Multiculturalism[1]

Jeremy Shearmur

Jeremy.Shearmur@anu.edu.au

1. Introduction

Earlier this year, a British Muslim writer, Ed Husain, published a striking book, **Among the Mosques: A Journey Across Muslim Britain**.[2] Husain visited a number of mosques across Britain, and reported with what I think can only be described as hostility, on the practise of Islam that he found among most of them. He did not like the fact that gay etc pride flags were not to be found in the neighbourhoods that he visited, that pubs had gone out of business (because observant Muslims were not drinking in them), and that in only one of the mosques were women running its administration. He seemed to see, behind the practises that he disliked, either the influence of funding from Saudi Arabia, or a preoccupation with the idea that Muslims stand in need of a religious ruler. (This concern with a Caliphate is characteristic of a political Islamist group of which he became a member, when he was a young man.[3]) What is rather strange, is that Husain did not display any real knowledge of or interest in the branches of Islam which influenced the mosques which disturbed him. They in fact came from two Indian (and subsequently Pakistani) traditions, the Deobandi and Barelwi.[4]

To cut a long story very short, these groups were among the responses made in India, to the defeat of the Muslim Mughal Empire by the British East India Company, and the subsequent assumption of political power in India by the British. Both groups drew, in different ways, on the scholarly traditions of certain Muslim intellectuals – the ulama,[5] and also on the mystical traditions of Sufism. They developed as an alternative to British attempts to administer Islamic law. Their scholars – who typically wrote in Urdu, Persian and Arabic – were involved in high-level scholarly discussion, including with Sunni scholars in the Middle East. But they were also concerned with practical issues in Indian and then in Pakistani politics. They were engaged in scholarly controversies with one another, but also in issues as to whether or not the celebration of Muhammad's birthday was legitimate, and they – and especially their followers – were involved in hot-headed political disputes. Their activities thus range from antiquated scholasticism, through most

interesting intellectual discussion, through the giving of practical religious guidance to Muslims for their day-to-day activities, to fomenting hostility towards Shi'ite Muslims. They also provided support for Pakistan's notorious blasphemy law, for the declaration that the sectarian Ahmadiyya were not to be counted as Muslims, and in the case of the Deobandi, had some contacts with the ideas and practises behind the Taliban.

The Deobandi also had a strong tradition in Islamic education, including the operation of Madrasas, within which training in Islamic scholarship was offered, and in which men who were going to play a role as local religious leaders were trained. The Deobandi – and a predominantly lay group which seeks to draw Muslims back to observance, associated with them (the Tablighi Jamaat) – played a significant role in India, and then, also, among Muslim migrants from Pakistan to Britain. A recent work surveying Islam in Britain,[6] concluded (p. 34) that 'the Deobandis control almost half of Britain's mosques and have overwhelming dominance in Islamic education'. The same work concluded (p. 116) that 'in Britain, around 90% of Sufi mosques are managed by Barelwi groups'. It was some of these mosques that Ed Husain encountered.

2. Some Issues Concerning Multiculturalism in Britain

As I explained in a previous piece,[7] Britain has long been a diverse society, but things changed after the Second World War with mass immigration from the Indian sub-continent and the West Indies and, subsequently, with people coming to the UK from various countries within the EU, and also other parts of the world.

In some ways, Jewish immigration from the end of the Nineteenth Century and in the first Part of the Twentieth Century offers an interesting model here. For over time, what took place was a range of things, from assimilation and inter-marriage (current estimates are a 25% rate of inter-marriage), to moderate social and religious separation coupled with integration into the educational, commercial and business life of the country, to, on the part of what is now about 18% of a Jewish population of 280,000, the 'ultra-orthodox or 'haredi'. This group interpret Judaism in such a way that they constitute largely self-contained communities. While they broadly comply with secular law,[8]

they conduct their affairs on the basis of Jewish religious law, and may follow a pattern of education which insulates their children from contact with the wider community.[9] The 'haredi' group is significant within the Jewish population, just because this group have a much higher fertility rate than do other British Jews, or, indeed, the broader British population.

