Multiculturalism from Above and Below: Analysing a Political Discourse

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Meer and Modood have written an admirably lucid exposition of the political–philosophical case in defence of multiculturalism. Their critical evaluation of interculturalism, a latecomer to the Anglo-American scholarly discourse on relations among cultures in modern states, is convincing: interculturalism is not really a political theory but refers to a mode of communication across ethnic or religious divisions. A further theory not mentioned by the authors, but also invoked as an alternative to the supposed multicultural tendency to essentialise or over-privilege cultural boundaries and cultural closure, is cosmopolitanism. Hollinger, for example, has argued that cosmopolitanism is neither universalist nor multiculturalist, but espouses a ‘soft’ multiculturalism that is responsive to diversity, particularity, history, the realities of power and the need for politically viable solidarities (2002: 228). Such situated or grounded cosmopolitanism nevertheless recognises, Hollinger argues, that cultures and groups change and evolve; they are not fixed and immutable forever (2002: 228).

My own critical evaluation of Meer and Modood’s exposition starts from the theoretical position that multiculturalism must be grasped as a discourse in which scholars participate along with cultural actors, politicians and the media. Multiculturalism is, in other words, always positioned, invoked in defence of rights (cultural, human) or in defence of communal solidarity, including that of the nation-state. It is a discourse characterised by constant seepage across academia, the media, politicians and ethnic-cum-religious public actors on whether multiculturalism is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, whether it has created ‘bridges’ (more solidarity) or ‘failed’ (and is thus divisive). Multiculturalism is in this sense often a performative utterance, played out in front of an audience hostile to immigrants, Islam or the West, or alternatively, ‘liberal’ or ‘cosmopolitan’, enjoying and embracing diversity.

If we accept my argument that multiculturalism is a discourse as well as a political theory, we need to examine its affinities and differences from religious discourse.
The debates on multiculturalism in Europe today, including the UK, often focus either explicitly or implicitly on Muslims and Islam, with Islam conceived of as a ‘culture’, leaving aside issues of religious tolerance and, indeed, inter-faith dialogue. But is this sleight of hand legitimate philosophically? Are the discourses of religious pluralism and multiculturalism identical? And if not, what distinguishes them? I start with a brief overview of my understanding of the multicultural debate.

Culture, Clifford Geertz proposed, is a “system of symbols and meanings”, which he contrasted with norms, defined as oriented patterns for action (in Kuper 1999: 71). Against this American privileging of meaning, Durkheimian and Marxist anthropological traditions have tended to regard culture with suspicion (Kuper 1999: xiv), so that “British social anthropologists like Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard were dismissive of the notion of culture” (Kuper 1999: 58), conceiving anthropology more as a form of comparative sociology (Kuper 1999: 129). Multicultural citizenship has similarly had its sceptical critics and defenders. Much of the multicultural debate at the turn of the century has focused on the politics of multicultural citizenship in plural or immigrant societies, and concerns language or religious rights rather than ‘culture’ per se.

Critics of multiculturalism come from both the socialist Left and the liberal Centre and Right. They include postmodern anthropologists, feminists and human rights activists. They also, of course, include right-wing racists, traditionalists and nationalists.

Anthropological critiques of multiculturalism start from its presumed false theorisation of culture. Multiculturalism, anthropologists argue, reifies and essentialises cultures as rigid, homogeneous and unchanging wholes with fixed boundaries (Friedman 1997, Baumann 1999). It assumes a fixed connection between culture and territory (Caglar 1997). Its political correctness glosses over internal social problems within ethnic groups (Wikan 2002). Current theories in anthropology are based on the idea that cultures are creative and changing, internally contested and heterogeneous. People in one culture constantly borrow from others. Cultures are therefore inescapably hybrid and permeable. For this reason too, cultures do not have a single, unified leadership and any attempt by the state to impose one is false and oppressive. Critically also, diasporas have multiple and intersecting identities, including party political affiliations to the left and right (Werbner 2002).

