

Prioritizing freedoms: British multiculturalism, British Pakistanis and inclination towards religious over cultural freedom

Abstract:

This paper consists of an analysis of the cleavage created between religious and cultural freedom in the UK. The author argues that clearly since the 2001 Census, but perhaps since much earlier, Britain has been slowly but steadily increasingly shifting the focus on religious rather than cultural freedom and this has led to very significant consequences among minority groups, but in particular South Asian Muslims, keener to self-ascribe themselves more along religious than cultural lines. If by cultural and religious freedom we do not only mean the protection of one's such identities, but also the creation of circumstances according to which they can thrive, the author argues that Britain nowadays has grown into a habitat much more conducive to religious rather than cultural freedom. The essay argues that technical and pragmatic factors have contributed to this multicultural intensification towards the defence of religious rather than cultural pluralism, and it tries to outline some possible causes and consequences of such a shift. The author will use policy examples as well as

anecdotal evidence from a number of fieldwork experiences among British Pakistanis between 2001 and 2008.

Introduction

This paper aims at looking at the pragmatic effects of Multiculturalism on the articulation of Muslim identity (to be understood in the realm of religious freedom) in Britain, relying on a specific case study, the one of British Pakistanis. In this essay the notion of freedom is tackled from the point of view that sees it as the protection of one religious and cultural identity, but also as the creation of circumstances according to which they can thrive.

This essay is structured around three main arguments that according to the author would need further development in debates about Multiculturalism and Muslims in Britain:

- The shift in focus from multi-culturalism to 'multi-faithism'
- The shift from a Pakistani to a Muslim identity in the Pakistani diaspora (the so-called 'religion vs. culture debate')
- The unintended but inevitable competition between religious and cultural freedom among British Pakistanis

Multicultural intensification and its semantic slip

The first part of this paper deals then with what I call 'multicultural intensification'. In order to understand what I mean by this term, it is important to identify the semantic slip that has grown into identifying (at least State-promoted) British Multiculturalism with, rather than a plurality of cultures, a plurality of faiths. While walking down a London street we may comment on its 'multiculturalism' because of the different pigmentations and dress styles, but at an institutional level the switch from culture to religion is very apparent. It is important to outline a few facts at an institutional level and push forward a few hypotheses as to why institutional politics, and as a hegemonic consequence British society, has preferred to prioritize religious over cultural freedom.

Predicaments of cultural freedom

The preference that has been accorded to faith rather than cultural freedom must be rooted in a number of circumstances. The first must be related to the blurring boundaries of such a category, and the lack of definite evidence (or the illusion of) of what 'orthodox' cultural practices consist of. The question 'which culture do you belong to?' is a very difficult one to answer, especially for people holding double citizenship or considering themselves

as cosmopolitan, and may often be replaced with an answer based on nationality, or hyphenated identities (i.e., British or British-Muslim). In Britain, the use of 'British' as a term that includes English, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish, has inaugurated an era where the idea of citizenship overcomes that of a Romantic national identity rich with cultural descriptors. This, although it may produce some tensions among Scottish and Irish populations, is an option which seems to be very much valued by Muslim populations in Britain, because it gives them the opportunity to claim citizenship rights within their identity label, by not compromising an aspect of their identity that they consider crucial: the religious one. Religious identity may also be considered a more inclusive identity than the one based on culture, as it automatically does away with variables such as class, cosmopolitanism, gender, hybridity, at least at first impression. Religion is often considered to be a much more stable identity trait than culture, and is supposed to have clearer guidelines (see for example the outlines of religion and belief in the Equality and Human Rights Commission website). In a multicultural system where group identity is so important, thus, a group identity based on the loose definition of culture would bring an infinite number of problems about the definition and the boundaries of such groups. Lobbying, on the part of minority groups, may then

be more problematic as their recognition in front of government agencies may be too difficult to prove.

