

Anti-Essentialism, Multiculturalism and the 'Recognition' of Religious Groups*

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I. ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

It is only in the last few years that the discourse of multiculturalism has become respectable. Yet, initially seen as a progressive discourse, it is today already seen by many academic commentators as conservative, even reactionary. Arguments for political multiculturalism are directed against essentialist or monistic definitions of nationality, for example, definitions of Britishness which assume a cultural homogeneity, that there is a single way of being British. Multiculturalists have emphasised internal differentiation (relatively easy in the case of Britain which encompasses up to four national or semi-national components, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and fluidity, with definitions of national belonging being historical constructs and changing over time. In this way it has been possible to argue for the incorporation of immigrant groups into an ongoing Britishness and against those who prophesied 'rivers of blood' as the natives lashed out against the aliens perceived as threatening national integrity.

In this political contest the ideas of essential unity, integrity, discreteness and fixity have been seen as reactionary, and internal differentiation, interaction and fluidity as progressive. Yet in the recent years that multiculturalism has come to be respectable, at least in terms of discourse, academic critics have attacked multiculturalism in very similar terms to how multiculturalism attacked nationalism or monoculturalism. The positing of minority or immigrant cultures, which need to be respected, defended, publicly supported and so on, is said to appeal to the view that cultures are discrete, frozen in time, impervious to external influences, homogeneous and without internal dissent; that people of certain family, ethnic or geographical origins are always to be defined by them

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and indeed are supposed to be behaviourally determined by them. The underlying assumptions of multiculturalism, at least in its non-reflective moments, have been identified as:

The premise of sorting populations by ethnic origins according to presumed cultural essence is that a culture is a community of deep-seated values. For values one may also read social roles and meanings, or customs and traditions. But what makes cultural origin a category of population is the additional assumption that a culture is a community of original identity, to which individuals belong by birth. By the common sense of being and belonging which sets the tone of this cultural recognition, all those born into a community absorb and ineradicably sediment within themselves its customary ways of thinking, feeling and being. Even if they do not so identify themselves, they are nevertheless properly identified with that community, whatever subsequent layers of other cultures they may have absorbed to cover over the original sediment.¹

In this anti-essentialist critique—in which the target is sometimes labelled ‘ethnic absolutism’, ‘culturalism’, ‘culturalist differentialism’²—multiculturalism is interpreted as ‘a picture of society as a ‘mosaic’ of several bounded, nameable, individually homogeneous and unmeltable minority uni-cultures which are pinned onto the backdrop of a similarly characterised majority uni-culture’.³ Despite its crudeness, or perhaps because of it, it is argued that throughout Europe many public policies and wider political discourses surrounding multiculturalism tend to employ just such a picture.⁴ In Britain this critique and the charge that multiculturalism supports reactionary community leaders is associated with activists and academics connected with Women Against Fundamentalism. This is an organisation set up by the Southall Black Sisters as a response to the political Islamism of the Rushdie Affair to ‘challenge the assumption that minorities in this country exist as unified, internally homogeneous groups’,⁵ and in particular to oppose the idea of the ‘seemingly seamless (and supraracial) Muslim consensus in Britain’.⁶ Despite anti-essentialism being a relatively recent position, the position it attacks, however much it may be assumed in our unreflective moments, is so manifestly absurd that few would want to defend it. In fact, it has recently been said that ‘opposition to essentialism is a near-universal characteristic of the debate on identity’.⁷

The British anti-essentialists have proposed the ideas of hybridity and of new ethnicities as an alternative to essentialist ethnic identities. The thrust of these

¹Feuchtwang 1990, p. 4.

²Quotations from, respectively: Gilroy 1992; Dirlik 1994; and Al-Azmeh 1993, p. 4 (after Taguieff 1987).

³Vertovec 1995, p. 5.

⁴ibid., p. 1.

⁵Women Against Fundamentalism 1990, p. 2; see also Yuval-Davis 1992, p. 284.

⁶Connolly 1990, pp. 4–5. It has been difficult for an organisation which has few Muslim members to have credibility as a critic of a coercive, essentialist, political concept of ‘Muslim’ when it supports a coercive, essentialist, political concept of ‘black’ (Modood 1992; 1995). I am, however, here concerned with the logic rather than the politics of this position.

⁷Kirton 1995, p. 5.

positions is that ethnic identities are not simply 'given', nor are they static or atemporal, and they change (and should change) under new circumstances or by sharing social space with other heritages and influences. The consequences of post-colonial immigration, the movement of populations, the mixing of cultures, the critiques of old ideas of racial superiority are individuals who have fused identities, whose lifestyles reflect a variety of ethnic heritages, who refuse to be defined by their ethnic descent or any one group, but who consciously create new identities for themselves.⁸ For some the power of cultural essentialism is such that it is implicit in even these attempts to oppose it. Ayse Caglar, in a recent article, points out that while theorists of hybridity are able to show how cultures can mix, the presumption is that prior to the mixing there were two different cultures *à la* essentialism. Moreover, even if hybridity theory shows the crassness of the idea of 'one group, one culture' and allows for fluidity and change, the cultures that it speaks of are still anchored in territorial ideas, for the underlying assumption is that 'one space, one culture' is the norm to which hybridity is the exception.⁹

Yet the fear of essentialism can push one too far the other way. Stuart Hall writes that, due to factors such as migration and the globalisation of economics, consumption and communications, societies can no longer be constituted by stable collective purposes and identities organised territorially by the nation-state. In its most radical version, it is not only politically constituted multiculturalism that becomes impossible, but the idea of a unified self becomes an unrealistic dream:

If we feel we have a unified identity . . . it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves . . . The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with—at least temporarily.¹⁰

This radically multiple self has a penchant for identities, but prefers surfing on the waves of deconstruction to seeking reconstruction in multiplicity. It is post-self rather than a multi-self. Even in less radical versions, the self is no more connected to one location/society/state than another, any more than the typical consumer is connected to one producer or the goods of one country. Reconciled to multiplicity as an end in itself, its vision of multiculturalism is confined to personal lifestyles and cosmopolitan consumerism and does not extend to the state, which it confidently expects to wither away.¹¹

⁸Rushdie 1991; Bhabba 1994; Hall 1992a. For a debate, see Werbner and Modood 1997.

