

Is this religion
absolutistic or
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The Problem of Religion for Constructivist Psychology BILL WARREN

Department of Education of Newcastle, Australia

The relationship between religion and science is a problem significant for a psychology based on the notion that individuals construct their own worlds. The issue is equally pertinent to any of the constructivist perspectives but is most clearly seen in one particular psychology, personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955). In this last perspective, we see the clearest example of the apparent tension that arises between that psychology's model of the person as " scientist" on the one hand, and religion -- which traditionally stands opposed to science -- on the other. Through a reconstruction of religion, we see a way out of the impasse.

AN OLD DEBATE IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS concerns the question of the relation between religion and science. The common wisdom once was that science and religion were incompatible, with consequences such as arguments made that religion has no place in schools or the creationism versus evolution theory debated in science classes. It was often claimed that there could be no legitimate concept of a Catholic -- or for that matter a Marxist -- university: A university was concerned with critical inquiry, which is incompatible with closing off any area or domain to critical inquiry or with the specification of an appropriate methodology or test of truth that was prejudiced toward a particular view of the world. Thus, the idea that there was a peculiarly Catholic form of inquiry -- or a Marxist one -or that there was a domain of knowledge appropriate for scrutiny and a domain that was beyond question was rejected.

Since the days when this common wisdom was being distilled, science itself has undergone something of a revolution in terms of our understanding of

what it is. Philosophers of science and social philosophers have serious questions about it being as value free and objective as was being claimed. There has also developed a related question of whether there can be such a thing as social science, and whether something other than the aims of physical science -- explanation, prediction, and control -- are more appropriate. In the latter case, there has developed, for example, *verstehen* analysis, and hermeneutics, which consider meanings imputed to social situations by the actors involved in them; social science is thus seen as an exercise in teasing out these meanings so that we may understand, rather than explain things.

Again, teleological explanation appears more relevant to social science than does the causal explanation appropriate in the physical sciences. The questioning of science took the now familiar trajectory from Popper (1960, 1963) and Kuhn (1962), to Lakatos and Musgrave (1970) and Feyerabend (1975), and beyond -- a trajectory that concerned Passmore (1978) in that he thought " the baby was being thrown out with the bathwater" in the overly zealous criticism of science. Indeed, it might be questioned whether some of that overzealousness was motivated by an interest in reinstating religion as a credible epistemological perspective.

These observations suggest that it is useful to make distinctions between the formal and the living aspects of science, that is, science as it essentially is, and as it has become. In considering what science has become, the essential nature of science is seen as having been deformed by pressures of life in advanced technological society (Tesconi & Morris. 1972). That essential nature of science is inquiry, critical inquiry, whereas technological society imposes pressures to control and direct that inquiry to solve merely practical

problems. More generally, the debate emerges as a tension between pure and applied science, the former struggling in advanced technological society just as the social sciences and humanities struggle to maintain a properly human focus (Tesconi & Morris).

Religion, too, has not been static. Apart from the considerable internal disagreements within particular religions and the disagreements between the various religions, there are new conceptions of older religions. One example will suffice, and this is the reinterpretation of Christianity as an ecological religion in the idea of " creation spirituality" (Fox, 1989). In general, what emerges from these developments is the value of distinguishing practiced religion, or doctrinal religion, from something else, for example, a belief in a spiritual level of existence or a spiritual dimension to our life, even a belief in " capital B" Being, wherein Being does not necessarily signify a creator.

Despite the fluid state of matters in relation to both religion and science, I begin from a premise that the very bedrock notion of science as inquiry is incompatible with the basic bedrock notion of every religion in a claim to know at least one objective truth. Simply put, science is about unfettered, critical inquiry; religion, at some level, holds certain beliefs to have the status of knowledge, as beyond question, beyond inquiry. An interesting illustration of the very fundamental nature of the distinction being made here, as well as its continuing significance, is given by Hawking (1988). He reports an experience of attending a conference on cosmology organized by the Jesuits in the Vatican in 1981, around the time that Catholicism " forgave Galileo." At the conclusion of the conference an audience with the Pope was arranged for the conferees, and Hawking noted:

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He told us that it was all right to study the evolution of the universe after the big bang, but we should not inquire into the big bang itself because that was the moment of Creation and therefore the work of God. I was glad then that he did not know the subject of the talk I had just given at the conference--the possibility that space-time was finite but had no boundary, which means that it had no beginning, no moment of Creation. I had no desire to share the fate of Galileo. (p. 122)

This conception of the relation of religion to science would seem to have something very important to say for a psychological theory that takes as its model of the person that of the person as scientist. It would also seem to run into some difficulties at a meta-theoretical level, if proponents of a constructivist position wish also to remain committed to a religious position. The problem applies equally to a position that says people have their world constructed for them (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). And it applies equally to any of the constructivist positions (Kelly, 1955. Mahoney, 1991), raising methodological and epistemological difficulties for them.

However, if there is a genuine tension between science and religion in general, and within constructivist psychology and personal construct theory in particular, a solution may lie in a uniquely " personal construct interpretation" of religion, in terms of a construal of religion following G. W. F. Hegels (1798-99/ 1961) interpretations. But what does the thesis that religion and science are incompatible say for personal construct theory as our exemplar of a more general constructivist perspective?

As a first approach to this question, we can consider what appears to be a rare specific piece of deliberation in relation to religion and personal construct theory in a study by Todd (1988). Todd examined the meaning of

religious belief to individual believers, and found that the personal construct methodology was helpful in disclosing the different aspects of what religious belief meant to different (Christian) believers. He suggested that if ones constructs of religious belief formed a constellation with few outside implications and separated from superordinate constructs, then religious constructs have little importance to ones ultimate life concerns and vice versa. Todd analyzed two grids to show the marked difference between two Christian believers in what aspects of their beliefs they emphasized or valued most. Thus a dialogue was opened that might assist reflection on what one believes, and that might open up the personal dimensions of belief, clarifying it and assisting its articulation.

