

# "Exploring the tensions between cultural pluralism and universalism in relation to developing public policy in multi ethnic societies"

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## Introduction

The idea that national and international policies are best built on cultural pluralism, or what is often termed multiculturalism, has almost achieved the status of common sense. Such a view is propagated on the recognition that societies around the world, due to complex social, political and ecological processes associated with old and new globalisation and the attendant mass and rapid migration of people, are much more mixed than the selective amnesia that historical nationalist narratives have hitherto acknowledged. Of course this does/has not resulted in the death of nationalisms; one only needs to switch on the TV across the globe, in each and every country we are seeing the reassertion of old as well as the birth of new nationalist movements, many of which have, such as the Golden Dawn party in Greece and the Tea Party movement in the US gained considerable ground following the 2008 Economic melt down. In India in recent years we have seen the rise of Hindutva, in the UK we have groups like the UK Independence party and the English Defence League, In France the French National front regularly commands 25% of the popular vote in local and national elections.

Whilst it clearly is the case that societies that chose to include through some form of accommodation, rather than exclude - and in some cases 'exterminate' - minorities and their respective cultural identities are much more desirable, the emergence of a new and altogether more sinister claims to cultural pluralism being made by religious fundamentalists, I content, exposes some of the limits to multiculturalism as it is most commonly understood. I want to suggest that the contradictions primarily arise out of accommodating specific belief systems which themselves might not be very accommodating broader universalist principles of human rights, such as or tolerance of difference. And it is this contradiction that reveals one of the central paradoxes of cultural pluralism as a manifestation of cultural relativism. (Healy, 2007:12). Whilst debates surrounding these two divergent perspectives can be located within a much broader sweep of history, the emergence of a public policy approach from 1970s that sought to

accommodate plurality of cultural standpoints known popularly as 'multiculturalism' (Singh and Cowden, 2011) led to a renewed impetus surrounding debates about how best to respond to the needs of minority groups. Whilst the intention of this policy was to foster respect for different cultures and therefore to give minorities a sense of belonging, as Malik (1996) notes, it actually led to collusion between the (racist) state and opportunistic religious and cultural organisations in the guise of self-appointed community leaders.

In this paper I seek to explore some of the tensions and complexities associated with expressions of ethnic identity (often manifested in terms of racial, religious, linguistic, class and caste differences) on the one and the needs to develop cohesive and integrated societies on the other. From the more general consideration, I will focus on a particular debate surrounding the question of religion that in the post 9/11 period in the context of the so-called 'War on Terror' has been raging across the world but particularly in the West. In this regard, my primary focus will be on the challenge of accommodating religious identities and practices.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of cultural identity or what it actually means to be different. I then go onto discuss the idea of multiculturalism and in particular how multiculturalist policies have sought to it to respond the contemporary assertion of religious identities and in particular how this has led to 'new fault lines' amongst traditional advocates of such approaches (Singh and Cowden, 2011). To ground the discussion, as any paper on social policy should do, I focus on the British Governments reactions to the emergence of so-called 'Islamic Fundamentalist extremist groups' and a concern with the influence they were having of young people.

### **Making sense of Identity**

In his book, *'Identity and Violence: The illusions of Destiny'* the economist and political philosopher Amartya Sen (2006) recounts a childhood experience during the last days of the British Raj in Bengal where he had a witnessed an stranger who was bleeding profusely and asking for water stumbling into the garden of his parent's house. He recalls shouted for his parents, and his father took the man to a hospital, where he died of his injuries. The man was a Muslim labourer who had been attacked by rioting Hindus. Reflecting on the incident he writes: "Aside from being a veritable nightmare, the event was profoundly perplexing." What makes neighbors living together in relative peace suddenly turn on each other, and most significantly, how could somebody with a complex identity belonging to many communities be reduced to a singular entity?

For Sen the root to some of these problems is the way we think of human identity in essentialist or 'solitarist' ways; something he believes has shaped much of communitarian and multicultural thinking of both the left and right

in recent times. For example, in Samuel Huntington's theory of "clashing civilizations" Sen suggests a central fallacy with such thinking is the proposition that one can even contemplate the idea of 'opposing civilizations' as if each existed as some homogeneous mass. For him, the idea that human beings can be divided up such a way leads to a "miniaturisation" of humanity, with is often the precursor for the kinds of violence he writes about. It is for these reasons that much of Sen's work and in particular his work on universal human capabilities, has sought to balance the idea of recognizing cultural differences with at least an equal commitment to aspects of human existence that are the same. By focusing on questions of justice and basic human needs, cultural differences are seen in a different light. That said, by refusing to offer any detailed list of universal capabilities and by emphasizing the importance of 'self-evaluation' he isn't at all hostile to factoring in differences that may inhibit ones capacity to transform capability into functioning's.

