themselves not part of this diversity, however, nor can their specificities be measured on a scale of cultural value because they are not 'cultural' but 'natural', representing the 'true' order of life and the universe.

It is the fact that both liberalism and Islam fasten the individual to their respective points of authority via a body of *public* law that creates the particular problem of Islam for any theory of multiculturalism based on liberalism. Islam proposes a very specific relation between each Muslim and the state based on a body of public law encompassing both criminal and civil law. Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and most other religions (with the possible exception of Judaism) do not.²³ This public law requires a state to enforce it. However, this law is fashioned on non-secularist principles that are incommensurable with liberalism. It is precisely this paradoxical similarity and incommensurable difference that contributes to the difficulty in reconciling Islam with liberalism. . It even poses a problem for the 'weak' secularism proposed by Parekh as even then there would be certain arenas of

law, especially criminal law and also some aspects of civil law relating especially, but not exclusively, to gender that are not easily commensurable.

Some Muslims and some liberals interpret this difficulty as an irresolvable conflict between Islamic and liberal principles and conclude that the only resolution would be for either Islam or liberalism to emerge dominant and victorious. Such Muslims speak of an Islamic state in Britain, and represent a tiny minority of Muslims; a larger proportion of liberals would like to see all Muslims becoming secularised counterparts to secularized Christians, observing their faith within the private sphere. In the current climate, it is difficult to prevent these extreme positions from intruding into the mainstream of public discourse. However, it is the principle of ‘resolution’ itself that must first be rejected. If a better, more adequate post-secular multiculturalism is to emerge it will only do so in that provisional space in which resolution is suspended in favour of permanent dialogic negotiation; a space in which both liberal and Islamic principles can be accommodated as equal players in the refashioning of public discourse on intercultural relations – along, of course, with other traditions and principles too. The opening of such a space would require an *ethical* endeavour that refuses the legalism and moralism to which certain Islamists and liberals seem especially prone. The automatic invocation of ‘rights’ on the one hand, and the ritual evocation of ‘offence’ on the other currently diverts all intercultural communication into the cul-de-sac of incommensurability. The ethical *accommodation* of each Other offers the only tentative route through the *impasse* and if it does so – if it can *only* do so – in an *ad hoc*, issue-by-issue manner, then so be it. In the process, ethical accommodation might just begin to transform the politics of cultural relations, rejecting conflict in favour of compromise, and replacing hostility and suspicion with mutual respect.

¹ ‘Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team’ Chaired by Ted Cantle, Home Office: 2001. In fact, the Cantle Report did not actually call for the abandonment of multiculturalism. Indeed, there is an explicit multiculturalist agenda in many parts of the report, and a recognition of the value cultural diversity. The commonality which it seeks as the basis for ‘community cohesion’ is explicitly stated as being based on the concept of ‘citizenship’ not culture.

² Ruth Kelly’s speech on launch of Commission for Integration and Cohesion, 24 August 2006. Full text available online at

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/britain/article/0,,1857369,00.html>

³ Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006 [2000]) p.3.

⁴ Interview with A. Sivanandan, Institute of Race Relations, 22 May 2006. The interview can be accessed online at <http://www.irr.org.uk/2006/may/ha000024.html> One may note here that the culturalist emphasis in contemporary critiques of multiculturalism matches its culturalist origins.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Its most recent *avatar* within British political discourse emerged during the 2005 general election campaign run by the Conservatives, and has since been resurrected from within the Labour government by Margaret Hodge in the run-up to the May 2006 local elections, and most recently by Ruth Kelly in her speech 24 August 2006 at the launch of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

⁸ Ruth Kelly, *ibid.*

⁹ Think of the way the *niqab* is talked about: one ‘hides’ behind a veil; it ‘shuts off’ visual communication; as a ‘mark of separation’ it links up quite nicely with the attack on multiculturalism outlined above, hence demonstrating the ways in which discourse about Muslim integration and the attack on multiculturalism overlap and intersect.

¹⁰ I use ‘multiculturalist’ as opposed to ‘multicultural’ society because, as Bikhu Parekh has pointed out, there is a slight difference. A multicultural society is simply one in which two or more cultures share the same social and political terrain. Such a society can take any number of attitudes with respect to this fact: it could, for example, reject this multiplicity and insist that the cultural difference is subsumed, or assimilated, into one culture – usually the dominant or ‘majority’ culture. This kind of society would be multicultural but not multiculturalist – in fact, it would be monoculturalist. On the other hand, a society might want to accept, respect and cherish cultural difference and argue that each culture is morally equal. This involves a commitment to diversity that has a corollary political and social rationale. The discourse of multiculturalism aspires to such a position. See Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London: Palgrave, 2006).

¹¹ Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002) p.1.

¹² Worryingly, in much of modern Europe assimilation is still the key discourse through which to talk about immigration, and cultural diversity. In 2004, at a conference in Copenhagen and Malmo organised by the British embassies in Sweden and Denmark, I noted with some concern that the Danes especially, but also the Swedes at times, continued

talk about integration as being equivalent to assimilation. ‘They’ should become like ‘us’. The same is happening now in the Netherlands. The problem is, as the British experience demonstrates, assimilation *exacerbates* the problem, widening the chasm of difference even as it seeks to narrow it, stirring antagonism even as it seeks to resolve it.

¹³ See Richard Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

¹⁴ Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, p.181

¹⁵ Bhikhu Parekh, ‘Ethnocentricity of the nationalist discourse,’ *Nations and Nationalism*, 1:1, March 1995, p.30.

¹⁶ Much of what follows is indebted to Bhikhu Parekh, especially pp.80-113 of *Rethinking Multiculturalism*.

¹⁷ Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, pp.111-112.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.21.

¹⁹ The difference being that ‘equality’ in Islam is ontological rather than juridical as it is in liberalism.

²⁰ Islamic modernists, radical or ‘moderate’, *salafi* or ‘liberal’, often use this principle to attack ‘popular’ forms of Islam that have emerged as a composite form encompassing rural folk traditions as well as Islamic practices as ‘superstitious’, ‘backward’ or ‘un-Islamic’ in favour of a more protestant Islam in which the textual authority of the *Quran* and the *shariah* as encoded within it is paramount. This ‘universal’ law contrasts sharply with the heterogeneity of customary laws as they have developed out of local cultural traditions in Muslim societies. Among more ‘liberal’ Muslims in the West there is less emphasis on the *shariah* in favour of acceptance of the secular law of the states in which they reside. This is based on a tacit acceptance of the principles of secular-liberalism which separates the public from the private spheres. A reformed *shariah* – literally meaning ‘the way’ or ‘the path’ – is seen by such liberals as being less a set of laws and more a set of ethical precepts and ritual performances (prayer, payment of the *zakat* tax etc.).

²¹ Religious tolerance in Islam is a complex matter. Jewish and Christian communities in Islamic states, known as ‘dhimmis’ or ‘peoples of the Book’, are allowed to retain and publicly practise their religion within certain circumscribed limits provided they accept the legitimacy and paramountcy of Islamic sovereignty. Theoretically, no other religious tradition should be tolerated. The actual practice has varied historically, depending on context and circumstance but pragmatic toleration has, for the most part, held sway.

²² With respect to Islam this is obvious, but it should be remembered that many liberals in its early days saw it as the ‘light’ that would bring the world out of backward darkness

²³ Like liberal Muslims, most non-orthodox Jews observe the same separation of public and private spheres, observing the secular law in the public sphere and reserving the religious law for the private sphere as ritual performance.