⁹Caglar 1997.

¹⁰Hall 1992b, p.277. Hall does not always argue as if the contemporary self was radically decentred (cf. Hall and Held 1989).

¹¹Modood 1997b.

It seems then that anti-essentialism is inherently destructive. Each escape from its grasp (for example, in the celebration of hybridities) proves to be illusory; while thoroughgoing embrace seems to leave us with no politics, no society, not even a coherent self. There seems to be a relentless and unstoppable logic that takes us from nationalism or social monism to the self as a comforting fiction. What promised to be an emancipatory, progressive movement seems to make, with its 'deconstruction' of the units of collective agency (people, minorities, the oppressed and so on), all political mobilisation rest on mythic and dishonest unities. Hence some of those who embrace philosophic anti-essentialism argue nevertheless that the pragmatic power of essentialism must be salvaged from the destructive logic. Hall, for example, analyses racial identity as a fiction, but one which is necessary in order to make 'both politics and identity possible'.¹² Others, especially some feminists, speak of a 'strategic essentialism' in which one knows that essentialism is false but in some politically favoured contexts may act as if it were true.¹³ Hence the conceptual-political unity of women or blacks—though not, as we saw earlier, of Muslims—is protected from radical anti-essentialism.

There must clearly be something wrong with an intellectual movement that leads to such counter-intuitive conclusions (the self as fiction) and to contortions in order to protect favoured political projects from the results of consistency. I think that the social theoretical movement I have been describing is based on the wrong kind of anti-essentialism. The starting point, the suspicion about some discourses of culture, is right but it does not follow that the ordinary, non-theoretical discourses are incoherent. In talking about other people's cultures we often assume that a culture has just the kind of features that anti-essentialists identify. When non-Chinese people, for example, talk of 'Chinese civilisation' their starting point often is that it has a coherence, sameness over centuries and a reified quality. Sometimes, as Caglar notes of minority intellectuals, one slips into such a mentality when talking of one's own cultural traditions.¹⁴ One is particularly prone to this when one is producing a systematic summary or ideological justification for those traditions. Hence, rich, complex histories become simplified and collapsed into a teleological progress or a unified ideological construct called French culture or European civilisation or the Muslim way of life. In cases where we essentialise or reify someone else's culture, no antidote may be to hand for we lack the knowledge to overturn the simplifications. In the case of a living culture that we are part of, that we have been inducted into, have extended through use and seen change in our own lifetimes, it is easier to better appreciate the processes of change and adaptation, of borrowings from other cultures and new influences, and yet at the same time appreciate what is the subject of change. For change implies the continuation of

¹²Hall, 1987, p. 45.

¹³Spivak 1987; Brah 1992; cf. Fuss 1989.

¹⁴Caglar 1997.

something which has undergone change. It is the same in the case of a person: at the end of one's life one might reflect on how one's personality changed over time and through experience, and see how all the changes constitute a single person without believing that there was an original, already formed, essential 'I' prior to the life experiences. As with a person, so with a culture. One does not have to believe that a culture, or for that matter an ethnic group as the agent of culture, has a primordial existence. A culture is made *through* change; it is not defined by an essence which exists apart from change, a *noumenon* hidden behind the altering configurations of phenomena. In individuating cultures and peoples, our most basic and helpful guide is not the idea of an essence, but the possibility of making historical connections, of being able to see change and resemblance. If we can trace a historical connection between the language of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Winston Churchill, we call that language by a single name. We say that it is the same language, though we may be aware of the differences between the three languages and of how the changes are due to various influences, including contact with and borrowing from other languages, and without having to make any claim about an 'essence'.

In the points that I have been making I have been influenced by Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism. In the 1930s and 1940s Wittgenstein thoroughly revised the philosophy of his earlier work, the *Tractatus*.¹⁵ In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had assumed that all languages aspired to a single ideal structure. In his later work he argued that languages were of many different kinds, reflecting different histories, purposes and forms of life and could not be judged against an ideal standard. But he did not think it followed that *anything* could be a language; he thought that specific languages could have a unity in the way that different elements of a game hang together and makes sense to the players. The key point is that one did not need an idea of essence in order to believe that some ways of thinking and acting had a coherence; and so the undermining of the ideas of essence did not necessarily damage the assumption of coherence or the actual use of a language.¹⁶ The coherence of small-scale activities (for example, games) is of course easier to see and describe than those of histories and ways of life, but as long as we do not impose an inappropriately high standard of coherence (for example, the coherence of a mathematical system, as assumed to be the ideal of language in the *Tractatus*), there is no reason to be defeatist from the start.

The lesson I draw from this is that we do not have to be browbeaten by a dogmatic anti-essentialism into believing that historical continuities, cultural groups, coherent selves do or do not exist. Nothing is closed *a priori*; whether there is sameness/newness in the world, whether across time, across space or across populations are empirical questions.

¹⁵Wittgenstein 1922.

¹⁶Wittgenstein 1967, para. 108.

