



## **Multiculturalism Bites**

*Tariq Modood on The History of Multiculturalism*

### **David Edmonds:**

Multiculturalism today is at the heart of political debate. Where did the concept of multiculturalism come from? Which country pioneered it? When did religion become central to it? Tariq Modood, a sociologist at the University of Bristol, has tracked how the concept of multiculturalism has evolved over time.

### **Nigel Warburton:**

Tariq Modood, we're going to be talking about the history of the concept of multiculturalism. Where did it begin?

### **Tariq Modood:**

A good place to start is the African-American struggle for equality. If we think of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement of the 1950s, one of its central ideas was we're all the same under our different coloured skins, and what was clearly a demand for equality based on sameness. Now multiculturalism emphasizes difference, but it came to this position by reacting to the earlier conception of equality. And so we get new social movements in the 1960s, some of them very directly based on racial equality like, say, Black Power in the United States, who expressly criticised King and what they saw as white liberals. But also I think there's a wider intellectual, political climate of opinion: linked movements such as feminism, gay rights, which emphasise particularity; 'we', 'us' and 'you' rather than just abstract human rights, and that emphasise identity and subjectivity: 'Respect us for what we are, don't try and change us into your conception.'

### **NW:**

So what you're saying is that Martin Luther King was arguing for a common humanity, that there is something that we all share and we shouldn't discriminate on grounds of difference. But the multicultural movements that grew out as a reaction to that were actually emphasising difference. They wanted to be celebrating the ways in which they were distinctly different from each other.

### **TM:**

I think that's right. Up to that point, you know, roughly the 1960s, liberal egalitarians assumed that difference was a problem, that it was only negative. But the multiculturalists say there's also a positive conception of difference: people's own sense of who they are, of what they are, their own sense of historical struggle to be themselves. Historically, we most associated this idea with nationalism, the German nation against Napoleon, and so many other nationalisms all across the world, and it's been a very powerful force in anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism.

But what multiculturalism does is it opens the space for other groups below the scale of nation who can't be defined by nation or even by territory, and nor can they just be defined by socio-economic location though they often are given an inferior socio-economic location like, say, slaves. But they're defined by a form of identity which is more to do with what we've come to call ethnicity, and they are typically minorities in a society dominated by other ethnicities.

### **NW:**

I don't recall Martin Luther King or the Black Power Movement talking explicitly about multiculturalism. When did the concept of multiculturalism as an explicit term come into play?

### **TM:**

Well one of the things that the younger generation of critics of King did was that they broadened the idea of politics. It was the beginning of what we sometimes call cultural

politics. They began to talk about being black, being of African descent, black and proud and so on. So that a cultural identity, what you wore, what you looked like, how you wore your hair, music, dance, and of course language, all these things became part of one's identity and people said 'we have a right to this as much as you have a right to your culture.'

So that's the move from race to culture. It was by no means confined to the United States. It was very centred on English-speaking countries to begin with, partly to do with the political culture of those countries. But I think it's also to do with the fact that some of the English-speaking countries are countries of immigration. Canada has the most developed policy and legislation in relation to multiculturalism.

**NW:**

So why was Canada so prominent?

**TM:**

Well, Pierre Trudeau who's the liberal prime minister in the late 60's, early 70's, faced a number of what one might call 'minority challenges'. One was from the French-speaking people in the Province of Quebec who wanted to resist what they saw as Anglo-domination. Then we had Native Americans: they too felt that various resources on their land and so on were being exploited by Canadian authorities, Canadian businesses, multinationals and so on, with very little reward for their own people. And then thirdly, Canada is obviously a country formed through immigration, and some migrant groups began to resist the classical policy of how states and societies handle immigration, and that is through assimilation. You began to get migrants from what one might call the political periphery wanting a slice of power rather than being forced to assimilate.

**NW:**

So it's almost as if assimilation policies are a form of internal imperialism: the powerful recreating their own values again, forcing them on people who've come from quite different backgrounds.

**TM:**

That is very much the multiculturalist critique of assimilation. Liberals, classical liberals let's say, believe that equality implies uniformity of treatment, but the multiculturalist critique is that no public space is culturally neutral. Those who've constructed that public space have built it to serve their needs and to privilege their position. Language is a very good example: one of the first things that multiculturalist movements argued for was the importance of state schools teaching bilingualism and not demanding everything be taught in the dominant language. Education, not just language, but education, is probably the single biggest policy area in which multiculturalism has developed.