Todd (1988) in his introductory observations to the foregoing study was generally sympathetic to religion, noting three possibilities for religious belief under threat: fundamentalism, a watered down humanistic version, and a rediscovery of religions experienced reality expressed in a renewed or newly invented language. Although he discussed religion in terms of psychological factors that boiled down to two (historical traditional factor and a personal faith factor), he did see religion as a generally positive force in individual and social life, part of some general spiritual quest in which all people are engaged.

There are, however, other perspectives that are less friendly. Bertrand Russell (1927/ 1979), for example, argues that religion is based on fear. Further, an argument can be made that the idea of the holy posited by Otto (1923) or the courage to be theorized by Tillich (1952) grow from an underlying dynamic that expresses a fear of freedom, a submissiveness, and, given the right social conditions, an eventual authoritarianism (Fromm,

1941/ 1972).

Whatever the resolution of these last controversial matters, the question being raised here is different from that raised by Todd (1988). The present question arises out of the type of thinking that finds religion restrictive rather than expansive for individual and group life. My question concerns the methodological issue of how the model of the person as scientist, that is, as critical inquirer, allows commitment to an area of belief that at some basic level makes knowledge claims that are beyond substantive critical inquiry. If the model of the person as scientist -- and the model of cognitive functioning leading to knowledge of the world that underlies constructivism generally -- leads to a relativist theory of knowledge, how does this square with the absolutist claims of most religions?

The old debate concerned the question of whether a scientist could be, say, a committed Christian. That debate centered on the manner in which the scientist went about his or her work, basing opinions and theories on observable, publicly available facts or on rationally argued theories that expressed a tentativeness and an incredulity about the world. By contrast, as a religious person he or she appealed to another world, to unseen and sometimes private experiences that could not be scrutinized in anything like this same public, objective fashion.

The present concern might be stated generally as an interest in the underlying philosophical anthropology of constructivist psychology. That is, what is its underlying response to the fundamental philosophical question: "What is Man?" For personal construct theory, the answer is that Man is characterized by inquiry. In Rowes (1978) terms, people are meaning making beings who are faced with the terrible irony that that to which they

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give their individual meanings may be "ultimately and forever meaningless" (p. 25).

However, while qua person, it is appropriate that a peculiarly religious meaning arises just as easily as does a nonreligious one, this poses problems for the absolutism of religious claims. Constructivist theory would equate religion and relativism, construing religion as personal beliefs found by an individual to agree with his or her own needs and interests. The psychology of religion would then be the major focus of inquiry, an exercise in teasing out what caused religious belief or what its purpose was for individuals and groups.

That religious belief and practice as a human phenomenon is a proper subject of inquiry using personal construct theory as a methodology is clear in the question as posed by Todd (1988): Just what is the meaning of religious belief to a believer? This meaning may stem from any one of the common dimensions of religiosity: theism, fundamentalism, ritualism, mysticism, church orientation, altruism, idealism, or superstition (Maranell, 1974). Or, it may be the outcome of fear or a fear of freedom that issues in the general downgrading of the individual and a vilification of the human in the face of a belief in something superhuman (Fromm, 1941/1972). Yet, the psychological aspects of religion are not what most religions want to illuminate. Most religions, certainly the major historical ones, claim truth, something beyond mere personal individual belief and independent of, or tangential to, one's upbringing, education, socialization, and so on.

The founder of personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955) might be thought to be of direct assistance to present concerns in that his own apparent commitment to Christianity raises the question of how he himself

construed his religious belief and how he squared this with his own theory. Yet, even in his apparently most relevant discussion, in his *Sin and Psychotherapy* (Kelly, 1962/ 1979), he makes no doctrinal evaluations and is in fact relatively unhelpful. The fall from grace in the Garden of Eden story of the Bible is discussed in the familiar terms of humankind henceforward having to deal alone with the problem of good and evil. Jesus is referred to, in the essay, as much as a wise man as he is referred to as the Son of God. There is as much a tone of familiarity with the Bible as there is a one of commitment to it as revealed truth, as might equally be found in an atheist's or a Marxist's discussion of the Bible.

Kelly discusses religion in a somewhat removed fashion, imparting a sense of "Here are some stories that show how some people of olden times attempted to construe the problem of good and evil and the appropriate responses to it"; or "Here are some ways in which both society at large and individuals have personally tried to confront the problem of good and evil." In general, if it contributes at all to our present discussion, this particular essay yields some support for the manner in which personal construct theory equates religion with relativism.

In short, then, it would appear that constructivist psychology in general and personal construct theory in particular must result in at least an agnosticism in relation to organized religion and a more general relativistic and humanizing of religious truth and experience. Religious belief, or the acceptance of religious doctrine, must signal on the personal level what Kelly (1965/ 1979) in a different context calls a "hardening of the categories" (p. 294). On the epistemological level, it must signal an absolutism that is inconsistent with the openness that supports constructivist psychology in

general and personal construct theory in particular.

One response at this point is to develop a theory of religion that harmonizes with constructivist psychology. This is a task beyond present interests in pointing up the apparent problem, but at least some suggestions can be offered based on personal construct psychology. One direction is in the work of Hegel, work that leads into a philosophical perspective with which personal construct theory is quite at home (Warren, 1985, 1990). Hegel broke with the dominant theme of some one thousand years of philosophy: the concentration since about A. D. 500 on matters theological and religious. He suggested that questions of the truth value of religious statements were too difficult to answer and that there was never likely to be agreement on them. Better, he thought, to consider the consequences of religious belief; and the consequences were divisiveness and alienation.

