The Fetish of the Margins: Religious Absolutism, Anti-racism and Postcolonial Silence

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Sometime in early 2006, a Powerpoint presentation on 'reformist' Islam produced a couple of years earlier by the Strategic Policy Team of the Home Office and Foreign Office was leaked to the *New Statesman*.['Working with the Muslim community: key messages', Strategic Policy team, Home Office / Foreign and Commonwealth Office, July 2004, document obtained by Martin Bright, New Statesman.]] It was one of numerous other such documents describing the government's strategic thinking on dealing with 'Muslim extremism'. One slide was especially striking because under the heading of 'reformist Islam', meaning an Islam that accepts the western, democratic paradigm in full, believes in women's emancipation and other such indicators of 'liberalism' or 'moderation', the document lists only two organisations as representing such a strand: the Jamaati-i-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, they are described as 'liberal' and 'progressive' organisations.

One can forward several plausible reasons for why two international Islamic Right political parties originally from Pakistan and Egypt respectively, each of which has an extensive history of violence and religious hatred, are to be habilitated into multicultural Britain: that the Foreign Office and, especially, the security services have had long established, even if uneven and informal, associations with Islamist parties and personalities abroad; that an independent dynamic related to the long-standing, so-called 'Arabist culture' in the Foreign Office is the cause; that the Home Office (and, even more implausibly, the Foreign Office) are simply ignorant about the nature of these organisations and are blundering along in the way the British state usually does around minority matters; that individuals with particular interests have promoted these organisations within the state; that the Islamic Right is genuinely or expediently seen as the solution to alleged extremism among Muslim youth; that promoting these organisations is a way of managing and keeping an eye on their personnel and activities; that these organisations, or sections of them, have miraculously changed their spots in the face of the rise of other *jihadi* and *irhabi* networks of political violence; or that it is in some unspecified 'national (security) interest' that the Islamic Right is actively promoted in Britain.

Consider another example (plucked from many such): one of the most important annual events in Tower Hamlets is the Baisakhi Mela, a huge festival and celebration of the Bangladeshi New Year. The *mela*, following the characteristic 'social effervescence' of South Asian festivals, is an open, secular event attended in large numbers by the local Bengali and other populations.

The *mela* is inseparable in much of the local political imagination from the 'war of liberation' against

Pakistan in 1971 and the horrific memories of a massive and systematic genocide against Bangladeshis undertaken by the Pakistani Army working in concert with Jamaati-i-Islami influenced militias. Some alleged associates of those militias are currently in Britain and were allegedly involved in war crimes; these individuals are regularly patronised by government, members of the Royal family or local authorities under a broad multiculturalist umbrella. Since the Jamaati-i-Islami influenced East London Mosque has come into existence, the *mela* has been regularly attacked as contrary to Islam, corrupting, impure (since it incorporates 'Hindu' and secular rituals from Sylhet) and hence to be forbidden as 'unIslamic'. [1] Those annual attacks have become increasingly vociferous and systematic. The far-left in Tower Hamlets has joined in these attacks on an important public secular space. The future of the *mela* may be under threat, and its ending would represent a defeat for secular nationalists in the face of the Islamic Right and far-left.

If some of the above arguments about the state's reasons for accommodation with the Islamic Right are plausible, there still remains a much broader question: why does this pattern of state adjustment with and promotion of the extreme South Asian religious right repeat itself decade after decade?

How can one explain why in the 1980s, Ken Livingstone's left-wing Greater London Council funded the Jamaati-i-Islami and Hindutva groups, a pattern that other local authorities repeated annually? How can it be that under the name of multiculturalism or anti-racism, both the Foreign Office and the Stop the War Coalition / Respect / Socialist Workers Party are falling over each other in their desire to court the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaati-i-Islami? How does a leftish local authority support and fund a right-wing Islamist mosque and nexus of Jamaati organisations? How can the far-left justify working with the Islamic Right to attack a secular Bengali space?

THE MYSTIFICATIONS OF CULTURE

Part of the answer lies in a mesmerising culturalism and the embedding of a ubiquitous cultural-communitarian orthodoxy across varied intellectual, political and policy fields that travel from the left to the right, from independent progressive groups to the British state. If it should be a scandal to the democratic integrity of any individual UK South Asian that an unelected leader or organisation is empowered to represent them fully, or cage their changing political views into a permanent religious abstraction, this is nevertheless how official British multiculturalism in its broadest sense functions. 'Culture' in the abstract provides intelligibility and unity for the most diverse group of political debates, policy initiatives and academic interventions about minority-hood and multicultural policy. It acts as a transcendental and protean abstraction, a self-reifying thing-in-itself, such that it has become the modality for thinking about almost anything, including geo-political conflict. It becomes coextensive with politics and sociality itself, such that there is effectively no social exteriority to culture, and certainly little in the way of a political economy of culture.

Today, we are all cultural subjects, though some of us are more culturally imbued than others. It is hence possible to speak of a definitive culturalist episteme for our multicultural times. Its matrices of intelligibility are figured through culturalist tropes such as 'the west and the rest', 'orientalism and occidentalism' and other grand geo-spatial binaries. These metonymically stand in for both the 'Third World' and ethnic minorities in the west, and are based on a methodological foregrounding of the image of the west or its 'others'. For example, the idea of culture acts to suture neatly some of the most militaristic forms of neo-conservatism with a monumental civilisational topology of perpetual geopolitical conflict. [2] Such tectonic binaries are critical to the political projects of the American neo-conservative right, exemplified by the writings of Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama and Robert Kagan and the more pungent effluvium produced by David Frum and Richard Perle among numerous others. [3]

However, it is also surely significant that critique of 'Orientalism' and Orientalists, as well as the deployment of a 'west-rest' cultural trope have been central to the political discourses of both Islamist and Hindutva movements, irrespective of how they also reproduce Orientalism themselves. Similarly, it is an idea of culture that for some (whether of the right or left), tidily divides 'the west' and 'the rest', 'the west' and 'Islam' and so forth. Culturalist reification is at the centre of claims of the kind that '9/11' demonstrates that we live in a multi-ethnic world, that those attacks were motivated by hatred or jealousy of American cultural values, or that they represented an assault on an emerging global culture of democracy. Culture similarly animates omnipresent claims that talk about 'Islam' in the abstract, or seek to find the answer to terrorism in the religion and culture in the name of which the terrorists, using similar abstractions, themselves act. [4] It is not the opposition of abstract universalism versus cultural relativism that is definitive today, but rather that this productive opposition only makes sense because of the cultural underlabouring upon which it rests - each side, as it were, accusing the other of a cultural partisanship that is smuggled within a universal claim.

