
Review

The problem of religious diversity: European challenges, Asian approaches

Edited by Anna Triandafyllidou and Tariq Modood Ednburgh,
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Edited collections on approaches to managing ethno-religious diversity in Europe are not exactly in short supply. Fed by what seems to be a never-ending preoccupation among both political and intellectual elites with the successful integration of migrants and their descendants (particularly those who happen to be Muslim), the scholarship on multiculturalism and the backlash against it has burgeoned almost to the point of saturation. One of the key voices in this debate from within political theory is Tariq Modood, the most prominent exponent of what has recently been dubbed as the ‘Bristol School of Multiculturalism’ (Levey 2018). In the volume reviewed here, Modood has teamed up with another frequent collaborator, Anna Triandafyllidou, to assess the extent to which approaches to managing the ‘problem’ of religious diversity outside Europe might provide lessons for the nations of the ‘old continent’. More specifically, the challenge set to the contributors is to offer suggestions as to how European countries could ‘adapt existing church-state relations and norms of secularism to an extra-Christian religious diversity that the continent has not known before’ (p. 10).

The book is divided into two parts, with part one offering appraisals of the principle and practice of secularism, and in particular Modood’s notion of ‘moderate secularism’, and its implementation in Europe (and beyond). Triandafyllidou’s chapter on nation and religion sets the scene by reminding readers of the paradox that religious minorities in Europe are now seen as more problematic than ethnic and national minorities. Islamophobia is a by-product of both a revival of nationalism and a resurgence of religion as an identity marker, what she terms the ‘revival of rootedness’ as a solution to the disorientating effects of globalisation. Modood uses his chapter to make some key clarifications about secularism, which has erroneously been viewed by some as merely another means to manage diversity. He reminds us that political secularism is not necessarily about the separation of church and state: in its most common form, it is about a two-way mutual autonomy of both the state and religion that the late Alfred Stepan (another contributor to the volume) famously called the ‘twin tolerations’ (2001). What



Modood is advocating is the version of moderate secularism that can already be found in a majority of European nations, that is, ‘not an abstract political theory model but a conceptualisation of a historically evolved set of arrangements and practices’ (p. 58). Rather than a Rawlsian strict separation or its opposite (the reassertion of Christianity in society), he prefers a multiculturalist secularism that is not ‘intrinsically fearful of religious communities and religion in public life’ (p. 64).

The chapter by Gurpreet Mahajan is one of two in this volume that examine the secular paradigm in India. Those who hope that Europe can learn from how the world’s largest democracy accommodates religious diversity will be disappointed, as Mahajan admits that India does not offer a model, and its version of moderate secularism is ‘still insufficient by itself to deal with the challenges thrown up by sharp religious differences’ (p. 85). What is also disappointing is how she provides a somewhat caricatural reading of France’s principle of *laïcité* to illustrate some of her points. This differs greatly from the contribution of Tariq Ramadan, who, as a regular visitor to France and the target of much invective by many who claim to be ardent defenders of French secularism, is keenly aware of what is at stake. While some may rail against the supposed aggressive nature of secularism in France, Ramadan makes it clear that this principle, at least understood as a legal framework, is not intrinsically hostile to religious minorities. Rather, it is the interpretation of such laws and concepts, such as ‘neutrality’, that is proving problematic as a direct response to fears about the presence of Muslims who ‘are seen to perturb or even undermine the supposed neutrality of public space’ (p. 97). Ramadan claims that secularism actually finds consensus in Western Muslim thought as the best way to regulate the presence of multiple religions. The final contribution to part one by Marie-Claire Foblets is perhaps the most engaging, as she makes the case for a version of reasonable accommodation as a means to stop the judiciary being overburdened with cases dealing with freedom of religion and its protection. Foblets is critical of what she sees as the ‘instrumentalisation of the protection of religious freedom for political purposes...defined in terms of the interests of the majority, not the minority’ (p. 120). In her view, many conflicts over religion (and particularly those in the workplace) could be solved without recourse to litigation if a legal right to reasonable accommodation were applied (in certain contexts).