In some senses Sen is seeking to disrupt the binaries of cultural relativism versus universalism, where relativists are seen a defenders of tradition and therefore regressive, and universalists as modernists and therefore progressives. In a co-authored chapter with Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum and Sen, 1989) entitled "*Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions,*" Sen and Nussbaum are critical of much of the representative work in developmental economics which they feel has succumbed such dichotomous ways. For them, such dichotomies are undermined once there is recognition of the internal diversity and criticism that exists within traditions as well as the mutual overlapping between and among cultures. It is precisely through identifying intercultural linkages that one can identify and endorse the valuation of basic, generally formulated capabilities, as well as the realization of those capabilities in the respective culture (Nussbaum and Sen, 1989 p.320).

Whilst critical theorists and post-colonialist writers, have for some time warned of the dangers of crude essentialism and the related processes of binary thinking and othering' (Derrida, Hall, Bhabba, Spivak), a key difference with them and Sen's work is perhaps with the broader perspective on multiculturalism and the politics of difference. For Sen, a politics of difference, despite seeking to identify and address social injustice against a particular group is at the same time exposed to the slippery slope of essentialism, fundamentalism and ultimately communalism, where as post-structuralism critiques of essentialism tend to lead not to a universalism, but rather a valorization of cultural relativism. For example, Derrida claims that there is no absolute identity or trans-historical truth and that what we know is simply a product of difference, which is total. Although his primary interest is in socio linguistics, his concept of *différance* constituting the notion to be different but also to differ, put off, Derrida has been understood by social theorists to explain that immanent and contingent nature of identity and by extension culture.

### **Ethnicity and Public Policy Responses**

Broadly speaking Multiculturalism represents a body of thought that seeks to identify reasoned and just ways to respond to cultural and religious diversity (Song, 2010). In its contemporary usage it is closely aligned with the demands of minority groups within a given society to be afforded equal citizen rights as well as a positive recognition of their unique cultural identities. i.e. from mere tolerance of to a celebration of difference. Whereas in most Western countries multiculturalist policies have primarily remained within the scope of accommodation of difference, in some contexts where group rights become associated with forms of indigenous and minority nationalism, demands have extended to constitutional equations surrounding questions of self-determination, as for example has been the case in various parts of India.

One of the underpinning aspects of cultural pluralism is the notion of 'tolerance'. Historically speaking, the idea of tolerance came to the forefront in European societies following the Reformation in the sixteenth century when it was seen as a means of ending the bloodshed between difference religious denominations (Grell and Scribner, 2002). Essentially, the idea of tolerance was a response to the need to establish social cohesion through a combination of pragmatism and idealism. Hence, this constituted a conditional acceptance of difference in the short term, with the longer-term aim being one of assimilation through the development of common values and culture.

It was the sense that tolerance represented a kind of cultural imperialism by stealth that led to the turn to 'cultural relativism'. This was first articulated by the anthropologist Franz Boas over 100 years ago, and in suggesting that there was nothing absolute about human civilisation or culture and that cultural plurality was a fundamental feature of humankind (Boas, 1974), was seen as challenging Enlightenment notions of human progress. In sociology, the principle is sometimes practiced to avoid cultural bias in research, as well as to avoid judging another culture by the standards of one's own culture. For this reason, cultural relativism has been considered an attempt to avoid ethnocentrism or the tendency for people to negatively judge others on the basis of an assertion of a perceived superiority of one's own cultural identity.

### **Building policy**

The challenge of developing public policy for managing ethnically diverse societies is not new and in some sense poses a recurring challenge for all rulers although arguably moral imperatives of tolerance and justice have tended to be a secondary concern. Policies can range from genocide (e.g. Nazi Germany), 'ethnic cleansing' (Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, India, on one side of the spectrum, to cultural assimilation, strategic accommodation (primarily for economic reasons), and on the other part of the spectrum, fully fledged

accommodations of minorities in the form of regal pronouncements<sup>1</sup> through to constitutional settlements and government policies, including, for example, as in the case of India and the US, affirmative action policies to confront social disadvantage (Deshpande, 2013).