Academically, the cultural method (analysis of archive, text, sign) is amenable to epistemic overreach, allowing for a variety of crude claims regarding the incommensurability between subaltern or diaspora cultures and 'western' thinking (this also takes the form of a particularly dim claim that all subaltern agency is intrinsically 'anti-western' or 'anti-imperialist'.) The thematic unities of this specifically left-wing 'west-rest' discourse are provided by its performance of 'anti-westernism' and anti-liberalism and through ecological and autarkic conceptions of inimitable or incommensurable subaltern and diaspora cultures. As important is the privileging of the alleged insight from the cultural margins that reveals the duplicities of 'western' thinking: the singular, orphic gaze from the diasporic or subaltern margins sees much across many times and places. [5] This is the gifted, almost supernaturally penetrating vision that migrants (Bhabha), gendered subalterns (Spivak), enchanted postcolonials (Chakrabarty) seemingly have. The temporal oscillation is therefore from the high colonial past to the diasporic present, a flattening, flattering conception of historical time. [6] In this way, the culturalist method occludes, rather than provides, fresh insights.

Such kinds of culturalist abstractions do not have the analytical power to explore with a genuine sense of ontological or historical depth what the real 'west' or 'the rest' might actually mean. Is oiligarchical Saudi Arabia or communist North Korea or 'secular' Syria part of the west, or of the rest? What about India or China? Was Iraq a secular state or society? Is it now? At what point did the Afghan *mujahideen* (largely initiated under US authority and direction by the pro-American Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) cease being 'western' and become part of the 'rest'? The epistemic flattening of states, histories, economies, nations, wars, even civilisations means that the transformations in geo-military imperialism we see today, as well as the forms of political violence that have emerged to engage or resist America, can only be apprehended through times, spaces, apparent congruencies and seeming continuities that are increasingly superfluous.

Also of importance is the inert, innocent nature of the agency and subjectivity that left culturalism imparts to non-western subalterns and western diasporics, a kind of heroic, narcissistic, victimology that cannot name itself as such. In much multicultural theory, the diasporic subaltern is primarily a culturally-described, infra-ethical victim rather than a subject fully capable of ethical existence and judgement. In postcolonial theory, the subaltern is simply voiceless. It cannot judge, since ethical judgement pollutes pure subalternity with a poisonous humanism; it cannot make a moral claim, since the latter is inherently a legislative claim upon and about humanity, and hence advances an unacceptable transcendentalism. This innocence is figured as an existential condition within which inheres a disavowal of the capacity for ethical judgement beyond what is dogmatically required to uphold the exceptional, superlative nature of one's ownmost being as a marginal figure.

This means that left culturalism (or multiculturalism or indeed much western anti-racism), unlike

predecessors like Fanon, avoids theorising the kind of contemporary subaltern agency that can and does kill other 'others', whether it is the southern Sudanese, Muslims in Gujarat, Shias in Pakistan and Iraq, Hindus and Buddhists in Kashmir or Bangladesh, or women and Christians in northern Nigeria. Nor, indeed, does it offer an imaginatively penetrating vocabulary that can help us understand any better the atrocities in Rwanda, Darfur, Gujarat, East Timor or, for that matter, the invasion and occupation of Iraq or the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

Through a culturalist method, it is always possible to trace the origins of contemporary subaltern horrors to old texts that elucidate rationalist, humanist, positivist systems of high Empire and colony; similarly, it is always possible to construct an argument about contemporary subaltern or diaspora victimhood that metonymically invokes the colonial past. However, this can also result in a suspension of ethical belief that can leave the moral space vacated, and therefore subject to occupation by the political right (and their pro-war chums on the left).

This kind of overwhelming culturalism is problematic not just for its depoliticising consequences but for the restricted political forms it makes available and the forms that it subdues. One of its effects, whether in academia, policy-making or amongst more activist tendencies, is to stifle the terms through which effective intellectual opposition could be manifested.

One critical set of areas where this is particularly pertinent is the politics of multiculturalism and the consolidation within social policy of a culturalcommunitarianism, empowered by a series of desecularising academic interventions. This essay explores this area first, and follows it with an extended discussion of the predicaments faced by the South Asian left in th UK, especially because of the rise of the religious right from the mid-1980s onwards.

THE MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

In many sophisticated or vulgar forms of postcolonial theory, the foundations of secularism are conceived to be the property of a distinctive European culture whose anterior causes were the Reformation or the Renaissance, or which are based on a disagreeable rationalist modernity. [7] This view is shared by multicultural theorists who wish to 'provincialise Europe' in their own way by relativising secularism as a particular, often idiosyncratic cultural possession that increasingly looks outmoded in multi-ethnic western societies. [8] Both therefore have an ineffectual stance regarding the sustained attacks on liberal and progressive rights by the Asian religious right. It is imperative to identify the latter as movements of the Asian religious right, rather than be seduced by abstract culturalist rhetoric that mystifies political interests under broader discourses of cultural or religious authenticity and belonging. One of the most remarkable mystifications engendered by communitarian-culturalist discourse is the concealment of political interests, groups and parties (whether Islamist, Hindutva or Zionist) through discourses of authenticity, discrimination and victimhood that normalise and habituate what are otherwise quite mendacious political ambitions.

