

Multicultural Citizenship

– options, choices and priorities

Introductory note

This is the foreword by Robin Richardson for *Still Not Easy Being British: struggles for multicultural citizenship* by Tariq Modood, published by Trentham Books in 2010. It was the follow-up to a similar book of essays by Modood on the same subject, published by Trentham Books for the Runnymede Trust almost twenty years earlier.

'P is for pig'

In the early 1990s the headteacher of a primary school in central England was aware that some of the younger pupils at his school were distressed by a pictorial display on one of the classroom walls. A is for apple, the display said, B is for ball, C is for cat, and so on through to Z – all entirely customary, traditional, dearly familiar, part of the wallpaper in every infant classroom in the land. The parents of the children who were distressed were from a conservative Muslim background in rural Pakistan and the image which distressed them was labelled P is for pig. The headteacher changed the image and the label, so that P was now for pencil instead.

Somehow, this tiny episode found its way into a national newspaper and the headteacher was vigorously ridiculed and abused. 'For too long,' said a ponderous satire in the *Sun* (12 November 1992), 'we have been teaching English in a white, middle-class, racist, sexist fashion. If we want to encourage immigrants to assimilate into our society we must help them to learn our language. For this reason the Government has decided to introduce a new alphabet tailored to the needs of Muslim pupils.' It then announced the new alphabet:

A is for Ayatollah, B is for Baghdad, C is for Curry, D is for Djabella, E is for Emir, F is for Fatwa, G is for Gaddafi, H is for Hezbollah, I is for Intifada, J is for Jihad, K is for Khomeni, L is for Lebanon. M is for Mecca, N is for Naan. O is for Onion Bhaji, P is for Palestine, Q is for Q8 [Kuwait], R is for Rushdie, S is for Saddam, T is for Tehran, U is for United Arab Emirates, V is for Vindaloo, W is for West Bank, X is for Xenophobia, Y is for Yasser Arafat, Z is for Zionist Imperialist Aggressor Running Dogs of the Great Satan. (*The Sun*, 12 November 1992)

'Islamophobia'

Almost exactly a year earlier, the word 'Islamophobia' had been used for the first time in a piece of writing by someone in Britain. (Slightly earlier uses of the word in English occurred in writings in the United States. The French word *islamophobie* had been in use since 1912.) The author was Tariq Modood, at that time an officer at the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and the occasion was a book review in *The Independent* in 1991 subsequently reprinted in Modood's compilation entitled *Not Easy Being British*, published by Trentham Books for the Runnymede Trust in 1992.

In the review itself, as also at greater length in other chapters in the compilation, Modood challenged the prevailing consensus in Britain's race equality community – race

equality councils, race equality officers and advisers in local government, the CRE itself – about the nature of racism. Race and religion are not wholly dissimilar categories, he argued, and it is frequently impossible to disentangle discrimination based on race from discrimination based on religion or belief. He popularised the understanding that racism has two principal ingredients, to do respectively with colour and culture.

Modood argued further that there needs in consequence to be a re-examination of the nature of Britishness, and of the place of religious language and symbols in public life, of majority/minority relationships, and concepts of recognition and identity. Such considerations may seem a far cry from the practicalities of wall displays in primary schools. They are deeply relevant to the field of education, however, as also to other areas of society, and can illuminate the day-to-day options, choices and priorities of, amongst others, headteachers and teachers.

Amongst individuals, the importance of *Not Easy Being British* was recognised and promoted from 1992 onwards through word-of-mouth recommendations, and it became an underground classic. Its significance was also increasingly recognised in academia. Amongst policy-makers, however, and in the race equality community, its arguments were largely ignored. Antiracists had been silent about cultural racism during *The Satanic Verses* affair in the late 1980s and continued silent on this topic through the coming years as well.

