In Defence of 'Political Faith'

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The terrorist bombings in London and the general heightened state of panic it has caused has produced a knee-jerk reaction from those who have most at stake in putting the biggest distance between them and the ideas of its perpetrators. This predictably has come down to forcing the Muslim community into a new phase of justifying itself: denouncing the 'extremists' amongst its ranks, declaiming their 'false theologies', and displaying incredulity that such barbarism could be done in the name of Islam. All of which may be true, but it raises the question that much of the media dare not ask: do they *have* to go through that? Is that really what will show resolve against future acts of terrorism? The climate of hysteria surrounding the subject of 'religious violence' guarantees that the ability for Muslims or anybody else knowledgeable on the subject to even attempt to *explain* the political context and conditions for it is completely circumscribed by the accusations cast on such people as 'apologists' of terror. Tony Blair, in order to show national 'resolve', may well want to show that he is "pull(ing) up this evil ideology by its roots".[1] But his method so far has been to sort out once and for all which of his subjects are teaching 'good' Islam and which are teaching 'bad Islam', and, crucially, to get some other Muslims to endorse his judgments. In the mean time this translates into the justification for a roving trigger-happy anti-terror squad and new anti-terror laws being sought not only for the incitement to hatred but the right to deport foreigners who have "alarmed the police and security services".[2] A wise choice of words, given how easily it is to be 'alarmed', or to 'alarm', these days.

How should one approach the problem of religious violence without alienating those affected by its stereotypes? Underlying this question is a fundamental debate to be had simply about the categorization of 'religion'. More than keeping religious studies scholars in work, this question should be informing our often hasty judgments about religious extremism, fundamentalism, and violence. In particular, as Russell T. McCutcheon argues in a recent book called *Religion and the Domestication of Dissent,* we need to do away with the notion that religions occupy one of two mutually exclusive positions: either private, peaceful and tolerant, or extremist, dangerous, and politically

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1   *The Guardian*, 14 July 2005.

2   *ibid.*

motivated.[3] For if our secular, liberal society is in shock at the resurfacing of 'political religion' this is perhaps due as much as anything to a naiveté towards the notion of religion such that it ceases to be a 'public' problem if it is simply banished to the private sphere. The paradox at the heart of liberal society is that we want to invite tolerance towards a diversity of faiths and beliefs on the condition that those beliefs become suddenly ostracized and defined as something altogether different and intolerable as soon as they begin to deviate from the non-threatening, universally acceptable version. This imagination of religion as something that is acceptable as long as it does not threaten to 'go public' springs from a desire to avoid messiness in our society, the refusal to live in "less than perfect" societies.[4] But its consequences for policy-making decisions are even more serious, informing as it does the reduction of a complex problem to the picture of mad, irrational religious beliefs that simply shouldn't exist in an 'enlightened' society. Ever since the birth of 'war on terror' rhetoric, the truth underlying both Bush and Blair's insistence that 'this is not a war on Islam' has been that, on the contrary, 'Islam' has simply become a term suited to reduce complex social grievances under the definition of 'radical Islam' or 'political Islam'. To presuppose that there is such a thing as good, tamed, universally acceptable Islam such that the bad alternative – fundamentalist, violent Islam, can be universally and uncontroversially rejected has been a powerful effective form for the focus of a new global offensive. But it has taken hold of quite ordinary, everyday prejudices because it makes dealing with the problem of religious violence a powerfully simple one: religious extremism is a madness which those from a secular liberal persuasion will simply never understand. Thus, Polly Toynbee can write that religious terrorism is "not about poverty, deprivation, or cultural dislocation" but only about "religious delusion".[5]

Whilst Polly Toynbee's delusions about religious violence come from the staunch secularist rejection of religious 'reasons' in social life in any form, the widespread success of such delusions have, on the contrary, been due to a feigned attempt to 'understand' Islam and so separate the truth from the hype. The last few years have seen the emergence of self-appointed experts on religious violence, extremism, and fundamentalism, reacting in part to the production of low-intensity paranoia and suspicion about the beliefs and practices of these 'other' people. In the months that followed September 11 book shops stocked up on a new wave of 'introductions' to Islam and experienced a huge increase in sales of the Koran. The search for greater understanding may well come from commendable motives. The controversy lies, however, in the fact that most of these publications simply feed the desire to see Islam, and religious belief generally, as something harmless insofar as it is kept private, or 'spiritual'. As a bestselling post-September 11 book, *Islam: A Short Introduction* by Karen Armstrong puts it, "(Islam's) power struggles are not what religion is really all about, but an unworthy distraction from the *life of the spirit*, which is conducted far from the madding crowd, unseen, silent, and unobstructive."[6] Or again, from Salman

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3   See McCutcheon, R.T. (2005) *Religion and the Domestication of Dissent*. London: Equinox, 13. Much of the arguments in this article I owe to this book.

4   *Ibid*.

5   Toynbee, P. (2005) 'In the Name of God', *The Guardian*, 22 July.

6   quoted in McCutcheon, *op.cit*, 63.