In the face of both religious assertion and an overwhelming communitarian culturalism, British left secularism (including its Asian, black and anti-racist varieties) is in danger of receding almost to the point of political obsolescence.

The facilitation by the Stop the War Coalition/Socialist Workers Party of the entry of the Muslim Brotherhood (the Muslim Association of Britain) into mainstream British politics for the first time ever and on such a wide scale represents an historic moment that is far more politically significant for the longer term than its initial location in the margins of far-left politics might suggest. The Muslim Brotherhood joins the Pakistan-based Jamaati-i-Islami, a range of other Islamists, and various salafi scholars in occupying the space of alleged moderation in Britain. It is exactly this

nexus of Jamaati, Brotherhood and Wahabbi-salafi groups that constitute the dominant Islamic Right in the UK.

This is the 'moderate-religious' political space whose early origins lie in the Thatcher period and former Home Secretary Michael Howard's courting of tendencies that much later (1997) became the (deeply Jamaati-influenced) Muslim Council of Britain, and which received an institutional boost after 11 September 2001. Its influence has increased considerably since July 2005, with the helping hand of Britain's unethical multiculturalism, foundationally incapable of ethical-political evaluation of cultural identity claims. The space of alleged moderation has been constructed by authoritarian Islamist tendencies precisely in and through their distancing from terrorism in the UK.

Secularism is hardly the preserve of the left anymore, where it is often anxiously seen as potentially anti-religious and therefore anti-minority. Hence the assertive spaces of secularism have become occupied by the right (as in the *Jyllands Posten* cartoon affair), by those who see the crisis of secularism as equivalent to the existence of Asians, or by the pro-war pro-Zionist left-wing champions of Enlightenment's reason who can barely disguise their visceral aversion to Muslims in general and Arabs in particular. 'Culture' is, of course, central to official British multiculturalism. Despite its philosophical, philological, ethnological and administrative precedents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British multiculturalism is seen to start really from the late-1960s disavowal of post-war assimilationism.

Interestingly, during the 1970s, Britain's official policy thinking generated a formative idea of Asian (usually male) youth as trapped 'between two cultures', an idea of singular in-between-ness that also emerges, in a celebratory form, in contemporary postcolonial theory. [9] The claim was that Asian youth lived something like a schizophrenic life on the boundary of two distinct moral fields, the Asian community and mainstream Britain. The 'Asian community' was rendered mainly through its supposedly traditional practices - religious and ethnic customs, strong community morality, family cohesion, arranged marriages and the like. Asians were hence imagined through an ecological and self-governing idea of a culture and community - a community marinated in religion and ethnicity, steeped in tradition, headed by an authoritative, typically aged male leadership, and not exactly hermetically sealed, but nevertheless generally immune from transforming influences from outside.

The opposition between the wholesome cultural integralism promoted by patriarchal guardians and the secular, impure, profane existence of Asian youth also betrays a strong distinction between the normal and the pathological, one that drives both British multiculturalism and the activities of the religious right. The remedy is regulation, specifically the promotion of religion as nomos.

Such normative ideas of dense, resistant cultures and autonomous communities can be deeply conservative and have been challenged far less frequently than they should have been. They initially advanced an autarky
– a more or less autonomous unit with its own rules and forms of cultural authority and internal governance. This idea of the socio-cultural autarky is one form of group thinking that forms a historically important strand in British institutional orientations towards minority ethnic citizen-subjects, powering a regressive dynamic of institutionally-managed autarky on the one hand and popular communalism on the other. [10] It is a persistent discourse that has become an institutional common-sense.

It should be a puzzle why the 'thinkability' of Asians in Britain is inseparable from the view of them as a 'community', a cultural cauldron located in the city but whose dense ecology acts to distance it from genuine metropolitan belonging. Since the nation-wide riots of 1981, the cultural-communitarian idea has been realised in sophisticated political and institutional forms that are more relevant today than they were in the 1970s. We see today not a return to the assimilationism of the

1950s, nor anything like a turn towards French republican civic citizenship or *laïcité*, but a combination of new assimilationist ideas with ones about state-initiated and managed cultural 'autonomy'. The latter is also not the autarky of earlier times, but one in which state institutions and policies related to race, religion and ethnicity are inextricably linked to the promotion and management of communally and ethnically-defined leadership institutions within civil society - invariably dominated by the least progressive, undemocratic and stern representatives of whichever community is under the policy gaze. In policy terms, individual members of the minority community are grouped into one main collective subject for consultation, policy development, health and social welfare needs assessment, surveillance or control (though this does not at all imply that these are unified strategies).

One important risk is that a full British civic citizenship is usually available for those outside the Asian community, but those considered culturally inside can possess something like an infra-citizenship, a citizenship that is usually formally legally present but nonetheless partially mutilated or qualified by an ascribed group membership. Many examples abound, but one will do: the curtailing of full civic citizenship and the range of formal legal rights afforded some Asian women facing violence in the home because of culturalist groupbased ideas within some social welfare provision about legitimate practices related to violence against women. [11] There are important political tensions between policies based on the idea of the social and cultural autarky, and ones based on the formal rights of any individual citizen-subject or sanctuary seeker. These tensions are now central to how Muslims are represented, negotiated with and treated (especially in the association between cultural belonging and fearsome criminality).

The cultural autarky is also paradigmatic in multicultural social and political theory. The report in 2000 by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain illustrates well this cultural communitarian approach. [12] Despite the qualifications regarding individual rights, the overwhelming thrust of both this report and dominant theoretical debates about multiculturalism is to propagate the idea of minority population as equivalent to a cultural community. (This communitarian idea of the minority community is also espoused by those who might otherwise be critical of the curtailment of individual by group rights). [13] Just as problematic is the intertwining of the communal idea with arguments that equate social well-being, the integrity of the personality, and moral worth and standing with the necessity of public recognition of religious group identity. [14] However, social recognition is rarely the problem, since those demanding recognition are already 'recognised', even if recognition is based on loathing ('I recognise you as worthy of my contempt and hatred'). [15] It is typically political contestation over the type and content of 'recognition' that is the issue. Moreover, state recognition, especially of minority religion, which many multicultural theorists advocate, brings religion within the purview of legislative and executive apparatuses, a development that necessarily initiates and empowers a communal-political logic. 'Britain' becomes not a 'community of communities' but instead a population within which minority populations receive institutional recognition as communal groups in a form that is best able to advance the undemocratically-derived political interests of those who wish to make communal claims. [16] Those interests today are invariably dominated by political parties of the South Asian and middle-Eastern religious right.

