

## Interview – Tariq Modood

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Tariq Modood

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JAN 17 2021

Professor Tariq Modood is the founding Director of the Bristol University Research Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship. He has held numerous grants, consultancies, and written many publications on political philosophy, sociology and public policy. He is the co-founding editor of the international journal *Ethnicities* and his work is frequently cited by policymakers and practitioners. Prof. Modood has served in various capacities in public policy, including being an Adviser to the Muslim Council of Britain. He was elected as a Fellow of the British Academy in 2017 and is currently a Visiting Fellow at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor. Over the last 25 years he has worked on: theory and politics of racism, racial equality, multiculturalism and secularism, with especial reference to British Asian Muslims; ethnic identities, national identities and the 'second generation'; ethnic disadvantage and progress in employment and education; comparisons within and between Western Europe and North America; the politics of being Muslim in the West. The topics he is currently most focused on are the political theory and sociology of multiculturalism, interculturalism, and secularism.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

There are two significant changes that have very much influenced my thinking about multiculturalism in a country like Britain. Firstly, it's the emergence of religion or religious identity as very important to some minority groups, especially groups of South Asian origin (e.g. Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims) like my own family. If you look at theories of multiculturalism, as they emerged in the 1980s, they actually didn't have very much to say about religion. It was assumed that multiculturalism was more about race, ethnicity, and related culture – the latter keeping religion more or less in the margins. I also think that politically, very few politicians wanted religion to have the profile and centrality that it has come to have in what one might call majority-minority relations in Western Europe but perhaps also in other parts of the world, like Canada which in many ways has started off the idea of state multiculturalism.

I started working on these issues of racial equality, ethnic minorities, and identities; I, too, wasn't expecting religion to come to have the salience that it did. Everything shifted for me in relation to a particular controversy, namely on the novel by Salman Rushdie called *The Satanic Verses* which was published in late 1988. There was a lot of anger from some Muslims, demonstrations, and a lot of controversy both in Britain and internationally. It made me realize how important Muslim identity was to Muslims and that multiculturalism would have to take that on board.

The second shift for me is that prior to the importance of religion was the importance of identity. This goes back to the new social movements of the 1960s and 70s which include feminism, gay pride, and – especially coming from the US – the struggle for Black dignity. I was very influenced by that and by political theorists like Bhikhu Parekh, Charles Taylor, and Iris Marion Young in thinking about these issues of identity as issues that were not reducible to the more classical arguments about equality which tended to have an economic character. Identity seemed to be something that people valued for itself, not because of its relation to economic equality, for instance. When I read the book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* by American political theorist Iris Marion Young in particular, I realized that these identities were identities that people should be able to assert into the general politics of their country. They weren't simply for what one might call one's own community, they were identities that were part of arguments about equality. It's because if people didn't respect that identity of yours that was important to you and that identity historically had been the basis for racism or inferiorization, they weren't really respecting you as an equal citizen.

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Those are the two important changes and shifts in the world for me: the emphasis both from politics and from theorists on minorities being able to assert their identity in the public space and secondly, what I saw as a Muslim assertiveness which indicated to me that religion and religious identity had to be central to multiculturalism.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

One of the frontiers of multiculturalism has to do with the place of religion in public life. This connects us to the topic of political secularism. I don't interpret secularism to mean a complete separation of church and state or of religion and politics. But, clearly, secularism assumes there are two modes of authority – religion and politics – and that political authority, reasoning, and purposes, have some kind of autonomy and independent character of their own and are not reducible to—or should not be governed by—religious authority. That kind of secularism is a very common idea and political practice in so many parts of the world, as long as we don't assume that it means an absolute separation of church and state because that hardly exists anywhere. The relationship between religion, especially minority religious identities, and political secularism is one of the exciting areas for me.