II. ETHNIC MINORITY IDENTITIES IN BRITAIN

Let us then try to proceed by locating ourselves within some empirical data. I shall here present some findings from the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities in Britain, of which I was the principal researcher. Fieldwork was undertaken in 1994 and covered many topics besides those of culture and identity, including employment, earnings and income, families, housing, health and racial harassment. The survey was based on interviews, roughly about an hour in length, conducted by ethnically matched interviewers, and offered in five South Asian languages and Chinese as well as English. Over five thousand persons were interviewed from the following six groups: Caribbeans, Indians, African Asians (people of South Asian descent whose families had spent a generation or more in East Africa), Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Chinese. Additionally, nearly three thousand white people were interviewed, in order to compare the circumstances of the minorities with that of the ethnic majority.¹⁷

As might be expected, the survey method has many limitations, especially in relation to complex topics like those of identity. Nevertheless, if we bear in mind that all research methods have their limitations and cannot be substituted for each other, so that no one is *the* method, then this survey has the potential to offer what small-scale ethnographic studies, armchair theorising and political wishful thinking cannot. The survey explored only certain dimensions of culture and ethnicity. For example, it did not cover youth culture and recreational activities such as music, dance and sport. These cultural dimensions are likely to be as important to the self- and group-identities of some of our respondents, especially the Caribbeans, as the features we gathered data on. Moreover, almost all the questions asked in the survey provided indications of how closely people affiliated to their group of origin. We did not explicitly explore ways in which members of the minorities had adopted, modified or contributed to elements of ways of life of other groups, including the white British.

We found that members of minority groups, including those born and raised in Britain, strongly associated with their ethnic and family origins; there was very little erosion of group identification down the generations. But, while individuals described themselves in multiple and alternative ways, it was quite clear that groups had quite different conceptions of the *kind* of group identity that was important to them. The important contrast between groups was that religion was prominent in the self-descriptions of South Asians, and skin colour in the self-descriptions of Caribbeans. Despite the various forms of antiracist politics around a black identity of the last two decades—an identity which politicians and theorists have argued is the key post-immigration formation¹⁸—only a fifth of South Asians think of themselves as black. This is not an Asian repudiation of

¹⁷Further details on all aspects of the survey are available in Modood et al. 1997.

¹⁸Modood 1992.

'the essential black subject'¹⁹ in favour of a more nuanced and more pluralised blackness, but a failure to identify with blackness at all.

The South Asian identification and prioritisation of religion is far from just a nominal one. Nearly all South Asians said they have a religion, and 90 per cent said that religion was of personal importance to them. In some ways this cleaving to religion extends to the Caribbeans too. It is true that as many Caribbean as white people, nearly a third, and even more Chinese, do not have a religion, and that the general trend down the generations within every ethnic group is for younger people to be less connected to a religion than their elders (though perhaps to become more like their elders as they age). Nevertheless, while only 5 per cent of whites in the 16–34-year-old group said that religion was very important to how they led their lives, nearly a fifth of Caribbeans, more than a third of Indians and African Asians, and two-thirds of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in that age group held that view. Non-white Anglicans are three times more likely than white Anglicans to attend church weekly, and well over half of the members of black-led churches do so. Black-led churches are a rare growth-point in contemporary Christianity. Indeed, the presence of the new ethnic minorities is not simply changing the character of religion in Britain by diversifying it, but by giving it an importance which is out of step with native trends.

Ethnic/racial/religious identification was of course not universal. For example, one in six British-born Caribbean-origin people did not think of themselves as being part of an Afro-Caribbean ethnic group; this was quite unrelated to the growing issue of mixed ethnicity: nearly half of all 'Caribbean' children had a white parent, a development which is bound in due course to impact on conceptions of Caribbean and black identities. For East African Asians their job was as important an item of self-description as any other. Whilst over a third of Caribbeans and about a quarter of South Asians wished to send their children to schools where half the pupils were from their ethnic group, only a tenth of Chinese wished to do so.

These identities, various as they are, do not necessarily compete with a sense of Britishness. Half of the Chinese but more than two-thirds of those in the other groups also said that they felt British, and these proportions were, as one might expect, higher amongst young people and those who had been born in Britain. The majority of respondents had no difficulty with the idea of hyphenated or multiple identities, which accords with our prior study and other research.²⁰ But there was evidence of alienation from or a rejection of Britishness too. For example, over a quarter of British-born Caribbeans did not think of themselves as being British. This too accords with our in-depth interviews at the development stage. We found that most of the second generation did think of themselves as

¹⁹Hall 1992.

²⁰Hutnik 1991; Modood et al. 1994.

mostly but not entirely culturally and socially British. They were not however comfortable with the idea of British being anything more than a legal title, in particular they found it difficult to call themselves 'British' because they felt that the majority of white people did not accept them as British because of their race or cultural background; through hurtful 'jokes', harassment, discrimination and violence, they found their claim to be British was all too often denied.²¹

Distinctive cultural practices dealing with religion, language, marriage and so on sometimes still command considerable allegiance. The case of religion has already been mentioned. A further example is that nearly all South Asians can understand a community language, and over two-thirds use it with family members younger than themselves. More than half of the married 16–34-year-old Pakistanis and Bangladeshis had had their spouse chosen by their parents. There was, however, a visible decline in participation in distinctive cultural practices across the generations. This was particularly evident amongst younger South Asians who, compared to their elders, are less likely to speak to family members in a South Asian language, regularly attend a place of worship or have an arranged marriage.

Yet, as has been said, this did not mean that they ceased to identify with their ethnic or racial or religious group. In this respect the survey makes clear what has been implicit in recent 'identity politics'. Ethnic identification is no longer necessarily connected to personal participation in distinctive cultural practices, such as those of language, religion or dress. Some people expressed an ethnic identification even though they did not participate in distinctive cultural practices. Hence it is fair to say a new conception of ethnic identity has emerged.

Traditionally, ethnic identity has been implicit in distinctive *cultural practices*. This still exists and is the basis of a strong expression of group membership. Additionally, however, an *associational* identity can be seen which takes the form of pride in one's origins, identification with certain group labels and sometimes a political assertiveness.

