Secularism and Respect for Religion

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TARIQ MODOOD, DEC 4 2010

One of the features of the 'cultural turn' in social studies and of identity politics is that, while many think one or both may have gone too far, it is now commonplace that the classical liberal separation of culture and politics or the positivist-materialist distinctions between social structure and culture are mistaken. Yet religion – usually considered by social scientists to be an aspect of culture – continues to be uniquely held by some to be an aspect of social life that must be kept separate from at least the state, maybe from politics in general and perhaps even from public affairs at large, including the conversations that citizens have amongst themselves about their society. This religion-politics separationist view, which is clearly normative rather than scientific, can take quite different forms, either as an idea or as practice and can be more or less restrictive, I shall call 'secularism'. While acknowledging the variety of forms it can take I want to argue that one of the most important distinctions we need to make is between moderate and radical secularism. The failure to make this distinction is not just bad theory or bad social science but can lead to prejudicial, intolerant and exclusionary politics. I am particularly concerned with the prejudice and exclusion in relation to recently settled Muslims in Britain and the rest of western Europe but the points I wish to make have much more general application.

In the following I argue firstly at an abstract level that it does not make sense to insist on absolute separation, though of course it's a possible interpretation of secularism. Secondly I maintain that radical separation does not make sense in terms of historical actuality and contemporary adjustments. Thirdly, given that secularism does not necessarily mean the absence of state-religion connections, I would like to make a case for respect for religion as one of the values that citizens and a democratic state may choose to endorse. This may be a limiting case for secularism but is I think consistent with the norms and goals of a secular polity..

Radical and Moderate Secularism

If secularism is a doctrine of separation then we need to distinguish between modes of 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. For example, in contemporary Islam there are ideological arguments for the absolute subordination of politics to religious leaders, as say propounded by the Ayatollah Khomeni in his concept of the vilayat-i-faqih, but this is not mainstream Islam. Historically, Islam has been given a certain official status and preeminence in states in which Muslims ruled (just as Christianity or a particular Christian denomination had preeminence where Christians ruled). In these states Islam was the basis of state ceremonials and insignia, and public hostility against Islam was a punishable offence (sometimes a capital offence). Islam was the basis of jurisprudence but not positive law. The state – legislation, decrees, law enforcement, taxation, military power, foreign policy, and so on – 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. Moreover, rulers had a duty to protect minorities. Similarly, while there have been Christians who have believed in or practiced theocratic rule (eg. Calvin in Geneva) this is not mainstream Christianity, at least not for some centuries.

Just as it is possible to distinguish between theocracy and mainstream Islam, and theocracy and modern Christianity, so it is possible to distinguish between radical or ideological secularism, which argues for an absolute separation

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between state and religion, and the moderate forms that exist where secularism has become the order of the day, particularly Western Europe, with the partial exception of France. In nearly all of 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 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.

Is There a Mainstream Western Secularism?

Having established at an abstract level that mutual autonomy does not require separation I would like to take further the point that while separation of religion and state/politics is a possible interpretation of secularism, it does not make sense in terms of historical actuality and contemporary adjustments. Rajeev Bhargava argues that 'in a secular state, a formal or legal union or alliance between state and religion is impermissible' and that 'for mainstream western secularism, separation means mutual exclusion' (Bhargava 2008: 88 and 103 respectively). What does he mean by 'mainstream western secularism'? His argument is that the secularism in the West has best developed in the United States and France, albeit in different ways. Americans have given primacy to religious liberty, and the French to equality of citizenship but in their differing ways they have come up with the best thinking on secularism that the West has to offer. 'These are the liberal and republican conceptions of secularism. Since these are the most dominant and defensible western versions of secularism, I shall put them together and henceforth designate them as the mainstream conception of secularism' (Bhargava 2008). He is critical of this conception of western secularism which understands secularism in terms of separation and 'mutual exclusion'; this is common ground between us and so in my terms he is a 'moderate' not a 'radical' secularist. He has principled arguments about the nature of secularism and believes that the Indian polity today better exemplifies them than any western polity. My concern here is with his characterisation of western secularism. I believe he is mistaken in arguing that the US and France are the best that the West had got to offer; and nor are they the dominant/mainstream conceptions. His argument is based on a poor understanding of the British experience (which I know best) and of the western European experience more generally. Most of western, especially north-western Europe, where France is the exception not the rule, is best understood in more evolutionary and moderate terms than Bhargava's characterisation of western secularism. They have several important features to do with a more pragmatic politics; with a sense of history, tradition and identity; and, most importantly, there is an accommodative character which is an essential feature of some historical and contemporary secularisms *in practice*. It is true that some political theorists and radical secularists have a strong tendency to abstract that out when talking about models and principles of secularism. If this tendency can be countered, British and other European experience ceases to be an inferior, non-mainstream instance of secularism but becomes mainstream and politically and normatively significant, if not superior to other versions.

