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Kymlicka on British Muslims: A Rejoinder

Abstract: I accept Kymlicka's admission that his remarks on arranged marriages and sex-segregated education were misleading, and continue to contest his description of British Muslim perspectives on the Rushdie Affair. By not recognising that Muslims are adapting to western legal systems and political culture he contributes to a polarisation and fails to see that liberals do have something to be optimistic about.

I criticised Will Kymlicka for asserting that British Muslim practices such as arranged marriages and sexual segregation in education were unlawful, and that the Rushdie Affair has led some Muslims to seek powers to restrict the spread of blasphemy *in the community* (my italics). I argued that the Muslim practices were not unlawful, and that the demand to outlaw blasphemy was for the banishing of blasphemy *per se*, not *pace* Kymlicka for restrictions over fellow Muslims.

He now accepts that his remarks on arranged marriages and sex-segregated education were misleading. He believes, however, that there is a real potential for conflict between certain Muslim practices and liberal democratic norms, and that British Muslim demands in connection with the Rushdie affair and schooling are examples of that conflict. He, therefore, believes that I am being overly sanguine in holding that Muslims in Britain are not an appropriate example of a group which wishes to limit the liberty of its own members.

In connection with the Rushdie affair he clarifies his original view by arguing that regardless of how some British Muslims came to express their grievance and demands for legal redress, the *initial* international, including British, Muslim response was that Rushdie's offence was one of apostasy. Hence, he argues, British Muslims are indeed a community whose primary concern in these matters is to seek legal ways to limit the freedom of belief of their members. I continue to think that this account is misleading. It is certainly not the case that British Muslims only 'subsequently' or 'eventually' came to emphasise that the offence in question was other than apostasy. The very earliest of public letters, including one within a few days of the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, from the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, to Muslim organisations, mosques, and prominent Muslim leaders in Britain, and from the hastily created national action group (UKACIA) to Penguin Books, make no mention of apostasy (Ahsan/Kidwai 1991, 315-7).

It is true that the declarations of the Muslim world (e.g. of the Organisation of Islamic Conference) speak of apostasy *and* blasphemy/sacrilege side-by-side. It

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may be suggested (this seems to be Kymlicka's drift) that the former charge was intended for the Muslim world, the latter for western societies. Nevertheless, it is significant that Muslims in western societies on the whole, especially when not distracted by the *fatwa*, pressed the latter charge. For surely that is an important piece of socio-political evidence of the kind of direction that western Muslims are taking. Given the primacy of apostasy over blasphemy in Muslim traditions, it is quite remarkable that western Muslims have reversed the priority. There is an element of pragmatism in this re-ordering of values but it is also an adaptation to western legal systems and political culture. If this is the case, then surely western liberals *do* have something to be optimistic about and should be wary of playing up the ideological tensions between western Muslims and western political culture.

In support of his view that a sense of apostasy was the motive of Muslim anger, Kymlicka cites those who, like Ali Mazrui, charged Rushdie with 'cultural treason'. But the point of using such a term was to make it clear that the issue was not to do with private beliefs, but of a betrayal of one's community. The charge was more like that of 'coconut' (brown on the outside but white inside) or 'class traitor' or 'collaborator'. Even those who were clearly arguing within Muslim traditions were not concerned with mere belief or apostasy proper, but the contribution of *The Satanic Verses* to the western cultural domination of Muslims and above all to the public disorder and havoc that the book gave rise to. The public threats upon the author's life arose not from the publication of the book, but from the deaths that publication had given rise to: western commentators invariably ignore that Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* of 14 February 1989 was directly stimulated by learning of the deaths of ten anti-*The Satanic Verses* demonstrators in Islamabad, Pakistan, on 12 February and the five deaths in Srinagar, India, on the 13th. Khomeini's line of argument had some support in Britain and more generally was seen as a morale-booster by those who felt that all reasonable protest was being ignored by the authorities and the media. While it confused the original line of protest based on attacking the book not the author, it failed to supplant it and led to no new British Muslim demands. The *fatwa* can perhaps be seen as giving rise to radical autonomist developments in Britain, such as the Muslim Parliament. Yet this remains a fringe development, and the agenda of legal reform which British Muslims have united around, seeking protection against religious discrimination, incitement to religious hatred and sacrilege, belies Kymlicka's description of them as community seeking *millet*-type powers (UKACIA 1993; Modood 1993).

In pointing out that those British Muslims who favour single-sex schooling are far from breaching any laws but hold views shared by many feminists, I do not think I was in danger of suggesting that there were not also fundamental differences between the two groups (not that they are entirely separate groups). Kymlicka argues that Muslim sex-segregated schooling differs from feminist in that Muslim schools do not aim to produce women with a capacity to question Islamic beliefs at a fundamental level. But the reason for the segregation is not to give girls an education inferior to boys (an education with less scope for critical

reasoning and the development of autonomy), but to give them an environment protected from unwanted sexuality. While Muslims do not hold that girls should receive an education less likely to encourage critical questioning than boys, Muslims are no more in favour of schools producing a questioning of fundamental Islamic beliefs than feminists are of schools producing a questioning of fundamental feminist beliefs. In this respect Islam is only one of many religious, ideological, social and political movements that does not give the priority to autonomy that Kymlicka does (Parekh 1993).

The reference to cultural treason and to issues of discrimination and incitement to group hatred shows that Muslim demands are not peculiar. Of course Kymlicka's argument is not that Muslims are a unique problem, and he cites several other religious groups as examples of illiberalism. My point is that the collectivism and minority rights that Kymlicka opposes are not distinctive to religious groups. Indeed, most contemporary discussion about group rights and solidarity is about class, gender, race and ethnicity. *That* is where the most significant ideological and political challenges to individualism are and have been for at least a century. In exaggerating the difficulties Muslims pose for liberal principles while ignoring these other groups and modalities, Kymlicka is guilty of double standards, making British Muslims appear much more problematic than they are. Moreover, in the process he might well contribute to a liberal-Muslim polarisation that liberals should be seeking to avoid. It would be better to recognise and encourage Muslim developments to overcome polarisation.

Bibliography

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