



Multiculturalism Bites

Chandran Kukathas on Varieties of Multiculturalism

David Edmonds:

The debate over female circumcision – or female genital mutilation (fgm) as it's usually known in the West - encapsulates the tensions in multiculturalism. In the West, a majority find it abhorrent: a tiny minority insist it's integral to their culture and want the freedom to practice it. How much leeway should communities be given to pursue their distinctive ways of life?

Would it be desirable for all citizens to share values and to engage in similar practices?

Professor Chandran Kukathas teaches at the London School of Economics. He maps out various approaches governments can take towards multiculturalism – among which he has his own – contentious – preference.

Nigel Warburton:

Chandran Kukathas, we're going to be talking about multiculturalism. What should we understand by that term?

Chandran Kukathas:

I think we can think about multiculturalism in two different ways. One is to think about it as describing a condition of society: when people talk about multiculturalism they sometimes mean just a culturally diverse society. We can also mean by multiculturalism a policy. Many societies, particularly Western democratic societies nowadays are multicultural because they employ multicultural policies, that is to say policies that address the issue of diversity within those societies.

NW:

Just to get that clear, you're saying that multiculturalism in the sense we're going to discuss it anyway is actually about political philosophy. It's about the justification of a certain organisation of society that facilitates satisfactory ways of accommodating different viewpoints?

CK:

I think that's correct. Multiculturalism really arose in countries like Australia and Canada and subsequently Britain and the United States because it was realised that society was culturally diverse and, more importantly, there were many groups within the society who wanted to hold on to their cultural particularity. Consequently a multicultural policy has evolved in order to work out how it was that we were to accommodate these differences.

NW: So let's be specific. There are some practices, some ways in which people live, which produce potential conflicts. Could you give some examples?

CK:

Well I think there are all kinds of ways in which people come into conflict, but we're thinking about conflicts that have their roots in cultural differences. People speak different languages: in any society that's linguistically diverse the issue of what language will be used, what language should be recognised, will come to the fore. People are also different in terms of their religion: all kinds of issues will arise - whether some sorts of religion should be tolerated at all, whether certain sorts of religious structures should be tolerated, whether certain forms of worship should be accepted, even very practical things like holidays and when the Sabbath should be kept. So I think there are many dimensions along which there may be conflict and I think they're very prominent today because we tend to live in societies that are diverse, in which we worship different gods, and we're looking for ways to try to resolve these tensions. But of course the fact that it's a practical problem does not mean that it's not a very deep philosophical problem as well.

NW:

So if we're approaching this issue philosophically what's the best place to start?

CK:

Well, obviously it depends very much on one's philosophical starting point and my own starting point is what I would call a liberal starting point, and for me to be a liberal is to be someone who thinks that individual freedom should be taken very seriously, individually equality should be taken seriously, and in particular one should recognise that there are many different ways that people want to live.

So my way of thinking about multiculturalism begins by assuming that people do want to live differently and we should not be in the business of trying to tell them how to live. The problem then is to figure out, well, what is that we can accept by way of common rules, common principles, that will allow us to get along given that we all want to live in different ways, but nonetheless also need in some respect to live by common standards.

NW: And what are the various approaches that might be taken to that issue?

CK: Well, it seems to me that there are a number of prominent possibilities, at least. One of them would be to take a view that the best way to approach multiculturalism is simply to exclude everyone who's different from coming into a society. This might be a kind of isolationist view you might take: perhaps the BNP would be in favour of this. Now this seems to me very impractical, there's not much support for it, and you would need to transform society so utterly that I don't think it's a serious contender.

Another possibility, and I think this was very prominent for a long time, is to say well what we need to do is accept that people are different but nonetheless we need somehow to assimilate them so that we all ultimately end up sharing a very strong common sense of what is ours, the way that we would like to live.

A third possibility would be to say that if we're going to take seriously the importance of cultural difference, recognising independent ways of life, then we should give special protections to those who want to live differently: perhaps grant them special rights or special accommodations. And that is a very prominent recent dimension in policy and also very much reflected in the literature on multiculturalism.

Another possibility would be to go for something like apartheid, but I think we know the fairly sorry history of this. Sadly this is not an isolated case that we're thinking about in South Africa: there are other places that want to pursue this; but I think ethically very very little can be said in defence of it.

