

Remaking multiculturalism after 7/7

Tariq Modood

29 September 2005

Britain's multicultural model is held responsible for the London bombs of July 2005. But a deeper understanding suggests a concept that can be extended to a "politics of equal respect" that includes Britain's Muslims in a new, shared sense of national belonging, says Tariq Modood.

In spring 2005, I published a book – *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* – which argued that by making progress towards the goal of multicultural equality and acceptance, and embracing plural ways of belonging to Britain, we in Britain were developing a “multicultural Britishness”.

The flyer for the American edition claimed:

“If an Islam-West divide is to be avoided in our time, Modood suggests, then Britain, with its relatively successful ethnic pluralism and its easygoing attitude toward religion, will provide a particularly revealing case and promising site for understanding.”

Such optimism would have struck some people as foolish at any time, but after the London bombings of 7 July and the abortive bombings of 21 July, it must strike many more as completely misguided. In particular, the fact that most of the individuals involved were born and/or brought up in Britain – a country that had given them or their parents a refuge from persecution, fear or poverty and a guarantee of freedom of worship – has led many analysts, observers, intellectuals and opinion-formers to conclude that multiculturalism has failed; even worse, that it can be blamed for the bombings.

To take just four examples from a waterfall of commentary over the last ten-to-twelve weeks:

- William Pfaff states that “these British bombers are a consequence of a misguided and catastrophic pursuit of multiculturalism” (“A monster of our own making”, *Observer*, 21 August 2005)
- Gilles Kepel observes that the bombers “were the children of Britain’s own multicultural society” and that the bombings have “smashed” the implicit social consensus that produced multiculturalism “to smithereens” (“Europe’s answer to Londonistan”, [openDemocracy](#), 24 August 2005)
- Martin Wolf concludes that multiculturalism’s departure from the core political values that must underpin Britain’s community “is dangerous because it destroys political community ... (and) demeaning because it devalues citizenship. In this sense, at least, multiculturalism must be discarded as nonsense” (“When multiculturalism is a nonsense”, *Financial Times*, 31 August 2005)

Trevor Phillips questions, in the context of a speech concerned with “a society ... becoming more divided by race and religion”, an “anything goes’ multiculturalism

... which leads to deeper division and inequality ... In recent years we've focused far too much on the 'multi' and not enough on the common culture." ("After 7/7: Sleepwalking to segregation", Commission for Racial Equality, 22 September 2005)

Even those who don't directly regard multiculturalism as the cause of the bombings tend to believe that we need to review the concept, often concluding that it needs to be replaced by "integration". Indeed, this current of thinking predates 7/7 (and, for that matter, 9/11); it became prominent with David Blunkett's arrival at Britain's Home Office in June 2001 and his response to the riots in some northern English cities in the early summer that year.

The argument against multiculturalism and for integration has, needless to say, an even longer lineage in critiques from both left and right in the 1970s. But its post-2001 manifestation was new in a crucial respect: it came from the pluralistic centre-left, and was articulated by people who previously rejected polarising models of race and class and were sympathetic to the "rainbow", coalitional politics of identity and the realignment and redefinition of progressive forces that it implied.

By 2004, it was common to read or hear that the cultural separatism and self-segregation of Muslim migrants represented a challenge to Britishness, and that a "politically-correct" multiculturalism had fostered fragmentation rather than integration. Trevor Phillips, then as now chair of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), declared that multiculturalism had once been useful but is now out-of-date, for it made a fetish of difference instead of encouraging minorities to be truly British (see Tom Baldwin, "I want an integrated society with a difference", *Times*, 3 April 2004).

Throughout 2004, a swathe of civil-society forums, journals and institutions of the centre-left or liberal-left – *Prospect*, the *Observer*, the *Guardian*, the CRE itself, Channel 4, the British Council, [openDemocracy](http://www.opendemocracy.net) – held seminars or produced special publications with titles like "Is Multiculturalism Dead?", "Is Multiculturalism Over?", and "Beyond Multiculturalism".

This line of argument has acquired even more vigour and force after the events of July 2005. But despite all that's happened in the last few months and the gathering chorus of belief to the contrary, I continue to

think that multiculturalism is still an attractive and worthwhile political project; and that indeed we need more of it rather than less.