Accommodative or moderate secularism, no less than liberal and republican secularism, can be justified in liberal, egalitarian, democratic terms, and in relation to a conception of citizenship. Yet it has developed a historical practice in which, explicitly or implicitly, organised religion is treated as *a public good*. This can take not only the form of an input into a legislative forum, such as the House of Lords, on moral and welfare issues; but also to being social partners to the state in the delivery of education, health and care services; to building social capital; or to churches belonging to 'the people'. So, that even those who do not attend them, or even sign up to their doctrines, feel they have a right to use them for weddings and funerals. All this is part of the meaning of what secularism means in most west European countries and it is quite clear that it is often lost in the models of secularism deployed by some normative theorists and public intellectuals. This is clearer today partly because of the development of our thinking in relation to the challenge of multicultural equality and the accommodation of Muslims, which highlight the limitations of the privatisation conception of liberal equality, and which sharpen the distinction between moderate/inclusive secularism and radical/ideological secularism. I have in my work expressly related the accommodative spirit of moderate secularism to the contemporary demands of multiculturalism (Modood 2007).

I would argue that it is quite possible in a country like Britain to treat the claims of all religions in accordance with multicultural equality without having to abolish the established status of the Church of England, given that it has come to be a very 'weak' form of establishment and the Church has come to play a positive ecumenical and multi-faith role.

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Faced with an emergent multi-faith situation or where there is a political will to incorporate previously marginalized faiths and sects and to challenge the privileged status of some religions the context-sensitive and conservationist response may be to pluralise the state-religion link rather than sever it. This indeed is what is happening across many countries in western Europe. In relation to the British case one can see it in a lot of incremental, ad hoc and experimental steps. For example, some years ago Prince Charles, the heir to the throne and to the office of Supreme Governor of the Church of England let it be known he would as a monarch prefer the title "Defender of Faith" to the historic title "Defender of *the* Faith". More recently, in 2004 the Queen used her Christmas television and radio broadcast – an important national occasion, especially for the older generation, on the most important Christian day of the year – to affirm the religious diversity of Britain. Her message was, in the words of Grace Davie, '[r]eligious diversity is something which enriches society; it should be seen as a strength, not a threat; the broadcast moreover was accompanied by shots of the Queen visiting a Sikh temple and a Muslim center. It is important to put these remarks in context. The affirmation of diversity as such is not a new idea in British society; what is new is the gradual recognition that religious differences should be foregrounded in such affirmations. Paradoxically, a bastion of privilege such as the monarchy turns out to be a key and very positive opinion former in this particular debate' (Davie 2007: 232-33).

If such examples are regarded as merely symbolic then one should note how British governments have felt the need to create multi-faith consultative bodies. The Conservatives created an Inner Cities Religious Council in 1992, chaired by a junior minister, which was replaced by New Labour in 2006 with a body with a much broader remit, the Faith Communities Consultative Council. Moreover, the new Department of Communities and Local Government, which is represented in the Cabinet, has a division devoted to faith communities. This suggests that a 'weak establishment' or a reformed establishment can be one way of institutionalizing religious pluralism. I am not suggesting it is the only or best way but in certain historical and political circumstances, it may indeed be a good way: we should be wary of ruling it out by arguments that appeal to 'the dominant and defensible western versions of secularism' (Bhargava 2008: 93). Stronger still: such institutional accommodation of minority or marginal faiths run with the grain of mainstream western European historic practice.