Specifically in terms of multiculturalism, broadly speaking one can talk about two kinds of approaches, what might be termed 'light multiculturalism' and 'fully fledged multiculturalism'. When talking about light multiculturalism the broad policy approach is predicated on largely non-coercive attempts at integrating 'new minorities' into an imaginary national cultural imaginary because, as Anderson has outlined, National identities are always products of the imagination i.e. idealized and normalized conceptions of belonging. This usually constitutes of a slow cultural assimilation based often on ideological manipulations associated with cultural imperialism (Young, 1998). Some differences, such as the need to provide bilingual services, may be 'tolerated' as a temporary measure to achieve this. In the UK during the 1960's we saw such policies being developed in relation to large-scale arrival of migrant labourers from South Asia and the West Indies. Typically such policies included the establishment of immigrant centers and teaching of English and the relaxation of certain dress codes in Schools and public services (e.g. Sikhs bus drivers and conductors being allowed to wear turbans on buses) and the provision for different dietary needs in schools and hospitals or in the private sector making provisions for prayer rooms and sit down toilets). However, it must be noted that these and other accommodations often came across not through good will but community struggles and social movements. In the UK this form of what might be termed radical multiculturalism is most closely aligned with anti-racist social movements, which have been largely secular in nature, but which through both community based groupings and trade and workers groups have sought to confront the racialisation and oppression of non white people within different strands of society, from racial attacks and harassment, through to challenging cultural and racial stereotypes in the media, education etc through to institutionalised forms of direct and indirect discrimination.

### **Multiculturalism and contemporary responses to the question of religion**

As noted earlier, the question of accommodating religious identity was until relatively recent times never seen as much of an issue. However, discussions about the place of religion in contemporary public policy in Britain have become strangely polarized. For some, against the back- drop of 9/11, 7/7 and the so-called 'War on Terror', the rise of religious fundamentalisms, particularly those linked to political Islam, represents a 'threat' to the very idea of Western democratic ideals; characterized most potently in

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard the Mogul Emperor Akbar who ruled India during the later 16<sup>th</sup> Century or Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Founder of the Sikh Kingdom who ruled large parts of Northern India in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century come to mind

Huntington's idea of 'a clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1996). In this context 'non-Western' minorities in general, but particularly Muslims, are viewed with suspicion as a new 'alien wedge' or 'enemy within'; This has triggered the British Government to introduce draconian policies for preventing, detecting and prosecuting violent extremism that has led to new forms of racial and religious profiling and surveillance.

Bizarrely, cultural pluralism, once viewed as part of the solution, was now presented as a reason for social segregation leading to calls for policies aimed at assimilating minorities into the mainstream of 'British' culture and values. The most clear and absurd manifestation of this trend in the UK was the introduction of a 'Life in the UK test' based on multiple choice questions about UK history, culture and life, which all applicants for British nationality are required to pass (HMSO, 2007). It is significant to note the unanimity with which both Labour and Conservative political leaders have lined up to demonize multiculturalism as having caused a whole range of problems associated with social fragmentation on one hand and the rise of fundamentalist Islamic groups on the other. For example the previous prime minister Gordon Brown claimed that multiculturalism had become 'an excuse for justifying separateness . . . [and] failing to emphasise what bound us together as a country' (Brown, 2007). Similarly, in a widely reported debate ironically hosted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, David Cameron suggested that 'State Multiculturalism' was 'leading to [Muslim - my emphasis] schoolgirls in Bradford disappearing from school and being forced into marriage' (Sparrow, 2008). More recently we have seen the emergence of a debate around forced marriages and the protection of Young Asian women and also the issue of the practice of Female Genital Mutilation and the failure of social workers to intervene and treat it as a child protection issue due to cultural relativism or fears of being accused of racism.

How has cultural pluralism gone from being the solution to the villain in such a short period of time within state policy? One clear reason is the emergence of home grown 'Islamic terrorism' and how the moral panics associated with assertions of a particularly assertive Islamic identity by young Muslims. Religion, once a privileged site for articulating multicultural difference, now appears to be the problem. It is this that explains successive UK Prime Ministers have been apologizing for being 'too tolerant' in the past and promising, however incoherently, to place the responsibility on non-white immigrants and their descendants to start 'being British' and to assimilate.

