

Secular Governance in a Multi Faith Society

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Many countries, including all western style democracies, are now clearly multi faith societies in which a number of faiths are a valued part of plural society and are enabled to practice and to play an active part in the social and cultural life of their followers, for whom faith and culture are often inextricably linked. For a number of reasons, particularly the present pre-occupation with the Muslim community, the notion of 'faith in the public sphere' has been taken as any visible manifestation of faith or representation of faith based arguments to further a particular cause, as evidence of its 'public' presence. Such a limited view is neither practicable nor desirable and the principal concern and focus should be on governance: the extent to which faith organisations influence the organs of the state and, more especially, whether the system of governance is seen to be based upon the views and wishes of one, or more, of the belief systems that underpin them.

The focus on the Muslim community has meant that discussion revolved around whether one faith has had more privileged access than the others. But the prominence of the faith debate nationally and internationally in recent years has also given rise to a related and just as significant issue: whether faith communities in general have a higher standing in the eyes of government than non-faith constituencies. Further, we also have to recognise that whilst the position of faith is changing, particularly at an international level, so to is the nature and role of the state. In this context, the ever more demanding requirements of the modern democratic framework, means that decision making processes will have no legitimacy unless based upon evidential standards which *no* belief system can meet, whether or not faith based.

There is a general confusion about what is meant by 'secularism', with most definitions revolving around a separation of church and state, without any real clarity about the nature of that division.

Modood (2009) usefully attempts to move us on from the notion that secularism is a 'doctrine of separation' to more nuanced divisions based on 'radical' and 'moderate' models. Various attempts have been made to define 'secularism', which are generally broadly based and contested notions of the way in which the society and culture become detached from religious doctrine and influence (see for example Berger, 1969). Parekh (2009) also reminds us of the early usages of the term, which relied upon the notion of the contrast between the 'immanency and time-boundedness of the modern world with the atemporality and eternal nature of the heavenly'. This is no clear and accepted definition of what is meant by faith in the 'public realm' and a recent book devoted to the subject, (Dinham et al, 2009) recognises the many different components of the subject. For the most part, the notion of 'faith in the public realm', seems to be more about its surprising 'political revitalisation' (Habermas, 2007), at a time when its decline seemed inevitable as science and rationality appeared to becoming ever more dominant parts of democratic debate. Terms like 'public realm', 'public square' and 'public sphere' have been used synonymously. The 'public' nature of faith has, for some, been associated with its visibility and, moreover, unfortunately linked with the Muslim community in public policy terms.

I want to argue that the notion of a 'secular society' is simply inappropriate, it can no longer be applied to modern multi—faith and democratic societies and could not, nor should not be seen, as a desirable policy objective. However, there is a real and pressing problem about the salience of faith based arguments within democratic institutions and decision taking processes; and 'secular governance' is both necessary and inevitable.

The shape and nature of societies has changed profoundly over the last fifty years or so, as a result of population movement, the globalisation of trade and business, the ease and affordability of international travel and communications, as well as impact of conflict, war and climate change (Cantle, 2008). Modern democracies have become much more dynamic multi cultural and multi faith spaces. This does not mean, of course, that the dominant faith in any country has entirely lost its position of relative

power and influence and have generally been protected by their historic position, often being granted formal status and constitutional privileges as well as becoming embedded into the social and cultural life of all citizens, for example, through institutional involvement in public ceremonies and the timing of holiday periods. However, such societies now experience many more public influences from within and without national boundaries.

The emergence of multi faith societies does not, however, create entirely new problems as a number of states have had to deal with longstanding divisions and conflicts between at least two principal faiths and have generally devised some form of pragmatic accommodation. In the UK the division between Catholics and Protestants has been evident for 500 years. Elizabeth 1 might be said to have created the first such accommodation by her policy of not 'opening in a window into the soul of men' – in other words, a belief system is a private matter and not for the public sphere. At the same time of course, this 'accommodation' did entail Anglicans retaining a limited privileged position over Catholics in relation to the governance system which has lasted until the present day.