Further, this was not true of ancient Greek folk religion, and it was not true of the real message of Jesus. Greek folk religion harmonized Greek society and the different aspects of individual mental life (emotions, thoughts, and behavior), and Jesus taught an ethic of love that the Church perverted into an ethic of authority. In a series of essays belonging to his early period, Hegel analyzed how and why the teaching epitomized in the Sermon on the Mount became distorted. What is of particular interest is Hegel's idea of love. Hegel considered that the Kantian moral position was mistaken in that it still placed the basis of morality in commands, either external or internalized commands that this or that behavior is good and must be followed. This was also the interpretation traditionally placed on Jesus teaching in The Sermon; it is to be understood that Jesus is stressing reverence for the laws. Rather, Hegel argued, some emotions, outlooks, inclinations, and so forth, are

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naturally good. He developed the idea of love as an emotion that does naturally what would have been commanded as good, should a command have been necessary. Thus, in Jesus teaching:

The Sermon does not teach reverence for the laws; on the contrary, it exhibits that which fulfills the law but annuls it as law and so is something higher than obedience to law and makes law superfluous (Hegel, 1798-99/1961, p. 212)

From this early period, Hegel was to go on to develop the notion of Sittlichkeit (the ethical life) as contrast with Moralität (morality). Each was a psychological concept describing, respectively, a free (autonomous) and an unfree (enslaved) state of mind. The good was thus a state of mind or a "way of going on" of mind that did not need to be commanded and that did not seek to command others. In more familiar terms, we might think of egalitarianism as an attitude of mind that we could contrast with authoritarianism. There is a considerable literature on this, from theoretical analyses like that of Sartre (1941) to the empirical work of Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levison, & Sanford (1954). Hegel's point was that we must look to the good as a quality of mind initially expressed in the concept of love and developing (as he saw the wider ramifications) into the notion of the ethical life (Sittlichkeit).

If these ideas are translated to the realm of what we usually regard as religion, we find a concept of religion that maximizes individual autonomy and regards the natural "going on" of free minds as expressing a religious attitude -that of love. This attitude of love is then seen as but one aspect of a more complicated way of going on of mind. More generally still, there is a natural sociality; minds that function in terms of a principle of egalitarianism

are not narrowly

selfish (not egotistic, though they may be egoistic), but do not seek to impose on others, and their operation leads to harmonious social life. There are echoes of later social theories here, theories such as anarchism, and the libertarian strand in Marxism before it was overtaken and converted to a position of authority. Indeed, some of the early anarchists claimed Jesus as a forerunner of their own views. Beyond that, however, such thinkers as Peter Kropotkin (1902) have stressed the human capacity for cooperation and mutual aid, capacities that alert us to some significant, very basic level of commonality and sociality in our individual constructions of the world.

Personal construct theory in particular, and constructivist psychology more generally, would appear to be quite comfortable in this last theoretical milieu. As suggested elsewhere in respect of personal construct psychology (Warren, 1985, 1989), it fits well with the general phenomenological tradition developing after Hegel and refocusing attention on the complex interactions between mind and society. Phenomenology has also been fertile ground for the development of alternatives to cognitive psychology in the 1970s (Bolton, 1980). The traditional antagonism between science and religion continues in Western thought. This antagonism would appear to pose a special problem for a theory that accepts the view that individuals construct their own worlds, and in one particular case takes as its model "man the scientist" (Kelly, 1955). In rendering religion in terms introduced by one of the most seminal of the Western philosophers. G. W. E. Hegel, there is a potential for minimizing the problem, within at least personal construct theory, although this might prove difficult if it is seen as the response Todd (1988) referred to as a "watering down" of religion to a humanism, and as

equating religion with relativism. For constructivist theories, however, it is one direction for a resolution of the continuing antagonism, a direction closer to Todds (1988) suggestion of a rediscovery of religions experienced reality expressed in a renewed language. We might re-express this, however, as a rediscovery of the essential nature of religion, as the progressive unfolding of love or as a more general principle of uncoerced, free, spontaneous social life. If this reconstrual is unacceptable, however, then there is an onus on those who would wish to hold to a more objective and transcendental position in relation to religion to indicate how this would not offend the " scientist" model originally propounded for personal construct theory, as well as the implicit relativism of constructivist theory more generally.

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The Fetish of the Margins: Religious Absolutism, Anti-Racism and Postcolonial Silence.

by Chetan Bhatt

Sometime in early 2006, a Powerpoint presentation on reformist Islam produced a couple of years earlier by the Strategic Policy Team of the Home Office and Foreign Office was leaked to the *New Statesman*. (1) It was one of numerous other such documents describing the governments strategic thinking on dealing with Muslim extremism. One slide was especially striking because under the heading of reformist Islam, meaning an Islam that accepts the western, democratic paradigm in full, believes in womens emancipation and other such indicators of liberalism or moderation, the

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document lists only two organisations as representing such a strand: the Jamaati-i-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, they are described as liberal and progressive organisations.

One can forward several plausible reasons for why two international Islamic Right political parties originally from Pakistan and Egypt respectively, each of which has an extensive history of violence and religious hatred, are to be habilitated into multicultural Britain: that the Foreign Office and, especially, the security services have had long established, even if uneven and informal, associations with Islamist parties and personalities abroad; that an independent dynamic related to the long-standing, so-called Arabist culture in the Foreign Office is the cause; that the Home Office (and, even more implausibly, the Foreign Office) are simply ignorant about the nature of these organisations and are blundering along in the way the British state usually does around minority matters; that individuals with particular interests have promoted these organisations within the state; that the Islamic Right is genuinely or expediently seen as the solution to alleged extremism among Muslim youth; that promoting these organisations is a way of managing and keeping an eye on their personnel and activities; that these organisations, or sections of them, have miraculously changed their spots in the face of the rise of other jihadi and irhabi networks of political violence; or that it is in some unspecified national (security) interest that the Islamic Right is actively promoted in Britain.