Currently in the UK and France, the wearing or otherwise of Hijabs or face veils has symbolized this confusion around cultural pluralism and its limits. Whereas in France, primarily because of its republican and secular traditions, there is no tradition of policy makers working with religious groups, this is not the case in the UK. Mainly due to subcontinent politics, from the 1980's we say the demise of Secular Black and Asian anti-racist groupings and the

simultaneous rise of faith based groupings. This has resulted in faith based groups and religious leaders being regularly feted by policy makers and a new partnership with government.

For example, in a keynote conference address on 15 September 2010, the Chairman of the Conservative Party Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, seeking to out do the previous Labour government went as far as to imply the Conservative Party was the true 'party of God'.

**. . . if anyone suggests that this government does not understand, does not appreciate, does not defend people of faith, dare I even say, does not 'do God', then I hope my schedule this week will go some way to banishing that myth. (BBC News, 2010)**

These statements highlight the way a general consensus within contemporary public policy has emerged in which an uncritical engagement with 'faith communities' has ceased to be seen as problematic, and where being sensitive to faith based 'difference' is seen as an end in itself. Whereas identity politics in general and ethnically sensitive policies and practices in particular were once championed by progressives as a means towards social justice (Iglehart and Becerra, 2008), many are now seriously concerned about the way secular anti-racism policies have now been almost entirely displaced by faith based approaches.

Whilst there now is an emerging critique within the literature of the limitations of diversity and faith based approaches to policy (Cheong et al., 2007; Kundnani, 2007), discussions about the relationship between these policies and contemporary religious fundamentalisms are much less developed. Within this moment, faith based multiculturalism takes on a profoundly oxymoronic role, where it is both some- thing to be feared, and simultaneously something to be celebrated; as though policy appears to veer between seeing the multicultural polity as the problem at one moment, and the solution in the next.

Whilst it absolutely essential to distinguish between faith based groups in general and religious fundamentalism proper, our argument is that the encouragement of a faith agenda has created a Trojan Horse in which religious fundamentalist groups have become increasingly influential in a range of public policy arenas. Particularly revealing in this respect is the recent fallout at Amnesty International where the Head of the Gender Unit, Gita Sahgal, accused the charity of putting the human rights of terror suspects above those of their victims. Specifically she accused the organization of uncritically associating itself with 'Caged Prisoners', an organization, which she alleged, has an explicit political agenda to support 'global jihad' (Kerbaj, 2010). The point here is the way these events reveal an atmosphere of uncertainty and division amongst groups, which were previously broadly

united around a progressive, anti-racist, feminist and human rights consensus.

On the one hand religious discourse, once felt to be in decline and in a process of 'withering away' under the weight of a combination of secularism and general disinterest, is being asserted anew, with the policy framework around 'multiculturalism' becoming a space in which arguments about the value of faith have become privileged. At the same time the rise of religious fundamentalisms, particularly those linked to political Islam in the UK, but which also echo in all of the major world religions internationally, is presented as a 'threat' to the very essence of democratic society. Religious minorities in general and Muslims in particular have come to be viewed with suspicion and hostility, as has been demonstrated by a recent report from Human Rights First, an internationally respected body, which documents widespread and sustained attacks on Muslims throughout Europe, with a particular upsurge following terrorist incidents and media driven campaigns (Human Rights First, 2007).

A sign of the confusing times we are living in is ironically the way one of the most dramatic critiques of multiculturalism has come from Trevor Phillips, former head of the Commission for Racial Equality: the body which was responsible for developing these policies for the previous two decades. In a speech entitled 'Sleepwalking to Segregation' delivered in Manchester Town Hall on 22 September 2005, Phillips argued that despite 30 years of multiculturalism British society was becoming a more divided by race and religion and more unequal by ethnicity. He goes on to warn that Britain 'could end up in 2048, a hundred years on from the Windrush, living in a Britain of passively co-existing ethnic and religious communities, eyeing each other uneasily over the fences of our differences'. (Phillips, 2005)

The concern expressed here is that multiculturalism has weakened social cohesion and therefore in some way contributed to the terrorist attacks on London on 7/7 which were committed by British Born Muslim youth. William Pfaff, writing in the Observer argued, 'these British bombers are a consequence of a misguided and catastrophic pursuit of multiculturalism' (Pfaff, 2005). Similarly, Martin Wolf a respected left leaning journalist argued that multiculturalism was directly responsible for undermining the idea of 'citizenship' and therefore it, 'must be discarded as nonsense' ('When multiculturalism is a nonsense', Financial Times, 31 August 2005, quoted in Modood, 2005a).