The discrimination against Catholics has endured largely because of its relatively minor nature – royal lineage, representation in the House of Lords etc. – and discrimination in employment and other fields were largely dealt with some time ago. But the inherent unfairness and obvious injustice nevertheless remains a source of complaint and is still being addressed, for example through the proposed reform of the House of Lords.

Given its historic position the UK, like many other western democracies then, may have been expected to have had greater difficulty in coming to terms with the growth and scale of many other faiths. This is especially true, as the rise of faiths within national boundaries has been accompanied by the growth of diaspora communities. Again, diaspora communities are not entirely new (Soysal, 2002) and the UK, in common with many other European countries have had a Jewish community - perhaps the longest standing diaspora – for at least 800 years. But as Jonathan Sachs (2007) has pointed out, the modern diaspora communities have far more significance and they find it easy to sustain themselves than ever before, largely because of the ease of modern transnational communications (Cantle, 2004). Any

modern system of governance, then, not only has to take account of intra-society pressures from faith and cultural groups, but from diaspora communities who transcend national boundaries and command support at many different levels. In other words, even those societies that have relatively small faith based minorities and where the majority faith is clearly predominant in the public sphere, they are still effectively influenced by a multi faith world society.

As societies have become more dynamic and diverse, so they have inevitably become multi faith. However, whilst diversity of culture is generally seen as bringing new, interesting and enriching experiences, there is more ambivalence about diversity of religion, which may be seen as creating more challenge in areas that still have a sacred and sacrosanct basis. This is understandable in the sense that faith is a 'zero sum game' and fundamental beliefs are, by definition, irreconcilable. Nevertheless accommodations have been made and are continuing to develop. Co-existence models are now prevalent with the emphasis on dialogue and exchange at the cultural level and mutual respect and understanding at the faith level. This approach has recently been endorsed by the UK government, following consultation with faith and other bodies in '*Side by Side*' (DCLG, 2008)

But culture and faith are not easily separable. Ratcliffe, (2004) illustrates this with particular regard to the way in which the Muslim 'transcends the public-private divide, being intrinsic to the way a Muslim lives her/his life'. Ideas about what constitutes religious dress varies from place to place, reflecting cultural acceptabilities and more profoundly, interpretations of religious texts are taken more literally in some societies and have been adapted in others. No clear dividing line is possible and even within nation states the diversity within religious communities is as significant as it is between those of different nationalities (see for example, *Understanding and Appreciating Muslim Diversity*, iCoCo 2008). The outside view of minorities has often confused notions of race, religion and culture, sometimes out of ignorance and sometimes deliberately so. The Far Right across Europe have propagated the idea that Muslims are a problem community, partly as a means of developing a racist agenda and taking advantage of the lower level of protection given to religious minorities as compared to racial groups.

The discussion about the role of faith in the 'public sphere' (or realm, or square) is complex, with perhaps an 'ideal' notion developed that we simply have to return to a separation of state and church, that is, 'one in which citizens have full freedom to pursue their different values or practices in private, while in the public sphere all citizens would be treated as political equals whatever the differences in their private lives'. (Malik, 2002).

An unfortunate and simple interpretation of the public nature of faith is taken to mean whether faith is 'visible', through the display of religious symbols, like the displaying of the cross, the wearing of the skull cap, or the various forms of head and face coverings for women. This is perhaps the most obvious form of public manifestation, but it is hardly central to the real issue of governance. The UK has long since taken a different view about such symbols, in contrast to countries like France, and they are generally valued as expressions of diversity and seen as part of culture and heritage alongside other forms of traditional dress – at least until the recent demonisation of Muslim minorities. In fact, the protection of religious dress in the public sphere had even been brought into legislation to accommodate minorities, as long ago as 1976 when Sikhs were allowed to wear their turbans, rather than crash helmets when riding a motorcycle. Of course, in some recent and perhaps exceptional cases, dress codes are a basis for division, and bans have been introduced on particular forms of clothing or accessories in the apparent interests of safety and/or communications. But 'faith visibility' through the wearing of particular forms of religious dress in public situations is not the principal issue behind the 'public sphere' debate.