I have suggested that Jewish people in Britain offer an interesting model, just in the sense that two very different issues are posed for government policy, depending on whether one is dealing with people who keep a distinctive cultural identity while in other respects interaction broadly with the society in which they are living, or people who are culturally separate.

On the face of it, there is an argument for respecting the cultural sensibilities of groups of the first kind. This would mean not only not behaving in ways that are obviously offensive, but also respecting, within reason, other people's religious obligations and sensitivities. There are two aspects to this. On the one side, those in minority cultural groups need to inform other people what their obligations and sensitivities are. They need, in this context, to appreciate that while other people can be expected, in broad terms, to respect these things, if they are not themselves believers in the ideas which motivate the people in question, their concern can only be a limited one, with people's sensitivities, rather than with an appreciation (which the believers may have) that the ideas are, say, commands of God valid for everyone. Those who constitute groups of any size[10] can expect that others will not behave in insulting or offensive ways (and that this will be upheld by the law).[11] In addition, they need to bear in mind, say, that the accommodation of breaks for prayer at particular times may be difficult in a small firm.

The other aspect, is that those in minority cultures need to do two things. First, they need to make sure that their claims would be reasonable in the eyes of a third party. If one does not proceed in this way, there is the danger that they can be encouraged to make expansive claims supposedly based on their identity or sensibilities, that it is not reasonable should be met by others in a pluralistic society. One has, here, to avoid the situation – which is currently taking place in other areas of our culture – in which if someone can claim the status of

a 'victim', then <u>any</u> claim or accusation that they make is taken as setting out something to which they are entitled. The second, is that they need to bear in mind the character of the majority culture within which they are operating.[12] To ask people to make what, for them, would be significant changes to how they do things, should not be requested lightly. While those who press religious-based sensibilities on people within a secular culture need to bear in mind the way in which freedoms which are now valued highly within that culture, were accepted as legitimate only after a long period of struggle against figures in positions of power who were influenced by religious views.

If this argument were accepted, it would seem to me that it should have two consequences.

First, in a multicultural society, we should accept that we need to be informed about, and to respect, the sensibilities of others. This does not mean that we should have to agree with them. For example, there is an important sense in which, say, Muslims, Christians and Jews – if they all believe anything like the ideas which were traditional within those faiths – will think that the others are terribly wrong about some of their core ideas. One can obviously have – and I think that we should strive for – a situation in which these matters can be debated between those people who care about such things, but where, equally, we also respect that people (who we may think badly in error) nonetheless have the beliefs that they do, and are entitled to conduct their lives on the basis of these things. I cannot see any reason why we should tolerate insulting behaviour towards our fellow citizens, about matters which are deeply significant for their lives, provided that we at the same time make sure that there is space for polite disagreement and debate about such things.

Second, the rules which need to inform a multicultural society are not the same as, simply, the ideas of the majority. They, rather, are simply one group within a multicultural society. Those living within such a society need to accept that they will not be in agreement with the views, and ideals, of some other groups within such a society. What is more, the 'cultures' of particular groups within such a society may not, themselves, in any way be favourable towards multiculturalism: it may have to be something that is imposed on them, and with which they will have to live, as part of the price of being a group within such a society.

There is a sense in which majority opinions will, here, play a key role. But it seems to me that it needs to be by way of their endorsement of multiculturalism, within which their particular ideas would feature as one alternative, rather than by way of their simply imposing their ideals on everyone else.

It is also important how all any such arrangements are organized. In the Ottoman Empire, there existed what was called a 'Millet' system.[13] Under this, different religious or ethnic communities were accorded a good measure of autonomy (subject to the Empire's own Islamic-inspired and other regulations). However, there were two inter-related features of these arrangements which should be avoided: arrangements were typically headed up by clerics, and had political power – enforced by the Ottoman authorities – over those within them. The problem, here, is that clerics – especially on issues about religious legal obligations – may have ideas which are much more demanding than are those of the wider community whom they might claim to represent. While according them political power, might generate a significant problem.

