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## Tariq Modood: On being a public intellectual, a Muslim and a multiculturalist

Interviewed by Simon Thompson

*What does it mean to be a public intellectual?*

Intellectual or academic life is usually organised in disciplines, and intellectuals' questions come out of those disciplines. But in public intellectual engagement the question does not primarily come out of a discipline. It comes from the public. It concerns our relations with each other as members of a society and especially as citizens of a polity. A public intellectual is a concerned citizen who accepts responsibility for his society and brings to its understanding insights of their discipline.

Most of what salaried academics do is contribute to their disciplinary community or to a broader academic community. So, a political theorist may say, 'Hannah Arendt was engaged with this question. This is a question that is still alive and her thought on this is strangely lucid. I want to revisit it and perhaps recover neglected aspects of it'. These questions all arise organically from thinking about Hannah Arendt.

But we also at times think about questions that don't just arise from the discipline. So, for example, we think about the relationship between religious identity and political equality. Is there any relation? Does political equality simply mean we are not interested in anybody's religious identity? We simply don't suppress or promote any such identities? Sounds plausible. But then if we think about it we realise that in fact, some people's religious identity tells them to have an ethical orientation which is clearly social *and* political – to do with questions like what kind of economic relations to have or not have, to be hospitable to refugees or not. Whereas for other people their religious identity is an entirely private matter.

So if political equality means merely ignoring religious identities, we are favouring religious identities that are purely private, and *not* treating all religious identities equally. We're *preferring* a particular kind of religious identity. So now we are not just talking about, say, Hannah Arendt's ideas. We're thinking about our existing political arrangements in light of the claims that some Muslims or some Christians or – for that matter – some new atheists are

making about political life and equality. We are engaged in public questions. But we are still drawing on academic conversations, academic tools, academic perspectives.[1]

*Do you think we've resolved this question – about how to square equality for all religious identities with political equality – in Britain?*

I think we have entered a period where we are rethinking the place of religion in relation to equality and the public sphere. But there's a deep antipathy to treating religious identities on a par with others. A good measure of this is how in the Labour Party or in a major trade union there can be a women's section, an LGBT section, a black or ethnic minorities section, but we can all imagine the consternation if and when Muslims ask for a Muslim or a religious minorities section!

*Should all intellectuals or academics be public intellectuals?*

Intellectual life, like society, has a division of labour. I'm not saying: 'all academics or sociologists or political theorists must engage in *this*.' The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is a good, though it's not the only good we should be concerned with. We need a certain amount of publically supported fundamental or 'blue skies' or pure academic research, because who knows what will come from it? Even the publically engaged intellectual working on political theory will still get a lot of value from the person who says 'I really want to understand Arendt.'

Public engagement is desirable rather than essential for individual academics. But when it comes to the collective – a department of politics or a school of sociology – I think it is essential for at least some of its members to be engaged. And what I mean by desirable is not simply 'optional'; public engagement is something that should be pursued *if possible*.

*Do you see yourself as bringing a specifically Muslim voice to public debate?*

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[1] In an earlier interview I give more content to the idea of a public intellectual by reference to Bhikhu Parekh and Stuart Hall, who have inspired me and exemplify two different kinds of public intellectuals: the reformer and the critic respectively, see D. O. Martinez (2013), 'Intellectual biography, empirical sociology and normative political theory: An interview with Tariq Modood', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 34(6).

To answer this we need to go back to the Rushdie affair. The Rushdie affair was a pivotal intellectual and biographical moment for me, because in some ways I came to *be* a Muslim at that time. It would have been quite straightforward for me to walk away from all these angry, aggressive Muslims and simply say: *they have nothing to do with me*. But I thought instead: *these people* are *something to do with me*. I was working in racial equality and community relations, I had a sense of belonging, solidarity, with a community of suffering. I was aware of and proud of my Pakistani roots. I thought of myself as British Asian, so to extend that to think of myself as a British Asian Muslim didn't seem such a leap. But it wasn't obvious either. I knew other British Asians who didn't want to have anything to do with these 'fundamentalists'. I felt I needed to address Muslims as much as I needed to address the wider 'public', and I needed to address them in a way that both exhibited identification and solidarity with them and said: *this is where I stand and this is where we should stand – and we should distinguish ourselves from some other Muslim positions*. So it was a critical stance, but I was expressing it as a Muslim.

My biography, or my social location, as a brown Brit of Pakistani origins and Muslim background, is very present in my work – both in the questions I am engaged with, and also to some extent the answers. But I don't think of myself as *simply* speaking as a Muslim. When I speak, I speak as a *multiculturalist* above all. This is the intellectual commitment that I bring to public debate.

*Should public intellectuals stand up for the marginalised or dispossessed?*

I don't accept the argument that the role of intellectuals is to always support the weaker party. We should all attend to the state of the weaker party. But that is an issue of justice and fairness, it's not especially to do with political theory or sociology or being an intellectual.

The answer to your question comes back again to the Rushdie affair. At that time, there were at least two prominent things motivating me. Concern for the wellbeing of British society. *And* concern for the wellbeing of British Muslims as a particular part of British society. I was trying to follow these two deep personal commitments *equally*. It wasn't just Muslims and Salman Rushdie who were affected. British society was affected by this incident – and, in fact, this set of issues is not confined to one country.