Consider another example (plucked from many such): one of the most important annual events in Tower Hamlets is the Baisakhi Mela, a huge festival and celebration of the Bangladeshi New Year. The mela, following the characteristic social effervescence of South Asian festivals, is an open,

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secular event attended in large numbers by the local Bengali and other populations.

The mela is inseparable in much of the local political imagination from the war of liberation against Pakistan in 1971 and the horrific memories of a massive and systematic genocide against Bangladeshis undertaken by the Pakistani Army working in concert with Jamaati-i-Islami influenced militias. Some alleged associates of those militias are currently in Britain and were allegedly involved in war crimes; these individuals are regularly patronised by government, members of the Royal family or local authorities under a broad multiculturalist umbrella. Since the Jamaati-i-Islami influenced East London Mosque has come into existence, the mela has been regularly attacked as contrary to Islam, corrupting, impure (since it incorporates Hindu and secular rituals from Sylhet) and hence to be forbidden as unIslamic. (2) Those annual attacks have become increasingly vociferous and systematic. The far-left in Tower Hamlets has joined in these attacks on an important public secular space. The future of the mela may be under threat, and its ending would represent a defeat for secular nationalists in the face of the Islamic Right and far-left.

If some of the above arguments about the states reasons for accommodation with the Islamic Right are plausible, there still remains a much broader question: why does this pattern of state adjustment with and promotion of the extreme South Asian religious right repeat itself decade after decade? How can one explain why in the 1980s, Ken Livingstones left-wing Greater London Council funded the Jamaati-i-Islami and Hindutva groups, a pattern that other local authorities repeated annually? How can it be that under the name of multiculturalism or anti-racism, both the Foreign Office and the Stop

the War Coalition / Respect / Socialist Workers Party are falling over each other in their desire to court the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaati-i-Islami? How does a leftish local authority support and fund a right-wing Islamist mosque and nexus of Jamaati organisations? How can the far-left justify working with the Islamic Right to attack a secular Bengali space?

THE MYSTIFICATIONS OF CULTURE

Part of the answer lies in a mesmerising culturalism and the embedding of a ubiquitous cultural-communitarian orthodoxy across varied intellectual, political and policy fields that travel from the left to the right, from independent progressive groups to the British state. If it should be a scandal to the democratic integrity of any individual UK South Asian that an unelected leader or organisation is empowered to represent them fully, or cage their changing political views into a permanent religious abstraction, this is nevertheless how official British multiculturalism in its broadest sense functions. Culture in the abstract provides intelligibility and unity for the most diverse group of political debates, policy initiatives and academic interventions about minority-hood and multicultural policy. It acts as a transcendental and protean abstraction, a self-reifying thing-in-itself, such that it has become the modality for thinking about almost anything, including geo-political conflict. It becomes coextensive with politics and sociality itself, such that there is effectively no social exteriority to culture, and certainly little in the way of a political economy of culture. Today, we are all cultural subjects, though some of us are more culturally imbued than others.

It is hence possible to speak of a definitive culturalist episteme for our multicultural times. Its matrices of intelligibility are figured through

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culturalist tropes such as the west and the rest, orientalism and occidentalism and other grand geo-spatial binaries. These metonymically stand in for both the Third World and ethnic minorities in the west, and are based on a methodological foregrounding of the image of the west or its others. For example, the idea of culture acts to suture neatly some of the most militaristic forms of neo-conservatism with a monumental civilisational topology of perpetual geopolitical conflict. (3) Such tectonic binaries are critical to the political projects of the American neo-conservative right, exemplified by the writings of Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama and Robert Kagan and the more pungent effluvium produced by David Frum and Richard Perle among numerous others. (4) However, it is also surely significant that critique of Orientalism and Orientalists, as well as the deployment of a west-rest cultural trope have been central to the political discourses of both Islamist and Hindutva movements, irrespective of how they also reproduce Orientalism themselves. Similarly, it is an idea of culture that for some (whether of the right or left), tidily divides the west and the rest, the west and Islam and so forth. Culturalist reification is at the centre of claims of the kind that 9/11 demonstrates that we live in a multi-ethnic world, that those attacks were motivated by hatred or jealousy of American cultural values, or that they represented an assault on an emerging global culture of democracy. Culture similarly animates omnipresent claims that talk about Islam in the abstract, or seek to find the answer to terrorism in the religion and culture in the name of which the terrorists, using similar abstractions, themselves act. (5) It is not the opposition of abstract universalism versus cultural relativism that is definitive today, but rather that this productive opposition only makes sense because of the cultural

underlabouring upon which it rests--each side, as it were, accusing the other of a cultural partisanship that is smuggled within a universal claim.

Academically, the cultural method (analysis of archive, text, sign) is amenable to epistemic overreach, allowing for a variety of crude claims regarding the incommensurability between subaltern or diaspora cultures and western thinking (this also takes the form of a particularly dim claim that all subaltern agency is intrinsically anti-western or anti-imperialist.) The thematic unities of this specifically left-wing west-rest discourse are provided by its performance of anti-westernism and anti-liberalism and through ecological and autarkic conceptions of inimitable or incommensurable subaltern and diaspora cultures. As important is the privileging of the alleged insight from the cultural margins that reveals the duplicities of western thinking: the singular, orphic gaze from the diasporic or subaltern margins sees much across many times and places. (6) This is the gifted, almost supernaturally penetrating vision that migrants (Bhabha), gendered subalterns (Spivak), enchanted postcolonials (Chakrabarty) seemingly have. The temporal oscillation is therefore from the high colonial past to the diasporic present, a flattening, flattering conception of historical time. (7) In this way, the culturalist method occludes, rather than provides, fresh insights.