Multicultural theoretical efforts slide from an essentially 'multicommunitarian' understanding of national belonging (though in practice, communal identity only applies to minority groups), towards a rendition of minority groups as determined by a cultural integrity and hence motivated by a survivalist problematic of cultural protection, defence, loss and existence. 'Culture' also necessarily implies a duty of loyalty to culture among adherents. [17]

Multicultural theory also characteristically privileges a primarily religious conception of the 'culture' of multiculturalism, one peculiarly seen to be a basis for moral integrity and direction that a

deracinated cosmopolitanism is incapable of furnishing. [18] The cosmopolitan, profane lived cultures of Asians in Britain is rarely, if ever, foregrounded, unless it is to make the pithy claim that all identities are multiple, changeable or hybrid, or that all cultures contain diversity. One might consider such efforts as special pleading for a religious-communal idea of culture which results in a progressive desecularisation of the academic discipline, as well as social policy. Even if religious discrimination is advanced as an explanation for disadvantage, one consequence will be that religion becomes identified as the cause of poor educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, lack of 'social cohesion', lack of 'integration', domestic overcrowding - thus heralding a return to the circular 'ethnic pathology' arguments of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Similarly, in much multicultural theory, an affable liberalism can mask an elitist religious identity politics and cultural narcissism that cannot admit that this is what it is: the multiculturalist theoreticians' call for cultural and religious tolerance and inclusiveness needs to be rigorously tested against the claims of other Asian populations ('minorities within minorities'), especially dalits and Ahmaddiyas. As importantly, multicultural theorists elide the key institution for cultural development and reproduction: the family. Indeed, the absence of the politics of the family constitutes a glaring void across many culturalist tendencies.

While, among multicultural theorists, there is critique of some exceptional practices (for example, female genital mutilation or coerced marriage), the 'normal', normative functioning of the family as the basis for cultural identities is not interrogated and is, hence, naturalised. There is nothing approaching a critical politics of gender and the family, or of systematic culturally-sanctioned gender inequity or intolerance. One additional paradox is that Asian cultural values and traditions in the UK that are naturalised by multiculturalism are, in their countries of origin, deeply contested political issues. Specifically, the human rights and public and personal freedoms women have fought for abroad are erased by some British multicultural theorists who argue for the institutionalisation of religious patriarchs.

ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITARIANISM

Many ideas about cultural autarky and the 'between two cultures' existence of Asian youth were vigorously challenged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mostly by Asian, anti-racist, pro-feminist progressives, mostly secular in orientation, and opposed to paradigms that prioritised ethnicity, culture and religion as dominant markers of communal identity. That independent Asian (and black) movement has gone, and its memories are dispersed among the smaller remnants and networks that continue to exist. There is indeed a powerful history of secular Asian anti-racist struggles over almost the last 30 years – from Brick Lane in 1976-78 and Southall in 1978-79; Grunwicks and other industrial battles for economic justice that presaged Thatcherism; the national events of 1981 starting in Brixton (April) and Southall (July) and then throughout the country; the rise of Asian women's organisations and their campaigns and activities around immigration, violence, civic and legal rights, and religious fundamentalism; numerous campaigns around racist attacks and murders, policing and criminal justice; the immense variety of anti-deportation campaigns; and the development of Asian youth movements. This radical politics was important in facing down the real threat of organised mass fascism in the 1970s, and through this consolidating a new independent black political sphere that was sustained well into the 1980s. Such histories are entirely written out of the discourses of academic multiculturalism or postcolonialism whose tangible institutional spaces were often the consequence of these earlier struggles.

This earlier movement maintained a secular commitment to what we can now call human rights, civil liberties, a fuller and more complete civic citizenship and, decisively, social and economic justice

and radical social transformation. As important were sometimes notional, sometimes very real commitments to international movements against dictatorships, women's rights, imperial brutalities, neo-liberal political economy, poverty and communalism. The ethical parameters that informed these groups in the 1980s and 1990s were usually universal in scope and they frequently went well beyond the injustices faced only by Asian constituencies – a marked difference from the religious-communal narcissism of many of today's religious Asian stakeholders, those besuited men whose shrill authoritarianism sabotages their moderate public masquerades.

This remarkably neglected history of secular Asian struggles in Britain, including the history of the nature and ferocity of the racisms that Asians faced, is in danger of being forgotten entirely by today's younger Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. For some of those young people, the collective term 'Asian' evokes disgust and they are instead keen to celebrate the supremacy of what they have recently discovered to be their own immaculate sacred texts, monuments and civilisations. The loss of the memory of this history can be mourned, or that history can be rescued. However, its political capacity in now challenging the communalisation of Asian politics in the UK can be doubted. For some on the Asian religious right, it is precisely this labour and people's history they wish to erase, and replace with a vulgar politics of class elitism or religious chauvinism. It is one of the peculiarities of this period that some young religious Hindus vehemently 'oppose colonialism' by claiming to be the real Aryans, just as some young Muslims claim to have seen right through 'western imperialism' and at its core is a world conspiracy of Jews or Freemasons, or a Crusader-Zionist-Hindu alliance. The argument that a resurgent BNP or the new National Front are the real problem becomes superfluous since they already vigorously oppose the latter. Opposing white supremacism and fascism can dovetail with other fascistic ideologies of communal purity.