Rushdie: "The restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal, its depoliticization…is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern".[7] McCutcheon argues that these attempts to 'understand' and stand in solidarity with 'true' Islam fell into a fundamental illusion that religions deposit a unifying, enduring truth over time that we can all grasp through a guided reading of its central tenets and appreciate on the 'spiritual' level. Fundamentalist terrorism therefore represents the nightmare that is triggered when religion breaks out of its private realm and defames its "timeless principles" with "sadly degraded forms of subsequent *practice*".[8] The notion of 'political Islam', which to quote Slavoj Žižek, comes down to imagining that people "dare to *take their beliefs seriously*",[9] has thus become synonymous with fanaticism or the tendency for *any* religious belief to turn violent given its incursion into public life.

Is it fair to assume religion as something that *can* ever be either private or public, or is it something which eludes such dualism? We have, in this assumption, perhaps transformed the literal meaning of *religio* as a 'binding' of something to oneself, to the notion that we can bind the undesirable elements of a group identity out of harm's way. And this problem of classification is, of course, not confined to religious prejudice but the tendency in our society to isolate and individualize *any* discourse that falls outside of normal, authorized, civil society and thus to strip dissent *in general* of its power and influence. An assumption has been etched into the social imagination, worsened by the naïve secularist views of thinkers like Toynbee, that 'religious reasons' for social engagement are always distinct from political ones and cannot therefore be positive, creative, and alternative contributions to it. But this assumption can only worsen the very attempts made explicit by those who want religious groups to be more 'public' in their contribution to the good of (British) society and the exclusion of those who threaten destruction. On the one hand, the Muslim community felt compelled to print a full-spread announcement under the 'Muslims for Britain Campaign' in the Guardian, saying that "We dedicate ourselves to work harder to serve the common good of British society".[10] And on the other, we want categorically to deny (or ignore) that our mode of 'being public' might come from religious reasons. Put simply, we cannot exclude 'political Islam' as a catch-all term to describe the incursion of private spirituality into the public domain without also circumscribing the ability for Islam, or any other faith, to make a positive, dynamic contribution to civil society, which essentially includes dissent and the application of moral values to political opposition. To want to understand a little of the complex matrix of political, religious, and cultural beliefs that underlie the recourse to religious violence is not to endorse it, nor even to engage with it. It is to recognise that religious beliefs can no more be expected to be confined to the private realm than any other political motivation to protest or disagree with the state. For that which we normally understand as 'religious reasons' are inextricable from political ones when we imagine the diversity of sources of belief to which people

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7   quoted in McCutcheon, *op.cit,* 59.

8   McCutcheon, *op.cit,* 37.

9   quoted in McCutcheon, *op.cit,* 64.

10   *The Guardian*, 14 July 2005.

normally refer when considering such issues as, for instance, opposition to war, the notion of equality, or human rights.

I began by questioning the amount of pressure that is put on the Muslim community to justify itself and explain the substance of its own faith as unified, easily digestible, and private. But in the context of the war on terror, the same is of course true of anyone whose belief and social practice stand in opposition to that of the state. And it is no surprise, given these simplifications of what it means to be and act religiously, that the attempt to disarm religious practices, particularly in the light of the effects of the 'war on terror', becomes tied up with the erosion of civil liberties in western democracies. In both cases there is at play a very powerful manufacture of political 'authenticity' and 'normal' citizenship in social discourse. As McCutcheon puts it: "Whether in academia, the courts, or on street corners, the discourse on faith, principles, authenticity, and belief act as but one cog in virtually any wheel, making a particular world possible only by allowing marginal groups to gain some sort of acceptance if only they idealize and privatize themselves, thereby simultaneously reproducing and putting up the conditions of their own marginality."[11] The increasing attitude in our societies is that it is OK to dissent as long as that dissent doesn't take itself too seriously or try to undermine the status quo. For instance, when protests against the Iraq war got millions of citizens onto the streets in February 2003, described as a triumph for participatory democracy, the protests received no attention from the UK or US governments save to observe how 'lucky' those citizens were that they were free to protest without fear of violent reprisal[12] (as if freedom of expression was a 'bonus').

Of course there are atrocities committed in the name of religion, and of course there are certain ways that religious groups can stand up to them. But we should not allow this task to justify the demonization of protest groups, ethnic minorities, or those of any 'alternative' faith to that of the state, as in some perverse way sanctioning the terrorists by giving a deeper explanation for their actions than that they are simply mad, religious zealots. The struggle to maintain the right to dissent in the face of increasingly repressive measures justified as 'counter-terror' are part of the same struggle to protect *any* religious faith from the paranoia and suspicion that accompanies the war on terror. One of the most positive consequences of the persistence of the anti-war protests, for instance, has been an unprecedented unification of a wide spectrum of class, political and religious identities under the banner of dissent. This has involved a tacit acknowledgment of the divergent beliefs and faiths that lie at the root of their dissent, whose complexity and influence on our lives cannot be neatly divided into our public/private, religious/secular selves. There is, in other words, a growing awareness that 'religious reasons' for broad-based popular movements are radically undermining our understanding of 'authentic' religion as a docile and ineffective participant of civil society. Perhaps, instead of forcing people to justify religious faith by guaranteeing its privatisation, we should look more carefully for those creative dynamics of social engagement, led by a great diversity of beliefs and attitudes, both religious and secular, without which our social life and civil rights would quickly die.

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11 McCutcheon, op.cit, 92.

12 BBC News, 16 November 2003 [www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/3274331.stm].

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