Events over the years

Key events over the years after 1992 would in due course include:

- the Runnymede Trust report on Islamophobia in 1997 and its follow-up in 2004
- the establishment of the Muslim Council of Britain in 1997
- media distortions and lies about *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (The Parekh Report) in 2000
- disturbances in northern cities in 2001 and the ensuing community cohesion agenda
- the attacks in the United States, also 2001, and the ensuing invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq
- the London bombs in 2005 and ensuing programmes to prevent violent extremism;
- attacks from left-leaning intellectuals from about 2004 onwards on multiculturalism, together with the allegation that Britain was 'sleep-walking towards segregation'
- the Danish caricatures episode in 2007
- frequent untrue stories in the media about, in a recurring phrase, political correctness gone mad, blaming Muslims for threatening traditional British values
- moral panics relating to the wearing of Islamic dress in public places

- media distortions of a modest proposal by the Archbishop of Canterbury to the effect that aspects of Islamic law should be formally recognised within UK law
- Europe-wide demonising of Islam by far-right political parties, claiming that Europe and Islam have nothing in common, and increasing support for these parties at local and national elections
- media and government attacks on the Muslim Council of Britain throughout most of the decade after 2001
- the full adoption into UK equalities legislation, towards the end of the decade, of the discrete category of 'religion or belief'.

On these and other such events and trends, Tariq Modood has continued to contribute to public debates. Partly and invaluable, his contributions have been in academic books, articles and lectures, and through the activities of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship at the University of Bristol, of which he is the founding director. Also, and equally invaluable, he has contributed through newspaper articles and the blogosphere, and through frequent appearances on radio and television. *Still Not Easy Being British: struggles for multicultural citizenship* contains a selection of these relatively non-specialist pieces.

The 'default position'

In the satire cited above, the *Sun* was playing on fears about what it saw as the increasing influence of Islam in Britain and in the wider world. In doing this, it set out the default position, so to speak, held by non-Muslims about Muslims – the 'common sense' that is widely assumed unless a conscious effort is made to question it and to replace it.

Six of the most frequent elements in the default position are these:

- a) Muslims are all much the same as each other, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, social class, geographical location and political outlook, and regardless of how observant and religiously-oriented they are, or are not.
- b) The single most important thing about a 'Muslim' is that he or she has certain religious beliefs and engages in certain religious practices, and accordingly everything a Muslim does is motivated by religion.
- c) Muslims are totally other – they have few or no interests, characteristics, needs, concerns or aspirations in common with non-Muslims, and therefore the values of Muslims and non-Muslims are incompatible with each other.
- d) Muslims are culturally, intellectually, politically and morally inferior to non-Muslims – quick to take offence, prone to irrationality and violence, hypocritical in the practice of their religion – and in consequence do not possess any relevant and valuable insights, perspectives and achievements from which non-Muslims may learn and benefit.
- e) Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims – globally, they may attack non-Muslim countries, as on 9/11, and are a threat to the existence of Israel, and within non-Muslim countries they are a treacherous and disloyal fifth column or enemy within.

- f) As a consequence of the previous five perceptions, there is no possibility of cooperation and partnership between 'them' and 'us', Muslims and non-Muslims, working as equals on tasks which require mediation, negotiation, compromise and partnership.

Weak and vulnerable

The *Sun* combined its attack on Islam with an attack on a particular non-Muslim individual, a primary school headteacher who did not understand, in the paper's view, the grave threats that Islam poses for British society and how weak, vulnerable and unsure of itself Britain has become.

If even primary school headteachers do not grasp the seriousness of the situation we're all in, the *Sun* appeared to be saying, what hope is there for the rest of us? Frequently it happens that moral panics about Muslims in the modern media are combined in this way with panics about the competence and reliability of non-Muslim authority figures, for example headteachers, and non-Muslim administrators and politicians. The effect may be to intimidate and demoralise them, and to undermine their confidence. The writings of Tariq Modood can help to stiffen their resolve, however, and help them to keep their heads and their hearts at difficult times.