Hence, anti-racism and anti-fascism appear to be exhausted in their capacity to turn some younger generations of Asians away from the appeal of non-western fundamentalisms and fascisms. Secular anti-racism may not be effective in the case of some younger Hindus or Sikhs who welcome the targeting, saturation surveillance, political control and management of Muslim communities – even proposals for 'internment', 'extraordinary renditions' and other punitive assaults on human rights and civil liberties.

As the independent black movement receded, it was replaced by new corporatist black formations that came in the wake of the 1981 and 1985 urban events. [19] They represented a different political project that tended to be based on political ambitions, on the tyranny of personal affect and experience, and a somewhat formulaic understanding of institutional racism. Much corporate anti-racism included an obsession with veracity regarding how minorities were depicted or spoken of, and about real or perceived insult arising from what was considered to be offensive or distorted representation of a 'race', culture, ethnicity or religion. This has since become a key method of political mobilisation among the Asian religious right, those who seem to believe that Asians are flimsy, delicate personalities who will shatter into a thousand pieces because of a critical, dissenting, offensive book, play, or image that someone (usually from 'within the community') has created.

In turn, some sociologists call for group defamation to be made illegal in the UK in order to protect the fragile sensibility of the religious personality. [20] This religious right politics of representation is not about propagating the endlessly smiling and wearisome 'positive images' of old. It is a novel politics of religious representation and assertion, strategically central to today's religious 'moderates' and demagogues. It emphasises religious 'authenticity' against alleged distortion, and religious 'understanding' against perceived or felt offence, criticism or 'hurt'. This is intended to shield whatever is promoted as the authentic religion, religious practice or symbol from analysis or criticism.

For demagogues, their religion is perpetually under threat, and this, indeed, seems to be the only

real meaning of religion for them (hence, their survivalist vocabularies of siege, victimhood, extinction). This results in a public sphere of illiberal religiosity that seeks to place itself above scrutiny and does not wish to trouble itself with the robust rules of public legitimation that secular or atheist political discourses inevitably face. It was indeed a short step from dwelling narcissistically on the specialness and uniqueness of one's black, minority or diasporic 'experience' to focusing on the supremacy of one's Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim one. A novel exhibition of the body and its clothing became public markers for a new-found religiosity especially among the younger generations – a proliferation of religious symbol and uniform, hijab and beard, icon and deity. Faith transformed into public display and exhibition, the latter substituting for a genuine consideration of how, ethically and morally, different Asians were to live with, rather than against, each other. [21] Religious absolutism indeed fails a key ethical test – the practical exemplification of a foundational ethical commitment to the full humanity of whoever is ascribed at any point in time to be the radical other of oneself, even as the humanism of 'humanity' is recognised as an unfinished process without guarantees. Religious absolutism instead represents a different ethical world in which the capacity for moral feeling is deliberately removed from its universal relevance and intentionally particularised solely to one's religious group, and so cannot be a morality at all. Political pluralism is transformed by the Asian religious right into a chauvinistic, communal supremacism pitted against other Asian religious adversaries.

Notwithstanding the decline of the left globally, the desecularisation of what were previously common Asian affiliations resulted from an elision by the left of political religion and communal sectarianism in the UK, a factor that was already apparent in the early 1980s (well before the Rushdie affair).

For example, the Asian left overwhelmingly assumed that the struggles against racism had the capacity to unite Asians in a common political struggle. However, those strategies that focused solely on race and racism also tended to promote an uncritical celebration of a unitary Asian community that paradoxically enforced a communal-cultural, rather than secular logic.

Raw varieties of such anti-racism mainly exist today in the form of some UK South Asian academic tendencies that are entirely isolated from the practical history of human rights, women's rights or even grassroots antiracism, but which insist on collective silence or censorship if an injustice or human rights violation is perpetrated by a person, movement or state that is perceived to be 'not white'. Political intervention becomes limited to a kind of narcissism that can only express fear of the omnipresent racist who scrupulously gathers together every dubious utterance. It represents a domesticated parochialism that, in the vigour of its British isolationism, is unmistakably Middle England

Hence, left anti-racism already contained ideas of community that were problematic in several ways, and now seem superfluous in a period when transnational affiliations across distant civil societies can be at least as important as allegiance to any local community. These emergent transnational processes, apparent even in the mid-1980s, were not bound to any particular civil society, community or nation and represented a new set of geo-social ideas about identity and political affiliation. They were also exploited by new religious right forces whose importance and novelty was not fully recognised.

The Rushdie affair from 1988 was not a cause of transnational religious activism, but a consequence of it.

The progressive secular ideal of community was essentially local and defensive, an anti-racist communitarianism that apprehended culture, ethnicity and religion as essentially benign backdrops. However, the actual 'community' was excessive to its fights against racism and fascism – it

contained numerous other dynamics of formation, political economy, settlement and change that were rarely foregrounded. Ethical judgements about some of the political institutions of the community, including religious absolutist and patriarchal groups, pro-family and anti-abortion advocates, and varieties of communal, nationalist and ethnic sectarianism were rarely challenged, except by a few exceptional tendencies. Progressive approaches to gender, the family and sexuality are key litmus tests for the differences in approaches to human rights, democratic freedoms and civil liberties between progressives and others (as starkly illustrated in the campaigns against what are appallingly misnamed as 'honour killings'). The defensive community autonomy advocated by the Asian left described what the left was against but rarely could it say what it was for, what its future horizon of possibilities for social transformation were.

Therefore, secular communitarian ideas could slip into defensive ones based on a cultural autarky, a community implicitly comprised in and through 'its' religion and culture. Consequently, under the banners of both multiculturalism and anti-racism, religious demagogues demanded their rights and freedoms against the discrimination and disadvantage they perceived as arising from the religious ideologies to which they chose to adhere. Such demands were made using virtually the same languages of rights, liberty, freedom, discrimination and autonomy that were formerly the preserve of progressive social movements. Hence, the UK Muslim Brotherhood-sponsored 'pro-hijab' campaigns, widely supported by anti-racists and the left, utilise the language of women's rights and freedoms, but have nothing to say about the rights and freedoms of women who are abused, beaten up, lashed, stoned, beheaded or killed elsewhere for not adhering to the dress codes that salafis, jihadis, Ikhwanis, the Jamaati-i-Islami and its alliance, or the Taliban decree.