To see this, let me return to the Deobandi mosques, the teachings of which upset Ed Husain. One needs, here, surely to distinguish between the legal scholars' interpretations of sharia law, and how members of the community actually behave.[14] In addition, it is worth bearing in mind the fact that, provided that a religious community does not have the power to enforce its rulings, then it is possible for those who find them too demanding to join other groups who have similar but not as rigid views.[15] It is here striking that in the United States, the Old Order Amish, who do not make use of most modern technology, practise a high degree of separation, to the point of speaking a distinctive form of German rather than English in their day-to-day lives. But it is possible, there, for people who find this way of life too restrictive, to leave their families, and join rather similar conservative Mennonite groups, who are more liberal in their social teachings, who are often to be found in areas close to where the Amish live. But for something like this to be possible, requires that membership of a group is voluntary

3. Practical Consequences

If the ideas that I am suggesting here were adopted, what might this mean?

First, and most obviously, it would mean that it would be important to give people information about the views and concerns of their fellow-citizens. One could, then, reasonably ask that others respect these sensibilities, and, indeed, accord them legal protection. But at the same time, what would get protected would be limited in its scope and – as indicated before – would be restricted to what a properly-informed third party judged to be reasonable. Such protections would be confined to protection from behaviour or displays that might reasonably give offence, not to the protection of ideas from criticism. This would mean not just to the protection of sensibilities of Muslims from the publication of offensive cartoons about Muhammed,[16] but also Christian communities from material which was obviously understandable as constituting offensive blasphemy.[17] But this would, obviously, not protect Muslims from claims that Jesus was the son of God, or Christians from claims that he wasn't. What should be limited should be minimal, and restricted to material that was – in the judgement of an informed third party – intended to be offensive. (The current concerns about the non-offensive use of terms would not be protected – e.g. the American local politician in Washington D.C. who was taken to task for using the expression 'niggardly', or the teacher who was suspended from his teaching duties for having explained to his pupils how the name of the country Niger should not be pronounced, would not be subject to any kind of restriction.)

Second, it would seem important to minimize – but also to insist on compliance with – the legal rules needed to run a multicultural society. For example, if a majority decision has been taken to legalise homosexuality, and to permit marriages to take place between same-sex partners, then that this is the case should be taught in schools. Similarly, those kids who have grown up in such households should be protected from bullying. But, at the same time, the fact that homosexual activity is regarded as immoral by several significant religious traditions, should also be taught. While, say, it makes perfectly good sense to say that gay couples have a (legal) right to marry, where this is the case, to claim this, and all kinds of other things, as 'human rights' (where this is taken to mean more than that the person making

the statement approves of it), is problematic. For such issues about rights obviously cannot be demonstrated to be correct; and if there is significant disagreement about such things across different communities within a multicultural society, then such a claim seems illegitimate, if it is to accord to these ideas a special, protected status, in the face of which everyone else is supposed to give way. (I should stress that I personally have no sympathy with religious or other claims that there is something morally problematic about homosexuality.)

Third, it would suggest that – just because there is no reason to think that multiculturalism of this kind forms an integral part of any of the substantive cultures within a polity – it is something that may need, positively, to be pressed upon people. We may argue to a reluctant majority that we are, de facto, faced with a situation in which most countries are now multicultural. While we may say to minorities: accepting the ground-rules – and thus informing all citizens of the existence of, and the need to tolerate, all kinds of things you do not like and may consider immoral, is the price that you pay for other people according to you the freedoms which you wish to enjoy.

4. But what about difficult cases?

My argument so far, is that while I can well imagine that many of my readers will not **like** what I am suggesting, it is not clear that it is unreasonable. Traditionalists may well not like the fact that it would allow all kinds of things to take place which were not features of the society in which they grew up, and which they do not like. The 'woke' – including Ed Husain – would have to put up with the fact that other people don't agree with some of their ideas, that their enforcement is not supported by the law, and that they are no more entitled to try to put moral pressure on others to conform with their views, than are, say devout Muslims or evangelical Christians on them. That is what life in a free and multicultural society is all about.

But there are, on the face of it, some difficult cases.