The ethnic identities of the second generation may have a weaker component of behavioural difference, but it would be misleading to portray them as weak because of this. In the last couple of decades the bases of identity-formation have undergone important changes and a minority assertiveness has arisen. Identity has moved from that which might be unconscious and taken for granted because implicit in distinctive cultural practices to conscious and public projections of identity and the explicit creation and assertion of politicised ethnicities. This is part of a wider sociopolitical climate which is not confined to race and culture or non-white minorities. Feminism, gay pride, Quebecois nationalism and the revival of Scottishness are some prominent examples of these new identity movements which have come to be an important feature in many countries in which class-politics has declined. Identities in this political climate are not

²¹Modood et al. 1994, ch. 6.

implicit and private but are shaped through intellectual, cultural and political debates and become a feature of public discourse and policies, especially at the level of local or regional government. The identities formed in such processes are fluid and susceptible to change with the political climate, but to think of them as weak is to overlook the pride with which they may be asserted, the intensity with which they may be debated and their capacity to generate community activism and political campaigns. In any case, what is described here as cultural-practices based identities and associational identities are not mutually exclusive. They depict ideal types which are usually found, as in this survey, in a mixed form. Moreover, a reactive pride identity can generate new cultural practices or revive old ones. For some Caribbean people a black identity has come to mean a reclaiming of the African-Caribbean cultural heritage and has thus stimulated among some younger people an interest in Patois-Creole languages which was not there amongst the migrants. A similar Muslim assertiveness, sometimes a political identity, sometimes a religious revival, sometimes both, is evident in Britain and elsewhere, especially amongst some of the young.

Some of the group differences mentioned above can be partly explained by place of birth, period of residence in Britain, occupational class or by a combination of these and related factors, but underlying them was an irreducible difference between groups. The contrast between South Asians and Caribbeans has already been mentioned. A further important difference between groups, perhaps related to the influence of religion, is between African Asians and Indians (about 90 per cent of whom are Sikhs and Hindus), and Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (over 95 per cent of whom are Muslims). On a range of issues to do with religion, arranged marriages, choice of schools and Asian clothes, the latter group take a consistently more 'conservative' view than the former, even when age on arrival/birth in Britain and economic position are taken into account.

Group differences of this kind used to be regarded by antiracists as of negligible significance for public policy, for it used to be argued that the important policy goal was eradicating racism and that all the non-white groups in Britain experience the same racism. As the research evidence of differential stereotyping has accumulated over the last decade, the leading theorists discovered what they alleged was a new racism, though the differential stereotyping and treatment of Asians and blacks seems to be as old as the presence of these groups in Britain.²² The Fourth Survey strongly supports the contention of differential prejudice targeted at different groups. The survey found that there is now a consensus across all groups that prejudice against Asians is much the highest of any ethnic, racial or religious group; and it is believed by Asian people themselves that the prejudice against Asians is primarily a prejudice against Muslims.

²²Modood 1997b.

The perception of these groups' cultural practices and the extent to which they are adhered to no doubt is a determinant of the prejudice against them such that the important prejudice in Britain is a cultural-racism rather than a straightforward colour-racism. But it would be wrong to assume that groups which are most culturally distinct or culturally conservative are least likely to feel British and vice versa. It has already been mentioned that the Caribbeans, of all non-whites the culturally and socially closest to the white British, had the highest proportion who dismissed identification with Britishness—more than the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis, the most culturally conservative and separate of these groups. This certainly should not be taken to imply that the cultural conservatism consists in simply wanting to be left alone as a community and not making political demands upon the public space, say, in the manner of the Amish in Wisconsin. For example, half of all Muslims wanted state funding for Muslim schools, something which was only granted in December 1997 and against which there is presumed to be still considerable white opposition (not necessarily from committed Christians: the survey found that nominal Christians and agnostics/atheists were more likely to express prejudice against Muslims than committed Christians). The political demands of Muslims such as these are not akin to conscientious objections, to principled exemptions from civic obligations, but—akin to other movements for political multiculturalism—are for some degree of Islamicisation of the civic. They are not for getting the state out of the sphere of cultural identities, but in some small way for an inclusion of Muslims into the sphere of state-supported culture.

At the same time, the trend in all groups, however, is away from cultural distinctness and towards cultural mixture and intermarriage. As can be guessed from above, the trend is not equally strong in the various groups. For example, among the British-born, of those who had a partner, half of Caribbean men, a third of Caribbean women, a fifth of Indian and African Asian men, a tenth of Pakistani and Bangladeshi men and very few South Asian women had a white partner.

III. 'RECOGNISING' HYBRIDITY

The above brief description of some of our survey findings about ethnic identities and group consciousness in Britain suggests a number of points that could be further discussed. The key implications I wish to draw here are that while there is much empirical support for those theorists who have emphasised the fluid and hybridic nature of contemporary post-immigration ethnicities in Britain, the suggestion that groups are so internally complex that they have become 'necessary fictions' is much exaggerated, and that the theoretical neglect of the role of religion reflects a bias of theorists that should be urgently remedied. The political challenge, I believe, is to reach out for a multicultural Britishness that is sensitive to ethnic difference and incorporates a respect for persons as individuals

and for the collectivities to which people have a sense of belonging. That means a multiculturalism that is happy with hybridity but has space for religious identities. Both 'hybridity'²³ and ethno-religious communities have legitimate claims to be accommodated in political multiculturalism; they should not be pitted against each other in an either-or fashion, as is done all too frequently by the anti-essentialists and by some liberal political philosophers.²⁴