Against critics of multiculturalism, Terence Turner (1993: 412) has argued that multiculturalism is a ‘critical’ rather than reifying discourse. The aporia that disadvantaged groups (women, ethnic minorities) face in the political arena relates to the definition of citizenship as the duty, *qua* citizen, to aim to transcend local concerns so that particularistic claims to compensate for historical under-privilege are often constructed as narrow, selfish and divisive. Hence, the challenge of the new multicultural politics is how to transcend such constructions, to eliminate current subordinations while stressing both universalism and difference (Modood and Werbner 1997, Werbner and Modood 1997). In Quebec’s multicultural ‘minority circuit’, activists “show themselves capable of... adopting a generic minority rights
rhetoric as an occupational vernacular” (Amit-Talai 1996: 106), but in suppressing their particularistic cultural claims, they often fail to challenge the majority’s hegemonic culture. Despite its morally grounded claims to separate cultural sovereignty, Quebec remains a deeply racist society (Knowles 1996). Multiculturalism, it is argued, thus co-opts leaders through minor investments. Feminists such as Okin (1999) argue that multiculturalism accords too much power to religious elders, usually men, to rule over women and their bodies, and to deny them their rights as equal citizens to choose how to dress, who to marry or divorce, if and when to have children, and so forth.

The argument in favour of multiculturalism put forward by liberal communitarians like Charles Taylor (1994) is that identities are deeply grounded emotionally in authentically specific cultures and moralities. To deny these is a form of offensive discrimination; second, that a pragmatic resolution of individual vs. collective rights is possible (Kymlicka 1995); third, that the public–private distinction is highly ambiguous (Parekh 1995, Modood 1997a); and fourth, that many forms of racism, such as anti-Semitism or Islamophobia, essentialise and biologise imputed cultural traits. Hence, the distinction between race and culture is untenable in reality (Modood 1997b). Indeed, multiculturalism without anti-racism does not make sense as a radical political programme. The need is to recognise that the two struggles are complementary rather than opposed (Blum 1994, Stolcke 1995). Racism denies universal human commonalities beyond culture, and thus presumes the licence to violate the symbolic and physical integrity of individuals and groups.

Tempelman (1999) distinguishes three forms of multiculturalism: ‘primordial’, associated with Taylor; ‘civic’, associated with Parekh; and ‘universalist’, with Kymlicka. While civic multiculturalism recognises that cultures are open, Tempelman claims, it fails to resolve cases in which dialogue fails and the state invokes its authority, as happened in the case of the The Satanic Verses affair in Britain or the scarf affair in France. Multicultural confrontations sometimes seem intractable and long term. The need is to distinguish therefore between multiculturalism-as-usual (ethnic restaurants, carnivals and special arrangements for school meals, burial, etc.) and what I have called ‘multiculturalism-in-history’ – unresolved conflicts that leave a bitter and often lasting legacy (Werbner 2005).

In current human rights discourse, the right of individuals and collectivities to foster, enhance and protect their culture and traditions is enshrined, but so too are freedom of speech and freedom from violence, which deny the absolute right of traditional practices, such as forced marriages or genital mutilation. Clearly, then, multiculturalism is fraught with potential contradictions if too rigidly defined. Anti-multiculturalist liberals argue that liberal democracy allows sufficient space for ethnic and religious expression in civil society and the private sphere. Universal individual rights to equality before the law are at risk if cultural rights are given precedence. There is nothing to prevent ethnic or religious groups, they say, from organising on a voluntary basis. However, as Talal Asad (1993), for example, has
argued, minorities need protection from offensive symbolic as well as civic or material exclusions and violations.

On the Left the argument is that the superficial celebration of multiculturalism – of exotic cuisines, popular music or colourful festivals and rituals – disguises ongoing economic and political inequalities. Rather than addressing these, the state funds multicultural festivals and turns its back on real problems of deprivation, prejudice and discrimination. Hence, multiculturalism and identity politics obscure the common oppression of the under-privileged within capitalist society and divide anti-racist movements (Sivanandan 1990). This debate, anti-racism vs. multiculturalism, shared oppression vs. culture, obscures, however, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) have pointed out, the divisive potential of equal opportunities policies.

**Multiculturalism from Below**

Critics on both Right and Left tend to assume that multiculturalism is a conspiracy of top-down state engineering. Against that, my own argument has been that multiculturalism in Britain, as applied to immigrant minorities rather than territorial ones, is a politically and bureaucratically negotiated order, often at the local level, responsive to ethnic grassroots pressure, budgetary constraints and demands for redistributive justice. It is bottom-up rather than top-down; a politics of citizenship, like other group politics (Werbner 2005). There is thus no single ‘just’ blueprint for multiculturalism, even within a single country and certainly between countries (Samad 1997).