Some people might say about me: 'he doesn't care about Britain, he just wants to look after the Muslim constituency.' I personally have never thought along those lines. I have an abiding concern for the wellbeing of British society, which doesn't mean that British society sometimes doesn't misunderstand where its wellbeing lies. When I try and engage with a broader British public, I am trying to get people to think about what is *really* good for British society. What is consistent with its beliefs and long-term character? Because, of course, British society has to work and adapt to include in a fair and just way what we might call the new British. What I have been concerned about – in the Rushdie affair and after – has not been the wellbeing of Muslims *per se,* but the wellbeing of Muslims who are part of British society and whose future is part of British society. The wellbeing of these parties is entangled, and  the conflictual parts of the entanglement have to be worked out so that the wellbeing of each becomes interdependent and, if you like, integrated.

*Does sharing an identity mean sharing solidarity?*

My biography gives me insights and a sensibility that others don't have. I don't claim to be specially empathetic, but I can say that I know certain things, having been brought up as a Muslim, having been an Asian in Britain since I was a child, and going to a very white, working-class school with a lot of racist and other kinds of bullying. I think this was the basis for my career. I could see that the way that British society was beginning to politically conceptualize the issues around race in the 1970s and 80s just did not fit with my own sense of who I was. And I felt that I was actually the norm in Asian communities and not the exception, for example, like most British Asians I did not think I was black, nor of course, white; and nor did I define myself against Britishness but as making a new, distinctive claim on it. That gave me the basis for arguing against a kind of black-white racial dualism and towards ethnic pluralism – towards multicultural Britishness, where there are different ways of being British.

The emergence of religion as a live issue, in particular the assertion of Muslim identity, was actually a bit of a surprise to me. When I first heard about the Rushdie affair I thought, 'it's not right for Muslims to be getting so angry.' But *being* amongst Muslims made me realize that this really mattered to Muslims, and they were unable to do what their sympathizers were asking them to do – which was basically to just forget about the novel entirely. I could see that Muslims were headed for a confrontation, and this wasn't good for Muslims or for

British society. And because I could identify with them I could understand: not because I'm particularly empathetic, as I say, but because I belong to a certain social world.

*You said above that the issues raised by the Rushdie controversy are not confined to one country. Could you expand on that?*

Comparable issues to do with Muslims protesting how their religion, especially the Prophet Muhammad, is portrayed arose with the Danish Cartoons Affair and more recently the cartoons in *Charlie Hebdo*. In each case, an important question has been to look beyond the horrific violence and murder and to ask how, in a multicultural society, groups of people such as Muslims or Jews or blacks should and should not be portrayed. We need incitement to hatred legislation, but I think in the main, these issues should be dealt with through 'censure not censor'. We should handle the offensive portrayal of racial and religious minorities through censuring rather than legal bans. When several prominent European newspapers and magazines republished the original Danish cartoons of Muhammad, no British newspaper or magazine did so, on the grounds that they were not in the business of giving gratuitous offence. This is the same British approach that unlike France and many European countries has not tried to make Holocaust denial a criminal offence but dealt with it through a culture of civility and censure.

*Do you think that racism, and in particular Islamophobia, are growing problems in this country, and what can politics do to fight against this rise?*

Most of the evidence suggests that racial discrimination, say in relation to jobs, persists. Ethnic minorities continue to make progress in terms of socio-economic mobility and participation in public life, but that's mainly because of the extra qualifications they achieve rather than because there is a level playing field. On the other hand, I think that racial prejudice is in relative decline if we look at the views of younger people compared to older people, and at friendship, dating, relationships, marriage and so on. Yet both in terms of employment and social life, suspicion of and hostility to Muslims continues to rise. Partly this is collective blame for jihadi terrorism but it's also an antipathy to publicly asserted religious identities. This 'Muslim penalty' has to be much more publicly stated as a problem. Blanket condemnation of racism is not enough. We need positive national narratives which feature Muslims and Islam as aspects of what it is to be British. Politicians also need to work with

Muslim communities to identify, isolate and defeat the processes leading to terrorism, rather than speak as if Muslims were the problem or that terrorism is a problem the Muslim community could solve on its own – or indeed that it could be solved without the full engagement of the Muslim communities, including conservative Muslims and critics of government foreign policies.

*You said that you see yourself as a multiculturalist intellectual. Do you think multiculturalism is still the model we should be following in Britain?*

Multiculturalism is the accommodation of minorities not just as individuals but as people sharing, promoting and remaking their group identities within a common citizenship and the rethinking of a national story. No doubt this has sometimes been expressed too simply, both theoretically and politically, so we must learn from critics emphasising community cohesion, or the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, or what is called 'interculturalism'. But these are really modifications of multiculturalism, not alternatives to it. This is clear as soon as you pose the question: what it is that anti-multiculturalist countries like France or Germany have achieved that Britain has failed to achieve? In fact by virtually any measure you care to pick – discrimination and victimisation, social mobility, presence in and participation in public life, rethinking national identity in a more inclusive way, inter-ethnic friendships, interfaith dialogue and cooperation and so on – the position of non-European origin minorities in Britain is better than in most or all European countries. So, to paraphrase Churchill, British multiculturalism may be the worst model, except for all the others. In the last few years I have been particularly sympathetic to voices on the centre-left (like Jon Cruddas) emphasising that the cultural identities and anxieties of the majority need to be part of a communitarian One Nation politics. I think that is right, but it is important that such a politics should not be cast as anti-multiculturalist but should include what might be called a critically evolving multiculturalism.

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**Further reading**

Modood, T. (2016) 'What is Multiculturalism and what can it learn from Interculturalism?' in 'Interculturalism versus Multiculturalism – The Cantle-Modood Debate', *Ethnicities*, Online First.

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