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Cracking and moderating secularist assumptions

POOYAN TAMIMI ARAB

ABSTRACT The four articles that make up this symposium on Tariq Modood's recent collection, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (2019), are based on a public conversation and research colloquium held at Utrecht University on 18 February 2020. In the first article, Modood introduces the conversation with a statement of his thinking over two decades on the subjects of secularism and multiculturalism. This is followed by responses by Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ernst van den Hemel and, in the fourth and final article, Modood has the last word.

KEYWORDS accommodation, conservatism, equality, liberalism, multiculturalism, neutrality, populism, secularism

Tariq Modood's *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (2019) collects two decades of thinking about secularism and ethnoreligious pluralism. The book complements *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*, which elegantly clarified concepts such as difference, multiplicity and equality, but also Islamophobia and racism. In more recent work, Modood defends 'multicultural nationalism', a shift inspired not by conceding to persistent majoritarianism across European countries, but by an expansion in his intellectual horizon of care for all citizens. In what follows I highlight three significant agreements as well as three differences of opinion with the new book.¹

First, I am persuaded by Modood's case for empirically grounding normative theories of political secularism. The actual state regulation of religious presence needs our attention before making sweeping statements about a 'crisis' of secularism or the 'death' of multiculturalism. Amsterdam's Blue Mosque is a case in point. In 2019, the Islamic house of worship announced a plan to amplify the call to prayer (adhan) once a week on Fridays. The mosque acted entirely in line with Dutch laws and policies, which do not require a permit for mosques to use loudspeakers. Moreover, mosques have been sounding the call to prayer since the 1980s in Rotterdam, The

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1 Tariq Modood, *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield/ ECPR Press 2019). References to chapters and pages in this collection are in parentheses in the text. See also Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* [2007], 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity Books 2013).

Hague, Leiden, Utrecht and in various smaller towns.² Announcing the wish to amplify the adhan does anger residents who repeatedly express worries about 'noise pollution' and the 'Islamization of public space'. These reactions are hardly surprising since we cannot expect most citizens to understand the particular form of political secularism that has developed historically in the Netherlands. Contrary to popular sentiments that religion should not manifest itself publicly, the Dutch governance model does constitutionally enable diverse religious aesthetics in the urban land- and soundscapes. It is disheartening that Amsterdam's mayor, a well-known leader of the social-liberal GroenLinks (GreenLeft) party, did not support the Blue Mosque. She lamented instead that banning the adhan was not an option without also limiting church bell-ringing.³ She was right, *de facto* and *de jure*, but did not convey the spirit of the law to the capital's residents.

Dutch readers of Modood will thus recognize his observation that British Muslims are not by default discriminated against by other, possibly conservative, religious organizations. Like Amsterdam's mayor, however, the secular-left and liberal intelligentsia all too often fail to defend the ideals of either secularism or multiculturalism (122). By studying real discourses and governance practices, we understand better that things are not always what they appear to be. Modood cautions:

If we have to think normatively of the place of religion in a polity and, ultimately, a multicultural citizenship, then existing political theory is not a good place to start because it has too limited traction with actual liberal democratic secular polities in which the challenge of a multicultural citizenship is being exercised (9).

This advice can be especially helpful to doctoral researchers who may be all too easily swayed by ideological desires to 'deconstruct secularism' without offering much in return (18). Modood's framework, in contrast, benefits down-to-earth research and does not misrecognize the space made available for public religion by political secularism. It also offers something to politicians who depart from a limiting understanding of what secularism entails, and can assist in practical engagement between municipalities, mosques and residents. The mayor of Amsterdam, too, eventually visited the Blue Mosque to hear and discuss the call to prayer.

Second, the attention to actual state religion connections derives from a stance of political realism. In consequence, Modood rightfully argues against fetishizing the metaphor of the separation of church and state. Among scholars of secularism, it is habitually thought that the disestablishment of religion from the state is the only genuinely acceptable form of

2 Pooyan Tamimi Arab, *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape: Religious Pluralism and Secularism in The Netherlands* (London: Bloomsbury 2017).