With some exceptions exemplified mainly by Asian feminist organisations, the renewed assertion of religious politics based on the family, gender and domesticity were usually unopposed. The Asian left did not publicly develop and sustain a critical politics of the private sphere, the family, children and gender relations. These were therefore left to religious absolutist influences and interventions. For religious absolutists, the personal is most definitely political. Authoritarian religious movements have consistently prioritised absolutist views about gender, the family, sexuality, young people and leisure, in order to speak for, make hegemonic claims over and attempt to discipline the community as a whole and its 'wayward' women and girls in particular. For example, an immense range of religious pamphlets was disseminated in the UK during the early 1990s, directly targeting individuals and families, women and teenagers. [22] (They were part of a sustained tendency among transnational authoritarian religious movements from abroad to prescribe religious codes of conduct (both Hindu *dharma* and Muslim *fiqh*) for adherents in the diaspora – a disciplinary and hegemonic process that illustrated the singular importance of the diaspora for those movements.)

Such publications, written in a simple, mostly humourless but personal style, were not necessarily the preserve of any one religion. They promoted in guidebook fashion an immense set of rules about moral conduct, bodily displays of religiosity, acceptable leisure activities and entertainments, leisure activities to be firmly avoided, the family, child-rearing and home-based role of women, strict guidance for teenagers and children, and techniques to minimise contact with and avoid unbelievers or those of other faiths at work or in public places. They placed an overwhelming burden on women, as well as youngsters, through their stress on the closure of the spaces of individual personality, and by propagating an anti-cosmopolitan, domestic subalternity. As Muhammad Abdul Bari, the allegedly 'moderate' head of the Muslim Council of Britain, argues, the key dangers to the family-based, childcare role of women, and their need for personal sacrifice, are feminism, individuality, secular gender roles, sexual freedom and 'materialism'. [23]

The emphasis of these guides for personal living in the UK was based on a religious supremacy that focused on the innate inferiority of other beliefs or non-believers. Civil society was precisely the field on which the religious right undertook considerable, dogged, patient and long-term labour. The

politics of the Asian religious right was based on critical and painstaking attention towards the local institutions of cultural production, and the development of a politics of religious assertion against which there was little effective secular left cultural politics.

The new cultural politics that developed around religion was not the 'cultural turn' that preoccupied academics and that many activists (probably wisely) dismissed. However, it is surely significant that the 'cultural turn' in academia elided virtually entirely the rise of the Asian religious right throughout the 1980s and 1990s (despite its 'essentialist' politics.) Many cultural theorists rummaged instead for concealed signs of Orientalism, racism and 'otherness' in the new nation-wide popularity of Asian music, films, food, youth cultures, fashion and clothes from the 1990s; Madonna's appropriation of the *bindi* from Asian women was clearly a monstrous ethical tragedy.

The religious right emphasis on the institutions of civil society, especially education, the family and other sites of cultural reproduction, was neither matched nor consistently opposed by the left. This related partly to influential views that located ethnicity and religion as essentially irrelevant 'divide and rule' strategies used by the state to divert attention away from racism and class. [24] To be sure, there is an important relation between the corporate multiculturalist policy initiatives that started to flourish from the mid- 1980s, the rise of religion and ethnicity-based organisations, and the related rise of the religious right within voluntary sector, welfare, educational and other policy areas. However, one consequence of this kind of race and class analysis was an evasion of sectarian ethnicity and religion as autonomous, independent political factors that were deeply important for one strand of community activists. What precisely is the relation between anti-racist activism and the religious activism from the mid-1980s for *halal* meals in Bradford schools? If the latter results in increasing desecularisation of state services, should the former support it? Hence, much anti-racist politics subsumed, remained silent about, or actively supported key religious demands in favour of a broader valuing of what it imagined to be a unitary anti-racist community.

This tendency continues in those who, somewhat staggeringly, claim that racism was the primary cause of the July 2005 London bombings, or others who (hope to) see in salafi-*jihadi* and *irhabi* ('terrorist') politics a resistance to imperialism that is cognate with the anti-imperialist struggles of yesteryear or the anti-globalisation anti-poverty movements of today. That the left unhesitatingly defends the human rights of Moazzem Begg, a person who was kidnapped, tortured viciously, incarcerated illegally and released without charge, should simply be an unremarkable fact. What is remarkable is how many left anti-racists have made this person a symbolic hero.

There is a further critical elision in communitarian anti-racist thinking between the defence by the left of (known and proven) salafi-*jihadis* of the Islamic Right, and the urgently required defence by the left of the human rights and civil liberties of UK Muslim populations facing saturation surveillance, mass arrests, police targeting and demonisation. There is of course a substantial debate in the academic literature about the conceptual utility of 'race'. If this debate remains unsettled, it has barely begun to empirically address the varieties of contemporary xenology, obliquely manifested in activist debates over terms such as 'Islamophobia', 'Muslimophobia', 'anti-Muslim racism', 'anti-Muslim cultural racism' and so on. The bigotry, harassment and violence meted out to Muslims might be hammered into the racism box, while noting carefully that all other Asian groups have been affected or that this is a new variant of cultural racism. However, this seems inadequate and perhaps reflects in a different way the parochial reductionism of debates that cannot see beyond race or racism, beyond colony and Empire, or beyond the Crusades and the gates of Vienna.

