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### Popular Cultural Relativism: Religion, Racial Profiling and National Multiculturalisms

**CAMERON MCAULIFFE**

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# Popular Cultural Relativism: Religion, Racial Profiling and National Multiculturalisms

CAMERON MCAULIFFE

School of Arts and Sciences, Australian Catholic University

This paper is concerned with the contemporary place of religion in multicultural Australia. It begins from the premise that despite the reality of multicultural programs and policies that expressly attend to the question of religious diversity and the recognition of religion, religion and religious identities remains widely understood as outside of multicultural discourse. This paper represents the starting point for a new research project based in part on a response to the Cronulla riots of December 2005 and the contemporary problematising of Islam in Australian society. However, beyond this the project will also be an investigation of the wider tensions between religious identities and the ongoing construction of a secularist Australian national community. In Australia, as in other western immigrant-receiving nations, serious questions have been asked of the ability of policies of multiculturalism to create a cohesive society (Bennett, 1998; Hage, 1998; Gunew, 1999; Mitchell, 1993; see Modood, 2005a for recent British comments). Multiculturalism has come under attack from the left and the right as variously too divisive, and hence fostering separation, or not representative enough, further entrenching inequalities. Regardless of the state of the debate it is clear that multiculturalism has suffered from, at its least, a narrow understanding, and at its worst, a wholesale misrepresentation. I do not have time to enter into these debates here. Suffice it to say that multiculturalism is not a fixed discourse, with disjuncture between the theoretical politics of difference or recognition and the policies formed in their name, with a marked variation in application across time and from place to place.

In this paper I will look at contemporary Australian multiculturalism and how there is a problematic intersection between the dominance of national identities and the emergence of religious identities. In a post September 11 and 'Bali bombings' world, discourses of social cohesion have become more apparent, and their focus has increasingly shifted towards the supposed problem of Islam in the west. This shift in focus to Islam is part of a wider shift in debates over secularism and the place of religion in society, both here in Australia, and in nations elsewhere. Multiculturalism has an important role to play in these debates. However, policies of multiculturalism in Australia have to date been dominated by discourses of national communal belonging to such a degree that other forms of identity are marginalised from official discourse. This policy based cultural relativism seeks the protection of the national mainstream 'us' from 'their' national migrant difference, subordinating or even excluding other communal identities, such as those tied to religion. The media has played an important role in (re)producing this limitation to a discourse of what can be called 'national multiculturalisms' (see McAuliffe, 2005). As a result of, and in collusion with, these restrictive cultural processes, popular understandings of difference are increasingly crystallised around national forms with religion relegated to an ambivalent position of threat. The divergence between the rhetoric of inclusion and the workings of a multicultural society that is dominated by

national discourses of recognition threatens to undermine multiculturalism at a time when it is most needed.

In attending to the tensions between religious and national identities within multicultural discourse the proposed research project which this paper introduces will take both a bottom-up and a top-down perspective. Beyond the contested debates in academic literature, and the policy programs that have been put in place from above, one of the most important tests of the success of multiculturalism in dealing with the tensions inherent in cultural relations is the perceptions of 'ordinary citizens'. Whilst recognising the importance of an engagement with these everyday understandings of multiculturalism, this paper will focus more on the politics of difference that sets the context for everyday understandings. There is little doubt that officially the politics of difference embodied in policy-based multiculturalism does engage with religion. A series of initiatives have been orchestrated to foster inter-religious dialogues and major government research funding has been committed towards better understanding Islam in Australia (e.g., Cahill, *et al*, 2004; Saeed, 2004). Yet, this engagement seems to have been 'lost in the translation' as politicians at federal and state level, on both sides of politics, struggle simultaneously with the so-called 'problem of Islam' and the 'failure of multiculturalism'. This tension from above, as mediated through our newspapers and television, embodies an uncertainty about the ability of multiculturalism to deal with 'the threat of Islam' in Australian society.<sup>1</sup>

Below I will outline a brief discussion of the tension between religion and nationhood detailing some of the problematic assumptions that limit Australian multiculturalism, followed by a brief preliminary analysis of the important role the media play in perpetuating this limited view of multiculturalism in Australia, based on print media representations of Lebanese and Muslims in and around the 'Cronulla riot' of December 2005.