I want to focus here on an aspect of the political recognition of religion for this is largely absent from cultural studies, sociological and political science discussions. Before I do so, I would just like to make the point that the recognition of hybridity does not suffer if multiculturalism includes a recognition of religious and other communities. Indeed, while the two may not require the same political structures, it may be that hybridity can actually benefit from some recognition of communities. What I have in mind can be illustrated by reference to an Anglo-Canadian comparative study.²⁵ Ghuman looked at the multicultural context and school provision in relation to some South Asian children in a part of Birmingham and a part of Vancouver. He found that there was much less official multiculturalism in Birmingham than Vancouver, but that the Indo-Canadian adolescents felt much more 'mixed' and 'hyphenated' (as the official ideology encouraged them to do), whilst the British Asians identified much more with their communities and the norms and mores of those communities rather than, as did the Indo-Canadians, with the values and lifestyles of their white peers. Much more than the ideologies of multiculturalism and assimilationism was relevant here; more of the Birmingham sample were from poorer homes, and were more residentially concentrated, for example. Nevertheless, I draw the implication that the influence of parental/communal conservatism upon children can be stronger than that of official monoculturalism in schools. Conversely, official recognition of communal heritages facilitates hybridity, national inclusivity and positive attitudes to change amongst minorities—and majorities. This seems to me to parallel the phenomenon that Barbara Lal has called 'the ethnicity paradox' to describe the conviction of some early twentieth century US sociologists that allowing European immigrants and Southern black migrants to cities such as Chicago to form communal organisations was the most satisfactory way of promoting long-term participation in the institutions of the wider American society.²⁶ This does not necessarily ghettoise or 'freeze' immigrant communities but may allow them to adapt in an atmosphere of relative security as opposed to one of rootlessness and powerlessness, where each individual is forced to come to

²³'Hybridity' is less than a satisfactory term, suggesting as it does that hybrids are something less than the 'species' from which they are derived. I reject that implication but use the term as it has gained currency in the literature, not least from those who wish to celebrate their own hybridity (Rushdie 1991; Bhabba 1994).

²⁴e.g., Waldron 1992.

²⁵Ghuman 1994.

²⁶Lal 1990, ch.5.

terms with a new society in relative isolation and, therefore, exclusively on the terms of the majority.²⁷

It is also worth noting that recognising hybridity has quite different implications for citizenship than multiculturalism is sometimes taken to have. For example, in one prominent liberal account of multicultural citizenship, the cultures in question are assumed to be discrete societal cultures, typically a 'nation', and the political significance for liberals of these cultures is that they are a context of choice for their members, without which capacity for autonomous individuality would be affected.²⁸ It is true that Kymlicka primarily has in mind indigenous, historical or territorial nationalities in what he takes to be multinational states rather than post-migration identities, the subject for discussion here. But this only serves to reinforce the point that justifications for different forms of multiculturalism (in the case of Kymlicka's subject-matter, 'multinational citizenship' seems the more apposite term) may be such that a claim that they are covered by a single theory cannot be substantiated. Certainly, British hybridic or hyphenated identities, such as black British or British Asian, do not depend on discrete societal cultures (such cultures are neither available nor sought); their political significance is less to do with 'contexts of choice' than with exclusion/inclusion, for the political issue it raises is the definition of the community of 'Britishness'. Moreover, while the community at issue is a nationality, it is not a nationality to be contrasted with one's group identity but a nationality which the hybrids wish to make a claim on and so be a part of. Hybridity, then, is not a sub-state nationality (in the way of Scottishness or Catalan), it is a form of complex Britishness. This is particularly worth emphasising because in Britain there are people who want not just to be black or Indian in Britain, but positively want to be black British or British Indians. They are not so much seeking civic rights against a hegemonic nationality as attempting to politically negotiate a place in an all-inclusive nationality.

Such political demands create argument and debate and unsettle identities, sentiments, symbols, stereotypes etc., especially amongst the 'old' British. Yet it should be clear that the empirical evidence of hybridity suggests that this is a movement of inclusion (at least from the side of those excluded) and social cohesion, not fragmentation. Translated into policy it could be a contribution to a renewal of British nationality or national rebuilding of the sort exhorted by Prime Minister Blair, especially in his Labour Party conference speech of September 1997.²⁹ In so far as an inclusive nationality is a precondition of or facilitates a sense of citizenship,³⁰ it is a positive contribution towards citizenship.

Hyphenated nationality seems then to pose no major issues of principle for citizenship as long as we are not committed to an essentialist definition of

²⁷Modood 1992, pp.57–8.

²⁸Kymlicka 1995.

²⁹Jacques 1997.

³⁰Miller 1994.

nationality, or the wrong kind of anti-essentialism or a theory that bases multicultural citizenship on a 'context of choice' argument. My own suggestion is that it points us towards a theory of multiculturalism in which we respect and recognise people's sense of belonging, regardless of whether that identity is a context of choice or not.

There is a lot more that can be said about recognising hybridity but, as there is already quite a lot of literature on the topic and very little on what I believe is equally important, the recognition of religious minorities, I would like to give more space to the latter.

IV. 'RECOGNISING' RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

In some western European countries, notably Britain, policy demands based on religion are increasingly being made and religious groups are often the basis of political mobilisation and lobbying. In Britain these demands include the modifications of school curricula, dress codes, provision of halal meat and vegetarian meals, separate worship in the generality of state-funded schools, and also state-funding for privately established Muslim schools in the same way that Christian and Jewish schools are funded.³¹ Parity has also been sought in relation to the law on blasphemy and/or the incitement to racial hatred³² and there is a general demand to outlaw discrimination on the basis of religion and to incorporate the cultural needs of religious minorities in social and health services.³³ Ethno-religious minorities have also sought to become political actors, either through the setting up of syndicalist institutions such as the Muslim Parliament, or demanding sectional representation in existing institutions such as the House of Lords or the Labour Party, usually on the model of a form of representation already achieved by Jews or blacks or women.³⁴

Most theorists of difference and multiculturalism exhibit very little sympathy for religious groups; religious groups are usually absent in their theorising and there is usually a presumption in favour of secularism. Yet we must not be too quick to exclude religious communities from participation in the political debates etc. of a multicultural state. Secularity should not be embraced without careful consideration of the possibilities for reasonable dialogue between religious and non-religious groups. In particular, we must beware of an ignorance-cum-prejudice about Muslims that is apparent amongst even the best political philosophers.³⁵

Charles Taylor is at fault here in his argument for a politics of recognition. He presents a moderate version of a 'politics of difference' and part of his

³¹MET 1997.