Beyond the struggles for local recognition, multiculturalism has today become a global movement against national assimilationist pressures (Nimni 2003). It refers to different struggles by minorities demanding autonomy, recognition and a share of state or local state budgets. The politics of multiculturalism in Botswana, for example, denies Tswana right to absolute hegemony in the public sphere in the name of nationalism (R. Werbner and Gaitskell 2002). Rather than thinking of multiculturalism, then, as a discourse that reifies culture, it needs to be thought of as a politics of equal and just citizenship that bases itself on the right to be ‘different’ within a democratic political community. The political is a critical dimension of the discourse of multiculturalism, both supporting and undermining it: the change in legislation in Botswana allowing community radio and indigenous or local language teaching in primary school has never been implemented. Without a struggle from below, it seems it never will be.

**The ‘Failure-of-Multiculturalism’ Discourse**

In the face of alleged Muslim terror plots by young British, American or French-born Muslims, the Sisyphean task facing national Muslim organisational leaders, of counteracting the widespread public image of pervasive, hidden, Islamic terror, is huge. Instead of lobbying for and promoting Islamic interests, they find themselves
and their organisations condemned by politicians and the media alike for their radical roots and failure to promote diasporic Muslim integration and multiculturalism.

In this context, the ‘failure-of-multiculturalism’ discourse has taken root in Britain, promoted by politicians, the media and academics, and is a central aspect of the debate between Muslim leaders and British politicians. Bagguley and Hussain describe this as a “wholesale rejection of the discourse of multiculturalism” (2008: 159). Hence the political call was for ‘community cohesion’. Multiculturalism-in-history was inaugurated by the Rushdie affair. Alleging blasphemy punishable by death, Muslims in Britain seemed deliberately to insist upon values alien to the majority population. They burnt books and demanded the death of an author. The 7 July 2005 London suicide bombings by young British Pakistanis were carried out in the name of Islam and as retribution for the sufferings of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East. Once again, this seemed to underline an unbridgeable chasm between European values of citizenship and the rule of law, and Muslims’ vengeful transnational politics. The Danish cartoon affair was yet another manifestation of seemingly incommensurable values, this time in the field of art and representation.

Like Muslims, diasporic Hindus and Sikhs have each in turn also sparked apparently intractable multicultural conflicts in Britain. In the Sikh case, the conflict surrounded a play, Behzti (Dishonour), written by a young Sikh woman, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, which depicted the rape and murder of a young woman by a priest in the Gurdwara (Sikh temple). Produced by Birmingham Repertory, the play was cancelled after Sikhs responded with a massive show of public outrage and threatened violence (Asthana 2004: 13). In the case of Hindus, the clash of values arose in response to a solo exhibition by one of India’s most celebrated contemporary artists, Maqbool Fida Husain, whose one-man retrospective in London included portrayals of the goddesses Durga and Draupadi in the “characteristic nude imagery associated with his work” (Khanna 2006: 2). Asia House Gallery withdrew the exhibition after highly vocal protests by Hindu Human Rights, the National Council of Hindu Temples and the Hindu Forum of Britain (Khanna 2006: 2).

The notion of multiculturalism-in-history is intended to separate day-to-day tolerance of cultural diversity and arguments over minor state funding allocations from exceptional cultural clashes that seem irresolvable. Historically, such confrontations are usually never resolved; they only ‘go away’, entering the collective sub-consciousness of a community as a bitter sediment. This was certainly true of the Rushdie affair. The 2007 award of a knighthood to Salman Rushdie, almost 20 years after the confrontation over The Satanic Verses, ignited once again the bitterness British Muslims felt over the affair, despite their muted public response.

Religion vs. Culture

Debates on multiculturalism often lead to an intellectual cul-de-sac. Detractors typically argue that culture is not identical with community; it is not a bounded or
territorialised entity; it cannot be reified since it is constantly changing and hybridising, an ‘open text’. While such deconstructive arguments are undeniable, they evade the question, first, of why certain issues evoke such passionate commitment and sharp disagreement, and, linked to that, is it accurate to speak of culture, when at issue are historical conflicts sparked by deeply felt religious feelings, in confrontation with liberal secularism or Western geopolitics? David Cameron, then leader of the opposition party in Britain, was able to say in the same breath, we will support the Notting Hill carnival (a cultural event), we reject multiculturalism as a failed policy. Carnival ‘culture’ is seemingly innocuous and non-polemical, neither race, ethnic chauvinism or religion; hence, an acceptable idiom in which to describe ‘difference’ in neutral terms. However, when talking about multiculturalism and its failures, more often than not the underlying attack turns out to be against diasporic Muslims’ alleged self-segregation in social ghettos or their ‘extremist’ defence of their religious commitments (there are countries, of course, in which language has the same effect). The fact that the underlying problematic of religion is not acknowledged publicly in Britain (as it might be in South Asia) so that ‘culture’ becomes a euphemism for religion or community entangles government ministers and opposition leaders alike in strange contradictions of which they seem entirely unaware.