### **The Myth of the Cohesive Society**

In Australia, the threat of 'home-grown terrorism', riots on the beach in Sydney, national debates on what it means to be an Australian, all reflect the rising tensions over what kinds of 'difference' are acceptable in 'our' society. The recent intensification of the debate over what has been called 'Australian values' signifies the latest attempts by politicians at federal and state level, on both sides of the political fence, to undermine or even eradicate the gains made under multiculturalism. The politics of difference is out of vogue, both here and elsewhere, and in an ironic twist, multiculturalism is increasingly being used as a political whipping boy in discussions of social stability and in the construction of a wholesome and nostalgic vision of community. Within this highly politicised discussion of the 'paradise lost' of Australian community certain fundamental assumptions have been made that need to be brought into the light of both critical and popular appraisal. Firstly,

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<sup>1</sup> It is the aim of this paper to expand on this problematic as a precursor to a bottom-up empirical investigation into the everyday understanding of the place of religion in Australian multicultural society.

there is an understanding that multiculturalism has failed, portrayed across the political spectrum, due to its inability to usher in a cohesive community. Secondly, there exists an assumption that this cohesive community is national in form, and needs to be understood in terms of an identifiable set of national characteristics. As a result of this narrow understanding of community other forms of identity, and in particular religious identity, become constructed in popular understanding as beyond the reach of multiculturalism.

The fact that multiculturalism, over its thirty year tenure, has not produced an idyllic cohesive society, one where 'ethnic tensions' have been 'solved', is held up by politicians and social commentators as proof of the failure of multiculturalism. That multiculturalism never promised such an outcome appears to be of little relevance. In contrast to this position, multiculturalism as a political philosophy accepts that society will always be a complex of tensions, and that to engage with these tensions as a normative process is more productive than to treat difference as aberrant. The politics of difference (Young, 1990) is an open relation between the dynamism of the particular and the universalising structures that attempt to fix and categorise. This tension between the universal and the particular as it is manifest in multiculturalism has been recognised as the tension between unity and diversity and is ultimately irreconcilable (Hesse, 2000). Stuart Hall called this irreconcilable tension the multicultural question (2000), whilst the ongoing nature of multicultural relations has been summarised by Ash Amin as agonistic multiculturalism. As such, multiculturalism does not supply 'off the shelf' simplistic prescriptive solutions, but instead represents a way of engaging with difference in an ongoing and reflexive manner. In the Australian case the inability to usher in a 'cohesive society' under multiculturalism has led to calls for more concrete and comprehensive solutions. One such solution which has been popularly supported centres on the compilation of a list of core values that define Australian society. This debate over 'Australian values' presents a dissatisfaction with the ongoing character of multicultural relations in lieu of a more 'ends-focused' model of integration. However, at its core this assimilationist model rests on the fact that there is some delimited society, wholly known and understood, into which one must integrate. Since the cultural turn it has been *de rigueur* to recognise society as more complex than a list of attributes or characteristics; something that cannot be known in its entirety. Taking the discussions of multiculturalism as a process into account, then the 'cohesive society' into which we must integrate, if the logic of the Australian values debate plays itself out, becomes an impossible fiction.

### **National Multiculturalisms**

According to the feminist critique of identity relations as applied to multiculturalism by scholars such as Iris Marion Young (1990) all societies are structured around certain kinds of understandings and practices which prioritise some cultural values and behaviours over others (Modood, 2005b). In western nations operating under multiculturalism this dominance is manifest in discourses of national belonging. As Gerd Baumann notes, based on the work of Benedict Anderson,

“since the greatest majority of people do not choose their nationality, national identity tends to appear to them as a matter of ancestry and birth, an attribute that feels as natural as kinship and family do” (1999: 39).

The decision in 1999 to reconfigure federal multicultural policies around the theme of ‘Australian multiculturalism’ reflects this ideological dominance. Comments emanating from the federal government concerning the uncompromising centrality of Australian values reproduce difference along national lines in such a manner that multiculturalism is crystallised around the protection of the national mainstream us from their national migrant difference. The hegemony of national discourses of belonging in policy multiculturalisms renders *national* unity as axiomatic. This axiomatic assumption of the centrality of national identities for the functioning of multiculturalism produces *national multiculturalisms* (see McAuliffe, 2005) which have difficulty extending the politics of difference beyond national ethnic groups.

