

Equality for Minority Faiths? Reflections on the Commission on Religion in British Public Life

Tariq Modood



A good way to approach the CORAB is through the argument that Britain consists of a Christian legacy, new faiths and the non-religious.¹ More specifically, that current debates about multiculturalism in relation to religion can I think be seen in terms of three contending forces,² which may be expressed in the contentions that Britain's public institutions and national identity should reflect that it is:

in terms of three contending forces,² which may be expressed in the contentions that Britain's public institutions and national identity should reflect that it is:

- i) Still predominantly a Christian country*
- ii) Now a multi-faith country*
- iii) Mainly a secular country.*

Approaching this demographically, according to the Census the number of people who identified themselves as Christian in England and Wales declined from 71% to 58% between 2001-2011 (p. 86).³ While, the Censuses are of the full population they are a relatively superficial measure of identification. In this regard it is best to supplement the Census with the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey findings, which is what CORAB does. The BSA, which includes Scotland, only has a sample of 3,000 but it is a systematic purposive attitudes survey and has been measuring religious attitudes annually since 1984. It shows that Christian identification has gone down from 68% in

1984 to 43% in 2014 (p. 16). This shows a steeper drop than the Census and so we might suppose that Christian identification has different meanings in different contexts and/or the true picture is somewhere between the two figures. The BSA offers data by Christian denominations and shows that during 1984 – 2014 the numbers identifying as Anglicans declined from 40% to 17%; and Catholics from 10% to 8%. Other Christians remain steady at about 18% of the British population. While there has been a decline in older Protestant churches such as Methodists and Baptists, there has been a growth in newer churches such as Pentecostals and Seventh Day Adventists, many of which are black majority-led. The findings are, then, that Christians are barely or not at all a majority in England and Wales, and Anglicans are no longer a majority amongst Christians; though of course Anglican is an elastic identity, as indeed is 'Christian' itself, as comparing the Census and the BSA shows. Yet Anglicanism does seem to have suffered a particularly steep decline.

On the other hand, those who say they have no religion have gone up from 15% to 25% between the 2001 and 2011 Census (p. 86); and in the BSA from just under a third in 1984 to almost half in 2014 (p. 16) – the two datasets being more discrepant on this point than on Christians. The key point is that both datasets show the same trend and strongly suggest that it is not short-term.

As for religions other than Christianity, the BSA sample sizes are too small to be useful but the 2001 and

2011 Censuses show that significant number of non-Christian religious minorities are to be found in all the major cities and towns and doubled in size over that decade, comprising nearly 10% of England and Wales in 2011.⁴ Being younger and having larger families, they will continue to grow. For example, while Muslims are about 5% of the population, they are 8% of those under 25. While Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and Muslims are about 12% of 9-13 year olds (three quarters being Muslims) they are double this proportion in London.

The New Religious Diversity and Significance of Religion

While for some right-wing newspaper commentators and editorials the big story of the Commission allegedly was one of Christian marginalisation and secular majoritarianism, my interest here is in the third point of the triangular relationship, namely, the minority faiths.⁵

While each new generation across the last century seems to be less Christian than its predecessor and so few young people today deem Christianity to be important to their life, this generational indifference is much less amongst post-immigrant groups. Indeed, amongst ethnic minorities expressions of commitment amongst the young can be exceptionally high: more than a third of Indians, and two-thirds of Pakistani and Bangladeshi 16–34-year-olds said in a national survey at the end of the twentieth century that religion was very important to how they led their lives compared to a fifth of Caribbeans and 5 per cent of whites.⁶ In the case of young Muslims, the importance of religion has been rising and overtaking their elders (GfK NOP 2006; see also Mirza et al 2007).⁷

Beyond that, religion has a social importance for minorities. In South Asia, from where the majority of British Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims originate, religious identity has a salience much higher than in Britain, so it is not surprising that during the last few decades religion – rather than say colour or linguistic heritage or national origins – has risen in the individual and community self-identities of these minorities together with their sense of Britishness.⁸ Of course groups are partly defined by not what they say they are but what others – usually a dominant group – says they are.