Paralleling this sense of multiculturalism inadvertently perhaps of fostering religious and ethnic segregation, is an altogether different strand of thought that we need more not less multiculturalism. For example, the British sociologist, Tariq Modood argues that the problem is not that there has been excessive attention given to religious and faith based identities, but too little (Modood, 2005b). He argues that, certainly within the UK context organized



religious minority groups embody the next logical development of community based anti-racist activism and struggles against oppression. Within such an argument the basis for the political challenge to racism, exclusion and disadvantage lies in the assertion of religious as opposed to secular identities. In a discussion of the importance of faith based identity politics he argues that:

The emergence of a 'politics of difference' out of and alongside a liberal assimilationist equality created a dissonance. Similarly, the emergence of a British Muslim identity out of and alongside ethno-racial identities has created an even greater dissonance because it challenges the hegemonic power of secularism in British political culture, especially on the centre-left. (Modood, 2005c: 12)

In his most recent book Multiculturalism Modood makes the direct analogy between the struggles of the New Social Movements and arguments over the acceptance of religious identities. While the former have now been accepted within a liberal citizenship paradigm, Modood argues that:

**Muslims [. . . ] are now utilizing the same kind of argument and making a claim that religious identity, just like gay identity, and just like certain forms of racial identity, should not just be privatized and tolerated, but should be part of the public space. (2007: 70)**

Whilst Modood's argument about the way in which faith has emerged as a potent organizing mechanism, for disenfranchised communities in particular, is important, it is the apparent ease with which the concept of a secular public space simply disappears which concerns us. The danger is that state policy being simply driven by a need to accommodate uncritically to these new faith based movements could lead to an undermining of the gains won by secular social movements, particularly in regard to women's rights, and Gay and Lesbian issues. What is therefore crucially absent in Modood's work is any sense of the different ideological thrust of these new faith based social movements, as opposed to the predominantly secular emphasis of the earlier New Social Movements (Crossley, 2002; Porta and Diani, 2005).

### **New Fundamentalist Social Movements**

Whilst it would be wrong to conflate religious belief and identification with fundamentalism, in the context of geopolitical events impacting all faith groups, there can be no doubt that across the world we are seeing an emergence within a range of different religious traditions - Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism - of a new form of militant piety and a general intolerance of liberal traditions associated with freedom of thought and expression. Chetan Bhatt, who has for instance followed the emergence of the BJP in India talks about the emergence of new forms of 'religious absolutism' which represent a militant intolerance of secularism (Bhatt, 2006).

An important defining feature of these new social movements is a sense of absolute truth of particular (though of course highly selective) religious discourses along with an assertion of primordial identities as the basis for new forms of nationalism.

The starting point of religious fundamentalist claims is the idea of 'cultural relativism'. Cultural relativism was born out of the work of radical anthropologists such as Frantz Boas and Margaret Mead in the first half of the 20th century who sought to challenge colonial and racist representations of non-Europeans as primitive and inferior. It was on this basis that they sought to posit the idea of all cultures being of equal value. However, during the latter half of the 20th century, as the work of Gilles Kepel (2004) has illustrated, against the backdrop of a postmodern crisis of Enlightenment values associated with scientific progress, cultural relativism has been used to discredit secularist rationalism whilst at the same time legitimating religious claims.

It is also important to understand the way this debate is taking place in a global context; Kepel's work makes it clear that what we are seeing here is an issue that is not simply about one particular religion, but about the resurgent global influence of fundamentalist movements generally within Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Islam. Kepel traces the origins of this new form of more militant religion to the 1960s, where the link between religion and civil society was questioned, as much by those inside as those outside various religious institutions. He sees a significant change as having taken place around 1975 when this questioning process:

**. . . went into reverse. A new religious approach took shape, aimed no longer at adapting to secular values but by recovering a sacred foundation for the organization of society, by changing society if necessary. Expressed in a multitude of ways, this approach advocated moving on from a modern-ism that had failed, attributing its setbacks and dead ends to separation from God. The theme was no longer *aggornimento* [accommodation] but a second evangelization of Europe; the aim was no longer to modernize Islam but to 'Islamize modernity'. (Kepel, 2004: 2)**