Another exciting area is that over some years, I've come to the view that multiculturalism should not be taken to be an absolute, one and only mode of integration or mode of minority-majority relations. Perhaps depending on the context and sphere of activity (e.g. work place, schools, hospitals, universities, the parliament), different modes of integration should be considered and worked in combination with each other. This is related to a project I'm currently working on entitled PLURISPACE where we're looking at four different -isms together: multiculturalism, interculturalism, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism. We're looking at them together to see if we can come up with ways that they either already overlap or could be made complementary, therefore possibly have a new normative perspective on issues of integration and minorities or 'difference'. We wanted to both come up with a normative theory or perspective and a basis for looking at four countries (Britain, Spain, France, and Norway) to see to what extent one or more of these -isms is present in either government policy or in civil society activism—the latter perhaps in the aspirations of ethnic minority associations and activists.

The third area of exciting research is a little bit difficult for me, which is the fact that multiculturalism has standardly been focused on the rights of minorities or the recognition of minority identities. But what exactly should multiculturalism take the position of the majority to be? It is difficult to disentangle what we might call majority culture or cultures from the national identity. Nevertheless, I think we have to have some kind of view about the place of the majority in multiculturalism. It's not something I've made a lot of progress on because it's quite a difficult question. I don't see other people having made a lot of progress on it either except for those people who are very anti-multiculturalist because for them, the idea of protecting the majority culture is actually something that forms the basis of rejecting multiculturalism. I think they're entirely wrong to do that and I want to find a multiculturalist view about the majority.

The last thing I'll mention, which I also find difficult, is that the issues I have been talking about are often talked about as those of recognition. The more standard issues of politics, especially where class is a central feature of a society and of political conflict or negotiation, talks about the redistribution of wealth through the state (e.g. collecting taxes, spending money on welfare and the poor). So, a lot of people like Nancy Fraser, for instance, have tried to have a theory of recognition and redistribution as one integrated political theory or project. I'm not particularly satisfied with what she had to say about recognition because to me there's not enough multiculturalism in her view. But I do feel the challenge of relating issues of identity equality (e.g., anti-racism, feminism) with economic equality or what's called redistribution. These are the four exciting but difficult areas for research and thinking.

### **In your most recent book, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism*, you discussed the relationship between secularism and multiculturalism. Can you tell us more about this relationship and its nuances? Is secularism compatible with a multicultural society?**

As I began to consider that religious identity really had to be included together with ethno-racial and ethno-cultural identities in multiculturalism, I saw that this posed a challenge for those people who believe that religion should be a private matter—that it shouldn't be to do with politics or public life, and that the state shouldn't support one religion or

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interfere in another. This is, broadly speaking, what we call secularism. I realized there was a challenge and I began with Britain, as I do in all my work. I thought that we already have religion in the public sphere to a much larger extent than many secularists, intellectuals, and theorists, seem to think we do or maybe they would like to have. That was a positive piece of understanding for me because if that's the case, then those people who say that multiculturalism isn't possible because it conflicts with secularism— that religion has to be kept out of politics—are quite wrong; they may not want religion to be in politics, but they can't say that the problem with Muslims is that they want to bring religion into politics when a country like Britain, regardless of Muslims, already has religion connected to politics in all kinds of ways. We have an established church, bishops of the Church of England sitting in the House of Lords, and massive state funding of religious schools. All these things are actually not peculiar to Britain, they're to be found in one form or another in most countries of the European Union. I thought that this was a positive finding; it means that I can now try to create a space for multiculturalism in the actually existing secularist arrangements as opposed to some abstract ideal of secularism. I call these existing arrangements, at least in Western Europe, moderate secularism.

Moderate secularism and multiculturalism seemed generally compatible without any fundamental difficulties. The question then was how to include the minority faiths like Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists into a Christian-dominated secularist public sphere arrangement dominated either by a Christian legacy or secular perspectives. Therefore, this is a vindication of the idea that multiculturalism and secularism were complementary. I could see that if you were committed to hard secularism—what I call radical secularism and which I think is exemplified by aspects of *laïcité* in France—then multiculturalism could be a problem for you. Yes, radical secularism and multiculturalism are probably incompatible; you have to choose or make some compromises between the two. But multiculturalism and moderate secularism—the secularism of Western Europe and beyond—are compatible.