Trudeau tried to deal with, as he saw, these minority issues, wrapped them all up together in a single concept or a single idea which came to be called multiculturalism. And he got Canadian Parliament to pass the Multicultural Act of 1971 which gave minorities for the first time certain specific rights and provisions. The Quebec nationalists weren't particularly satisfied with this: they saw being yoked together with Native Americans and immigrants as a dilution of their claim of nationhood. And actually the Native Americans weren't very pleased with it either because they said they had territorial claims, they didn't just want languages or education, or what in Britain was derogatorily called 'steel bands, saris and samosas', you know, cultural frills.

The people who were most pleased were migrant groups. And as migration grew as a worldwide phenomenon in the 1960s onwards, countries like Canada, the United States, Australia, who up to then had, broadly speaking, been importing white people, European-based people, began to open up to the rest of the world. And of course the same was happening in Britain and Northwest Europe as Pakistanis, West Indians, Turks, Maghrebians and so on were coming in to help rebuild Western European economies. And so, from about that point onwards, multiculturalism comes to be associated with migration and the respect for post-immigration group formations.

**NW:**

Well clearly with the migration came significant numbers of people from different religions: that must have had a part to play in how multiculturalism developed in Europe.

**TM:**

It certainly has had a part to play, but it is an unintended part. Nobody was really thinking about religion. People were thinking about customs, family formations, possibly language, and language was regarded as the most politically difficult. The shift towards religious identity was very much from the ground upwards: it was not what was planned by politicians.

**NW:**

That's fascinating. What happened that changed the emphasis from ethnicity to religion?

**TM:**

Well by and large British politicians, and certainly British academics, thought that the dividing line, the conflict line, was around colour. Salman Rushdie is a case in point: he wrote a celebrated article in the 1980s where he said Britain has now come to be a country of two colours - black and white. But people from South Asia very rarely think of themselves in terms of colour. People from South Asia have very strong identities, regional identities, national identities – meaning Pakistani, and Indian and Bangladeshi.

But the single biggest community-based identity in South Asia is religion. When someone says to you 'who are you?' and so on, here people often or not say things like, 'oh, I work in a bank.' But when someone asks you that in Lahore or in Mumbai they're much more likely to be expecting an answer like, 'I'm a Hindu' or 'I'm a Farsi' or something like that. That is your community affiliation - a bit like Northern Ireland where if someone says they're a Catholic, 'Oh a Catholic atheist, of course. But a Catholic'. And there was a movement from below which was unintended and in many ways unwelcomed by the societies in which it took place.

**NW:**

Well you've mentioned Salman Rushdie already, but clearly he's better known as the author of *The Satanic Verses*.

**TM:**

You're quite right, and that in fact is one of the moments in the story of multiculturalism that I had in mind. There are two moments, and they both actually take place about the same time '88-'89. The battle over the novel *Satanic Verses* in Britain and the battle over the Muslim schoolgirls wearing a headscarf in France: these two battles shook multiculturalism. It's fair to say it divided supporters of multiculturalism, some of whom thought secularity and freedom of speech should be essential to multiculturalism because it was certainly essential to their politics. And similarly in France Republicans were outraged that someone wanted to drag in religion into a state school, the one area where all citizens were united, equal and completely unmarked by religion or any other kind of minority identity.

So these two battles, they began to turn what up to then had been a secular multiculturalism into a multiculturalism that had to find some space for religious identity or to fight with people asserting that identity. And, if you like, Britain and France have taken those two options. The British decided that it meant some form of accommodation for Muslims; the French decided it meant the reassertion of *Laïcité* and republican norms and certainly dress codes in public places. So they first banned the hijab in schools and more recently they banned the burkha – that is to say the head-to-toe covering for Muslim women – throughout the whole of France in public places.

**NW:**

In terms of schools, that's a consistent policy that's anti religious display: it's not solely targeted at a Muslim minority.

**TM:**

None of the policies in France are targeted at specific minorities, the word 'Muslim' may not even be mentioned in the legislation, and it probably isn't. But everybody knows that's what

it's about. The legislators are happy to say so. The Jews protested because up to that point Jewish boys had been allowed to wear the kippah or the yarmulke on their heads. And the Sikhs had been allowed to wear a turban - no one had minded that at all.

**NW:**

Why do you think the presence of Muslims in Europe has created such an issue for multiculturalism?

**TM:**

One way of looking at this is looking at the US/European contrast, and I think there are at least two elements. One is that Europe has a suspicion of religion, which is very different to the United States. And of course this goes back to the time when people were engaged in mass slaughter in the name of religion; whereas in the United States, because it's a country founded on religious refugees from this European turbulence and violence, they give pride of place to religion, and even though they have a strictly secularist constitution, most people go to church. Religion is actually a form of integration in the United States, it binds people together, and migrants usually emphasise their religious identity. So that's one very major difference on why Muslims are regarded much more nervously in Europe than they are in America.