3 Ruben Koops, 'Halsema vindt versterkte gebedsoproep Blauwe Moskee niet van deze tijd', *Het Parool*, 29 October 2019.

secularism. Weak types of establishment, like in the United Kingdom (UK), are perceived as survivals of less liberal, less democratic times. Modood's evaluation of the varieties of political secularism, however, leads him to infer the impossibility of state neutrality vis-à-vis culture or religion (11). Rather than seeking republican disestablishment, as favoured by Rajeev Bhargava or Martha Nussbaum, he finds the British pluralization of weakly established religions a better alternative.⁴ In support of his argument, it is certainly uncomplicated to reason that British Muslims enjoy greater freedom of religion in the UK than in France.

A comparison with early modern Enlightenment philosophers, who dealt with actual matters of governance such as the construction of houses of worship or the question of whether Jewish ritual slaughter should be allowed, can further elucidate Modood's position. Spinoza, for instance, explicitly warned against wanting to separate church and state in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*,⁵ contending that an established religion is not only required but must steer the people's power of imagination and shape ethical ideas of living together. In the *Tractatus Politicus*, the philosopher named this a *religio patriae*, a national church or religion, that could, in the seventeenth-century, not yet be wholly identified with the *civil religion* we know from French and American contexts.⁶ Spinoza's national religion did not sever ties with historical and existing state religions, which, he argued, should be materially privileged above other religions and yet be adapted to undermine theocratic forces and to serve citizens of diverse faiths and backgrounds equally. Similarly, Modood writes: 'The national church ... belongs to the people and the country, not just to its religious members and clergy' (199). We know from histories and anthropologies of secularism that such thick state-religion connections are prone to bias in favour of majorities.⁷ Accordingly, while Modood's realism and critique of a radical separation hit the mark, the prospect of enduring European monarchies, only now pluralized, should be indefinitely argus-eyed.

Moreover, certain forms of legal disestablishment are *de facto* combined with contingent forms of establishment. For example, the Netherlands still has a Protestant king (and, for the first time, a Catholic queen), but is widely understood to have formally disestablished religion from the state

4 Rajeev Bhargava, *The Promise of India's Secular Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: BasicBooks 2008).

5 Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* [1607], ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. from the Latin by Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2007), ch. 19.

6 Baruch Spinoza, *Politischer Traktat: Lateinisch-Deutsch* [1677], ed. Wolfgang Bartuschat (Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1994), ch. 8, §46.

7 Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2009); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2015).

in 1983. Whatever particular cases may suggest, scholars who thought disestablishment to be an unquestionable goal might find themselves convinced by Modood's effort to crack and moderate secularist assumptions. The latter effect of Modood's essays is sobering indeed.

The third agreement with Modood, which follows his empirical scrutiny and realist attitude, is that we 'cosmopolitan' scholars should take ordinary people seriously in their wish to form thick bonds and communities. 'Critical' scholars get it wrong if they judge an ethnoreligious people's identification with a specific group to be the mere product of Othering. Group identities are not so fluid as to lack any coherence. Therefore, normative theorists of secularism and multiculturalism should take people seriously as religious believers who usually organize their lives around ethnic lines. They are, as Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, shaped by culture and creed, colour and class, and by country.⁸ States should not force *assimilation* on such people, or strive for a national identity to 'cannibalize' minority identities.⁹ Nor can we theorists ignore attacks against people *as a people*; cultural racism and Islamophobia are, after all, forms of racism.

Notwithstanding these agreements, I now elaborate on three differences of opinion.

The first difference of opinion concerns the proposed manner of balancing different forms of racism. Modood writes the following about the United Kingdom:

The perception of Asians ... is that their defects lie deep in their culture rather than in a biology that produces their culture. This means that Asians, *more than blacks* [my emphasis], suffer a double racism. This does not mean that Asians suffer more racism—such as harassment, discrimination and institutional exclusion—than do blacks in Britain (34).

But what *does* this mean, if not that Asians suffer more racism? One could argue that sociological generalization discloses the fact that Asians suffer double racism more than black citizens.¹⁰ That is, it is an empirical matter to be adjudicated based on measuring and interpreting data on British racism. Citing a documentary on discrimination in the police force, Modood illustrates his broader argument that 'most hostility [in the UK] is directed towards Asians/Muslims' and that 'a hierarchy of racisms cannot

8 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity: Creed, Country, Colour, Class, Culture* (London: Profile Books 2019).

9 Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2010), 166.

