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Abstract:

This paper questions the conflation of ethnicity and race in UK public policy and in the media. The paper asserts that race and ethnicity should be treated as distinct categories, as human rights legislation recognises, whilst acknowledging that intersectionality (overlapping, interconnected social categorisations especially in relation to disadvantage) also exists. The paper highlights the disadvantage faced by 'minorities within minorities' such as Black atheists whose voices are suppressed by the current government's insistence on using 'faith' as a surrogate category for 'race'.

# MULTICULTURALISM AND SECULARISM: BRIDGING THE FALSE DIVIDE

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The origins of this talk go back to December 2004 when I was invited to participate in a Home Office consultation with “faith” groups on proposed changes to the burial laws. The overwhelming number of participants were white Jewish, south Asian Muslim and white Christian. With the exception of one participant - a representative of the BHA as it turned out – all the participants were male. It struck me as very odd that whereas the consultation had been drawn along “faith” lines in order to address ethnic diversity, the group around the table was hardly representative. Where were the Black communities? Or the east European? Or the Middle Eastern? Or the Chinese? Where were the women?!

Previously, one of the Runnymede Report’s recommendations had been to review, with a view of increasing, the role of religion on “legal and constitutional matters”. Meanwhile, however, the Commission for Racial Equality has spoken out against proposed changes in human rights law aimed at protecting diversity but in fact lessening emphasis on integration. Earlier this summer, Polly Toynbee made a hard-hitting assessment of race and religion (*Guardian*, 10 June 2005).

But how religious are people of ethnic minority descent? Are race, ethnicity and “faith” all the same thing? Certainly not.

The problem as I see it is the blurring of religion, race and ethnicity. We see it almost daily in our media, where reports casually slip from talking about “Asians” then “Muslims” then “Arabs”. The government is increasingly using “faith” as surrogate for ethnicity. Community and civic groups follow (they know where their funding is coming from, after all). We see an increasing prominence of faith-based consultations even in areas not obviously faith-related for example, the Olympics. Segregation along gender lines is accepted at some publicly funded universities.

We should be concerned. As the “faith” perspective is increasingly legitimised in the political sphere it results in a misrepresentation of ethnic minorities as a whole. The result is discrimination against women and other ethnic groups, positive discrimination to the benefit of the religious, an erosion of the secular public sphere and potential problems for longer term multicultural policy.

## Defining Multiculturalism

A dictionary definition of multiculturalism is

“The belief and practice of giving different cultural groups equal status in society”  
(Macmillan dictionary)

In practice, multicultural policy comes in different flavours. Historically the USA has favoured a “melting pot” variety where everyone is supposed to mix with everyone else. In Canada, Australia and Malaysia there is the “mosaic” type where

mixing occurs but the main thrust of government policy is to support retention of ethnic community identity so long as it does not over-ride adherence to the national identity. Generally speaking, citizens of countries where either the "melting pot" and "mosaic" varieties of multiculturalism exist tend to show a strong national allegiance despite their inherited ethnicity.

In other countries multiculturalism is more segregated, with the different communities largely living apart as in Israel, South Africa, and to a great extent in the UK.

### **Cultural Identity And Religious Belief**

What makes up a *cultural* identity? We might say it is made up of a shared language, customs, history, belief systems, political systems, fashion, cuisine, aesthetic taste. Shared experience can be binding: "Notre pays c'est l'hiver" wrote the French-Canadian Gilles Vigneault.

In Britain we have a long history of inward and outward migration. An excellent book published by the CRE, *Roots of the Future* traces the historical waves and patterns, flows of peoples, ideas, commerce, and the positive contribution of immigrants from all over the world and in all fields of life.

But are people of an ethnic minority background more religious? If we put 100 British people in room, typically 72 will be Christians and 15 will be declared atheists. Of the remaining 13, more than half would prefer not to discuss their religious beliefs in a public environment e.g. a census. The remaining 5 people would be from the other minority religions. It is amazing how much media and government attention those last 5 out of the 100 have been receiving lately!