This, however, does not mean that those calling for integration do not have a point; multiculturalism and integration are complementary ideas. What it does mean is that integration should take a multicultural rather than an assimilative form. At the same time, we in Britain do probably need to work harder to develop a national identity, and forms of belonging to each other, that can win the imaginations and hearts of minorities and majorities alike.

Assimilation, integration, multiculturalism

It is widely said by its critics that "multiculturalism" is a vague, confused concept whose different meanings to different people render sensible debate and policy orientation difficult. There is some truth in this, but the same is true of its rival ideas or models, "assimilation" and "integration".

Thus, a useful debate and reasoned action requires first some conceptual ground-clearing. The meanings I offer below are not, I believe, arbitrary; rather, they arise out of the public discourses in which these terms are used, and pitted against each other. The way I define them and establish their inter-relationship are however my own, and I am aware that others may prefer to work with other meanings (see Bhikhu Parekh, "British Commitments", *Prospect*, September 2005).

Examples of alternative use of these words include "assimilation" in American sociology (as in the "segmented assimilation" proposed by Alejandro Portes & Min Zhou), which is similar to what is meant by integration in Britain.

In general, European ethnic groups in the United States are seen as an exemplar for sociological theories and models of assimilation (see Peter Kivisto, *Incorporating Diversity: Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, Paradigm Publishers 2005). Thus, Jews are taken to be a successfully assimilated group but the use of this term includes awareness that they have also changed the American society and culture they have become part of. When politicians in Britain and especially continental Europe speak of integration, the meaning they have in mind is what I define below as assimilation.

The principal social dimensions that relevant analysis and policy on these ideas needs to engage with are threefold:

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- socio-economic opportunities and outcomes
- socio-cultural mixing
- civic participation and belonging

A brief consideration of how these three dimensions might differently operate can help to define and distinguish between assimilation, integration and multiculturalism.

Assimilation is where the processes affecting the relationship between social groups are seen as one-way, and where the desired outcome for society as a whole is seen as involving least change in the ways of doing things of the majority of the country and its institutional policies. This may not necessarily be a *laissez-faire* approach – for the state can play an active role in bringing about the desired outcome, as in early 20th-century “Americanisation” policies towards European migrants in the United States – but the preferred result is one where the newcomers do little to disturb the society they are settling in and become as much like their new compatriots as possible.

Integration is where processes of social interaction are seen as two-way, and where members of the majority community as well as immigrants and ethnic minorities are required to do something; so the latter cannot alone be blamed for “failing to or not trying to integrate”. The established society is the site of institutions – including employers, civil society and the government – in which integration has to take place, and they accordingly must take the lead.

Multiculturalism is where processes of integration are seen both as two-way and as working differently for different groups. In this understanding, each group is distinctive, and thus integration cannot consist of a single template (hence the “multi”). The “culturalism” – by no means a happy term either in relation to “culture” or “ism” – refers to the understanding that the groups in question are likely to not just be marked by newness or phenotype or socio-economic location but by certain forms of group identities. The latter point indeed suggests that a better, though longer, term might be “pluralistic integration”.

In the perspective of multiculturalism, the social requirement to treat these group identities with respect leads to a redefinition of the concept of equality.

Let us take these two points, multiplicity and equality, in turn.

Multiplicity

Multicultural accommodation of minorities is different

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from integration because it recognises the social reality of groups (not just of individuals and organisations). This reality can be of different kinds; for example, a sense of solidarity with people of similar origins or faith or mother tongue, including those in a country of origin or a diaspora. Such feelings might be an act of imagination but may also be rooted in lived experience and embodied in formal organisations dedicated to fostering group identity and keeping it alive.

This form of accommodation would also allow group-based cultural and religious practices to be fitted into existing, majoritarian ways of doing things. These identities and practices would not be regarded as immutable, but neither would there be pressure either to change them (unless a major issue of principle, legality or security was at stake) or to confine them to a limited community or private space.

Multicultural accommodation works simultaneously on two levels: creating new forms of belonging to citizenship and country, and helping sustain origins and diaspora. The result – without which multiculturalism would not be a form of integration – is the formation of “hyphenated” identities such as Jewish-American or British Muslim (even if the hyphenated nature of the latter is still evolving and contested). These hyphenated identities are in this understanding a legitimate basis for political mobilisation and lobbying, not attacked as divisive or disloyal.