But the other difference is numbers. Most migrants and their descendants in Western Europe are Muslims; whereas the majority of migrants in the United States are not Muslims. In fact the single thing that marks them out in the eyes of the majority society is that they're Spanish-speaking, and one academic nicely captured this in the title of an article he wrote when he said 'Why Islam is like Spanish.' When you think of multiculturalism in America you nearly always are thinking about Hispanics and the threat of them demanding bilingual rights; whereas nobody thinks language is the issue about multiculturalism in Western Europe. You say anything about multiculturalism, positive or negative, in Western Europe and everybody thinks that's a code for Muslims.

**NW:**

Well in Europe, given this crisis for multiculturalism, do you think multiculturalism has run its course, as it were? We've talked about its origins in the United States with the notions of equality and what grew out of that, and a Golden Era as it were of liberal toleration, and then the emergence of these quite frightening conflicts. Does that mean we have to abandon multiculturalism now, it's not a viable concept politically any more?

**TM:**

It's certainly become unpopular. 'Multiculturalism has failed', 'multiculturalism is dead', is so common a refrain now. Somebody made a list of all the European premieres that have actually made a speech in the last six months saying multiculturalism is dead, and it was I think about nine. It certainly includes the three most senior premieres - you know, our own Prime Minister Cameron, Nicolas Sarkozy President of France, and Angela Merkel Chancellor of Germany. I think it's very clearly related to what we were talking about just now, the emergence of religion - and not just religion in general, but quite assertive Muslims, Muslims demanding this, protesting against that, organising against this, and Muslims being powerful once they link up, not just with members of their faith, within their own national boundaries, but once they link up internationally, as we saw in the Danish cartoon affair, for instance. Muslims were a tiny minority, I think 1% of Denmark, and so they could be bullied. But once they managed to get the Arab populations agitated and those countries including Saudi Arabia, prosperous countries like Saudi Arabia, carried out a boycott of Danish goods, it was Denmark that was actually the junior. To say that multiculturalism is responsible for some of these things is completely mistaken.

Let's take the case of France, France has successfully resisted multiculturalism, is proud that it's resisted multiculturalism. It is willing to deny girls the freedom to wear what they choose to wear because it is so frightened of multiculturalism. Does anybody think that France has fewer minority/majority problems than Britain? You could say with some better justification that we are witnessing continuing problems around issues to do with integration, around minority/majority relations. That is closer to the truth but it's no one particular policy or model.

Some of the countries that are loudest in saying multiculturalism has failed have never even tried any multiculturalist policies. When has Germany instituted any kind of multiculturalism? So for Merkel to say 'multiculti' has utterly failed – well, not in Germany because it never was tried there.

**NW:**

What are the most important challenges for multiculturalism today?

**TM:**

I would say that there are certain key issues that need to be seriously thought about: issues around religion. How are we to incorporate groups for whom religious identity is very important, who are not willing to privatise their religious identity? Another important issue is what is the relationship between celebrating multiculturalism and having some form of group rights or group political representation? Because on the whole, I would say in a country like Britain there is quite a lot of support for one version of multiculturalism. People like the free mixing across ethnicity, across race, across religion. We celebrate the fact that London is a cosmopolitan city or a multicultural city: no one is strongly trying to be of one identity or another, and that refers to both the minorities and to the majority. So the majority doesn't try to impose a single culture but is open to cultural influences, and what people prize is synthesis, novelty and sharing. But some groups can not be accommodated in that way because they want to be recognised as groups and not just dissolving in to this happy, multicultural broth.

And I'd say the final big issue of multiculturalism today is 'What is the place of nationality?' Some multiculturalists assumed that we were moving towards an age, an epoch, that they characterise as post-national; this was what post globalisation was going to achieve. I think they were sadly mistaken as events have proved. In the last 10-15 years national identities have become strengthened all over the world, and certainly migrants are constantly being told to be more British, more French, more German. They're not told to be more European. Most European governments have come to the view that integration means playing up national identity, that national identity is a resource for integration and I actually agree with that view. The question is what kind of national identity. I think we need to multiculturalise our national identities so that the story that we tell about ourselves is one in which the minorities can recognise themselves and have a voice, and it's not a top down mono-cultural nationalism.

**NW:**

Tariq Modood, thank you very much.

**TM:**

Thank you, Nigel.