I have already referred to Haredi Jews. There are attractive aspects to their lives. The kind of picture offered in Chaim Potok's **The Chosen** and subsequent novels, is impressive, as are some aspects of the conscious updating of the Lubervitcher Chassidic tradition in the Chabad movement. Debra Renee Kaufman's **Rachel's Daughters: Newly**

Orthodox Jewish Women[18] offers a fascinating account of the way in which some Jewish women who had been involved in the 'counterculture' in America, had become attracted by, and had joined, ultra-orthodox Chassidic movements.

I was, however, struck, when I wrote and asked Debra Kaufman about it, that there seemed no interest, on the part of these women, as to whether their own children would have any opportunities for making choices comparable to their own.

This serves to highlight a problem. For while, say, women and children are not imprisoned within Haredi Judaism, or in very conservative Muslim settings, those looking at their situation from the outside might still be very concerned. The combination of male leadership, strict interpretation of religious law and tight community bonds, might be argued to mean that there is little freedom of choice for women. While if children have received a restrictive education,[19] this may mean that they are not well-prepared for life outside such a group. All told, someone might argue, it is one thing for an adult to choose to live under such conditions; quite another for people to be socialized into them, without any real knowledge that there are alternatives.

I think that the situation, here, is indeed difficult. We are dealing with matters to do with religious and moral values, and views of the world; an area in which, while rational argument and discussion is possible, we are simply not in a position to claim that we can show that the views of these people are wrong, and those of the majority are right. I have argued, earlier, that a society can reasonably require that knowledge of the existence of, and of the legal requirement for respect for, other views be taught – as the other side of the freedom given to any group within a multicultural society. In addition, as I mentioned was the case for the Old Order Amish, there will be opportunities for living related but not as austere forms of life, for the conservative-minded dissident.

It would also seem vital that arrangements be made so that marriages made within these traditions also give women the legal protections offered by secular law. Clearly, it will be a matter for their decision as to whether or not they wish to take advantage of them, and that choice may be costly. But otherwise, it is not clear that their rights as citizens are properly protected.

One other problem that arises, with regard to some Muslim immigrants from Pakistan to Britain, is that, in effect, they brought with them the culture and social conventions of peasant farming life in Pakistan. These were re-enforced by a conservative interpretation of Islam, and also by a tradition of family inter-marriage, often between people who are closely related – where these marriages have also taken place between the two countries, thus linking behaviour in Britain to what is approved of in rural Pakistan. On the face of it, two issues arise here. The first is that life in contemporary Britain is likely, over time, to effect changes in how people are living (and also, as it has done for others living here, to extend practical freedoms to women). The second is that, in addition to ensuring that education – and basic rights – are extended to all citizens, it would seem not unreasonable, where groups living in Britain are large, to take steps to make international intermarriage more difficult. The rationale for this is that the exercise of religious and cultural freedoms within Britain, depends on an internalization of, and compliance with, the most basic of ideas about citizens' rights in Britain as a multicultural society. And for this to take place, would seem to require the development, over time, of a culture which is distinct from that in Pakistan.

5. The Benefits of Multiculturalism

Given the existence of large-scale migration from other parts of the world, and our concerns about individual freedom and the right of people to practise their religion within the law, there would seem no alternative to the practice of multiculturalism. For this to be genuine, however, requires that there is – subject to the law – the freedom to hold views, and to practice ideals, which are different from those of the majority. They also need to be respected and protected. This means that, while there may be people such as Ed Husain, who interpret Islam as a slightly exotic-looking version of being 'woke', there is no reason why anyone should be pressured into this. Genuine differences should be respected, however much we may be unhappy about them. For freedom, if we take it seriously, means much more than freedom to agree with us and to share our values.

It is important, however, that in such a multicultural country, freedom should also be combined with the development of forums for discussion and critical exchange. Dialogue is important; but if it is between people

who are in deep disagreement, it may be unsettling. We should also not over-estimate the degree to which we can expect this to lead to agreement. Rather, as Karl Popper has argued, we need to bear in mind that we may each have most to learn when we enter discussion with other people whose views differ significantly from our own, and with whom we don't come to agreement.[20]

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[1] I would like to thank Ali Paya for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[2] London: Bloomsbury, June 2021.