### **Why do you think secular institutions should accommodate religious diversity?**

Multiculturalism is based on the idea of equal citizenship, a citizenship which is not a culturally privatized citizenship or just a civic culture. I think that there are much thicker national cultures that politics, including our ideas of citizenship and national identity, connect with, shape, and are shaped by (so they mutually shape each other). If this is the case, then equal citizenship for minorities means allowing them to bring their cultural and religious identities into dialogue with and a synthetic relationship with the existing national culture/s. I think that this project of widening our public understanding of religion from a form of Christianity to a much more multi-faith situation is essential to our equal citizenship.

It's not just about recognition and national identity, it has to be carried through into policy, institutional change, and accommodation. Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs should be able to feel at home in schools, hospitals, workplaces, and in participation in the civic and political life of the country; they should not feel that just because they are Muslims, they are somehow second-class citizens and that only Christianity has a presence in deciding how public life is formed. For example, how public ceremonies take place and which days of the calendar are public holidays like Christmas and Easter. What about Eid and Diwali? That's why I think multiculturalism means that religious minorities have to have their presence and needs accommodated by the institutions of civil society and the state.

### **What are the common points of friction in the debates about free speech and the respect for religious and cultural sensibilities? How can governments intervene to reduce the risk of conflict?**

We have various kinds of limits on free speech. I think that most people value free speech, I certainly do; but at the same time, most people, if not everybody, recognize that there are and ought to be some actual limits to free speech. For instance, we have legislation against incitement to racial hatred, racist speech, cartoons and images and so on. Most people now accept that, but an area of controversy is where one says that the same should apply to religious minorities because they shouldn't have to put up with incitement to hatred and aggressive speech which, too, can take a form of racism. You can have racism against Muslims parallel to racism against Jewish people or any other racialized group.

Some people define free speech as being able to say what you like about other people's religion. I began by talking

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about *The Satanic Verses*, the Danish cartoons, and then last year, a reminder of the Charlie Hebdo affair. We know from so many controversies that have taken place over the last years that some groups of people, like Muslims especially, can get very angry when some kinds of satire and aggressive speech is directed at them and in particular, where the Prophet Mohammad is involved. I think we do need some legislation here just as we have for race, but I am mindful that many of these controversies can't be controlled just by the law; maybe the very extreme elements can, but most of it can't. That is certainly true for the case of *The Satanic Verses*.

I suggest that where we think the law is of limited use or is potentially restrictive of free speech, unintentionally it risks limiting free speech. We should exercise censure—not censorship—against what we think is demeaning of other people's religious identities and faith just as we do when we call out something for being racist or sexist. I think that we do need to have some law, but we can take a more "free speech approach" to lawmaking if we combine it with censure especially with those people in leadership positions, with political authority, and who are public personalities. Then, the law won't be quite so necessary because the minorities will feel that some people are speaking up and recognizing that they are hurt and that their dignity is being attacked. I think this is really what has happened in relation to anti-black racism, forms of sexism, and homophobia; most of it is not controlled by law, but it's strongly controlled by public censure—what we might call the norms of public speech. I think that is the way to handle these controversies related to religion in general and specifically, Muslims.

### **What is the ideal role of political satire in a tolerant and democratic society? What are its limits?**

Satire should be used to criticize or draw attention to abuse of power, excessive power, or forms of oppression. Most satire is directed at politicians, government, and powerful people; it makes very good sense, and it's a very good feature of a democratic life where that is part of the democratic culture. But, when the same tools of satire are directed at minorities—a people who are not powerful—I think that's the wrong kind of satire. This offensiveness against minorities is more like racism than it is like political satire or political critique. I would make this fundamental distinction between satirising the powerful and satirising the powerless. In any case, I would say that any satirist or editor publishing satire should have some social responsibility about what effect their satire would have. This goes back to my previous point on the importance of censure and public norms directed to not attacking the dignity of minority groups or powerless groups in general.