The fundamentalist challenge to secularism was additionally emboldened through its concurrence with the postmodernist and postcolonial repudiation of Enlightenment traditions, of which secularism and universalism are amongst the most important (Malik, 1996). The postmodernist rejection of Enlightenment universalism (Lyotard, 1984) opened a space where essentialized 'other-identity' claims were legitimized and in some instances even celebrated as inherently progressive. Edward Said's classic early work *Orientalism* (2003) provides an illustration of the dangers of a postcolonial critique, which presented the Enlightenment simply as an Imperial project. His all too frequently quoted assertion that 'it is therefore correct that every

European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric' (Said, 2003: 204) created the very essentialism that he was seeking to undermine. It was by taking such observations out of their overall context, that fundamentalist ideologues were to give their claims a veneer of respectability; be they Islamic religious fundamentalists seeking to legitimize a notion of inherent anti-Western victimhood, or their mirror image in the form of conservative ideologues promoting their own agenda through the 'clash of civilizations' thesis, as discussed above.

Therefore it could be argued that postmodernist arguments about 'subjectivity' and 'being', far from advancing anti-racist thinking, led to the obfuscation of both the concrete historical struggles by colonized peoples as well as an understanding of the essentially political nature of contemporary fundamentalisms. Bhatt has noted the way in which this cultural relativism has allowed '... the concealment of political interests, groups and parties through discourses of authenticity, discrimination and victimhood which normalise what are otherwise quite mendacious political ambitions. (2006: 102)

Terry Eagleton has also discussed the way postmodernist arguments have been used by the Ulster Unionists in Northern Ireland to justify their claims for a specific cultural identity - the point is that this language gives a progressive gloss to something which is deeply reactionary and chauvinistic (Eagleton, 2006). One can see a similar strategy mobilized by the Hindu fundamentalist Hindutva movement in India, which relies heavily on postcolonial critiques of British cultural imperialism (Bhatt, 2001). In a broader sense the trap that progressives fell into in the face of the vacuum caused by the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' was, as Zizek has noted an obsession with the 'constant creation of new terms; "postmodern society", "risk society", "post-industrial society" etc.' (2009: 6) without attending to what was really new - the dramatic ascendancy of disparate but nonetheless powerful forms of religious fundamentalism.

It is very important to understand that while fundamentalist movements often originate within the mainstream religious traditions, their political demands are far removed from the majority of religious organizations and individuals that make benign and largely sincere demands for religiosity, spirituality and affirmation of difference. As Kepel (2004) has noted, the key feature of fundamentalist movements is the construction of a sense of 'crisis' in society - in this sense we would argue that they are anti-systemic movements as opposed to the largely consensual attitude espoused by mainstream religious institutions. In effect this mobilization of a sense of crisis places them in direct competition with materially based political movements, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico or Naxalite groups in India. The dialectics of religious fundamentalist movements is that they seek to both

interpolate an existing (economic, political, social) crisis, as well as manufacture a sense of crisis based on the previously discussed notion of victimology, rooted in the godless nature of modernity. It is through this appeal to an ongoing grievance against a monolithic conception of 'the West' as innately evil<sup>2</sup> that some fundamentalists have sought to impose, as Imam, Morgan and Yuval Davis have argued:

**. . . a single version of collective identity as the only true, authentic and valid one, and use it to impose their power and authority over 'their' constituency . . . They usually claim to be the representatives of an authentic tradition, and they speak against the corrupting influence of modernity and 'the West.'** (2004: x)

This quote points to one of the crucial ways in which fundamentalist movements assert their power; that is to discipline, repudiate or expel those more tolerant, pluralist and hybrid elements within their own religious tradition, thereby seeking to 'purify' it.

This notion of purification also points to a key paradox of fundamentalist movements; while on one hand they construct themselves through the language of a 'return to the past', they are in fact entirely products of the contemporary period. Rather than being 'medieval' as liberal secularist opponents often characterize them, fundamentalist movements are profoundly modern (Bhatt, 1997). While they argue that the setting free of reason from faith is the major cause of the social ills of modern society, and associate new technologies, and in particular multimedia, as being instrumental in the moral degradation of society, they themselves are highly adept at exploiting those very technologies they seek to demonize. In this sense, these movements are highly paradoxical; while they present themselves as expressions of and defenders of a primordial, traditional and pre-modern absolute truth, they are in fact highly proficient participants in the technology of modernity, be it in the exploitation of the internet, television, fund raising or the use of destructive weaponry. In this respect they could be characterized as 'anti-modernist forms of modernity'.