There can be many practical reasons that state policy may support religious groups (eg., partnership in the delivery of healthcare) but in my final section I would tentatively like to suggest a reason that is not merely practical (for four other reasons, see Modood 2010)

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There is an image of religion as organisations or communities around competing truths, which are mutually intolerant, which perhaps even hate each other's guts. There is some truth in that in some times and places but the opposite is more important. Let me illustrate this by reference to my late father's, a devout and pious Muslim, decision that I should attend the daily Christian non-denominational worship at my secondary school. When I told him that I could be exempted from it, like the Jewish children, if he sent in a letter requesting this, he asked what they did during this time each morning. When I told him that some read comics, some took the opportunity to catch up with homework and some even arrived late, he said I should join the assembly. He said that as Christians mainly believe what we believe I should join in fully but whenever it was said that Jesus was the Son of God, I should say to myself, 'no, he is not'. It is a view that can perhaps be expressed as it is better to be in the presence of religion than not and so the value of religion does not simply reside in one's own religion. One's own religious heritage is to be cherished and honoured but so are those of others and the closing down of any religion is a loss of some sort.

I would suggest that historically it has been a prevalent view in the Middle East and South Asia, indeed where respect for the religion of others has extended to joining in the religious celebrations of others, borrowing from others, syncretism and so on. Respect for religion does not however require syncretism and can be found amongst contemporary Muslims in the West. Reporting on a recent Gallup World Poll, Dalia Mogahed and Zsolt Nyiri write of Muslims in Paris and London that their 'expectations of respect for Islam and its symbols extends to an expectation of respect for religion in general' and add that recently 'Shahid Malik, a British Muslim MP, even complained about what he called the ''policy wonks'' who wished to strip the public sphere of all Christian religious symbols''' (Mogahed and Niyiri 2007: 2). It is an attitude that the West (where mono-religion has been the historical norm) can certainly learn

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from, as I think some people of my generation realised and which is evidenced in the interest in the spiritualities of 'the East'. Respect for religion is, clearly beyond toleration but also utility for this valuing of religion and respect for the religion of others, even while not requiring participation, is based on a sense that religion is a good in itself, is a fundamental good and part of our humanity at a personal, social and civilizational level: it is an ethical good and so to be respected as a feature of human character just as we might respect truth-seeking, the cultivation of the intellect or the imagination or artistic creativity or self-discipline not just because of its utility or truth. We can think religion as a good of this sort regardless of whether one is a believer or not just as we can think music or science a good whether I am musical or scientific or not. A person, a society, a culture, a country would be poorer without it. It is part of good living and while not all can cultivate it fully, it is a good that some do and they should be honoured and supported by others.

This view is not dependent upon any kind of theism for it can be a feature of some form of ethical humanism. I think it can be justified within a philosophy of human plurality and multi-dimensionality of the kind to be found in for example R G Collingwoood's *Speculum Mentis* (1924) or Michael Oakeshott's *Experience and its Modes* (1933).

Respect for religion is, however, clearly more than respect as recognition or recognition of religious minorities, and while I am mainly concerned to argue for the latter I am open to the former, especially as I believe that respect for religion is quite common amongst religious believers (the mirror-image of Dawkins) and I worry about an intolerant secularist hegemony. There may once have been a time in Europe when a powerful, authoritarian church or churches stifled dissent, individuality, free debate, science, pluralism and so on but that is not the present danger. European cultural, intellectual and political life – the public sphere in the fullest sense of the word – is dominated by secularism and secularist networks and organisations control most of the levers of power, and so respect for religion is made difficult and seems outlandish but may be necessary as one of the sources of counter-hegemony and a more genuine pluralism. Hence, respect for religion is compatible with and may be a requirement of a democratic political culture.

I appreciate that this may seem to be, and indeed may be a form of 'privileging' religion. For in this idea that the state may wish to show respect for religion I am going beyond not just toleration and freedom of religion but also beyond civic recognition. Nor am I simply pointing to the existence of overlaps and linkages between the state and religion. The sense of 'privilege' may not however be as strong as it may seem. After all, the autonomy of politics is the privileging of the non-religious, so this is perhaps qualifying that non-secular privileging. Moreover, it is far from an exclusive privileging. States regularly 'privilege' the nation, ethnicity, science, the arts, sport, economy and so on in relation to the centrality they give it in policy-making, the public resources devoted to it or the prestige placed upon it. So, if showing respect for religion is a privileging of religion, it is of a multiplex, multilogical sort; and it is based on the recognition that the secular is already dominant in many contemporary states.

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