Much of the discourse on multiculturalism assumes, unreflectively, that the cultures of minorities, defined in the broadest sense of the term to include religion, can be made to disappear by fiat if politicians and policymakers refuse to support them, either rhetorically, on official occasions, or with small dollops of cash. While defending multiculturalism, Meer and Modood implicitly make the same assumption. In reality, however, the very opposite has often been the case historically. The cultures of minorities are strengthened by the need to mobilise internally for the sake of culture or religion in the absence of public funding. Singling out Muslim religious associations for censure as British politicians have chosen to do arguably merely legitimises their representative status in the eyes of the public they serve.

As a minority, it makes sense for Pakistanis in Britain to highlight their religious identity in civil society and the public sphere: first, because as pious believers this is their most valued, high-cultural identity; but importantly also, there are in Britain laws that set out entitlements for religious groups. Among these are the right to found voluntary-aided state schools, supported by government funds; the right to worship, to build places of worship and so forth. Oddly enough, despite periodic invocations of the failure of multiculturalism, there are no laws in the UK that enshrine the cultures of immigrants, though limited legal rights to cultural, political and territorial autonomy have been granted to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In other words, multicultural citizenship in Britain, as elsewhere, recognises the rights of indigenous territorialised peoples and settled minorities, aboriginals, Native Americans and so forth, to a measure of self-rule, autonomy and formal representation in the public sphere. Only secondarily does multicultural citizenship...
apply to immigrant minorities not settled territorially. The UK Race Relations Act protects ethnic and racial minorities – and this includes most Muslims. The recent law against incitement to religious hatred goes some way to protect Muslims against extreme religious offence or vilification. On purely pragmatic grounds, then, immigrants fighting to gain equal rights in the UK will choose to struggle in arenas where there already exist established rights, some of which are denied them. In such cases, there is no need to establish the ground rules and principles; merely to insist on their universal application.

Unlike hegemonic nationalism, multiculturalism’s innovation as a philosophical movement is that it applies to all citizens, even the majority. However, in a further twist that highlights the ambiguity of the culture concept, young Muslims themselves are rejecting their parental culture and tradition, in a paradoxical move that seems to deny culture in the name of religion.

Religious vs. Multicultural Discourses

Islamists in Britain and elsewhere deny the validity of local cultures (see Roy 2004). This raises an interesting question: can there be a religion that is not also cultural? Pakistanis reiterate that Islam is a whole, all-inclusive, way of life, and this indeed was the argument put forward by the Muslims of India in claiming a national homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. However, if Islam is a whole way of life, then surely it refers to the customs and traditions of particular localities? In a sense, both claims are equally dubious: religion is not the same as culture, at least not in the modern world, but nor is it entirely separable from it. Islamism may reject the Pakistani-style chiffon headscarf, but it substitutes for it another head covering that becomes over time a uniform, that is, a custom. This custom can, however, be shared by persons from different places and backgrounds.

Nevertheless, I believe that it makes sense to distinguish between culture and religion, in a way that an Islamist does. This is because, as discursive formations they are not the same, and particularly so in the case of the three monotheistic religions. In these, religious belief is about a relationship with a transcendent being that demands conviction and commitment, experienced in highly emotional ways. It may be, as Durkheim famously argued in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, that God is merely the embodiment of community; and it is probably true that culture, in the sense of language, but also law, morality, food, music, art, architecture, spices and perfumes, clothing and so forth, also embodies a community – though not necessarily the same one. However, religion and culture are not the same for the simple reason that cultural practices are not hedged in a similar way with sacred taboos, dangerous no-go areas. Culture is not pitted against moral transgressions and ethical violations, although those who perform it badly can be laughed at for their gaucheness. Religion is threatened by believers’ internal doubt, which may or may not be fuelled by externally inspired scepticism. Culture is threatened by the physical destruction of objects or buildings, by forgetfulness, and perhaps more than anything
in the modern world, by radical dislocations and changes in social organisation. A person may have multiple cultural competences, and switch between them situationally, or she may be a cultural hybrid, the product of even or uneven fusions of two or more cultural worlds. There have been periods in the history of religion when boundaries between, for example, Islam and Hinduism in South Asia, or Judaism and Christianity in the Near East, were blurred (for a discussion see Werbner 2009a). However, in the modern world it would seem odd to be a Muslim, a Jew and a Christian simultaneously, however syncretic one’s faith.