It is also too simple to suggest that the issue revolves around whether people of faith should be allowed to enter the public square and express their points of view based upon their religious beliefs or proselytise on behalf of their faith. In a democratic society, such debate is not only generally free but also welcomed as part of free speech, at least within the limitation of 'incitement to religious hatred'. In fact, secularists would argue that such protection has, by law or common convention, gone too far and prevents proper and reasonable criticism of religious beliefs. The more recent campaign to promote the view that 'there is probably no god, so stop worrying and enjoy your life' is perhaps a reaction to this and a reassertion of that right of free speech (though a similar bus campaign has been banned in Italy). In theocratic or

authoritarian societies, even the right to practice a particular religion is in doubt and for them the notion of faith in the 'public sphere' will inevitably have a very different connotation.

The central issue for democracies is, or should be, whether the system of governance is based upon any form of belief system, rather than clear and transparent empirical evidence and science. This is irrespective of whether the belief system is one which is faith based, whether based upon another form of moral or ethical code, or the particular beliefs of an individual leader or group. In a modern multi faith society governmental decisions require a rational basis and this inevitably militates against those dictated by one or more faiths. This is partly because any decision based upon a particular belief system will potentially conflict with the beliefs of other faiths and groups who have adopted different moral and ethical codes and an evidenced based decision is the only means of ensuring equality of power and influence. And whilst the belief system of one group (usually the majority group) could be selected over that of others, the effect would clearly be to disenfranchise those of others and become the cause of tensions and conflict. Further, simply expressing, and acting upon, a belief that one course of action is preferred to another is no longer an acceptable justification for a decision. In a modern bureaucratic state, decisions are open to public and legal challenge if they have not been able to demonstrate a legitimatising process and a reasonable evidential standard. For example, they must show that the relevant consultations have taken place and taken into account, that expected impacts have been considered and that the evidence forms the basis of the decision. Nowhere is this more certain than in the criminal justice system, where to assert a belief that a person is guilty of a particular crime would be literally laughed out of court, and generally followed by a writ for slander. Whilst the standards expected in the criminal justice system are higher and clearer, those obtaining in the political system are not far behind and are gradually being extended (largely through the judicial review and challenge).

None of this is to say that decisions cannot be based upon some notion of right and wrong and that this notion may have been influenced by religious beliefs. For example, the notion of 'thou shall not kill' is embedded in many faiths and widely adopted as a cornerstone of national and international law. It is variously used to support a range of political preferences, for example to oppose

capital punishment, abortion and war. But these are no more than statements of general principle and the practical interpretation of these issues are open to widely diverse views and a simple statement of beliefs, however keenly felt, will not provide adequate justification. With regard to abortion for example, to adopt the approach of the Roman Catholic Church would be to deem that virtually all abortions were prohibited. This is clearly not accepted by people of other faiths and no faith and to adopt such a policy would therefore 'privilege' one faith over others. In order to arbitrate between such competing arguments and to avoid accusations of 'privileging', Governments have fallen back on to rational arguments, in this case based upon the age at which babies can survive outside the womb, the evidence of health impacts of the mother, or other documented benefits and disbenefits. In other words, an evidential and objective basis.

A modern multi faith society will inevitably develop notions of universal rights and responsibilities that transcend all faith and belief systems and often as a means of mediating between them. Faith and belief systems have given rise to many moral and ethical standards and have long since been incorporated into legal systems. However, it is nevertheless difficult to distinguish the moral case from the practical basis in each case. Again, the belief in the sanctity of human life on a moral basis, might have guided a number of legal principles, but it also has a practical impact as a form of reciprocal protection – 'killing others is wrong because others may chose to kill me'!