³²Modood 1993a.

³³UKACIA 1993.

³⁴Modood 1993b.

³⁵Modood 1996, pp. 178–9.

moderation consists in his recognition that not everybody can join the party: there are some groups to whom a politics of recognition cannot be extended within a liberal polity. However, the only example he gives of those that cannot be included are Muslims. While he refers to the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, the only argument he offers for the exclusion is: '[f]or mainstream Islam, there is no question of separating politics and religion the way we have come to expect in Western liberal society'.³⁶ Similarly, in her argument for a plural politics, Chantal Mouffe asserts that modern democracy requires an affirmation of a 'distinction between the public and the private, the separation of church and State' in ways not granted by Islam.³⁷ However, I believe, these are odd conclusions for at least two reasons.

First, it seems inconsistent with the starting point of the argument for multicultural equality, namely, it is mistaken to separate culture and politics. More to the point, it all depends on what one means by 'separation'. Two modes of activity are separate when they have no connection with each other (absolute separation); but activities can still be distinct from each other even though there may be points of overlap (relative separation). The person who denies politics and religion are absolutely separate can still allow for relative separation. In contemporary Islam there are ideological arguments for the absolute subordination of politics to religious leaders (for example, Khomeini; even then the ideology is not always deemed practical), but this is not mainstream Islam, any more than the model of politics in Calvin's Geneva is mainstream Christianity.³⁸

Historically, Islam has been given a certain official status and pre-eminence in states in which Muslims ruled (just as Christianity or a particular Christian denomination had pre-eminence where Christians ruled). In these states Islam was the basis of state ceremonies and insignia, and public hostility against Islam was a punishable offence (sometimes a capital offence). Islam was the basis of jurisprudence but less so of positive law. Legislation, decrees, law enforcement, taxation, military power, foreign policy, and so on—the state—were all regarded as the prerogative of the ruler(s), of political power, which was regarded as having its own imperatives, skills etc., and was rarely held by saints or spiritual leaders.³⁹ Moreover, rulers had a duty to protect minorities.

Just as it is possible to distinguish between theocracy and mainstream Islam, so it is possible to distinguish between radical or ideological secularism which argues for an absolute separation between state and religion, and the moderate forms which exist throughout Western Europe except France. In nearly all of

³⁶Taylor 1994, p. 62.

Mouffe 1993, p. 132.

³⁸Ayatollah Khomeini is of course regarded by many Muslims as one of the most important Muslim leaders of this century. My point is that his concept of rule by religious scholars, *vilayati faqih*, is a radical innovation and not mainstream Islam (Ayubi 1991).

³⁹Piscatori 1986; Ayubi 1991; Khaldi 1992.

Western Europe there are points of symbolic, institutional, policy, and fiscal linkages between the state and aspects of Christianity. Secularism has increasingly grown in power and scope, but it is clear that a historically evolved and evolving compromise with religion is the defining feature of Western European secularism, rather than the absolute separation of religion and politics. Secularism does today enjoy a hegemony in Western Europe, but it is a moderate rather than a radical, a pragmatic rather than an ideological secularism. Indeed, paradoxical as it may seem, Table 1 shows mainstream Islam and mainstream secularism are philosophically closer to each other than either is to its radical versions.

TABLE 1

Religion-State	Radical Secularism	Radical Islam	Moderate Secularism	Moderate Islam
1. Absolute separation	Yes	No	No	No
2. No separation	No	Yes	No	No
3. Relative separation	No	No	Yes	Yes

Muslims, then, should not be excluded from recognition in the multicultural state because their views about politics are not secular enough. There is still a sufficient divide between private and public spheres in Islamic faith and practice to facilitate dialogue with other (contending) religious and non-religious communities and beliefs.

There is an alternative argument, however, for a multiculturalism which explicitly embraces radical secularism. Versions of this argument are quite popular with reformers as well as academics in Britain at the moment.⁴⁰ This argument recognises that in a country like Britain religion and state are not separate, the constitution gives the Church of England (and Scotland), with its links with the monarchy and Parliament, a privileged position, often referred to as 'establishment'. Moreover, it is asserted that an institutional privileging of one group is *ipso facto* a degrading of all the others, allowing them only second-class citizenship: establishment 'assumes a correspondence between national and religious identity which marginalises non-established churches, and especially non-Christians as only partial members of the British national collectivity'.⁴¹ It is maintained that if we are to take multicultural equality seriously, the Church of England ought to be disestablished: public multiculturalism implies radical secularism, regardless of whatever compromises might have been historically required.

⁴⁰Modood 1994; 1997a.

⁴¹Yuval-Davis 1992, p. 283.