Key conceptual terms important to the left – state, labour, class, and community – were also being undermined by transformations in the politics of racism during the 1990s. Immigration and class (which preoccupied south and south-east Asian, west African and Caribbean populations) were

replaced by a different politics of asylum and sanctuary, institutional welfare processes, civil and ethnic conflict, genocide and politicide abroad. New processes, especially of refugee settlement, were occurring that were not easily encapsulated within lexicons of community formation or industrial workers' struggles. There were also uneven and geographically variable but nevertheless major class transformations within Asian populations. The Asian working class constituency of earlier left anti-racist discourse had shrunk, albeit geographically unevenly, by the early 1990s. Conversely, the assumption that Asian 'ethnic' belonging necessarily implied progressive politics was misplaced – some Asians find it entirely possible to be simultaneously a Labour or Liberal Democrat supporter, an anti-war protestor and a committed activist for Hindutva or Islamist groups.

The formidable consolidation in the 1990s of the Asian religious right as key players and stakeholders was also critical in creating a new form of transnational activist politics, characteristically based on demanding minority religious rights in Britain but propagating supremacist, hate-driven antiminority ideologies in South Asia. These groups rapidly staked a claim to the institutional spaces which New Labour multiculturalism had expanded. One important development, whose political future is unclear, was the establishment of enduring transnational networks and alliances between the religious right here and parent organisations in south Asia or the middle-east.

This was a conscious and strategic process whereby religious political parties and organisations, missionary movements, welfare organisations and charities from abroad established major networks in the UK. These organisations began to expand in the UK and, conversely, their work in the UK began to have dramatic impact in the 'home' countries. It is no accident that supporters of virtually every major Islamist and Hindutva political party or organisation from the middle-east and south Asia dominate local and national spaces of Asian minority representation and consultation. An entirely new dynamic also emerged of fawning deference by some (especially younger) Asians towards a range of middle-eastern Islamist activists and scholars, in which Asian ethnic or cultural belonging became an embarrassing awkwardness that had to be repudiated in favour of (typically salafi-based) religious authenticity.

These processes highlighted how the interests of sections of minority groups in the west can be radically opposed to the interests of impoverished, non-elite, oppressed or minority groups in the 'home' country. [25] The religious right in south Asia specifically privileged their supporters in the UK, Europe, USA, Canada and elsewhere. Some sections of the diaspora became important not because of the incarnadine chicken tikka masala and tinny Bollywood jingles they cheerfully offered to Britain's beery youth, but because of their determined and uncompromising support for chauvinistic ideologies and violent organisations abroad. This demonstrated starkly that no natural political affiliation between the minority living in the West and the oppressed in the 'home' countries can be assumed.

One other consequence was the way sections of the Asian communities wished to distance themselves dramatically from their erstwhile compatriots.

Particularly after the 2001 events in the northern towns (though starting much earlier) some Hindu and Sikh groups demanded not to be addressed as 'Asians', and instead to be recognised as high achievers in employment and education, and as loyal, model minorities committed fully to Britishness.

Hence, class divisions in Asian populations came to be articulated as religious divisions, with some successful Hindus and Sikhs claiming to be a whole universe away from the Muslims they rubbed shoulders with daily: the 'good' minorities against the 'bad'. That there has been a progressive desecularisation of a wide range of independent political and policy spaces should be an

uncontroversial claim. Of significance, however, is the momentum of such processes following the London bombings. In August 2005, a restricted series of Foreign and Commonwealth and Home Office documents from 2004 were leaked. [26] The documents illustrated key elements of the government's strategy prior to July 2005 in dealing with extremism among young Muslims. The key policy areas revolve around strategically foregrounding and politically empowering some key Muslim organisations, federations and imams, those which the FCO/HO consider to be 'mainstream' or 'moderate'. This multiculturalist, autarkic method of 'take me to your leader, but if you can't find him, let me make you into one' has a long history.

A subsequent policy document, produced immediately after the London bombings, and under the auspices of the Home Office, also exemplifies this approach. [27] Just as in 1968 (an Immigration Act plus a Race Relations Act), 1971 (another Immigration Act and another Race Relations Act), and 1980-1981 (a Nationality Act and the Scarmanite approach to 'race relations'), there is the characteristic combination of 'soft' and 'hard' strategies. The 'soft' ones include recommendations for wideranging promotion of Muslim cultures, images, leaderships; extensive faith monitoring; youth, religious, educational and cultural initiatives and the like.

Similarly, the 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act and the 2005 Racial and Religious Hatred Bill were intended to cover discrimination. Conversely, the 'hard' strategies included a string of counter-terrorism, security, identity, saturation surveillance, policing and other measures, and repeated legislation directed against sanctuary seekers.

Just as in the wake of the 1981 and 1985 urban events, when a range of statutory initiatives were established to create a new corporate black (including Asian) leadership and voluntary sector infrastructure, there is today a somewhat similar strategy for Muslims, one that combines explicit recognition of cultural autonomy with integrationist and assimilative measures. In its 'soft strategies', state intervention is aimed at identifying, engaging with, promoting and semi-institutionalising religious tendencies, including ones long involved in sectarian hatred and violence abroad - the belief apparently being that empowering political Islamism will yank young Muslims away from extremism and terrorism.

The significance of the 'harmonisation' of domestic and foreign policy is how much of the ground has already been given away to non-moderate desecularisation processes. Representatives of Islamic Right parties are involved in deciding educational policy about and for Muslims in Britain. Further initiatives include actively promoting the kind of Islam that government agencies appear to believe is moderate and which roving troupes of salafi scholars will propagate up and down the country to misguided youngsters. These communitarian (and superficially social environmental) strategies are based on a regressive cultural circularity that does not have the capacity to address the political violence represented by the *jihadi* and *irhabi* transnational networks. The consequences include a legitimation by the state of the kinds of social and cultural autarky and authoritarian religious identity politics that have been part of the problem. Despite claims about the diversity of Muslims, there is a powerful investment among both statutory policy-makers and the religious right in homogenising strategies that characterise Muslim populations in monolithic ways. (It is virtually axiomatic that the religious right have a deep aversion to actually existing co-religionists; they have to be fashioned anew.) Conversely, progressive Muslim voices, both secular and religious, are systematically marginalised – the coarse assumption being that secular commitment necessarily means religious or cultural inauthenticity.