Such kinds of culturalist abstractions do not have the analytical power to explore with a genuine sense of ontological or historical depth what the real west or the rest might actually mean. Is oiligarchical Saudi Arabia or communist North Korea or secular Syria part of the west, or of the rest? What about India or China? Was Iraq a secular state or society? Is it now? At what point did the Afghan mujahideen (largely initiated under US authority and

direction by the pro-American Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) cease being western and become part of the rest? The epistemic flattening of states, histories, economies, nations, wars, even civilisations means that the transformations in geo-military imperialism we see today, as well as the forms of political violence that have emerged to engage or resist America, can only be apprehended through times, spaces, apparent congruencies and seeming continuities that are increasingly superfluous.

Also of importance is the inert, innocent nature of the agency and subjectivity that left culturalism imparts to non-western subalterns and western diasporics, a kind of heroic, narcissistic, victimology that cannot name itself as such. In much multicultural theory, the diasporic subaltern is primarily a culturally-described, infra-ethical victim rather than a subject fully capable of ethical existence and judgement. In postcolonial theory, the subaltern is simply voiceless. It cannot judge, since ethical judgement pollutes pure subalternity with a poisonous humanism; it cannot make a moral claim, since the latter is inherently a legislative claim upon and about humanity, and hence advances an unacceptable transcendentalism. This innocence is figured as an existential condition within which inheres a disavowal of the capacity for ethical judgement beyond what is dogmatically required to uphold the exceptional, superlative nature of one's ownmost being as a marginal figure. This means that left culturalism (or multiculturalism or indeed much western anti-racism), unlike predecessors like Fanon, avoids theorising the kind of contemporary subaltern agency that can and does kill other others, whether it is the southern Sudanese, Muslims in Gujarat, Shias in Pakistan and Iraq, Hindus and Buddhists in Kashmir or Bangladesh, or women and Christians in northern Nigeria. Nor, indeed, does <https://assignbuster.com/is-this-religion-absolutistic-or-relativistic/>

it offer an imaginatively penetrating vocabulary that can help us understand any better the atrocities in Rwanda, Darfur, Gujarat, East Timor or, for that matter, the invasion and occupation of Iraq or the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

Through a culturalist method, it is always possible to trace the origins of contemporary subaltern horrors to old texts that elucidate rationalist, humanist, positivist systems of high Empire and colony; similarly, it is always possible to construct an argument about contemporary subaltern or diaspora victimhood that metonymically invokes the colonial past. However, this can also result in a suspension of ethical belief that can leave the moral space vacated, and therefore subject to occupation by the political right (and their pro-war chums on the left).

This kind of overwhelming culturalism is problematic not just for its depoliticising consequences but for the restricted political forms it makes available and the forms that it subdues. One of its effects, whether in academia, policy-making or amongst more activist tendencies, is to stifle the terms through which effective intellectual opposition could be manifested. One critical set of areas where this is particularly pertinent is the politics of multiculturalism and the consolidation within social policy of a cultural-communitarianism, empowered by a series of desecularising academic interventions. This essay explores this area first, and follows it with an extended discussion of the predicaments faced by the South Asian left in the UK, especially because of the rise of the religious right from the mid-1980s onwards.

THE MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY AND THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

In many sophisticated or vulgar forms of postcolonial theory, the foundations

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of secularism are conceived to be the property of a distinctive European culture whose anterior causes were the Reformation or the Renaissance, or which are based on a disagreeable rationalist modernity. (8) This view is shared by multicultural theorists who wish to provincialise Europe in their own way by relativising secularism as a particular, often idiosyncratic cultural possession that increasingly looks outmoded in multi-ethnic western societies. (9) Both therefore have an ineffectual stance regarding the sustained attacks on liberal and progressive rights by the Asian religious right. It is imperative to identify the latter as movements of the Asian religious right, rather than be seduced by abstract culturalist rhetoric that mystifies political interests under broader discourses of cultural or religious authenticity and belonging. One of the most remarkable mystifications engendered by communitarian-culturalist discourse is the concealment of political interests, groups and parties (whether Islamist, Hindutva or Zionist) through discourses of authenticity, discrimination and victimhood that normalise and habituate what are otherwise quite mendacious political ambitions.

In the face of both religious assertion and an overwhelming communitarian culturalism, British left secularism (including its Asian, black and anti-racist varieties) is in danger of receding almost to the point of political obsolescence. The facilitation by the Stop the War Coalition/Socialist Workers Party of the entry of the Muslim Brotherhood (the Muslim Association of Britain) into mainstream British politics for the first time ever and on such a wide scale represents an historic moment that is far more politically significant for the longer term than its initial location in the margins of far-left politics might suggest. The Muslim Brotherhood joins the Pakistan-based

Jamaati-i-Islami, a range of other Islamists, and various salafi scholars in occupying the space of alleged moderation in Britain. It is exactly this nexus of Jamaati, Brotherhood and Wahabbi-salafi groups that constitute the dominant Islamic Right in the UK.

This is the moderate-religious political space whose early origins lie in the Thatcher period and former Home Secretary Michael Howard's courting of tendencies that much later (1997) became the (deeply Jamaati-influenced) Muslim Council of Britain, and which received an institutional boost after 11 September 2001. Its influence has increased considerably since July 2005, with the helping hand of Britain's unethical multiculturalism, foundationally incapable of ethical-political evaluation of cultural identity claims. The space of alleged moderation has been constructed by authoritarian Islamist tendencies precisely in and through their distancing from terrorism in the UK. Secularism is hardly the preserve of the left anymore, where it is often anxiously seen as potentially anti-religious and therefore anti-minority. Hence the assertive spaces of secularism have become occupied by the right (as in the Jyllands Posten cartoon affair), by those who see the crisis of secularism as equivalent to the existence of Asians, or by the pro-war pro-Zionist left-wing champions of Enlightenment's reason who can barely disguise their visceral aversion to Muslims in general and Arabs in particular. Culture is, of course, central to official British multiculturalism. Despite its philosophical, philological, ethnological and administrative precedents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British multiculturalism is seen to start really from the late-1960s disavowal of post-war assimilationism.