The gap between culture and religion raises the question of what exactly is meant by multiculturalism in Britain? Whereas cultural ‘traditions’ may be open to negotiation in the diasporic context, religious customs anchored in Holy writ and said to originate in a transcendent covenant, may be conceived of by believers as non-negotiable. When encapsulated religious minorities negotiate a place in their new nation with the majority society, the more pious among them insist on the religious basis of customs (such as veiling) that in reality may have evolved historically. Culture for them assumes the aura of divine commandment, impervious to politicians’ invocations of ‘community cohesion’.

The problematic tendency to conflate religion and culture in debates on multiculturalism and identity politics in the UK includes academic defenders of multiculturalism as religion such as Modood (2005) or Parekh (2000) as well as their critics on the left (e.g. Yuval-Davis 1997). The “mystification of culture” as Bhatt (2006: 99) calls it, conflating religious pluralism with identity politics, imperceptively merges two quite separate, historically constructed discourses (Asad 2003). On the one hand, a discourse on religion that recognises that modern religions are institutionalised, bounded and textualised, even if subject to constant internal divisions and schismatic tendencies, more or less ‘extreme’, ‘doctrinaire’ or ‘humanist-liberal’; ‘pure’ or ‘syncretic’, ‘relaxed’; based on ‘universalistic’ or ‘particularistic’ interpretations; and, on the other hand, a discourse on ‘culture’ that recognises its fuzzy, historically changing, situational, hybridising and unreflective aspects. Arguably, issues usually regarded as a matter of multicultural policy, for example, the dispensation to wear exotic headdresses to school or work (turbans, veils, skullcaps) more rightly belong in the constitutional domain of religious pluralism. Cultural conventions on headdress, which do not carry that non-negotiable imperative quality, can be ignored.

Politicians would naturally like the Muslims of Britain to be contained within the envelope of the nation-state, to live scattered among the wider population and to be concerned mainly with religious education and pastoral care. They reject not only the extreme religiosity of many Muslims, including the second generation, but their enclaved living and diasporic commitments – not just to their country of origin but to Muslim communities elsewhere, especially Palestine, but also Iraq. They demand a non-politicised religion, which they label ‘culture’. In addition, because Muslims in Britain are far more pious than most other British citizens and are equally emotional about their transnational loyalties, then it seems multiculturalism has not only failed
but supposedly foments hatred and division. Of course, at another level everyone – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – shares the knowledge that intractable international conflicts are impinging on the consciousness of young Muslims in Britain and encouraging a few of them towards – in their own eyes – heroic deeds of self-sacrifice, which to everyone else appear as unacceptable atrocities. How to reach these young people is a predicament shared by all British citizens, including Muslims. In a sense, too, it may well be that politicians feel on safer ground when they criticise religion, even if they label it ‘culture’. They know from their own experience of European history that religion can be more or less extreme, more or less tolerant, more or less politicised, more or less individualised and private. Second, the term culture is also used to imply ‘community’: ethnic communities are expected by British politicians to exert moral control over their members. The failure of the Muslim community in Britain to control some of its youngsters is a failure of community and hence also of culture and multiculturalism.

Clearly, it is absurd to believe that the paltry sums of money given by the government to Muslim organisations whose members are, after all, tax payers, can shake the foundations of Muslim faith in Britain. Muslims raise vast sums of money in voluntary donations, running into millions of pounds each year, for charitable causes and communal projects like mosque building. For the latter, they also sometimes access overseas donations. No politician can determine the continued existence of Islam in Britain. The only use multicultural and multi-faith state or local-state funding can have is positive: to require that organisations service a wider range of ethnic minority users than their own internal fundraising would demand; to create alliances, to enter into dialogue with unlikely partners, to engage in joint efforts with other groups in order to provide help and services to the needy. Rather than fomenting hatred, state multiculturalism from above is designed to attenuate divisions between ethnic and religious groups and propel them into dialogue. The aim of multiculturalism from above is thus greater interculturalism! However, no amount of state funding can stop groups from asserting their diasporic loyalty and sense of co-responsibility vis-à-vis diasporas beyond the nation-state in which they have settled. World politics, not religion per se, are at the heart of the current multicultural debate.