Ethnicity is not the same as race. Ethnicity is learned whereas race is biologically determined. The categories imposed by the CRE and other, government bodies however can be contentious. For example, some South American people be racially "White" but might not consider themselves to be "White European". There are huge cultural differences between Black Caribbean and Black African people. Nonetheless, using the generally accepted ethnic categories as used in the UK, there is another way to look at the question of religious belief and ethnicity.

For example, despite the popular media presentation, only half of Asian people are Muslim (In British terminology *Asian* refers to the south Asian sub-continent). The highest percentage stating "no religion" is the Chinese group. Interestingly the Chinese group also amongst the highest scores for educational achievement and affluence. The Black and Asian group has the lowest level on "no religion" however mixed people have the second highest. These trends are important for us to recognise in the secular movement.

We find that Christians and Jews are largely White, whereas Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are largely Asian. The most ethnically diverse religion appears to be the Buddhists though the Muslim group is also fairly diverse i.e. some religious groups in the UK are more homogeneous than others in terms of ethnicity.

The census is not the only source of information on matters of ethnicity and religious belief but it is the most comprehensive and no doubt the most accurate available. However there has been another recent report on these issues titled "Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey". Unfortunately, the methodology used in this latter report was not consistent with standard statistical practice. The 2001 Home Office survey used a skewed sample which included an ethnic "booster" population of around one third more than the actual population, it used "focused enumeration" which meant opinions collected tended to be concentrated in particular neighbourhoods. The questions had a pro-religion bias.

Nonetheless, even this grossly unbalanced survey suggested that

- Most people rank family as most important thing in life
- Most people think level of government attention to religion is about right
- Asians rank religion much higher in identity than others
- Key concerns were the convergence of religion, ethnicity and deprivation in some ethnic communities

The report went on to warn against use of "faith as a proxy for ethnicity", and yet this is precisely what the government and the media are doing. These observations above lead us to the question: Why is the government and the media focusing so heavily on a particular ethnic group (Asians) which makes up only 4% of the country's population, or a religious group (Muslims) that only make up less than 3% of the population. [Note: this paper was delivered before the events of 07/07/05 in London]

Is the government's policy a short-term, guilt induced response to the invasion of Iraq? An "insurance policy" of sorts? Are the attempts at "consultation" a facade to cover over the more serious underlying problem of the convergence of race, religion and deprivation which both the last census and the 2001 Home Office survey observed? Or are we witnessing a general fragmentation in UK society as a whole? I leave you to consider the various political theories, conspiracy speculations and the like.

What we do know from the census data is that people of minority ethnic descent are not necessarily more religious. Religion is in any case only one aspect of ethnic identity and for many people of a minority ethnic background it is not a primary one. It would seem that secularism and multiculturalism can certainly co-exist but we do well to take into account diversity amongst and within ethnic communities and be aware of other socio-economic factors.

### **A Way Forward**

Atheists and secularists of ethnic minority descent have a special responsibility to help promote a secular form of multiculturalism. How can we do this?

- Consider carefully the costs and benefits of different policies: melting pot vs cultural mosaic vs segregation
- Plan for successful immigration based on accommodation, transition and integration

- Encourage civic awareness
- Appreciate that there can be a multiplicity of cultural “belonging”
- Speak out when faith used as a surrogate for ethnicity or race
- Provide support for minority ethnic secularists - e.g. help line lines, language support
- Listen and respect the voices of dissent from within ethnic groups
- Provide support to progressive groups, especially women’s groups and those struggling against religiously oppressive regimes eg. Iran.
- Promote ethnic diversity in our own media and employment practices
- Remember the distinction between secularism and atheism.
- Put our own house in order: religious privilege still exists in UK
- Distinguish between secular (eg. Palestine) and religious (eg Tibet) liberation movements
- Be weary of statistics, even those sponsored by government.

Vive la difference!

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