Interestingly, during the 1970s, Britain's official policy thinking generated a formative idea of Asian (usually male) youth as trapped between two

cultures, an idea of singular in-between-ness that also emerges, in a celebratory form, in contemporary postcolonial theory. (10) The claim was that Asian youth lived something like a schizophrenic life on the boundary of two distinct moral fields, the Asian community and mainstream Britain. The Asian community was rendered mainly through its supposedly traditional practices--religious and ethnic customs, strong community morality, family cohesion, arranged marriages and the like. Asians were hence imagined through an ecological and self-governing idea of a culture and community--a community marinated in religion and ethnicity, steeped in tradition, headed by an authoritative, typically aged male leadership, and not exactly hermetically sealed, but nevertheless generally immune from transforming influences from outside. The opposition between the wholesome cultural integralism promoted by patriarchal guardians and the secular, impure, profane existence of Asian youth also betrays a strong distinction between the normal and the pathological, one that drives both British multiculturalism and the activities of the religious right. The remedy is regulation, specifically the promotion of religion as *nomos*.

Such normative ideas of dense, resistant cultures and autonomous communities can be deeply conservative and have been challenged far less frequently than they should have been. They initially advanced an autarky--a more or less autonomous unit with its own rules and forms of cultural authority and internal governance. This idea of the socio-cultural autarky is one form of group thinking that forms a historically important strand in British institutional orientations towards minority ethnic citizen-subjects, powering a regressive dynamic of institutionally-managed autarky on the one hand and popular communalism on the other. (11) It is a persistent

discourse that has become an institutional common-sense. It should be a puzzle why the thinkability of Asians in Britain is inseparable from the view of them as a community, a cultural cauldron located in the city but whose dense ecology acts to distance it from genuine metropolitan belonging. Since the nation-wide riots of 1981, the cultural-communitarian idea has been realised in sophisticated political and institutional forms that are more relevant today than they were in the 1970s. We see today not a return to the assimilationism of the 1950s, nor anything like a turn towards French republican civic citizenship or laicite, but a combination of new assimilationist ideas with ones about state-initiated and managed cultural autonomy. The latter is also not the autarky of earlier times, but one in which state institutions and policies related to race, religion and ethnicity are inextricably linked to the promotion and management of communally and ethnically-defined leadership institutions within civil society--invariably dominated by the least progressive, undemocratic and stern representatives of whichever community is under the policy gaze. In policy terms, individual members of the minority community are grouped into one main collective subject for consultation, policy development, health and social welfare needs assessment, surveillance or control (though this does not at all imply that these are unified strategies). One important risk is that a full British civic citizenship is usually available for those outside the Asian community, but those considered culturally inside can possess something like an infra-citizenship, a citizenship that is usually formally legally present but nonetheless partially mutilated or qualified by an ascribed group membership. Many examples abound, but one will do: the curtailing of full civic citizenship and the range of formal legal rights afforded some Asian

women facing violence in the home because of culturalist group-based ideas within some social welfare provision about legitimate practices related to violence against women. (12) There are important political tensions between policies based on the idea of the social and cultural autarky, and ones based on the formal rights of any individual citizen-subject or sanctuary seeker. These tensions are now central to how Muslims are represented, negotiated with and treated (especially in the association between cultural belonging and fearsome criminality).

The cultural autarky is also paradigmatic in multicultural social and political theory. The report in 2000 by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain illustrates well this cultural communitarian approach. (13) Despite the qualifications regarding individual rights, the overwhelming thrust of both this report and dominant theoretical debates about multiculturalism is to propagate the idea of minority population as equivalent to a cultural community. (This communitarian idea of the minority community is also espoused by those who might otherwise be critical of the curtailment of individual by group rights). (14) Just as problematic is the intertwining of the communal idea with arguments that equate social well-being, the integrity of the personality, and moral worth and standing with the necessity of public recognition of religious group identity. (15) However, social recognition is rarely the problem, since those demanding recognition are already recognised, even if recognition is based on loathing (I recognise you as worthy of my contempt and hatred). (16) It is typically political contestation over the type and content of recognition that is the issue. Moreover, state recognition, especially of minority religion, which many multicultural theorists advocate, brings religion within the purview of legislative and

executive apparatuses, a development that necessarily initiates and empowers a communal-political logic. Britain becomes not a community of communities but instead a population within which minority populations receive institutional recognition as communal groups in a form that is best able to advance the undemocratically-derived political interests of those who wish to make communal claims. (17) Those interests today are invariably dominated by political parties of the South Asian and middle-Eastern religious right.

Multicultural theoretical efforts slide from an essentially multi-communitarian understanding of national belonging (though in practice, communal identity only applies to minority groups), towards a rendition of minority groups as determined by a cultural integrity and hence motivated by a survivalist problematic of cultural protection, defence, loss and existence. Culture also necessarily implies a duty of loyalty to culture among adherents. (18)

Multicultural theory also characteristically privileges a primarily religious conception of the culture of multiculturalism, one peculiarly seen to be a basis for moral integrity and direction that a deracinated cosmopolitanism is incapable of furnishing. (19) The cosmopolitan, profane lived cultures of Asians in Britain is rarely, if ever, foregrounded, unless it is to make the pithy claim that all identities are multiple, changeable or hybrid, or that all cultures contain diversity. One might consider such efforts as special pleading for a religious-communal idea of culture which results in a progressive desecularisation of the academic discipline, as well as social policy. Even if religious discrimination is advanced as an explanation for disadvantage, one consequence will be that religion becomes identified as the cause of poor educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, lack of

social cohesion, lack of integration, domestic overcrowding--thus heralding a return to the circular ethnic pathology arguments of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Similarly, in much multicultural theory, an affable liberalism can mask an elitist religious identity politics and cultural narcissism that cannot admit that this is what it is: the multiculturalist theoreticians call for cultural and religious tolerance and inclusiveness needs to be rigorously tested against the claims of other Asian populations (minorities within minorities), especially dalits and Ahmaddiyas.