Hence the ascendancy of religious fundamentalism needs to be understood against the backdrop of two key historical processes. Firstly the power vacuum created through the decline and collapse of secular visions of a better world - be those socialist, communist, progressive nationalist, or feminist. Secondly the profoundly destabilizing impact of economic globalization, neo-liberal economic policies and Structural Adjustment Programmes of the sort

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<sup>2</sup> For example the mobilization of the notion of '*Great Satan*' as derogatory epithet for the United States of America and the West more generally by Iranian leader Khomeini in 1975. Ref: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Satan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Satan)

promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Westra, 2009). In the developing world, Westra argues, where these policies have been imposed without regard to their consequences, there have been devastating increases in poverty, homelessness and unemployment. Fundamentalist movements have been the beneficiaries of the anger, disillusionment and 'anomie' caused by this. Emerson and Hartman have noted the way that 'for Fundamentalists and their sympathizers, Western versions of modernization rush over them in a tidal wave of change, ripping up communities, values, social ties and meaning' (2006: 131). It follows that the attraction of fundamentalism lies in part in the way it represents a protest to the imposition of Western neo-liberalism. Similarly Gilbert Achcar has argued that neo-liberal deregulation represents in effect 'anomisation' in the developing world, and it is this overwhelming level of change which causes a 'retrenchment to basic identity markers', of which religion is one of the most significant (Achcar, 2009). It is the very destructiveness of contemporary capitalism that nurtures the return of religion as an attempt to rediscover meaning, as Zizek has noted:

**The problem is one of meaning, and it is here that religion is now reinventing its role, rediscovering its mission of guaranteeing a meaningful life to those who participate in the meaningless functioning of the capitalist machine. (2009: 25)**

And so, as Mooers (2005) suggests, any attempt to make sense of the production of cultural identities that does not factor in the impact of political economy is likely to result in an obscuring of oppression. Multiculturalism, he suggests, has worked to fetishise 'forms of liberal citizenship through its own peculiar dialectic of revelation and concealment by effacing the lived experience of racism and sexism through the apparent validation of visible forms of difference' (p.15). In short, an emphasis on culture in the absence of examining the economic and political contexts in which it is produced and reproduced will simply result in the obscuring of relations of dominance and oppression.

### **Concluding thoughts**

A key objective of this paper has been to understand the curiously paradoxical place of religion and faith based groupings in the contemporary multicultural polity, and the confusion, and in some instances conflicts, this has caused amongst progressives. The capacity of religious fundamentalists to acquire influence must be understood in three key ways. At the global level, fundamentalists, but particularly jihadist groups, have interpolated the sense of anomie that has come as a consequence of the overwhelming social change represented in particular by neo-liberal economic policies. At the national level, the Janus face of government policy leads on one hand to policies and strategies, developed under the rubric of the 'War Against Terror', which have victimized entire Muslim communities whilst at the same time by

extending the remit of multiculturalism to incorporate religion, has allowed religious social movements, including fundamentalist groups to occupy the space of defenders of the oppressed.

Perhaps the most important starting point in thinking about the efficacy or otherwise of cultural pluralism is to note that the making of culture is both a unfinished and contested project. Despite the claims of fundamentalists and nationalists, religious or ethnic groups are never monolithic, but are manifestations of hegemonic struggles. Cultural relativism, as noted by Anne Philips (2001) is not a useful ally when it comes to women's struggle over oppression' (p.iii) and a 'hands-off approach to cultural difference can end up capitulating to unjust social power' (p.iii) All cultural groups, particularly those defined in religious terms are always internally differentiated along lines of gender, class and caste, social justice is perhaps best served by building some common aspirations. To avoid cultural imperialism this needs to be done in a ways that gives voice and testimony to the oppressed within each group. It also means recognizing that despite the efforts philosophers and political scientists, the project of conceptualizing justice and equality is itself imminent. Hence, it is important that there is maximum cross-cultural engagement in the formation and reformation of universal principles and policies that one might seek to deploy. Moreover, such discussions will need to factor in a political economy element that seeks always to establish the link between material factors and the production and reproduction of cultures of exclusion and oppression. Perhaps only then can one create the possibility of resolving tensions between cultural pluralism and universalism.

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