British society, as it happens, has been very receptive to ethnic minority self-definitions and re-definitions. For example, when West Indians said they were African-Caribbean; when non-whites said they were not ‘coloured’ but blacks; when Asians said they were not ‘black’; ethnic minority collective self-projections quickly altered public discourses and prevailed over older nomenclature. So, similarly, when ethnic minority groups such as Pakistanis started dismissing ‘Pakistani’ and ‘Asian’ for themselves in preference for ‘Muslim’, the wider British public, especially the media and public organisations, fell in line. This does not necessarily refer to religiosity but is a recent manifestation of the well-known phenomenon that Jews generally and Catholics in locations like Northern Ireland can call themselves and can be called by others as Jews and Catholics respectively even if they are not religious and may even be anti-religious. We are here clearly talking about group identity or ethno-religious community membership not belief.⁹

“British society, as it happens, has been very receptive to ethnic minority self-definitions and re-definitions.”

Of course, as indicated above, what minorities are usually unable to do is to control the meaning of terms. This again is most evident in the recent period, especially after 9/11 and in Britain especially after the July 2005 bombings in London (‘7/7’), in relation to Muslims and Muslim identity or public discourses of Islam. Muslims may have demanded recognition qua Muslims and may have propelled that identity into public discourse and popular consciousness but very few Muslims have sought to have ‘Muslim’ mean fanatic, fundamentalist, misogynist, separatist or terrorist but anyone familiar with current affairs and how it is reported in the British media knows that this is what to many ‘Muslim’ currently connotes in Britain.¹⁰ This stereotyping of Muslims, part of the phenomenon generally called Islamophobia can be understood as ‘racialisation’. Not simply because that is what happens to groups designated as ‘races’, nor even because non-whiteness is closely associated with being a Muslim¹¹ but because it is to treat Muslims as if they were a single, racial or quasi-racial group. The dissonance that one might experience here

in accepting the idea that a religious group is a 'race' can be eased by considering the general case of how the Jews have been racialized (indeed in continental Europe the Jews are the [quintessential](#) race), as well as the specific case of Catholics in Northern Ireland or Muslims in the 'ethnic cleansing' rampages in the former Yugoslavia.¹² In this regard it is worth noting that the CMEB recommendation that discrimination on grounds of religion or belief should be outlawed (quoted above) began to be fulfilled from 2003 onwards; initially only in relation to employment, following an EU directive, later also covering services and was fully implemented in the Equality Act, 2010. In that Act, religion or belief as a ground for discrimination was put on a par with all other grounds for discrimination in the strongest anti-discrimination legislation in Europe. The CORAB was very mindful of the phenomenon of religious discrimination and of how it was often based on a racialized view of religion and intertwined with racial discrimination, suggesting that the term 'ethno-religious' – a legal concept in Australia – captures an aspect of this (para 2.5). It did make a recommendation for the law to better understand this intertwining (paras 8.18-8.21) but in the light of the 2010 Act there was much less scope for it to make recommendations in relation to discrimination than might be the case in many other countries.

It should be clear from the above that the meaning of religion can vary between religions, in particular between Christians and non-Christians, or between being a member of a majority or a minority religion: for Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs religion is not just about belief but also sometimes primarily about community and cultural heritage or identity, including resisting stereotypes about one's own community or discriminatory treatment. Yet another way in which religion is not just about belief is that it often requires a public performance or a behaviour e.g., in relation to codes of

"religion is not just about belief but also sometimes primarily about community and cultural heritage or identity, including resisting stereotypes about one's own community or discriminatory treatment."

dress or food, and so is much more publicly visible and sometimes requires institutional adaptation in order to be accommodated.¹³ While this is barely a feature of modern, especially Protestant, Christianity, where 'inner belief' can be considered sufficient and it is often deemed unnecessary, perhaps even inappropriate to display markers, even a cross, of one's faith, this is quite exceptional in global, and now British, terms. Most religions require the observance of rules of piety and Britain is experiencing such practice-based religions re-entering the public space – Muslim dress being the most visible and contentious – after quite a long period in which such religion has been eroded away or transformed into private belief. Institutions and areas of public life which have given up the need to accommodate Christians are now having to adjust to the needs of minority faiths, and sometimes stimulating Christian reappraisal of its retreat from public piety (eg, the display of a wearer's cross, as in the Eweida case at ECHR). Dietary requirements, space for worship, and gender relations, besides dress, are also prominent as elements of religious praxis that institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons, and even workplaces are being asked to adjust to. Adaptations of codes of dress or uniforms, or provision of vegan, vegetarian, kosher and halal meals, places for worship and time off to use them are the kinds of requests being made upon state institutions, universities, employers and so even when no parallel provision exists for Christians and is not being requested for by Christians. This praxis-based accommodation is a significant multiculturalist challenge because it is not simply a matter of granting minorities provisions already enjoyed by the majority but a matter of respecting minority religions in ways that Christians may be indifferent too in relation to their own faith. And of course it is not just a symbolic recognition that is being requested as substantive provisions or institutional changes are sometimes necessary.