As importantly, multicultural theorists elide the key institution for cultural development and reproduction: the family. Indeed, the absence of the politics of the family constitutes a glaring void across many culturalist tendencies. While, among multicultural theorists, there is critique of some exceptional practices (for example, female genital mutilation or coerced marriage), the normal, normative functioning of the family as the basis for cultural identities is not interrogated and is, hence, naturalised. There is nothing approaching a critical politics of gender and the family, or of systematic culturally-sanctioned gender inequity or intolerance. One additional paradox is that Asian cultural values and traditions in the UK that are naturalised by multiculturalism are, in their countries of origin, deeply contested political issues. Specifically, the human rights and public and personal freedoms women have fought for abroad are erased by some British multicultural theorists who argue for the institutionalisation of religious patriarchs.

ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITARIANISM

Many ideas about cultural autarky and the between two cultures existence of

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Asian youth were vigorously challenged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mostly by Asian, anti-racist, pro-feminist progressives, mostly secular in orientation, and opposed to paradigms that prioritised ethnicity, culture and religion as dominant markers of communal identity. That independent Asian (and black) movement has gone, and its memories are dispersed among the smaller remnants and networks that continue to exist.

There is indeed a powerful history of secular Asian anti-racist struggles over almost the last 30 years--from Brick Lane in 1976-78 and Southall in 1978-79; Grunwicks and other industrial battles for economic justice that presaged Thatcherism; the national events of 1981 starting in Brixton (April) and Southall (July) and then throughout the country; the rise of Asian womens organisations and their campaigns and activities around immigration, violence, civic and legal rights, and religious fundamentalism; numerous campaigns around racist attacks and murders, policing and criminal justice; the immense variety of anti-deportation campaigns; and the development of Asian youth movements. This radical politics was important in facing down the real threat of organised mass fascism in the 1970s, and through this consolidating a new independent black political sphere that was sustained well into the 1980s. Such histories are entirely written out of the discourses of academic multiculturalism or postcolonialism whose tangible institutional spaces were often the consequence of these earlier struggles.

This earlier movement maintained a secular commitment to what we can now call human rights, civil liberties, a fuller and more complete civic citizenship and, decisively, social and economic justice and radical social transformation. As important were sometimes notional, sometimes very real commitments to international movements against dictatorships, womens

rights, imperial brutalities, neo-liberal political economy, poverty and communalism. The ethical parameters that informed these groups in the 1980s and 1990s were usually universal in scope and they frequently went well beyond the injustices faced only by Asian constituencies--a marked difference from the religious-communal narcissism of many of today's religious Asian stakeholders, those besuited men whose shrill authoritarianism sabotages their moderate public masquerades.

This remarkably neglected history of secular Asian struggles in Britain, including the history of the nature and ferocity of the racisms that Asians faced, is in danger of being forgotten entirely by today's younger Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. For some of those young people, the collective term Asian evokes disgust and they are instead keen to celebrate the supremacy of what they have recently discovered to be their own immaculate sacred texts, monuments and civilisations. The loss of the memory of this history can be mourned, or that history can be rescued. However, its political capacity in now challenging the communalisation of Asian politics in the UK can be doubted. For some on the Asian religious right, it is precisely this labour and peoples history they wish to erase, and replace with a vulgar politics of class elitism or religious chauvinism. It is one of the peculiarities of this period that some young religious Hindus vehemently oppose colonialism by claiming to be the real Aryans, just as some young Muslims claim to have seen right through western imperialism and at its core is a world conspiracy of Jews or Freemasons, or a Crusader-Zionist-Hindu alliance. The argument that a resurgent BNP or the new National Front are the real problem becomes superfluous since they already vigorously oppose the latter.

Opposing white supremacism and fascism can dovetail with other fascistic

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ideologies of communal purity. Hence, anti-racism and anti-fascism appear to be exhausted in their capacity to turn some younger generations of Asians away from the appeal of non-western fundamentalisms and fascisms.

Secular anti-racism may not be effective in the case of some younger Hindus or Sikhs who welcome the targeting, saturation surveillance, political control and management of Muslim communities--even proposals for internment, extraordinary renditions and other punitive assaults on human rights and civil liberties.

As the independent black movement receded, it was replaced by new corporatist black formations that came in the wake of the 1981 and 1985 urban events. (20) They represented a different political project that tended to be based on political ambitions, on the tyranny of personal affect and experience, and a somewhat formulaic understanding of institutional racism. Much corporate anti-racism included an obsession with veracity regarding how minorities were depicted or spoken of, and about real or perceived insult arising from what was considered to be offensive or distorted representation of a race, culture, ethnicity or religion. This has since become a key method of political mobilisation among the Asian religious right, those who seem to believe that Asians are flimsy, delicate personalities who will shatter into a thousand pieces because of a critical, dissenting, offensive book, play, or image that someone (usually from within the community) has created. In turn, some sociologists call for group defamation to be made illegal in the UK in order to protect the fragile sensibility of the religious personality. (21) This religious right politics of representation is not about propagating the endlessly smiling and wearisome positive images of old. It is a novel politics of religious representation and assertion, strategically central to today's

religious moderates and demagogues. It emphasises religious authenticity against alleged distortion, and religious understanding against perceived or felt offence, criticism or hurt. This is intended to shield whatever is promoted as the authentic religion, religious practice or symbol from analysis or criticism. For demagogues, their religion is perpetually under threat, and this, indeed, seems to be the only real meaning of religion for them (hence, their survivalist vocabularies of siege, victimhood, extinction). This results in a public sphere of illiberal religiosity that seeks to place itself above scrutiny and does not wish to trouble itself with the robust rules of public legitimation that secular or atheist political discourses inevitably face.