The groups in Britain for whom questions of integration arise – those formed out of the “new Commonwealth” immigration from the post-1945 generations – are multiple; their different identities combine elements based on origins, colour, culture, ethnicity, and religion. They are not just a plurality but differ in kind. Moreover, they have diverse socio-economic positions and trajectories, and experience both advantage and disadvantage in British society – some of these groups have incomes above the national average.

The “multi” aspect of multiculturalism must apply to the analysis of racism also. There is not a singular racism but multiple racisms that include colour/phenotype forms but also cultural forms building on “colour”, or on a set of antagonistic or demeaning stereotypes based on alleged or real cultural traits. The most important such form of cultural racism today is anti-Muslim racism, sometimes called Islamophobia.

Equality: of dignity, and of respect

The concept of equality has therefore to be applied to groups and not just individuals (see Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and*

Political Theory, Harvard University Press, 2005). Different theorists have offered slightly different formulations on this question; Charles Taylor, for example, distinguishes between equal dignity and equal respect (see his essay in Amy Gutman, ed., *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, 1994). Equal dignity applies to all members of a group in a relatively uniform way.

A good example is Martin Luther King Jr's civil-rights movement. He said black Americans want to make a claim upon the American dream, to achieve American citizenship in the way that the constitution theoretically is supposed to give to everybody. But Taylor also posits the idea of equal respect, which I would argue is the key idea of multiculturalism – or, in Taylor's formulation, of the politics of "recognition", which consists of giving group identities a public status.

The American feminist scholar Iris Marion Young has explained why this is necessary: any public space, policy or society is structured around certain kinds of understandings and practices which prioritise some cultural values and behaviours over others; no public space is culturally neutral (see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, 1990).

In so far as subordinate, oppressed or marginal groups claim equality, what they are claiming is that they should not be marginal, subordinate or excluded; that they too – their values, norms, and voice – should be part of the structuring of the public space. Why, they ask, should we have our identities privatised, while the dominant group has its identity universalised in the public space? The issue, then, is about the public/private distinction and what is "normal" in a society, and to lessen any group feeling abnormal or different.

For example, many gay people have – especially since the 1960s – argued that they do not want to be tolerated merely by being told that homosexuality is no longer illegal and acts between consenting adults done in private are fine. They want people to know that they are gay and to accept them as gay; and for public discussion about gayness to have the same place as discussions about heterosexuality.

The consequence is that when public policy is made – for instance on widows' benefits or pensions – we

should not assume an exclusively heterosexual model of society. This argument for equal respect is central to multiculturalism.

Ascribed and chosen identities

This equal-respect approach to multiculturalism has two important aspects. First, it takes race, sex and sexuality beyond being merely ascriptive sources of identity, merely categories. Race is of interest to liberal citizenship only because no one can choose their race and so should not be discriminated against over something over which they have no control. But if equality is about respecting previously demeaned identities (for example, taking pride in one's blackness rather than in accepting it merely as a "private" matter), then what is being addressed in anti-discrimination or promoted as a public identity is a *chosen* response to one's ascription.

Exactly the same applies to sex and sexuality. We may not choose our sex or sexual orientation but we choose how politically to live with it: do we keep it private or do we make it the basis of a social movement and seek public resources and representation for it?

The second aspect of this approach is that it undermines a frequently-made distinction: that being a woman, black or gay person is an ascribed, unchosen identity while being a Muslim is about chosen beliefs, and that Muslims therefore need or ought to have less legal protection than these other kinds of identities. Rather, the position of Muslims in Britain today parallels other identities of "difference" as Muslims catch up and engage with the contemporary concept of equality.

No one, after all, chooses to be or not to be born into a Muslim family. Similarly, no one chooses to be born into a society where to be or to "look like" a Muslim creates suspicion, hostility, or failure to get the job you applied for.

How Muslims respond to such circumstances will vary. Some will organise resistance, while others will try to stop looking like Muslims (the equivalent of "passing" for white); some will build an ideology out of their subordination, others will not (just as a woman can choose to be a feminist or not); some Muslims may define their Islam in terms of piety rather than politics (just as some women may see no politics in their

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gender, while for others their gender will be at the centre of their politics).

In this light, multiculturalism can be defined as the challenging, the dismantling, the remaking of public identities in order to achieve an equality of citizenship that is neither merely individualistic nor premised on assimilation.