The net result of what I have been describing in this section is that minority religions have come to have a significant – even if contested – public presence.¹⁴ Public campaigns for inclusion and equality, conflicts over faith schools, women's dress and gender more generally, not to mention all the issues to do with the 'war on terrorism' and Islamist radicalism, has made religion much more politically prominent and in pub-

lic affairs generally. Public dialogue, representation and leadership is often sought and realised by those who define themselves in terms of religious community organisations.

Whilst these are some of the reasons, in which religion has become more publicly salient and in which the meaning of religion has changed and so some appropriate public learning is required. It has also to be acknowledged that most people are losing touch with their own religious heritage, let alone understanding the new significance and variety of religion. At this juncture of simultaneous growth in ignorance about religions and their rising public, political, international and geo-strategic importance CORAB makes one of its central recommendations. Namely that there is a substantial need for raising the level of religion and belief literacy amongst the public, journalists, policy-makers and various kinds of professionals (p.9). The suggestion that the low level of public understanding of religion is a problem and needs to be remedied is not new to CORAB.¹⁵ What I believe is distinctive about CORAB is the understanding of religion that it is said greater literacy is needed of. Namely, religion which is extended to include secular belief systems; yet which is not reducible to belief for it includes pious practice, as for example, in relation to dress; which is a community or ethnic identity, especially for minorities; and which is intertwined with racism such as in the case of anti-Semitism or Islamophobic racializing of Muslims as an 'Other'. This complex, multi-dimensional understanding of religion, the lack of literacy in which is a serious problem of public life, is a thread across the report and is fundamental in the report's discussions of law, the media, education, social action and dialogue. Just as CORAB's generalisation of the legal concept of 'religion or belief' has extended religion in one direction, so the ideas of praxis, racialisation and identity in the concept of 'ethno-religious' has extended it in another. Moreover, religious literacy is required across society and especially by opinion-formers and policy-shapers and implementers because religion in this extended sense has something to contribute to the common good. But this is not a crudely pro-religion view. Nor just because secular beliefs and ethno-religious communities are folded into it. CORAB recognises that religion as 'a public good', but also as 'a public bad', and so for both

these reasons governments have a legitimate and indeed a necessary interest in it (para 2.6).¹⁶

In CORAB, then, there is a thinking about the nature of multiculturalism in a changing context. In particular with how religion and not just colour becomes the marker of minority-status and of otherness. Most importantly it is about the interaction of race/ethnicity and religion in the 'ethno-religious', which when combined with an extensive concept of 'religion and belief' displays in the British context a reworked concept of religion. At the same time there is an affirmation in an evolving, plural, British national identity; one which cannot be taken for granted but must be revisited as a work in progress. If the Commission on Multi-Ethnic Britain (CMEB, aka Parekh Report) is perhaps one of the most forceful statements of that view, a more balanced position is offered in CORAB. Perhaps CORAB was merely trying to state the message of the CMEB more clearly and avoid the brickbats received by the latter. If CMEB was interpreted as over-emphasising the deconstructive attitude towards received notions of national identity, CORAB was careful to project a more constructive tone. I think that is a distinctive aspect of CORAB, together with the endeavour to indicate a balanced, inter-twined and evolving relationship between the Christian, the secular and the minority faiths through an (implicit) affirmation of the existing moderate secularism with an established church but more specifically through an extended concept of 'religion and belief' and, what I have been looking at here, an extended concept of the 'ethno-religious'.

"minority religions have come to have a significant – even if contested – public presence."

Tariq Modood is Professor of Sociology, Politics and Public Policy at the University of Bristol, founding Director of the university's Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship and founding editor of the journal *Ethnicities*. He served on the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life and was one of the organisers of the Zutshi-Smith Symposium.