Anxieties about the competence and reliability of non-Muslim authority figures have their origins in widespread social change, not primarily or essentially in multiculturalism, and certainly not in Islam. The problem is not in the first instance to do with differences of culture, religion, ideology or civilisation. Rather, it is to do with conflicts of material interest. Globally, the key conflicts are around power, influence, territory and resources, particularly oil. Within urban areas in Europe they are around employment, housing, health and education. Such conflicts between and within countries become 'religionised' or 'culturalised' – each side celebrates and idealises its own traditions and cultural heritage, including religion, and disparages and demonises the traditions of the other.

Further, and even more importantly, the attacks in America on 9/11 were a vivid reminder that the governments of nation states – even of extremely powerful nation states – are no longer able to guarantee the security of their citizens. At the same time they cannot control, to the extent they did in the past, economic, cultural and ecological borders. The resulting insecurities lead to scapegoating and moral panics, with Muslims and other minorities as convenient enemies and targets, but not as the principal causes. Similarly authority figures such as primary school headteachers are convenient targets and scapegoats, not the real culprits. Considerations such as these can help maintain a sense of proportion.

Equalities legislation

In the coming years, as the Equality Act 2010 takes effect in Britain, there will be increasing awareness of 'religion or belief' as a protected characteristic in the new legislation. In this connection too, clear thinking and a robust sense of proportion will be vital. 'The law will protect the believer,' observed the Equality and Human Rights Commission in its briefings for the Equality Bill committee stages in the House of Lords in 2009, 'not the belief.' But as Tariq Modood shows at length in his many publications, religion is not only a belief system, something that an individual chooses to adopt or to reject.

Religion is also a broad cultural tradition, something that an individual is born into and on the basis of which they may be discriminated against, or be the target of a hate crime, regardless of whether they are 'believers'. In relation to challenging hostility and discrimination on grounds of religion, this latter understanding of religion is frequently the more relevant. This is well known in Northern Ireland, for example, and in many other parts of the world, including the Balkans, Lebanon, Nigeria and South Asia. It is reflected in terms such as 'nominal Christian' and 'secular Jew', and in similar distinctions in other traditions.

A key concept in equalities legislation is that of reasonable accommodation. At all times and in all places human beings make adjustments to their practices, customs and policies in order to accommodate a range of interests, needs and concerns. They typically do this through processes of discussion, dialogue, negotiation and compromise – namely by saying, in the words of the Hebrew scriptures, 'come now, let us reason together'. They engage with each other, that is to say, in a spirit of good will rather than with the use or threats of coercion and brute power. The root syllable of the word accommodation appears also in 'moderate' and 'modest' – the concern is to devise systems that are *good enough*, not totally perfect, and not making a great fuss or drawing attention to themselves.

'A great civilisation worthy of being argued with'

In the preface written for Tariq Modood's 1992 compilation there was a quotation from a then recent article by the journalist Peregrine Worsthorne. He had claimed Islam was 'once a great civilisation worthy of being argued with' but had now 'degenerated into a primitive enemy fit only to be sensitively subjugated' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 3 February 1991). It is interesting that Worsthorne made two distinctions in this claim, the one to do with perception ('great civilisation'/'primitive enemy') and the other to do with forms of thinking and relating ('argued with'/'subjugated'.)

To see an individual or a group or a civilisation as 'worthy of being argued with' is necessarily to be open-minded towards them. The hallmarks of open-mindedness include:

- readiness to change one's views, both of others and of oneself, in the light of new facts and evidence
- not deliberately distorting, or recklessly over-simplifying, incontestable facts
- not caricaturing the views of people with whom one disagrees
- not over-generalising
- not using double standards when comparing and contrasting others with oneself
- seeing difference and disagreement as a resource for understanding more about oneself, not as a threat
- seeking to understand other people's views and standpoints in their own terms, and recognising where they are coming from – the narratives and stories with which they interpret events
- not claiming greater certainty than is warranted

- seeking consensus or, at least, a *modus vivendi* which keeps channels of communication open and permits all to maintain dignity.

These features of the open mind characterise, and indeed distinguish, the writings of Tariq Modood. They are also likely to be strengthened and emboldened amongst all those who read him.