Another possibility, which is the one that I favour, is a position that I would describe as weak multiculturalism. And this is a view that says we do need to recognise that people want to live differently: difference should be recognised and tolerated. But at the same time we also can't demand that those who disapprove of the way others live somehow endorse it or support the way others live.

So in this respect what I want to push forward is something I call weak multiculturalism as a kind of doctrine that says: Our basic principle is one of toleration or live and let live. If someone else wants to live differently, let them go ahead and do it. But let me not be asked to support it, or endorse it, or subsidise it in any way.

So this is a view that says we don't need to give groups special rights, strong entitlements, but neither do we discourage them or try to undermine them or try to assimilate them, and to the extent that assimilation takes place, which it will, let it take place by the interaction of people by their attempts to persuade one another to live one way or another, but not try to craft or engineer a particular outcome.

NW: It seems to me that we can eliminate those approaches pretty quickly, as I'm sure you'll agree: the isolationist position where you just say 'We're not going to let people who are different from us be part of our society', and then you've got the apartheid system which has separate groups with completely different rights within one's society, and that, as you pointed out, has got a terrible history.

So that leaves us with basically three positions: assimilation where people are actually converted to a consensus position. You have what you call 'weak' multiculturalism, a 'live and let live' approach: we should tolerate practices that are widely different from our own. In contrast with that, the approach which actively promotes the rights of particular groups in living the way they want to live.

So let's look at assimilation. Some people would say that's what happened in New York, for instance: you know, you get a group of people from several different cultures mixing in the melting pot of that city. After a couple of generations there's a sort of common core of beliefs, through education and other kinds of assimilation, that have come to the fore. What's wrong with that?

CK:

There's nothing wrong with people assimilating in itself, and of course over the generations assimilation will take place. The issue is whether or not people should be assimilated forcibly. 'Forcibly' may mean at the point of a gun, but it may also mean by compulsory education and a whole range of mechanisms. Even if it's forcible assimilation by very gentle means, the problem is that many people simply don't want to be assimilated, they don't want to be made the same. Interestingly I think both the strong multicultural, or the strong group rights view, and my weak multiculturalism both arise out of a recognition that there's something unsatisfactory about assimilation, and its unsatisfactory from a liberal point of view because the whole mark of liberalism is the view that people do have different ways of life, they do have different ends, they do have different desires, and this should be respected. So if people do want to live differently, including differently culturally, or to speak different languages, then this has to be accepted. If that's the case a policy of assimilation, however gentle, seems inconsistent with the liberal attitude.

NW:

Let's take that language issue, because there's a difference between saying that everybody who wants to be a part of this society has to have some threshold level in our common language: that's different from saying 'Nobody's allowed to speak their native tongue. in our city' which would be an extreme kind of assimilation. Why shouldn't people be expected to have the language in which the street signs are written, in which transactions in shops occur, in which people who bump into each other as strangers can then meet and help each other rather than misunderstand each other?

CK:

Well I think it could be very sensible for anyone in a society to try to speak the dominant language. To try to require people to speak English, say, in this society is almost redundant: people do want to learn the language, they do want to be able to get on, they do want to be able to read the street signs. So this issue really arises in places where language is more than just a tool that you might use in order to live more easily. It really arises in places where not being able to speak your language poses some kind of threat to your identity. And in those circumstances I think what the liberal needs to ask is, well, people very sensibly will make decisions to learn a language if it's going to make their lives go better, but sometimes they'll have to make a trade-off between making their lives more convenient and holding on to an identity. Now, from a liberal point of view, who should decide about that trade off? And I think the liberal answer should be 'Well, let the people who are those language speakers themselves decide: if they want to put themselves at a disadvantage, by having less access to the majority language because they want to preserve their cultural traditions, that's surely a decision for them.'

NW:

On the assimilation position you teach people the dominant language of the society, in school presumably or in evening classes. But the liberal position would tolerate people not learning the language that's dominant locally. The strong rights position might actually actively promote the preservation and enhancement of learning the minority languages so that money might be redirected into the particular group having facilities to become better at speaking the language of their parents.

CK:

Yes, and I think from my position, from the weak multiculturalist position, I would say there's no warrant for this because while I think the majority of people in society should tolerate those who want to live differently, speak different languages, this doesn't translate into an obligation to then support or subsidise whatever language they want to do. They are the ones who should bear the cost, unless there's some significant public benefit that can be shown.