Rather than this limited application of multicultural ideology it is more useful to think of the politics of difference as encompassing a wider range of potential themes for inclusion and engagement. Whilst the nation as a container of identity remains the centre of themes of attachment in the modern world, and national identities in turn remain the *lingua franca* of identity politics, it is important to recognise other modes of identification and the role these play in the everyday negotiations of social relations. In discussing the limitations of national multiculturalisms, one does not seek to deny the importance of national identity in identity politics. Rather, multiculturalism needs to be seen as not merely about national difference. A more productive politics of difference will engage with difference along a variety of semantic and symbolic trajectories, recognising and engaging with national as well as other modes of communal belonging. In this sense, national multiculturalisms are not assimilationist in their intent. Australian multiculturalism, whilst limited in its application to the recognition of national discourses of communal belonging, continues to reflect a commitment to the politics of difference. The attack on multiculturalism and the shift towards integration, thus represents an ideological change from the limited application of the politics of difference towards a neo-assimilationist agenda.

### **Multiculturalism as a Territorialised Discourse**

It is useful to bring a particular geographic perspective to the cultural politics at play in national multiculturalisms. National identities are territorially bound and are hence spatially exclusive in nature. According to the debates over values currently circulating, to be within the territory of the nation involves obligations to adhere to not merely the laws of the nation, but to certain cultural norms that typify the Australian ‘way of life’. This exclusive nature of territorialised national identity also helps explain the tendency to construct regional stereotypes that are similarly constructed as a threat to the sanctity of Australian identity. Men of Middle Eastern Appearance in the present, just like Asian migrants in the recent past, are comprehensible because they belong ‘over there’, outside the territory of the nation. These racially categorised groups of people, whether understood through national or regional identities, can thus be told to ‘go back where

they came from' if they are perceived to not fit in or do not adhere to a particular territorialised set of values.

If we turn briefly to the so-called Cronulla riot, as a virulent expression of what Hage (2003) has called paranoid nationalism, this policing of the internal borders can be viewed at one level as a contestation between popularised notions of 'Aussies' and 'Lebs' (of course, recognising that this is but one strain of a complex of narratives). The race riot on Cronulla beach in early December of last year centred on the clarion call to repel the 'Lebs' and 'wogs' that threatened 'the Shire'. The text message, circulated in the days leading up to the riot, and further advertised through the media, stated: "This Sunday every fucking Aussie in the Shire get down to north Cronulla to help support Leb and wog bashing day. Bring your mates down and lets (sic) show them that this is our beach ... Let's claim back the Shire" (SMH, 10-11 Dec, 2005: 3). For these mainly male protagonists it makes sense to set the territorial claims as a battle between 'Aussies' and 'Lebs'; a new war on the beach where the red and yellow flags are replaced by national flags, a territorial debate explicitly linking the local and the national. When we turn to the processes of racial profiling used by the NSW police force we find the term Leb or wog or Arab replaced with the supposedly more clinical and hence less racially intoned Men of Middle Eastern Appearance. As has been discussed elsewhere, (e.g., Collins et al, 2000), this language of profiling, despite its claims to rational separation from racist discourse, is in fact a new racist construct that is open to interpretation and can be used to similar effect as the aforementioned text message. Part of the reason for this is that the Middle East is similarly a 'place over there', outside Australia, and can thus be legitimately mobilised as a territorialised 'other' in the defence of this place, 'our nation', 'our beach', and 'our Shire' - typified by the much publicised statement written on the body of one 'rioter', 'We grew here. You flew here.'

Tensions and uncertainty arise when these straightforward territorially fixed identities of national or regional difference are replaced with more complex, less spatially comprehensible identities. In particular, it is worth considering the examples of dual nationals, the second generation, and religious identities. Dual nationals and the second generation remain embedded within spatialised identity relations and therefore remain comprehensible to a degree through dominant discourses of national belonging. It becomes a question of commitment or allegiance to the nation. All will be well so long as you clearly lay out your dominant allegiance to the Australian nation and its territorialised cultural identity expressed through the essentialised list of Australian values. Turning now to religion the resolution of tensions is less straightforward.