Citation

To cite this article, please use the following: Modood, Tariq. (2017) 'Equality for Minority Faiths? Reflections on the Commission on Religion in British Public Life, *Public Spirit* (February, 2017: <http://www.publicspirit.org.uk/?p=4705&preview=true>)

¹ Weller, Paul. *Time for a change: Reconfiguring religion, state and society*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005: 117.

² Modood, 'Crisis of Secularism'.

³ A religion question was only introduced in 2001 and so there is no earlier Census data on this. There is less diversity in Scotland, though a higher proportion are non-religious. In N.Ireland, Christian affiliation is much higher (with Protestants and Catholics about 40% each).

⁴ Or 7.4% of the UK population, consisting of Muslims (4.8%), Hindus (1.5%), Sikhs (0.8%), Jews (0.5%) and others (0.8%), and double these proportions in many urban areas.

⁵ The reception of the report included some anger in certain Christian quarters, who interpreted it as anti-Christian and a secularist hollowing out of a Christian legacy and especially objected to the proposal to end compulsory Christian worship in all schools. This point of view was reflected in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *Spectator*. More favourable were the centrist/mainstream responses, as in *The Times*, *Independent* and *Guardian* and the BBC, who saw it as appropriately recognising the growth of non-religion as well as diversity.

⁶ Modood, Tariq, Richard Berthoud, Jane Lakey, James Nazroo, Patten Smith, Satnam Virdee, and Sharon Beishon. *Ethnic minorities in Britain: diversity and disadvantage*. No. 843. Policy Studies Institute, 1997.

⁷ GfK, N. O. P. "Social Research,(2006) Attitudes to Living in Britain—A Survey of Muslim Opinion."; see also Mirza, Munira, Abi Senthilkumaran, and Zein Ja'far. "Living apart together." *Policy Exchange* (2007).

⁸ It is doubtful for example that most South Asians in Britain ever thought of themselves in terms of colour identities such as black or brown as much as some observers thought to be the case (Modood 1994, Modood et al 1997: 291-297). In relation to Britishness see Modood et al 1997: 338-331, and Heath and Demireva 2014.

⁹ Modood, Tariq. "Anti-Essentialism, Multiculturalism and the Recognition' of Religious Groups." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 6 (1998): 378-399. Of course historically speaking it could be said that the Jews were a people who had a religion (which came to be called Judaism) rather than a religious group; the same could perhaps be said of Hindus and Hinduism. The term 'ethnoreligious' here is therefore most apt.

¹⁰ Morey, Peter, and Amina Yaqin. *Framing Muslims*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹¹ That 'Muslim' is racially coded (as colour, cultural alienness and not being European) in the way the CMEB argued Britishness is racially coded as whiteness.

¹² Modood, Multicultural Politics; Meer, Nasar, and Tariq Modood. "Refutations of racism in the 'Muslim question'." *Patterns of prejudice* 43.3-4 (2009): 335-354. Note however the point made in footnote 54. Jews may be considered as a racialized religious group or as a religionised ethnic group or 'nation'.

¹³ Tariq Modood, 'Religion in Britain Today and Tomorrow', *Public Spirit*, 26 January, 2015 <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2015/01/29/religion-in-britain-today-and-tomorrow>; cf. Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, *London Youth, Religion, and Politics: Engagement and Activism from Brixton to Brick Lane*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. It is often said of some religions, for example, Judaism and Hinduism, that they do not really have (many) core beliefs but are lived out and transmitted through core practices. This relates to the limitations of the word 'religion' as alluded to in footnote 54.

¹⁴ Modood, 'Multicultural Politics'; Dinham, Adam, and Vivien Lowndes. "Faith in the public realm." *Faith in the public realm: Controversies, policies and practices* (2009): 1-20.

¹⁵ Dinham, Adam, and Matthew Francis, eds. *Religious literacy in policy and practice*. Policy Press, 2015.

¹⁶ Modood, Tariq. "Moderate secularism, religion as identity and respect for religion." *The Political Quarterly* 81.1 (2010): 4-14; as applied to the role of universities, see: Tariq Modood and Craig Calhoun, *Religion in Britain: Challenges for Higher Education*, Stimulus Paper, London: Leadership Foundation in Higher Education, 2015.