NW:

So your position is that people should be allowed to do more or less what they want, but that must be up to a certain point, there must be a point where you say, 'No, that's going too far.' What is that point?

CK:

Well obviously this can't be pinpointed very exactly. But you're absolutely right that tolerating different ways of life does not mean tolerating everything. Obviously one can't tolerate all kinds of forms of criminality, and there may be things that one would want to discourage people from doing for very practical public good reasons. If you found that families were raising their children like Fagin in order to become thieves and pickpockets, there may be a good public interest reason to put a stop to this.

But at the same time, a great deal of leeway has to be given to people so that they can cleave to their own cultural traditions, to their own cultural beliefs, because again the key to liberalism is the view that there is no uniquely best way of life, so one needs to find some way of accommodating this difference.

NW:

Let's think about that in terms of a particular controversial example: the practice of female genital mutilation. If that's imported to Britain, shouldn't a liberal intervene? You can be a liberal but you don't have to accept that a culturally prevalent practice should be tolerated towards children in that way.

CK:

This is a very difficult issue. So let me give you first an abstract and more philosophical response, and then a more practical one. The philosophical response is to say that, with the position that I've taken, weak multiculturalism, I have to say that even a practice as terrible as female genital mutilation has to be tolerated. The reason for this is that once one takes the view that one should only tolerate those things that are tolerable, one in a sense has simply given the game away: then one is no longer thinking like a liberal, one is thinking in concrete terms about what is a good life. The logic of my position implies that even something as terrible as female genital mutilation should be tolerated. But what is the practical response to this? Or to put it differently, what would be the practical implication of this philosophical stance?

To address this issue properly one has to think about this particular practice. It's a practice that's prevalent in some parts of the world, notably in sub-Saharan Africa, where it's grown up as a result of particular cultural norms surrounding marriage. Even among those who recognise the harmfulness of this practice the difficulty is being the first mover, being the first one to abandon the practice, because this has very very serious costs. Now when you come to a country like Britain, of course, those background cultural norms no longer obtain. It's not a marriage issue. How does one deal with this in a place like Britain?

I should say at the outset I think this is a very very bad practice and anyone wanting to question this needs simply to look at the medical literature: it is a terrible practice. So I think there is a serious public health concern here. But my view is still that the mechanisms that one should deploy ultimately are mechanisms of reasoning and persuasion rather than a simple banning or prohibition. There was a famous case in Seattle some years ago at a hospital, I think it was called Harbour View where there was some parents who wanted to perform female genital mutilation on their daughter and the hospital came up with what looked like a useful compromise which was to say they would do kind of symbolic cutting but not actually do the cutting and infibulation that's standard practice: no harm would have been done and all parties would have been satisfied. Unfortunately the public outcry meant that this could not happen because even that very minimal cutting was regarded as unconscionable. The unfortunate consequence, of course, is that the parents in question then went back to Somalia and you can imagine what happened from there. So there are two things really: one in principle I'm not in favour of prohibitions or interventions, but also in practical terms one has to consider what would be the effect of intervention.

NW:

Some people think that toleration implies respect. But it's clear from what you're saying that you don't think that female genital mutilation is actually a good practice, you don't think it's something that people ought to be doing to their children. So, what does it mean to say 'I tolerate another way of living'?

CK:

Well, the word 'toleration' has many different dimensions to it and in some ways one can be tolerant simply be forbearing from action: I tolerate you simply because I refuse to do anything that will prevent you from doing what you're doing. But that need not imply that I respect what you're doing, or like what you're doing, it may even be consistent with my despising what you're doing. But there's also another sense of the word toleration which connotes a kind of respect. A tolerant person might be someone who is not only disinclined to intervene but who also shows a certain kind of awareness and respect for other people generally.

I think the richer form of toleration would be very desirable; but I think it's not really possible in principle all the time simply because of the fact that there are some practices which are very difficult for everyone to accept.

NW: I can imagine somebody sceptical listening to this and saying 'Well that's all very interesting, it's very theoretical, but it won't have any practical import in real life.'

CK:

Yes, I don't think that's the case. I think if one looks around the world, one of the things one is struck by is the extent to which people are moving around, living in different societies. So we do confront these questions all the time. And I think as the world becomes more mobile and people become more used to finding their neighbours looking and thinking differently to them, the more we're going to find that we'll need to address these issues head on.