The adoption of moral values based upon a notion of right and wrong which coincides with the beliefs of one or more faiths is not in itself problematic, providing that there is a consensus which can ensure some form of wider acceptability and that it has a rational basis, in other words, is not simply an 'act of faith'.

However, even if Governments do not base their decisions upon the tenets of a particular faith or belief system, the way in which they engage with faith communities might create the perception of privileged access and therefore unfair advantage for one faith, or of faiths in general over and above secular bodies. This has certainly been the case in the UK, where even the Church of England has complained about having less access (and therefore influence) than the Muslim community. Similarly, the secularist groups complain that they are discriminated against in the political

process because they have more limited access. Perversely, they are now beginning to be treated for consultation purposes, as though they were a 'faith'.

The existence of an established church can therefore be a bone of contention, irrespective of whether the established church represents the majority population; any privileged position in terms of engagement will inevitably be seen as discriminatory. It is difficult to believe that such institutional arrangements can persist in multi faith societies given the perception of preferential treatment and unfair advantage. Indeed, this has become apparent to the Church of England, with the Archbishop of Canterbury recently indicating his willingness to contemplate disestablishment. The level of influence, however, does not depend upon whether a church is actually formally established and can just as easily be dependent upon less formalised processes. For example, the Church of England may have less influence in the UK, despite its constitutional position, compared to the much more pervasive role of Christian churches in the United States where it does not enjoy established status.

Our system of governance of course also extends to regional and local agencies, including local authorities. And faith bodies have a number of roles, which are connected to government but not necessarily a part of the governance arrangements. For example, many such bodies are funded to deliver public services and are thought to be able offer higher standards in this respect as they can utilise committed volunteers and empathise with and understand the cultural sensitivities of their group. However, whilst this is being questioned by the criticism of 'single group funding' (CIC, 2007), there is a distinction between a service delivery role and that of policy maker, albeit a fine one. This is perhaps most evident in the provision faith schools. For the most part, the 7,500 faith schools in England are bound by pretty much the same constraints as the other 17,000 non-faith state maintained schools. They are generally charged with implementing policy – and funded and regulated on this basis – rather than making it. However, at the margins they are able to determine a number of processes, particularly with regard to admissions and to provide religious instruction to students drawn largely from that faith community. Whilst the position of faith schools has been maintained and their number extended a little in recent years (particularly to minority faiths) they have also come under pressure to widen access and to

promote tolerance and respect for other faiths (Cantle, 2001 and Runnymede 2008) and have also been made subject to the duty to promote community cohesion (DCSF, 2006).

The debate about 'faith in the public sphere' should therefore revolve around the extent and nature of faith in our system of governance, either in terms of the reliance on belief systems as a justification for particular decisions, or whether one or more faiths has a privileged access to, or influence over, the organs of government as compared to other faiths or those of no faith. In a multi faith society no single faith or group or faiths should have a constitutional or practical advantage over another. Inevitably, the principal church will have to be disestablished, but the mere fact of establishment should not be taken to imply a wholly unacceptable level of advantage, given historic accommodations over time and ongoing reform. Similarly, modern democracies are built upon rational-legal decision making processes and as this is set to become more and more manifest so policy makers will find it increasingly difficult to cite value laden belief systems for justification and will have to be able demonstrate an empirical and scientific evidence basis for decisions. To this extent, faith based beliefs will become increasingly incompatible with the system of governance. However, given the continued support for faith based belief systems and the growing strength of diaspora communities, faith will still be very visible in the public domain and will continue to be recognised as another valued component of diversity. In this sense alone, no modern democracy can now ever be thought of as 'secular'. And in most cases, faith organisations can also play a significant role in lobbying for policies which their faith supports, either on a collective or individual basis. This will increasingly imply, however, a higher level of challenge and debate, which has both opportunities and risks for faith based organisations.

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