In a sense, the failure-of-multiculturalism discourse is thus meant to remind minorities that there are no no-go areas within the diaspora that are closed to the press and media. Double talk – one message for them, one for us – is from now onwards unacceptable. The political thrust is towards an open, transparent multiculturalism, legitimising press undercover reporting or engagement with spaces hidden from the public eye, and cultural-cum-religious intercultural debates with minorities on their own ground, sometimes on quite arcane issues, such as the writings of Mawdudi, on media websites or in the ethnic press (see Werbner 2009b). The question is whether this constant digging beneath the surface – the day-to-day media reporting on Muslim seditious plots and plotters, Muslim opinion polls that reveal out-of-line opinions and conspiracy theories, tirades by politicians against
so-called multiculturalism, or the invocations by politicians of the need to ‘learn’ to be good citizens – is in any way conducive towards a more positive integration of Muslims into British society? Such rhetorical attacks on a daily basis, many via the media, surely lead to a sense of siege and alienation among the vast majority of law-abiding Muslims, whatever their political sentiments.

The introduction of new discourses may disrupt “established assumptions structuring debates in the public sphere” (Asad 2003: 186). In this respect, the discursive attack on multiculturalism may be conceived of as a rejection by British politicians and the media of the invasion of religious discourses into the public sphere: faith and passion do not belong in a space of rational argumentation, economics and politics (Asad 2003: 187). The reasoned responses of Muslim leaders however, utilising the national platform of their own ethnic press, has carved out a space of intercultural civility in which they argue against allegations of extremism passionately and yet rationally (Werbner 2009b).

**A New Kind of Multiculturalism?**

While much of the failure-of-multiculturalism discourse since 2000 has focused on the concern with the ‘non-integration’ of the Muslim minority, some features of the old state multicultural policy have always been unsatisfactory, especially the tendency to recruit representative delegates from each ethnic or religious group to sit on representative race and community relations councils. Against this, a ‘new’ public sector multiculturalism of consultation and participation has emerged in Britain, grounded in quite a different discourse. It makes no assumptions about the pre-existence of bounded communities. Instead, it creates vast lists of organisations that are invited in massive numbers to participate in public forums. In the case of London, for example, the organisations communicate through email with government agencies, the NHS, the Local Authority, the GLA and directly with each other. Their paid staff is multi-ethnic, as is the client population. While divisions tend to surface whenever ‘representative’ committees are set up across the whole black and ethnic minority population, cooperation and inclusive networks are likely to emerge and produce effective solidarity in narrower constituencies – and especially when it comes to the fair distribution of resources and jobs.

Our recent research on the black African diaspora in London disclosed the capacity of the African elite in civil society to create and sustain amicable inter-ethnic networks across the whole African diaspora, informed by a sense of justice, fairness and cooperation (see Werbner 2010). Elite Africans meet on many occasions — in public forums, workshops, parties, policy meetings, committees and advisory groups — some initiated by government, some by their national embassies or high commissions, and some by their own associations. Many have rubbed shoulders with the Great and the Good, including the leaders of their own countries. They are invited to receptions in Downing Street or the House of Commons, have advised ministers and the Mayor of London and sit on key Local Authority advisory groups.
This, despite the fact that in some cases their work is voluntary and unpaid. It is particularly the consultation and participation in forums that points to the emergence of a new kind of more inclusive multiculturalism in Britain, a feature of elite networking in a more open, participatory environment.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that multiculturalism is a political discourse that is always positioned. Augmenting Meer and Modood’s consideration of the merits of multiculturalism vs. interculturalism, I highlight the central role that multiculturalism from above can play, at least in Britain, in facilitating, indeed requiring, intercultural or inter-faith openness and dialogue. It is thus extremely counter-productive, I argue, that politicians tend to use multiculturalism as a euphemism for immigration or extremism. All they achieve by the failure-of-multiculturalism discourse is a growing sense of alienation among religious and ethnic minorities who in any case rely on autonomous internal resources to perpetuate their culture and religion and create ‘community’.

Notes

[2] The amended British Nationality Act, 2005 requiring persons seeking naturalisation to have a minimal knowledge of English may be classed as a ‘multicultural’ law perhaps.

Works Cited


Khanna, A., 2006. Naked gods are found!, Eastern Eye, 19 May, p. 2.