The importance of faith at a national level

What are the reasons behind this intensification of attention around faith? Historically, the Church of England has played a very important role in the management of welfare (see Farnell et al. 2003), but its influence was shrunk down to size in the last century. Britain now has a number of laws and policy guidelines that put faith at the forefront by setting out entitlements to faith groups (see Werbner, forthcoming). This happens where religious practice is overall steadily diminishing, although not in all segments of the population. A very clear case of this is the field of urban regeneration, where the 'Inner city religious council' has been established, regeneration guidelines include a very important faith dimension, and statutory agencies are given systematic guidance for working with faith-based organizations (see Furbey and Macey 2005). Of course, this has not been developed without criticism, where a number of authors have argued that faith groups are not representative of a good number of citizens, some of them are much more conservative, they may bring social division and conflict, faith organizations may degenerate once they get secular power (Farnell et al. 2003.). In this paper

however we are not concerned about religious freedom and what costs for non-recognised religions or for non-religious people this has, but the relationship (and alleged competition) between religious and cultural freedom. We argue that if we consider by freedom not only the right to practice, but also the creation of an environment which is conducive to the grooming of one identity element, Britain has contributed to creating a context which, at least for British Pakistanis, puts religion and culture at odds with each other and is potentially saving the first and putting the other in jeopardy.

Just after the end of the Second World War, a substantial and steady wave of labour migration from Pakistan became the basis of what is now the second national group for migration to the UK (Finch et al. 2009). At the time, migrant welfare associations had not a religious core (see for example Kashmir welfare society, as mentioned by McLoughlin 1996). Until the early 1980s, the main problems about integration of minority ethnic groups were related to racism and service provision. African Caribbeans and South Asians alike, for instance, were all included in the same bulk of preoccupations the Commission for Racial Equality was established for. This commission was established in 1976, and its mission was based on ethnic and racial identity and

the freedoms attached to any individual independent from such identity. In 2009, this Commission was transformed into the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), whose focus on faith is evident from the number of entries regarding it in the FAQ but also in related documents and reports.

Unintended consequences of the switch from culture to religion

The anxiety produced at an institutional level to safeguard religious freedom, rather than cultural freedom, has led to, we argue, an articulation of one's heritage in the public sphere that is strongly influenced by the categories that are promoted, discussed and used by institutions. Thus, the institutions, pressed by events such as the public riots in Northern England (see Bolognani 2009), and the change in the global scenario (see McLoughlin 1996 and 2006, Werbner, forthcoming), we argue, have managed to shape the public sphere so that 'celebration of difference' has been at once put to the forefront and shaped along religious rather than cultural lines. This has been matched by a fertile soil as far as Pakistanis go. The vast majority of Pakistanis in the UK are from the Mirpur district in Azad Kashmir, an area that has always been at the periphery, both in relation to the Kashmir Princely State and to Pakistan (see Kabir 2009). It

has been argued in a number of writings on British Pakistani diaspora (see for example Bolognani 2009) that among this population, there is a very strong sentiment around an issue that has been labelled 'religion vs. culture debate'. In a kind of typical postcolonial condition where the colonised suffer from a sense of inferiority complex, most of my informants and many among the ones that have contributed to seminal work about identity among second and third generation British Pakistanis (see for example Jacobson 1997) have over and over again articulated disrespect and lack of attachment to their parents' background, traces of antagonism against aspects of the host culture, and instead a tendency to find an alternative 'strong' and positive identity such as 'Islam'. Although it has been argued (McLoughlin 2006) that the Islamic identity they refer to is, most of the time, a very culturally biased (Saudi) approach to Islam, the dichotomy has been incredibly popular and has perhaps even intensified in the post-2001 world. This is of course stimulated by the penetration of a religious-based vocabulary (i.e. Muslim instead of Pakistanis, as observed by Shaw 2008). The meeting of this Pakistani-based trend towards religious identification, with external factors such as Government policies and discourses, is where the shift from culture to faith reaches its climax. While on a global level, the revival of religion can be linked to change of