10 The house style of *Patterns of Prejudice* does not capitalize the 'B' in 'black' when it is an adjective. I find Kwame Anthony Appiah's argument for capitalization at all times compelling, namely that 'Black' indicates an identification rather than a natural category. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'The case for capitalizing the B in Black', *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2020.

be ruled out simply because it does not sound nice' (39). Further on in the book, we again read that 'Asians face the greatest hostility today' and that this is because most hostility is 'directed to Muslims' (123). Undoubtedly, racisms do not affect groups precisely in the same manner or at all times with the same intensity. Irish Catholics suffer less prejudice in Boston and New York City today than do Muslims hailing from Africa and Asia. The issue becomes contentious when we weigh brown Muslim citizens against black citizens, seemingly presumed to be non-Muslims, excluding many of African descent. If we agree that racisms can be measured and that their intensities are matters of social scientific interpretation, doing so nevertheless requires extraordinary sensitivity in the contemporary UK (the country Modood knows best) or in the Netherlands (the country I am most familiar with). The phrase 'a hierarchy of racisms' itself aggravates existing divides in the Netherlands, where citizens who identify as Jewish, Black and Muslim often clash in their respective drives for moral recognition and political support. What is more, the continued impact of slavery, colonialism and genocidal antisemitism on black and Jewish people is difficult to compare hierarchically with the experiences of Turkish-Dutch Muslims whose parents or grandparents were known as 'guest workers'. The balancing act is even more challenging (though not futile) when we take into account the numerous smaller and ever-diversifying groups that have redefined Rotterdam and Amsterdam at least since the end of the Cold War.

The second difference of opinion concerns the freedoms of enquiry and expression that may pit groups against each other and that are also frequently demanded by minorities within minorities. It is striking that Modood mentions Salman Rushdie and the novel *The Satanic Verses* in all chapters of *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism*. When comparing it with the notorious Danish cartoons, Modood argues that, for Muslims, it is 'the novel that is more offensive' (24) and that the 'eroticization of the sacred in *The Satanic Verses* was far more hurtful than anything in the cartoons' (67). This view aligns well with the anthropology of offensive images. Jojada Verrips explains that offensive pictures betray stable subject patterns. They usually revolve around the sacred, sex and death. A combination, such as the eroticization of the sacred, additionally exacerbates the visceral experience of offence.¹¹ Modood advocates 'norms of civility' in response, 'which give us a base to censure Rushdie' (24). Whereas he does not recommend legal censoring, Modood's plea for informal censoring remains far-reaching (e.g. 65–8). To justify censure, he distinguishes the freedom of enquiry from the broader freedom of expression. Modood believes, in line with Spinoza's exclusive defence of *libertas philosophandi*,

11 Jojada Verrips, 'Offending art and the sense of touch', *Material Religion*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2008, 204–25; Jojada Verrips, 'A brief anatomy of offensive imagery', in Birgit Meyer, Christiane Kruse and Anne-Marie Korte (eds), *Taking Offense: Religion, Art, and Visual Culture in Plural Configurations* (Paderborn: Verlag Wilhelm Fink 2018), 284–316.

that the freedom of enquiry should enjoy greater protection than the freedom of expression.

At the end of the book, Modood explains the experiential basis for wanting to censure *The Satanic Verses*. The Rushdie Affair and its aftermath made him identify more as a Muslim (227). It was a pivotal moment in his thinking, which developed under conditions of discrimination and racism targeting European Muslims. His passion for this topic is understandable. However, as a European who is also a citizen of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I cannot agree with the call for the censuring of Rushdie as a broader model for moderating political secularism and managing ethnoreligious pluralism. For Iranians, Rushdie was not a new phenomenon, nor can they isolate the international affair from theocratic tyranny. They still know the names of intellectuals such as Ahmad Kasravi, who was stabbed to death in a court in Tehran while facing blasphemy charges in 1946, long before the revolution and long before Rushdie's novel.¹² It was a murder inspired by ayatollahs among whom was the later Supreme Leader of Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini. In the present, many face the wrath that Rushdie endured, by Khomeini's shadows, Ali Khamenei and his fellow deceivers.