Institutional inclusion and secularism

What are the implications of this approach for the position of Muslims in the context of current British experience? David Hayes suggests that a choice is available: he rightly recognises that moving forward with multiculturalism requires giving Muslims sanctioned public recognition and respect, which taken to its extreme means a corporatist set of structures that includes a Muslim parliament; alternatively, we could move towards a radical secularism that would banish religion from all civic structures (see “What kind of country?”, [openDemocracy](#) 29 July 2005).

The choice before us, however, is not so stark. Corporatism would not be my own preference for it would not represent the British multicultural experience and its potentialities at its best. A corporatist inclusion would require Muslims and their representatives to speak in one voice and to create a unified, hierarchical structure when this is out of character in *Sunni* Islam, especially the south Asian *Sunni* Islam espoused by the majority of Muslims in Britain, and in the contemporary British Muslim scene as a whole.

Corporatism would in practice be a kind of controlling secularism; it would very likely consist of state control of the French kind, with the state imposing upon Muslims its own template, plans, modes of partnership and chosen *imams* and leaders. This is a form of control that is being experimented with across the European Union but has not yet eliminated the mutual distrust between Muslims and European states.

A Board of Deputies model of community representation offers a better illustration of a community-state relationship. The Board of Deputies of British Jews is a body independent of, but a communal partner with, the British state – a federation of Jewish organisations which includes synagogues but also other Jewish community bodies. Its leadership typically consists of lay persons whose standing and skill in representing their community is not diminished by any absence of spiritual authority.

It is most interesting that while at some local levels Muslim organisations in Britain have chosen to create

political bodies primarily around mosques (for example, the Bradford Council of Mosques), the Board of Deputies model seems to be more apparent at a national level. This is certainly the case with the single most representative and successful national Muslim organisation, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), whose office-holders and spokespersons are more likely to be chartered accountants and solicitors than *imams*.

Most mosques in Britain are run by local lay committees, and the *mullah* or *imam* is often a minor functionary. Very few of those who aspire to be Muslim spokespersons and representatives have religious authority, nor are they expected to have it by fellow Muslims. So the accommodation of religious groups is as much if not more about the recognition and support of communities rather than ecclesiastical or spiritual representation in political institutions. The state’s role here is as much to help ensure that Muslim civil society is drawn into the mainstream as it is to enable its representation within state structures.

The above example is merely illustrative; the general point is that multicultural political representation implies some element of collectivity but not necessarily corporatism. It can be about pressure groups, consultations, political-party influence and targeting of votes; it can also include autonomous organisations like black or women’s sections in political parties, trade unions and the Poale Zion in the Labour Party. There are a variety of means to enhance multicultural representation and the majority of them have to take place in the varied sites of civil society, not simply within the state. Most of the burden of remaking the public space lies with civil society and should not be left with the state.

David Hayes, however, has helpfully highlighted that a programme of racial and multicultural equality is not possible today without a discussion of the merits and limits of secularism. Secularism can no longer be treated as, as President Chirac put it, “off-limits”. Not that it’s really a matter of being for or against secularism. The status quo is a largely secular political culture but one in which established churches, religious ceremonies and faith schools continue to have a place.

We should let this evolving, moderate secularism and the spirit of compromise it represents be our guide. Unfortunately, an ideological secularism is currently being reasserted and generating European domestic versions of “the clash of civilisations” thesis and the conflicts that entails for European societies (on this

issue, see Tariq Modood, TA Triandafyllidou and R Zapata-Barrero, eds., *Multiculturalism, Muslims and Citizenship: A European Approach*, Routledge 2005).

The development by some people in Britain of secularism as an ideology to oppose Islam and its public recognition is a challenge both to pluralism and equality, and thus to some of the bases of contemporary democracy. This trend has to be resisted no less than the radical anti-secularism of some Islamists.

Islamist ideologies, no less than extreme secularism, can be a problem – not because they are religious but because they divide people into two (Muslims and non-Muslims) and because they tend towards absolutism (namely, one identity always trumping all others). In both these aspects, Islamist ideologies are inimical to multiculturalism.

Just as earlier exclusivist dichotomies of British/alien, or even the political blackness that divides us into black/white, had to be challenged, so similarly some versions of Islamism are not sufficiently respectful of fellow British citizens and the aspiration of a plural Britain.

In search of national belonging

Multiculturalism in Britain has I believe been broadly right, progressive and beneficial in its principles and practice; it does not deserve the desertion of support from much of the centre-left I described above, let alone the blame for the present crisis. Its articulation has, however, overlooked or at least underemphasised the other side of the coin, which is not just equally necessary but is integral to multiculturalism.