### **In an article you wrote a decade ago, you described a shift taking place from a multiculturalism of hope to a multiculturalism of fear. Where do we stand at present?**

I think that there is a lot of fear and related to that, distrust. One of the sources are issues to do with security which then ties up with aspects of international relations. A lot of people say that this multiculturalism of fear or the death of multiculturalism happened because of 9/11. It was when people said, "Look, it's not just about respecting minority groups, some minority groups want to blow us all up. They hate our way of life, they want to take over" and so on—that is definitely a multiculturalism of fear.

What are the sources of hope? Well, a lot of minorities—meaning people of recent migration streams—in countries like Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and the US actually want to be a part of those countries. They want to be German, Canadian, or British, and so on. This was during the 1970s or 80s which a lot of British anti-racists assumed was impossible. They thought that ethnic minorities would not be accepted as British and they wouldn't want to try to be British, that they would be positioned as the intruder within the nation and not of the nation. But I think here is a sign of optimism because most white British people actually do accept ethnic minorities as British; they don't think that in order to be British, you have to be white or Christian or hide your religion. This is a very positive development.

Related to that is the idea that there are different ways of being British, American, French and so on. The Americans introduced the term 'hyphenated nationality or identity' (e.g. Black American, Irish American) to describe this and the idea has caught on in Britain as well. A lot of people say that they are British Indians or Black British and some say they are Scottish and British, or Welsh and British. We're able to remake our sense of national belonging by adding some other important salient identity and making that connected to or part of a shared nationality. I think that's

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another positive development and we've been moving in that direction so those are some sources of hope.

I also think that when you look at political activism, we do go through periods of apathy. However, on the whole and certainly in these past few months with Black Lives Matter, the issues we've been discussing here actually attracted a lot of passion, commitment, and desire to be politically engaged. That in itself is a sign of hope, but what's particularly hopeful is that it's taking a multi-ethnic form. Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US and in the UK took a multi-ethnic character and lots of white people were part of these protests and organizations. Those are some of the factors that go to make up a multiculturalism of hope.

### **What's the most important advice you could give to young scholars?**

One piece of advice is that people should want their work to matter beyond academia. This sometimes takes time, it's not something you can make happen straight away. The aspiration to be relevant to public life, political controversies, and movements like multiculturalism and anti-racism has been very important to me personally and I try to encourage that in my PhD students and my postdocs. Relatedly but somehow independently of that, I place a high premium on clarity of expression—writing in a way as clearly as we can because that makes our writing more accessible to more people, especially people beyond our own narrow specializations. I would advise that if you want to have any kind of influence in life beyond academia, then certainly you have to be able to write in a non-technical and non-jargonistic way.

My third piece of advice would be to not be afraid to use your own experience and insights to try out ideas in your scientific and theoretical work. Certainly, my own experience of a boy growing up in Britain of Pakistani-Muslim background and family has influenced my work a lot; it's pretty apparent to most people who know it that that experience informs my work. I'd offer that advice to others as well but with one important qualification: don't reduce yourself or your work to a single identity (like woman, black, Muslim). Think about yourself in a more rounded way. Some people would talk about intersectionality as the connection of different kinds of identities and positionalities and that would be relevant here. Don't simply push one identity such that the others—which may actually be important to you—are kind of theorized away in the way that you do your work. Be aware of that risk and try to avoid it.

Finally, I don't know if everyone would want this advice but at least it's been true for me, a very important feature of my work and its public engagement has been to be a bridge between different identities (e.g. Muslim and British, religious people and social scientists). I think it's important where groups don't speak the same language, metaphorically and literally [using the same concepts and having the same sensibilities], to help them relate to each other if you find yourself straddling both sides of that bridge, those identities, and social locations. One of the things central to my work is how I've tried to bring in and highlight the concerns and well-being of British Muslims and the concerns and well-being of the rest of British society into some kind of connection with one another so that they're not threatening each other but instead, are in conversation with one another and hopefully finding common ground.