A. NEUTRALITY

This argument relies upon three different assumptions which I would like to consider in turn. First, it seems to be assumed that equality between religions requires the multicultural state to be neutral between them. This seems to be derived from Rawls's contention that the just state is neutral between 'rival conceptions of the good'. It is, however, an appeal to a conception of neutrality that theorists of difference disallow. For a key argument of the theorists of difference is that the state is always for or against certain cultural configurations: impartiality and openness to reason, even when formally constituted through rules and procedures, reflect a dominant cultural ethos, enabling those who share that ethos to flourish while hindering those who are at odds with it.⁴²

This objection seems to have particular bite for secularism; for, even where it is not avowedly atheistical, it seems not to be neutral between religions. For some people, religion is about 'the inner life', or personal conduct or individual salvation; for others, it includes communal obligations, a public philosophy and political action (for example, the Christian socialism favoured by the British Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, not to mention the various Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe). Radical secular political arrangements seem to suit and favour the private kind of religions, but not those that require public action. It is surely a contradiction to require both that the state should be neutral about religion, and that the state should require religions with public ambitions to give them up. One way out of this difficulty is to restrict neutrality to certain kinds of cases. Thus, for example, it has been argued that the liberal state is not and ought not to be neutral between communalistic and individualistic conceptions of the good. Liberals should use state power to encourage individualistic religions over those oriented to shaping social structures; what they ought to be neutral between are the various individualistic religions.⁴³ But this leaves unclear why non-liberals, in particular those whose conception of the good is not confined to forming a coherent individual life for themselves, should be persuaded that the liberal state is the just state; and, if they are not, and the pretence of meta-neutrality is dropped, how is the liberal state to secure its legitimacy? Even this, however, is a less arbitrary use of the idea of liberal neutrality than that found among multiculturalists such as Taylor or Amy Gutmann. After recognising that multicultural equality between groups can take a neutralist or interventionist version, Gutmann suggests that the former is more suited to religious groups and the latter to non-religious educational policy.⁴⁴ Yet she offers no justification for this differential approach other than that it reflects the US constitutional and political arrangements.

⁴²Young 1990.

⁴³Waldron 1989, pp. 78–80.

⁴⁴Gutmann 1994, pp. 10–12.

It has been argued that even where absolute neutrality is impossible, one can still approximate to neutrality and this is what disestablishment achieves.⁴⁵ But one could just as well maintain that though total multicultural or multi-faith inclusiveness is impossible, we should try and approximate to inclusiveness rather than neutrality. Hence, an alternative to disestablishment is to design institutions to ensure those who are marginalised by the dominant ethos are given some special platform or access to influence so their voices are heard. By way of illustration, note that while American secularism is suspicious of any state endorsement of religion, Indian secularism was designed to ensure state support for religions other than just those of the majority. It was not meant to deny the public character of religion, but to deny the identification of the state with any one religion. The latter is closer to what I am calling moderate rather than absolute secularism. In the British context, this would mean pluralising the state–religion link (which is happening to a degree), rather than severing it. It is interesting that Prince Charles has let it be known he would as a monarch prefer the title ‘Defender of Faith’ to the historic title ‘Defender of *the* Faith’.⁴⁶

B. AUTONOMY OF POLITICS

Secondly, implicit in the argument for the separation of the spheres of religion and politics is the idea that each has its own concerns and mode of reasoning, and achieves its goals when not interfered with by the other. (I am here only concerned with the autonomy of politics.) The argument is that politics has limited and distinctive goals and methods which relate only to a dimension of our social world and can best be deliberated over in their own terms, not derived in a law-like way from scriptures, dogmas or theological arguments. The focus of political debate and of common political action has to be defined so that those of different theologies, and those of none, can reason with each other and can reach conclusions that are perceived to have some legitimacy for those who do not share a religious faith. Moreover, if people are to occupy the same political space without conflict, they have mutually to limit the extent to which they subject each others’ fundamental beliefs to criticism. I think such arguments became particularly prominent in seventeenth century Western Europe as people sought to put an end to the religious wars of the time.

I have already suggested that this idea of relative autonomy has shaped statecraft both in the Muslim world and the constitutional structures of contemporary European states. Nevertheless, I do not think the autonomy of politics is (or could be) absolute, nor that it supports radical (as opposed to moderate) secularism. The point I wish to make here is that this view of politics is not just the result of a compromise between different religions, or between theism

⁴⁵Phillips 1997.

⁴⁶Dimbleby 1994, p. 528.

and atheism, but is part of a style of politics in which there is an inhibition, a constraint on ideology. If politics is a limited activity, it means political argument and debate must focus on a limited range of issues and questions rather than on general conceptions of human nature, of social life, or of historical progress. Conversely, to the extent politics can be influenced by such ideological arguments, for example, by their setting the framework of public discourse or the climate of opinion in which politics takes place, then it is not at all clear that religious ideologies are taboo. While it is a contingent matter as to what kind of ideologies are to be found at a particular time and place, it is likely ideologically-minded religious people will be most stimulated to develop faith-based critiques of contemporary secularism where secular ideologies are prevalent and, especially, where those ideologies are critical of the pretensions of religious people.

Of course, we cannot proscribe ideology, secular or religious. My point is simply that the ideological or ethical character of religion is not by itself a reason for supposing religion should have no influence on politics. Rather, institutional linkages between religious conscience and affairs of state (as through the twenty-six bishops who by right sit in the House of Lords at Westminster) are often helpful in developing politically informed and politically constructive religious perspectives that are not naively optimistic about the nature of politics.

C. DEMOCRACY

Proponents of a radically secular multicultural state maintain that establishment, even a reformed establishment (for example, a Council of Religions), is a form of corporatist representation and is therefore open to the charge of being undemocratic. Advocates of multicultural equality are skating on thin ice here for it is not uncommon for them to argue for special forms of minority representation. While in practice this often means special consultative committees, the preferred method is usually some form of constraint on an electoral process (a device, for example, that reserves certain seats for women or a minority in a decision-making forum). In any case, there is no reason to be a purist in politics where mixed forms of representation are the norm and are likely to remain so. We are after all talking about bodies with very little power. One would, therefore, have to take a practical view of how damaging it would be for an institution with such little power to remain independent of the franchise.