This is that we cannot have strong multicultural or minority identities and weak common or national identities; strong multicultural identities are a good thing – they are not intrinsically divisive, reactionary or “fifth columns” – but they need a framework of vibrant, dynamic, national narratives and the ceremonies and rituals which give expression to our common citizenship.

We – in Britain and in Europe generally – have overlooked that where multiculturalism has been accepted and worked as a state project or as a national project (in Canada, Australia and Malaysia for example) it has not just been coincidental with but integral to a nation-building project (to creating

Canadians, Aussies, Malaysians). Even in the United States, where the federal state has had a much lesser role in the multicultural project, the incorporation of ethno-religious diversity and the welcoming of hyphenated Americans has been about country-making, civic inclusion and nurturing a claim upon the national identity.

Just as integration is a two-way process, so is the pluralising and remaking of citizenship and national identity. This goes to the heart of social policy, where (for example) the phenomenon of residential segregation has many causes beyond ethnic minority groups themselves: including structural conditions such as poverty, racist exclusions, “white flight”, benign neglect by local authorities, and estate-agency discrimination.

In the same way, we must recognise that the lack of a sense of belonging to Britain able to withstand the ideological call of *jihad* against fellow Britons also has several causes, including those belonging to the majority society and not the minorities.

The source of this lack can be found in arguments on both right and left. On the right are exclusivist, even racist notions of Britishness that hold that non-white people are not really British and that Muslims are an alien wedge. On the left is the view that there is something deeply wrong about rallying round the idea of Britain, about defining ourselves in terms of a normative concept of Britishness – that it is too racist, imperialist, militaristic, and elitist – and that the goal of seeking to be British in the present and the future is silly and dangerous, and indeed demeaning to the newly settled groups among the population.

But if the goal of wanting to become British, to be accepted as British and to belong to Britain is not a worthwhile goal for Commonwealth migrants and their progeny, what then are they supposed to integrate into? And if there is nothing strong, purposive and inspiring to integrate into, why bother with integration at all?

Do we just take the view that if inspiring and meaning-conferring identities can be found elsewhere – in some internationalist movement – that’s just fine and if that’s at the expense of your country and its citizens, well they don’t really matter all that much in the ultimate scheme of significance? That being British is small coinage in the light of the real struggles between

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good and evil; between the dross and misery of the present and the imaginative and redemptive futures that beckon?

We cannot both ask new Britons to integrate and go around saying that being British is, thank goodness, a hollowed-out, meaningless project whose time has come to an end. This will inevitably produce confusion and will detract from the sociological and psychological processes of integration, as well as offering no defence against the calls of other loyalties and missions.

Perhaps one of the lessons of the current crisis is that multiculturalists, and the left in general, have been too hesitant about embracing our national identity and allying it with progressive politics. The reaffirming of a plural, changing, inclusive British identity, which can be as emotionally and politically meaningful to British Muslims as the appeal of *jihadi* sentiments, is critical to isolating and defeating extremism. But – like multiculturalism as a whole – this is not a minority problem. If too many white people do not feel the power of Britishness, it will only be a legal concept and other identities will prevail.

A path to renewal

British involvement with the United States's geopolitical projects – including the creation of Saudi-backed *jihadism* in Afghanistan in the 1980s as well as

those following 9/11 – is certainly part of the current crisis and is putting great strain on multiculturalism. Yet, in the same period New Labour has been part of an evolving multiculturalism, not least in understanding that religious equality is a necessary part of multicultural equality. These developments of recent years should not be called into question in the name of integration, anti-terrorism or secularism.

What is urgently needed is not a panicky retreat from multiculturalism, but to extend its application by recognising Muslims as a legitimate social partner and include them in the institutional compromises of church and state, religion and politics, that characterise the evolving, moderate secularism of mainstream western Europe, and resist the calls for a more radical, French-style secularism.

Moreover, this is not just a matter of state action, for the burden of multicultural representation has to be borne by the multitudinous institutions of civil society that constitute our public space, our public interactions and our plural, public identities.

Thus, the lesson from the current, post-7 July crisis of how to respond to the appeals and threats from *salafi jihadism* is that we need to go further with multiculturalism: but it has to be a multiculturalism that is allied to, indeed is the other side of the coin of, a renewed and reinvigorated Britishness.

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