Part two looks specifically at a range of examples from which Europe might learn in matters of governing religious diversity. In what must have been one of his final publications, Alfred Stepan examines the case of Indonesia and the principles of the doctrine of *Pancasila*, which can help explain the country’s enduring commitment to democracy and non-confrontational governance of religious diversity, despite repeated calls by Islamist groups for an Islamic state. Thus, while the overwhelming majority is Muslim, there is official recognition of minority religions, including their co-celebration in the form of public holidays.



Stepan suggests that European democracies might want to adopt such an approach given that ‘not one of these sixty religious holidays in these Western European countries is for a non-Christian minority religion’ (p. 146). While there is little else that can be gleaned from the Indonesian experience for European policymakers, this is not true for neighbouring Malaysia. Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and Zawawi Ibrahim explain that secularism there is of the ‘soft variety’ and is under attack in a country that is now witnessing a state-driven form of Islamism, which is already having deleterious consequences for religious minorities. Significant restrictions are evident on the freedom of religion, and the state ‘positively authorises the setting up and management of Islamic institutions and the enactment of Islamic by-laws by state assemblies [which] is proof that Malaysia cannot be categorised as a secular state’ (p. 181). Another potential model of secularism is, of course, India. In the second of the chapters focusing on this populous and diverse nation, Rochana Bajpai argues that secularism and multiculturalism are mutually supportive but are being severely tested and challenged by Hindu nationalism. India loosely upholds Modood’s version of moderate secularism, which translates as the ‘equal respect of all religions construed primarily in terms of state deference to religion and to the rights to religious freedom of groups and of minorities’ (p. 217). Yet this tolerance can easily be exploited and portrayed as a form of ‘minority appeasement’, and therefore one might actually wonder whether, given the state of politics in India, other countries should be adopting its unique brand of constitutional secularism. It is interesting to note that, both in India and Europe, political controversies regarding secularism and multiculturalism invariably involve Muslim minorities. This parallel remains underexplored in the chapter, and a further discussion of this, as well as the effects of Hindu nationalism, would have been welcome.

The final three country cases deal with nations that would seem to offer more tangible lessons for the European experience, none more so than Australia, whose merger of a version of moderate secularism with an official commitment to multiculturalism replicates the approach of many European countries. Public institutions are responsive to accommodating religious and cultural difference, and legislation against discrimination is extensive at both state and federal levels. Yet Geoffrey Brahm Levey reminds us that ‘Australian multiculturalism works well in certain respects and remains deficient in others’ (p. 235). He is particularly critical of what he regards as a strong current of cultural nationalism that, as in Europe, has been bolstered by fears over the integration of Muslims. If Australia fails to live up to expectations as an ideal model, the assessment of Israel by Raphael Cohen-Almagor is much more damning because it ‘offends and discriminates against non-Orthodox Jews as well as non-Jews’ (p. 258). Turkey offers some caution for those who would like to see more state control over religion, as this form of secularism may also generate a religiously dominated state policy. Haldun Gülalp masterfully demonstrates how, despite being long held up as an example alongside France of ‘assertive secularism’, Turkey now uses the very instruments the state previously



used to marginalise religion to create religious legitimacy. In this sense, the institutional structures of Turkish secularism are actually a double-edged sword, because ‘those institutions that secularists have created and used to constrain Islam or to support an approved version of Islam have also been used by Islamist governments to promote their own priorities’ (p. 280). This chapter is the highlight of the whole book, as it provides a useful corrective to much of the extant literature portraying the Turkish state as secular.

The collection is rounded off with two thought-provoking afterwords by Joseph Weiler and Bhikhu Parekh and the editors have done an excellent job of bringing together a remarkable collection of scholars to discuss these issues which are not only important for political theory but also for practical policymaking. The book will be of great use to those interested in models of secularism and multiculturalism in a global perspective. Those hoping to be enlightened as to how Europe can overcome the challenge of religious diversity might be disappointed. None of the contributors suggests that Europe should adopt the models and approaches discussed, not least because it is recognised that many of these nations are ‘tending to move away from religious pluralism and/or secularism to institutionalised religious majoritarianism’ (p. 22). The biggest lessons to be drawn, therefore, might be how we in Europe can avoid falling into a similar trap. At the current moment in time, this would be a very valuable lesson indeed.

References

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