
Review

Multiculturalism and moral conflict

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Multiculturalism remains an incendiary political issue. It also poses serious problems for liberal theorists. What claims can cultural groups mount in the public sphere against the liberal secularist consensus? In practical policy, are liberals forked between secularist hegemony and cultural balkanisation, in which some groups freely flout liberal, feminist and laic norms? These issues crystallise at the level of public policy John Rawls's famous question about the philosophical justification for secular liberalism: can it avoid being just another sectarian doctrine?

This is a useful collection, comprising papers by some leading theorists in the field. Few of them think that the answer to Rawls's question is an unequivocal 'Yes'. One who perhaps does is Peter Jones, who distinguishes 'collective' and 'corporate' group rights: whereas collective rights hold purely because the individuals composing the group have rights as members of it, corporate rights are held by the group itself. For Jones, the distinction is crucial, because the (Razian) basis of rights lies in sufficiently weighty interests, and therefore no group can invoke a collective right against one of its members where this opposes his interests. But the possibility of drawing a distinction here does not show that groups cannot assert *corporate* interests in support of corporate rights. The political argument cannot be resolved purely by conceptual analysis.

Some papers focus on the state's role in cultural conflict. Andrew Mycock reviews recent debates over Britishness and the Empire, and argues convincingly that politicians' revisionist attempts to resurrect a sense of British national identity assume an unduly stark view of the imperial legacy. But it seems misplaced as it might usefully have prefaced rather than closed the collection. Peter Stirk argues that statehood is double-edged for cultural minorities who, by definition, have failed to achieve it. This seems to assume a Hobbesian view of the state as monolith. The danger certainly exists: it is often the *bête noire* that the *Federalist Papers*' authors try to scotch. But equally, as United States history suggests, some minorities rub along well without facing dilemmas of assimilation.

Several contributors doubt liberalism's capacity to tame cultural diversity. Monica Mookherjee argues that if autonomy is the precondition of subjection to norms of justice, as many liberals think, they have to accept that minorities often have not autonomously consented to the liberal order. She highlights Will Kymlicka, who argues, with value-pluralists like Joseph Raz, that autonomy demands a range of cultural options to choose from. One could argue that this idea of a cultural supermarket relies on the very notion of an abstracted chooser that pluralism subverts. But this applies to cultural rather than value-pluralism, which is consistent with ascribing special value to autonomy, as does Raz's *Morality of Freedom*. Mookherjee's attempt to extract lessons from Edmund Burke for liberal pluralists is engaging and mildly audacious. Matthew Festenstein contends that sceptical dismissals of multiculturalists' political claims fail. Festenstein's argument is misconstrued by the Introduction, which says he argues that accepting the normativity of culture does not entail conceding multiculturalists' political demands. His point is rather that these demands remain politically potent, regardless of whether 'essentialist' views of culture fall to sceptical (for example, constructivist) criticisms.

Others also pursue modestly deflationary ambitions. For John Horton, disagreements between reasonable beliefs often pose fewer political problems than *unreasonable* beliefs. This sits oddly with the argument earlier in his paper that (contra criticisms by Brian Barry and others) reasonable disagreement is not always self-defeating, because religious revelation may constitute purely positional epistemic authority. Such claims however focus attention on the authority question, particularly when mobilised to support political demands. Roughly, the stronger the demands, the stronger the pressure that will be put on the authority of testimony that backs them. But this argumentative anomaly ironically supports Horton's point: even if recipients of a 'revelation' disagree reasonably with sceptics because of asymmetries in epistemic authority, this is not why religious 'truth' becomes politically significant in the first place.

Several contributors sympathetically examine religious claims in the liberal public sphere. Gerry Gaus cites Christopher Eberle's public justification principle: a coercive law is wrong unless each citizen has conclusive reason to accept it. Gaus then argues that the principle puts minimal constraints on political advocacy, which may be strategic or expressive; it may cite religious doctrine without violating civility. This offers a salutary corrective to more anaemic theories of public reason, and indeed Gaus might have made more of the fact that any such theory that is liberal at all, needs to protect public advocacy on pain of jettisoning free speech. Religion should suffer no special burden, but equally enjoys no special authority, in political speech. Cécile Laborde targets *status quo neutrality*, which accepts extant norms and practices

reflecting a historically dominant (for example, Christian) culture. Equality of burdensomeness, however, is not an option: take creationist opponents of public school science curricula, or anarchist objectors to state coercion. As the only credible neutrality is procedural, its upshot is likely to reflect historical residues unless it is designed to guarantee specific *soi-disant* neutral outcomes.

Neutrality is already breached in deciding what counts as a religion. The Abrahamic faiths doubtless get in, along with Buddhism and Hinduism. But what about astrology, scientology and Wicca-worship; or the Jedi ‘religion’ from *Star Wars*, whose professed adherents in the 2001 UK census were double those of Judaism? The point is not that religion must be disbarred from the public sphere: as Tariq Modood acutely notes, in recent decades religion and sex have swapped places across the liberal public-private divide. Ideals of even-handedness may try to grant Islam equal public presence with Christianity, but, as he also observes, equality is a culturally specific ideal. Modood’s notion of gradualism and pragmatic accommodation offers a more attractive and politically palatable approach to religion in the public sphere rather than the blanker forms of neutrality.

Rawls was more successful in asking the question about sectarianism than in answering it. Soon, perhaps, multiculturalism will no longer be treated as *sui generis* within political theory, but as exemplifying the jurisdictional balkanisation of post-Westphalian states. How far sovereign states can hold legitimate sway vis à vis non-state actors – transnational corporations, INGO, supra-national authorities like the EU, NATO and the WTO, as well as the multifarious civic and national groupings within their borders – is the defining political question of our time. Cultural and religious groups make their claims, too, but have no special title over others. As this collection cumulatively suggests, the culture wars testify less to the power of cultural difference than to the executive weakness of liberal states.

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