politics, modifications in trajectories of social movements, and technological developments, on a national basis we argue that the State has contributed to producing a fertile soil for this shift, as it not only aims at creating safe spaces for religions, but more than that identifies religious freedom as the freedom to prioritize. While the agents seem to want to be recognized more according to their religion rather than any other denotation (see for example the lack of success of the campaign for the inclusion of the term 'Kashmiri' in the 2001 Census, see Sokefeld and Bolognani, forthcoming), it is still to be investigated how much this sort of 'faith intensification' in multiculturalism has played a part in this trend among the members of other minority ethnic groups. Religion becomes thus the identity primarily articulated by Muslim populations of different heritages in Britain, while African-Caribbeans, Chinese and even Indians are more inclined to see themselves through ethnic lenses. This happens at the expenses of ethnicity in the public discourse, both on inter and intra ethnic platforms. This means, for instance, that during the riots in 2001, commentators were more inclined to use religious categories and variables to analyse the public disturbances, rather than gender, class or economic factors, producing an essentialization of Muslims that can be dangerous in a number of ways that cannot be speculated upon in the space of this essay.

Religious freedom vs. cultural freedom?

Britain is recognised worldwide for an approach to pluralism called 'British Multiculturalism' that has been described, in the more slogan-type way, as 'celebrating diversity' and has regionally been articulated as notions of pride in difference (see for example the 2008 campaign for Bradford as European capital of culture). The core of British Multiculturalism, articulated more pragmatically in its latest development such as 'social cohesion', is that provided groups and individuals share the basic (British) values of civic liberties, everyone is free to live life as they wish, this freedom being among those very values. Putting aside the British-centred notion that such values would be British and would not belong to other cultures, for the purposes of this essay, we concentrate on what is subsumed to be the 'kind of life' that people are proclaimed to be free to lead. It is our argument, in fact, that a semantic slip has occurred, and British Multiculturalism refers now more than ever to the idea of religious identity rather than cultural identity.

This essay has tried to argue that contemporary Britain has been increasingly promoting, to a certain extent unconsciously, religious freedom over cultural freedom. Although the principal approach to pluralism in Britain,

which is recognized all over the world, is Multiculturalism, the etymology of the word is actually currently misleading. A number of events such as the grass-roots battles for rights of faith schools, the Rushdie-related campaign for the inclusion of Islam among the faiths covered by blasphemy laws, and other education-related issues, have pushed the government towards considering religious freedom as a priority. Perhaps, in more theoretical terms, the important switch that has occurred is the separation in the definition of religion as something separate from culture. Culture thus emerges as something that is disposable, secondary in the priorities of preservation of identity components, an accessory. Cultural freedom may then become endangered the more this trend develops. While in France we observe more tension towards cultural rights, and thus for instance Sikhs are exempt from provisions regulating covering one's head in schools affecting Muslim women because their turban is considered to be a cultural rather than a religious sign, in Britain Rastafarians (as a non-recognised faith group) may have to engage in a much tougher battle than other minority groups for, for instance, defending their right to keep dreadlocks while serving on jobs where a strict code on personal appearance is enacted. The freedom to live one's life as desired is in fact articulated and protected at its best if it can be ascribed to a faith realm. This has occurred for a

number of reasons rooted both in structural circumstances and in the changing trajectories of the agents' volitions in a globalised world. 'Culture' with its blurring boundaries is not government-efficient, and therefore it has become uneconomic to 'celebrate' and protect.

The dilemma of a situation where religious freedom is at the forefront at the expense of cultural freedom, highlights a number of issues in terms of what Werbner describes as Multiculturalism as the power of government to decide whether a culture survives or not, and therefore related to the issue of cultural freedom as preservation of a culture. She in fact argues that 'multiculturalism is a top-down policy that enables the state, policy makers and politicians to decide whether cultures will continue to exist' (Werbner, forthcoming). Although Werbner means by this 'whether CERTAIN cultures' (my emphasis) will cease to exist, I argue that at present the survival of a notion of culture beyond religion amongst Pakistanis is overall in jeopardy and thus the competition between religious and cultural freedom has already shown better prospects for one over the other.

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