It seems therefore that even the terms within which it is possible to express effective dissent are determined by others, whether governments or religious patriarchs, militarists and cultural-religious absolutists, unethical multiculturalists and pro-war or pro-Zionist 'muscular liberals'. There has similarly been a political haemorrhaging of virtually every conceptual term that was once possessed

by the left. In this sense, the challenges faced by the left in Britain are profound, despite cheerleading claims that these are temporary or strategic issues. If 'democracy' is enforced through military occupation and war, 'human rights', 'women's rights', 'liberty' and democratic 'freedoms' are propounded with a belligerent zeal by US neo-conservatives.

'Humanitarian' governmental and international NGO intervention (and 'peace-keeping') is now intertwined with and logistically dependent on semi-permanent global structures of military intervention and occupation. 'Freedom' and 'liberation', alongside that malevolent term 'evil-doers', are George W. Bush's pet phrases. The practices of 'humanitarianism', 'democracy', 'liberty' and 'human rights' are now thoroughly embedded within imperial regime change, nation-building, military occupation and unilateral, unfettered war. The international progressive currency of human rights and humanitarian discourse is severely diminished from non-western vantage points (such as from the perspective of someone rescued from starvation by the same military battalion who have just bombed her home, shot dead her husband and now want to feed and clothe her children). In this sense, the 'default' left positions articulated through human rights, civil liberties and humanitarianism, as critically vital as these are for any democratic left project, will fail as substitutes for emancipatory discourses.

Acknowledging this means facing a multitude of political directions at once, as complicated and difficult as this seems. It may mean that the 'antiracist anti-imperialist' politics of the left is genuinely exhausted in the face of ruthless geo-military imperialism, a permanently bellicose war Zionism, and the authoritarianism of the transnational religious right. It might require accepting that secularism is now irreparably scandalised as simply meaning 'anti-religious', and new multifaceted and visionary antinomian approaches are required in confronting the complexities of authoritarian religious assertion in states and civil societies. There is little here that the kinds of culturalism described earlier can offer.

Chetan Bhatt

P.S.

Footnotes

[1] John Eade, Isabelle Fremeaux and David Garbin, 'The political construction of diasporic communities in the global city', Pamela K. Gilbert (ed), Imagined Londons, SUNY Press, Albany, 2002.

[2] Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, London, Touchstone, 1998.

[3] obert Kagan, Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order, New York, Atlantic Books, 2004; David Frum and Richard Perle, An End to Evil: how to win the war on terror, New York, Ballantine Books, 2004.

[4] A critique of circular, culturalist approaches to Islam is given in Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam: the search for a new ummah, London, Hurst, 2004.

[5] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999; Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000; Homi Bhaba, The Location of Culture, London, Routledge,1993.

[6] See Frederick Cooper, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History', in A. Loomba et al, op. cit., pp401-22.

[7] See, Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: a derivative discourse, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993; The Nation and its Fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993; 'Secularism and toleration', in A Possible India: essays in political criticism, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp228-62.

[8] Tariq Modood, Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

[9] Community Relations Commission, Between Two Cultures – a study of relationships between two generations in Asian communities, London, Community Relations Commission, 1976, exemplifies the problematic, and Bhabha, op. cit., the celebratory approach to cultural syncretism.

[10] On this argument, see Gilles Kepel, Allah in the West: Islamic movements in America and Europe, Oxford, Polity Press, 1997.

[11] Southall Black Sisters, Against the Grain, London, London, Southall Black Sisters, 1990; Rahila Gupta (ed), From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters, London, Zed, 2003; Gita Sahgal & Nira Yuval-Davis (eds), Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain, London,Virago,1992.

[12] Commission on the Future of Multi- Ethnic Britain, The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, London, Profile Books, 2000, pp27-29, 247.

[13] See for example the essays in Will Kymlicka (ed), The Rights of Minority Cultures, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, which tend to individualise majority citizenship, but inevitably render minority belonging in group terms.

[14] Social and moral well-being as necessarily linked to communal recognition is advocated in Commission on the Future of Multi- Ethnic Britain, op. cit., p37.

[15] On this type of argument, see Judith Butler, Excitable Speech: a politics of the performative, New York and London, Routledge, 1997.

[16] The Commission's report refers to a future Britain as a 'community of communities', a term borrowed from a communal organisation (the UK Board of Deputies of British Jews).

[17] Bhikhu Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000, p160.

[18] Both Modood, op cit. and especially Parekh, op. cit., p150 exemplify this position. In such approaches, the same ontology of rights is seen as transferable from the individual to the group. A different (perilous) approach is given in Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society [1960], New York, Continuum, 2005

[19] For stiff critiques of black and antiracist corporatism, see A. Sivanandan, A Different Hunger: writings on black resistance, London, Pluto, 1982; Paul Gilroy, There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack, London, Routledge, 1987.

[20] A position advocated in Modood, op. cit., pp114-24.

[21] On religiosity as exhibition, see Aziz al-Azmeh, Islams and Modernities, London and New York, Verso, 1993; Roy, op. cit.

[22] Many examples abound, but see Huda Khattab, The Muslim Women's Handbook, Ta-Ha Publishers, London, 1993 and R. Waris Maqsood, Living with Teenagers: a guide for Muslim parents, Ta-Ha Publishers, London, 1995.

[23] Muhammad Abdul Bari, Building Muslim Families: challenges and expectations, Ta-Ha Publishers, London, 2002.

[24] Sivanandan, op. cit. and Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ed), The Empire Strikes Back: race and racism in 1970s Britain, London, Hutchinson, 1982, illustrate this classdriven approach to ethnicity.

[25] Gayatri Spivak makes this point in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, op. cit..

[26] Foreign & Commonwealth Office/Home Office, 'Young Muslims & Extremism', plus Annexes, April 2004, author archive.

[27] Home Office, 'Preventing Extremism Together' Working Groups, August- October 2005, London, Home Office, 2005.