Even if we do learn to 'exercise restraint' when it comes to offending religious sensibilities—and I agree that restraint may be a public good depending on context—I worry that this will too often benefit conservatives. For example, in 2019, Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum removed an Iranian calligraphic composition of the Prophet Muhammad from the permanent exhibition after complaints by a small number of conservative Sunni-Muslims. The museum also put up a black screen in front of a South Asian miniature painting of the Prophet seated on a throne, made in Kashmir circa two hundred years ago.¹³ But Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese Muslims—the three groups that own most mosques in the Netherlands—can also find the presumption of offence insulting, while others insist on removal. Although Modood advises celebrating diverse forms of heritage, the offered multicultural model does not seem sufficiently robust to protect against silent iconoclastic acts. In practice, limiting the freedom of expression in these ways will benefit one community over another. This brings me to a final difference of opinion regarding the principle of strict neutrality or treating all equally, that is, the same.

Modood criticizes 'legal positivism' (139) when explaining secularism and neutrality: our understanding of law should not be reduced to general mechanical rules that are continually applied literally and in the same way. Similarly, political secularism is not a mechanical or exact doctrine. We require, Modood argues, interpretive methods and contextual sensitivity to meet

12 See the introduction and writings in Ahmad Kasravi, *On Islam and Shi'ism* [1944] (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers 1990).

13 Pooyan Tamimi Arab, 'Longing for Mecca (Verlangen naar Mekka)', Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (February 2019–January 2020)', *Material Religion*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2020, 394–6.

the challenges of living with ethnoreligious diversity. The book therefore begins with the fundamental statement that ‘equality must be extended from uniformity of treatment to include respect for difference’ (1). This argument echoes that of philosophers, such as Aristotle himself, who reasoned that an overly mathematical conception of justice flattens the tension between particular cases and general principles.¹⁴ *Justice is more than simple equal treatment.* By introducing relativity and proportionality, the ancient philosopher advised context-dependent interpretation of general laws by living, namely thinking and feeling, persons. Modood’s own notion of accommodation, defined as a positive recognition and active respect for differences that refuse to be effaced, thus overcomes the limits of what can be named ‘legal positivism’.

Crucially, however, Aristotle did not dispense with universal principles but merely brought these into dialogue with specific situations. Political secularism’s ideals of strict neutrality and universality likewise remain decisive when religious minority rights are concerned, without us having to go so far as to resurrect a hubristic conception of secularism as a positivist doctrine. That is not to oppose Modood’s ideal of accommodation but to warn against underestimating the substantive equality guaranteed by straightforward neutrality, namely by treating all citizens the same. Mosque construction, Islamic calls to prayer, wearing the hijab and Islamic schools are not guaranteed in the Netherlands by active respect for difference, but because of a strict form of neutrality that is more than often upheld only grudgingly, as seen in the mayor of Amsterdam’s response to the amplified adhan. Even in the more contested cases of ritual slaughter and the face veil, the Dutch Council of State—the body that advises the Senate—defended these religious practices with an appeal to simple religious equality as guaranteed by the constitution. In the Netherlands, the outcome resembles much of what Modood calls accommodation. Yet, the sophisticated step from strict neutrality towards accommodation is not a matter of mere semantics. If racism persists in Europe, as Modood thinks it will, the primary condition for Muslims as equal citizens will remain an unembellished and unambiguous implementation of equal rights.¹⁵

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14 In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher contrasts his own view with (his interpretation of) the Pythagoreans: ‘There are some who even think that what is just is simple reciprocity, as the Pythagoreans maintained, because they defined justice simply as having done to one what one has done to another.’ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. from the Greek by J. A. K. Thomson, revd by Hugh Tredennick (London: Penguin Classics 2004), NE1132b.

15 The last paragraph’s argument is developed in Pooyan Tamimi Arab, *Why Do Religious Forms Matter? Reflections on Tolerance, Neutrality, and Public Reason* (New York: Palgrave Pivot forthcoming).

of *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape* (Bloomsbury 2017) on religious pluralism and political secularism in the Netherlands. Tamimi Arab combines political philosophy with the anthropology and sociology of religion, focusing on secularism and material religion. His current project, *Pictures That Divide*, is a research study of contested visual culture and religious diversity. In the forthcoming *Why Do Religious Forms Matter?* (Palgrave), Tamimi Arab explains why religious aesthetics are key to understanding political philosophical concepts such as tolerance, neutrality and public reason. Email: P.TamimiArab@uu.nl