There are certainly advantages in allowing organised religion corporatist influence rather than encouraging it, or obliging it, to become an electoral player. Some examples of what happens when a religion deprived of state influence seeks an electoral intervention and joins the party competition, as in Pat Buchanan's bid for the Republican Party presidential nomination in the United States, or the emergence of Islamist parties in various countries, or in the effects of electoral Hindu chauvinism on the Indian state, suggest the radical secularist's concern

with democratic purity may in the end be counter-productive. Of course, one could argue that organised religion should not be allowed to support electoral candidates,⁴⁷ but advocates of this restriction typically fail to explain why churches and other religious organisations are significantly different from ethnic associations, businesses, trades unions, sport and film stars and so on. It is also difficult to see how such restrictions are democratic: denying religious groups corporate representation while at the same time requiring them to abstain from electoral politics—all in the name of democracy and so that ‘the nonreligious will not feel alienated or be denied adequate respect’⁴⁸—seems to more seriously compromise democracy than the maintenance of the current weak forms of corporate representation.

The goal of democratic multiculturalism cannot and should not be cultural neutrality but, rather, the inclusion of marginal and disadvantaged groups, including religious communities in public life. Democratic political discourse has perhaps to proceed on the assumption that, ideally, contributions should be such that in principle they could be seen as relevant to the discourse by any member of the polity. This may mean that there is a gravitational pull in which religious considerations come to be translated into non-religious considerations, or are generally persuasive when allied with non-religious considerations. What it does not warrant is the relegation of religious views to a private sphere. Neither my intention nor expectation is the demise of secularism. The argument for inclusion is aimed at keeping open the possibility of dialogue and mutual influence. It does mean, however, as pointed out by Graham Haydon that:

there is no reason to assume that religious points of view must entirely give way to secular ones. For the entry of non-secular views into the debate does at least make it more possible for secular thinkers to appreciate the force which the other points of view have for those who adhere to them. Secular thinkers may pragmatically be willing to make some accommodation to the views of religious thinkers: movement need not be all the other way (as it would be, by default, if religious viewpoints were to remain only in a private realm).⁴⁹

In arguing that corporate representation is one of the means of seeking inclusiveness, I am not arguing for the privileging of religion, but recognising that in the context of a secular hegemony in the public cultures of contemporary western Europe, some special forms of representation may be necessary and more conducive to social cohesion than some other scenarios. The implications of the recognition of religious groups for civic identities are, however, less clear to discern than in the case of hybridic ethnicity. In various societies religious sectarianism, communalism or fundamentalism produces social cleavages which undermine the conditions of civic solidarity. It is equally clear that similar effects are produced by cleavages associated with ethnicity, nationality, race, class and

⁴⁷Audi 1989.

⁴⁸*ibid.* p. 295.

⁴⁹Haydon 1994, p. 70.

so on. If religion is a potential danger to civic pluralism, it is not peculiarly so. On the other hand, religion can be a source of renewal of community to overcome social divisions and can provide an underpinning of compassion, fairness, justice and public morality—to refer once again to Tony Blair's Christian socialism for illustration—on which civic solidarity and civic duties rest. Ethnoreligious formations, such as Muslim political assertiveness in Britain, are intrinsically neither friend nor foe to multicultural citizenship and hyphenated nationality. It all depends on how the civic order responds to them and modifies them. To reject them outright on the basis of an alleged definition of Western political culture is neither theoretically nor practically justifiable. What is important is that we eschew the contemporary bias against religious groups when discussing these matters.

V. CONCLUSION

The anti-essentialism that has become a virtual orthodoxy in identity studies is right to emphasise that minority identities are continually changing and reinventing themselves through fusing with elements of majority cultures and that this process of mixing, of hybridisation will increasingly be the norm where rapid change and globalisation have made all identities potentially unstable. However, it is a misunderstanding of anti-essentialism to conclude that all collective agency rests on mythic and dishonest, albeit strategically necessary, agency. Unities, continuities, resemblance, groupness are not *a priori* banished but remain the object of empirical inquiry. One such inquiry in Britain suggests that the minorities are not of a single generic type. A multiculturalism that is not biased towards non-white minorities of a particular kind (those defined by colour; those defined by transatlantic youth culture) should aim to find political space for hybridity and religious communities.

I have suggested that there is a theoretical incompatibility between multiculturalism and radical secularism. That means that in a society where some of the disadvantaged and marginalised minorities are religious minorities, a policy of public multiculturalism will require the recognition of religious minorities, and the theoretical incompatibility will become a practical issue. In such situations moderate secularism offers the bases for institutional compromises. Such moderate secularism is already embodied in the church–state relations in western Europe (France being an exception). Rather than see such church–state relations as archaic and as an obstacle to multiculturalism, we should be scrutinising the compromises that they represent and how those compromises need to be remade to serve the new multicultural circumstances.

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Essentialism is a response to problems of recognition and meaning. Amid all the variety of empirical experience and the multiple forms that objects assume, how do we recognize many differently appearing things as instances of the same phenomenon? Where do the categories in and through which we organize empirical experience come from? Anti-essentialist accounts emphasize the importance of social context, environmental factors, and structural factors (including economics and class). This shareable PDF can be hosted on any platform or network and is fully compliant with publisher copyright. Anti-Essentialism, Multiculturalism, and the "Recognition"™ Of Religious Groups. Tariq Modood. March 2000, Oxford University Press (OUP). DOI: 10.1093/019829770x.003.0007. The authors haven't finished explaining this publication. If you are the author, sign in to claim or explain your work. Read Publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/019829770x.003.0007>. The following have contributed to this page: Professor Tariq Modood. PDF generated on 06-Feb-2021 Create your own PDF summaries at 1992. Anti-essentialism, multiculturalism and the "recognition"™of religious groups. T Modood. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 6 (4), 378-399, 1998. 476. 1998. The politics of multiculturalism in the new Europe: Racism, identity and community. T Modood, P Werbner, R Werbner. Zed Books, 1997. 476. 1997. Changing ethnic identities. T Modood, S Beishon, S Virdee.