

Tariq Modood

Introduction: Odd Ways of Being Secular

BEGINNING FROM WHERE I AM SITTING—NAMELY, ENGLAND—ONE of the main stories of the twentieth century had been that the future of Europe is America. Growing up and through my adult life, we have constantly told ourselves in Britain that what happens in the United States today will happen here in a few years time. This is certainly true in relation to technology, to forms of economic organization, lifestyles, popular culture, and at times even politics and issues such as racial equality.

But there are some things about which that is not true. I think that the topic of this issue of *Social Research*, and particularly of this section, religion and its relation to politics is one such. As I understand it, the big issues in the United States are abortion, school prayer, creationism versus evolution, and concerns centered around gender and sexuality. Yet, these are not really the major ones in Britain or, more generally, in Europe, with the exception of gender and sexuality—although the latter too can be debated quite differently, with perhaps smaller numbers of people placing them as highly as in the United States. A comparable list of the big issues in western Europe in relation to religion and politics would have to include the headscarf affair—and in not just France (Bowen 2007, Scott 2007) but in various other countries too, something partly touched on by Charles Taylor in this volume. Another prominent area of contention has been the battle around Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* and subsequent debates about freedom of expression and the Muslim sense of offense or disrespect (Modood 2005). There has been the cartoons affair only in the last couple of years (Modood et al.

2006 and Lindekilde et al. 2009) and there have been a number of other less prominent conflicts of the same ilk. A feature of the European list is that the items are about the accommodation of Islam and Muslims, which was not at all a feature of the U.S. list. Interestingly, in these European debates that I have mentioned, Christian and, for that matter, Jewish voices are relatively muted: they are only present to a limited extent. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the main debate is between and among Muslims and secularists; among the latter, there is often a tension between intellectuals affirming ideological positions such as secularism and libertarianism, and pragmatic politicians seeking to find ways of defusing conflict and accommodating Muslims into constitutional, legal, and policy provisions that, albeit in different ways, are present in each western European state.

The existence of these state provisions, which of course are and have been for various, differentially privileged Christian churches, though also have been extended to Jews, may in the view of some readers be a source of the problem. It may be thought that the official privileges of Christians and Jews is a source of legitimate grievance on the part of Muslims and marks out European polities as not fully secular states in the manner of the United States. Yet this would be too simple a reading if not an outright misunderstanding. Very few Muslims, or for that matter other religious minorities, complain about the privileges of Christians and Jews; they generally find them reasonable. Their complaint is about their own exclusion from such provisions. They do not seek to dispossess Christians and Jews but to share a similar status (Modood 2007). Hence their public disputes are not with Christians and Jews but with those secularists who want to deny them the provisions currently enjoyed by the churches and Jewry (of course, such secularists disapprove of these). Moreover, it would be simplistic to suppose that the United States is more (or less) secularist than European countries such as Britain. True, the United States has a constitutional separation of church and state in its first amendment ("there shall be no establishment") but as this section of this special issue abundantly illustrates, religious mobilization is a feature of U.S. politics, and it is

commonly said of it that no overt atheist can get elected for a major political office. On the other hand, Britain has an established church in England and another in Scotland, and so fails to qualify as secular state by the most fundamental of U.S. criteria, yet British political culture eschews religion. An indication of the latter is how Tony Blair's press officer, Alastair Cambell, when asked if the Prime Minister prayed with President George Bush during a visit to the White House, replied, "We do not do God." Questioned about this, Blair, one of, if not the most openly religious prime ministers the United Kingdom has ever had, said: "I don't want to end up with an American-style type of politics with us all going out there and beating our chests about our faith" and that while people were defined by their faith, it was "a bit unhealthy" if it became used in the political process (BBC 2005).

So, secularism in the United States finds its most heightened expression (perhaps its only major expression?) in its constitutional arrangements; in this respect Britain falls short but by its own secularist standards—as the following essays display—American politics are saturated by Christian, especially Protestant concepts and sensibilities, which shape the hopes and fears, the ideals and blind spots of American political culture. It is as if two quite different social compacts were at work: in the British case (and I would argue that this is true more generally of northwest Europe) it appears that the religious majority can have state recognition at the highest level but then they must exercise self-effacement in relation to the democratic process if not public culture as well. In the United States, it is as if all churches can agree to allow a certain limited area of public life as "religiously neutral" and "beyond religion," the rest of public life is an open field for religion.

It was a privilege to attend the conference that this special issue documents; I learned a lot from it, not least from the papers in this section. The understanding of the relationship between religion, politics, and the democratic state in the United States that I came away with is that American secularism has a parallel with capitalism: the state is deliberately given a limited role so that each individual and company/church may pursue their interest/salvation to the maximum degree. No

one church is given institutionalized primacy so that no one's conscience and perception of religious truth risks being slighted, and so initially all Protestants (and ultimately all religions, albeit a certain Americanized, Protestantized version) are equally free not just to live by their own truth, run their own churches, and leave their churches and set up new churches, but to attempt to *lead the nation*, to make the nation in their own image—as long as it is not through establishment. It is not that politics is a no-go area but establishment is not an appropriate means to further religious ends. American secularism, then, it seems to me in the light of the papers that follow, is not the depoliticization of religion but the rejection of one political method, namely establishment. The American way of being secular is to be religious by all means but one.

The following excellent papers show then that U.S. politics is steeped in religion but at one remove; a certain secularized version of Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, shapes the values that are taken for granted or contested in politics.

REFERENCES

- BBC. "Blair Shuns US Religion Politics." March 22, 2005.
- Bowen, J. *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Lindelkilde, L., P. Mouritsen, and R. Zapata-Barrero, eds. *Ethnicities*. Special Issue: The Muhammad Cartoons Controversy in Comparative Perspective. 9:3 (September 2009).
- Modood, T., ed. *Church, State and Religious Minorities*, London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997.
- Modood, T. *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- . *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.
- Modood, T., R. Hansen, E. Bleich, B. O'Leary, and J. Carens. "The Danish Cartoon Affair: Free Speech, Racism, Islamism and Integration." *International Migration* 44:5 (2006): 3-57.
- Scott, J. W. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.