It was indeed a short step from dwelling narcissistically on the specialness and uniqueness of one's black, minority or diasporic experience to focusing on the supremacy of one's Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim one. A novel exhibition of the body and its clothing became public markers for a new-found religiosity especially among the younger generations--a proliferation of religious symbol and uniform, hijab and beard, icon and deity. Faith transformed into public display and exhibition, the latter substituting for a genuine consideration of how, ethically and morally, different Asians were to live with, rather than against, each other. (22) Religious absolutism indeed fails a key ethical test--the practical exemplification of a foundational ethical commitment to the full humanity of whoever is ascribed at any point in time to be the radical other of oneself, even as the humanism of humanity is recognised as an unfinished process without guarantees. Religious absolutism instead represents a different ethical world in which the capacity for moral feeling is deliberately removed from its universal relevance and intentionally particularised solely to one's religious group, and so cannot be a

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morality at all. Political pluralism is transformed by the Asian religious right into a chauvinistic, communal supremacism pitted against other Asian religious adversaries.

Notwithstanding the decline of the left globally, the desecularisation of what were previously common Asian affiliations resulted from an elision by the left of political religion and communal sectarianism in the UK, a factor that was already apparent in the early 1980s (well before the Rushdie affair). For example, the Asian left overwhelmingly assumed that the struggles against racism had the capacity to unite Asians in a common political struggle.

However, those strategies that focused solely on race and racism also tended to promote an uncritical celebration of a unitary Asian community that paradoxically enforced a communal-cultural, rather than secular logic. (Raw varieties of such anti-racism mainly exist today in the form of some UK South Asian academic tendencies that are entirely isolated from the practical history of human rights, women's rights or even grassroots anti-racism, but which insist on collective silence or censorship if an injustice or human rights violation is perpetrated by a person, movement or state that is perceived to be not white. Political intervention becomes limited to a kind of narcissism that can only express fear of the omnipresent racist who scrupulously gathers together every dubious utterance. It represents a domesticated parochialism that, in the vigour of its British isolationism, is unmistakably Middle England.)

Hence, left anti-racism already contained ideas of community that were problematic in several ways, and now seem superfluous in a period when transnational affiliations across distant civil societies can be at least as important as allegiance to any local community. These emergent

transnational processes, apparent even in the mid-1980s, were not bound to any particular civil society, community or nation and represented a new set of geo-social ideas about identity and political affiliation. They were also exploited by new religious right forces whose importance and novelty was not fully recognised. The Rushdie affair from 1988 was not a cause of transnational religious activism, but a consequence of it.

The progressive secular ideal of community was essentially local and defensive, an anti-racist communitarianism that apprehended culture, ethnicity and religion as essentially benign backdrops. However, the actual community was excessive to its fights against racism and fascism--it contained numerous other dynamics of formation, political economy, settlement and change that were rarely foregrounded. Ethical judgements about some of the political institutions of the community, including religious absolutist and patriarchal groups, pro-family and anti-abortion advocates, and varieties of communal, nationalist and ethnic sectarianism were rarely challenged, except by a few exceptional tendencies. Progressive approaches to gender, the family and sexuality are key litmus tests for the differences in approaches to human rights, democratic freedoms and civil liberties between progressives and others (as starkly illustrated in the campaigns against what are appallingly misnamed as honour killings). The defensive community autonomy advocated by the Asian left described what the left was against but rarely could it say what it was for, what its future horizon of possibilities for social transformation were. Therefore, secular communitarian ideas could slip into defensive ones based on a cultural autarky, a community implicitly comprised in and through its religion and culture. Consequently, under the banners of both multiculturalism and anti-racism, religious demagogues

demanded their rights and freedoms against the discrimination and disadvantage they perceived as arising from the religious ideologies to which they chose to adhere. Such demands were made using virtually the same languages of rights, liberty, freedom, discrimination and autonomy that were formerly the preserve of progressive social movements. Hence, the UK Muslim Brotherhood-sponsored pro-hijab campaigns, widely supported by anti-racists and the left, utilise the language of women's rights and freedoms, but have nothing to say about the rights and freedoms of women who are abused, beaten up, lashed, stoned, beheaded or killed elsewhere for not adhering to the dress codes that salafis, jihadis, Ikhwanis, the Jamaati-Islami and its alliance, or the Taliban decree.

With some exceptions exemplified mainly by Asian feminist organisations, the renewed assertion of religious politics based on the family, gender and domesticity were usually unopposed. The Asian left did not publicly develop and sustain a critical politics of the private sphere, the family, children and gender relations. These were therefore left to religious absolutist influences and interventions. For religious absolutists, the personal is most definitely political. Authoritarian religious movements have consistently prioritised absolutist views about gender, the family, sexuality, young people and leisure, in order to speak for, make hegemonic claims over and attempt to discipline the community as a whole and its wayward women and girls in particular. For example, an immense range of religious pamphlets was disseminated in the UK during the early 1990s, directly targeting individuals and families, women and teenagers. (23) (They were part of a sustained tendency among transnational authoritarian religious movements from abroad to prescribe religious codes of conduct (both Hindu dharma and <https://assignbuster.com/is-this-religion-absolutistic-or-relativistic/>

Muslim fiqh) for adherents in the diaspora--a disciplinary and hegemonic process that illustrated the singular importance of the diaspora for those movements.) Such publications, written in a simple, mostly humourless but personal style, were not necessarily the preserve of any one religion. They promoted in guidebook fashion an immense set of rules about moral conduct, bodily displays of religiosity, acceptable leisure activities and entertainments, leisure activities to be firmly avoided,