[3] See his **The Islamist**, London: Penguin, 2007. For an account of the group in question, Hizb ut-Tahrir, see Sadek Hamid, **Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism**, London: Tauris, 2016.

[4] Among material that I have found useful on the Deobandi are Barbara D. Metcalf, **Islamic Revival in British India**, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, **The Ulama in Contemporary Islam**, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002 and also his **Islam in Pakistan: A History**, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018; Brannon Ingram, **Revival from Below**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2018, and Ebrahim Moosa, **What is a Madrasa**, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. See also Sherali Tereen, **Defending Muhamad in Modernity**, Notre Dame: IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020.

[5] They were concerned, particularly, with religious knowledge, including issues both of Islamic doctrine and Islamic law. Their approach to these matters was a very traditionalistic one, making atemporal use of commentaries in a manner akin to what was also found in Medieval Christian scholarship, and in traditional Jewish scholarship. There is a risk that the term 'ulama' may be used in a restricted manner: for a wider guide to traditional strands of Muslim scholarship, written from a Shi'ite perspective, see Murtada Mutahhari, **Understanding Islamic Sciences**, second edition, ed. Ali Paya, London: ICAS Press, 2019.

[6] Innes Bowen, **Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent**, London: Hurst, 2014.

[7] This is a reference to a piece on 'Social Diversity' which, like the present piece, is likely to be published in Croatian in the on-line journal Ideje.hr.

[8] There have been some issues concerning schools that are unregistered, and large weddings that have taken place in breach of Covid regulations.

[9] For a very hostile personal account of this, see: https://humanism.org.uk/2018/02/27/a-day-in-my-life-at-an-illegal-ultra-orthodox-school-in-london/ For a broader survey of Jewish education, see: https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-uk422

[10] I write this just because it is not clear that members of tiny groups can reasonably expect any general concern with their sensibilities.

[11] The issue of free speech, here, seems to me to be a red herring. It is offensive expressions of views which pose a problem, not the views themselves. There would seem, say, no reason to censor sober academic discussion of, say, the illegitimacy of the Papacy, but that this is a very different matter from claiming that people should have a right to yell out claims to that effect in a Catholic church. See for fuller discussion my 'Blasphemy in a Pluralistic Society', in **Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts**, ed. Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Maria Suzette Fernandes-Dias, ANU e-press, 2008, pp. 127-143. http://epress.anu.edu.au/nts02/pdf/ch09.pdf

[12] One problem, here, is that, initially, members of minority groups may not have a good knowledge of such things, and we may need a body – possibly, say, drawn from clergy, more generally, who can offer them advice about such things.

[13] See for example Bruce Masters, **Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. It is also clear that one needs to be careful about idealized accounts that are sometimes offered as to how this system worked.

[14] In this context, it is worth bearing in mind that the views of the ulama are likely to be much more stringent than are those of most Muslims in their day-to-day lives (which contrasts with experiences of Christians in recent times, where the theological views of clerics have typically been much more liberal than those of their congregations!).

[15] There is, however, a distinctive social element to the behaviour of some Pakistani immigrants, which adds complications; this I will discuss shortly.

[16] The publication of the Danish cartoons seems to me to have been idiotic; see for some discussion my 'Free Speech, Offence and Religion', https://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2015/04/images/stories/policy-magazine/2006-22-2-jeremy-shearmur.pdf

[17] This would mean actual blasphemy, rather than, say, material that religious people simply don't like, such as Monty Python's **Life of Brian**.

[18] Debra Renee Kaufman, **Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women,** New Brunswick: NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1991.

[19] Haredi Jews seem to favour their own schools, some run illegally outside of governmental control. Among observant Muslims, what seems more common is attendance at state schools, with religious training taking place in the home, or in extensive after-hours education: see for an interesting study Jonathan Scourfield et al, **Muslim Childhood**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

[20] See, on this, Karl Popper's **After the Open Society**, London etc: Routledge, 2008, chapters 20 and 37.