### **Religion in a Multicultural Society**

It is interesting to note in the case of the Cronulla riots a shift in the discourses of representation from a dominant discussion of 'the Muslim problem' back to a discussion of 'the Lebanese problem'. Reporting of the Cronulla riots and the subsequent revenge attacks have been noticeable for their exclusion of religion. In much of the reporting the constructed stereotypical cultural traits formerly attributed to Muslims, such as, the disrespect of women, predisposition to violence, disrespect of 'our way of life', have been transferred to negative representations of Lebanese, or Men of Middle Eastern

Appearance. There is a lack of discussion of Muslims and Islam surrounding the Cronulla riots highlighting the dominance of territorialised discourses in multiculturalism in this case.

Gerd Baumann notes that “any theory of multiculturalism must beware of the misunderstanding that religion is a class of facts different from other social facts” (1999: 23). Yet in multicultural discourse dominated by territorialised national identities, the (at least partially) deterritorialised nature of religious identities is a cause of widespread tension. Whilst religion is territorialised in different ways it need not necessarily be spatially fixed and bounded as national identities are. As a result, religion often appears in tension with Australian multiculturalism. In an attempt to approach the tensions between territorialised national identities and the more deterritorialised religious identities I have conducted a preliminary analysis of media representations of issues related to the Cronulla riots that appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald between December 2005 and August 2006. This was not a comprehensive survey, but was designed to tease out some of the relevant themes in the representation of religious identities in relation to the riot, and leads on from earlier research on the media representations of the children of Iranian migrants in Sydney, London and Vancouver (McAuliffe, 2005).

At this stage I wish to draw attention to five particular themes in the representation of religion that I have noted:

Conflation with national identity – This subset of the surveyed articles territorialise religious identities by conflating religion and national ethnic identities, as Lebanese Muslims. This representation was also found in other research on the representations of Iran and Iranians in the press and reflects a need to reterritorialise in order to render coherent and to place this religious identity (Muslim) in dialectical opposition to Australian identity.

Elision from the discourse – Through failing to mention religion explicitly these articles tend to render religion simultaneously invisible and ubiquitous. The elision of religion from the discursive construction of an ideal community not only problematises religion but also may serve to conflate religion with national identities, rendering religion ubiquitous within national contexts.

Invocation of global threat – These articles aligned local Muslims with a supposed wider global Islam hence serving to deterritorialise Islam and construct Muslims as a threat that is everywhere in potential.

Denial of religious rights – These articles pursued a secularist position that religion has no place in Australian politics (and by extension, society). These representations included the debates over the supposed desires of Muslims to institute the *umma* and *Sharia* courts in Australia, which were defended from a secularist position that demands the separation of church and state, placing religion and theocracy as antithetical to Australian values.

Recognition of religious diversity - There are some astute commentators who continually remind us of the fact that not all Lebanese are Muslim and that not all Muslims are the same.

Articles tend to follow at least one of these themes with regards to the question of religion and the fallout from the Cronulla riots. It is important to note from these themes that whilst some articles fail to mention religion others make an attempt to incorporate religion into the article in one way or another. Articles taking seemingly contradictory positions on religion and the riots may even appear on the same page of the newspaper. As a result, even from this preliminary analysis, complexities and contradictions in the way religious identities are represented are apparent. A deeper analysis may attend to these issues. However, this complexity also reflects the difficulty that journalists and editors have in incorporating religion into a debate that has been racialised along predominantly national/ethnic lines.

There is a need to extend on the limited understanding of multiculturalism in Australian society, to include religion and religious identity as a legitimate form of identity in the politics of difference. There is a need to challenge the construction of essential national ethnic communities, the migrant other, against which 'our' invisible and essential whiteness is set. This dualism of national us and them is inadequate. It does not help understand the complex nature of identities that are increasingly tied into circuits of transnational relations. Religions, as transborder identities, can unsettle the hegemony of national discourses of belonging and embody a more inclusive politics of difference. I say more inclusive here, because as has been discussed above, there is no closed and complete answer to the multicultural question (see Hall, 2000), but rather a sense of direction that plays itself out as an agonistic process in the pursuit of an inclusive everyday multiculturalism.

## **Conclusion**

The increasingly apparent presence of at least partially deterritorialised religious identities in the nation represents an ambivalent threat. For some, religion has become a destabilising force that is beyond the control of multicultural policies. It is unclear the degree to which difference defined through religion is recognised as part of multicultural discourse, both at the level of policy and in the minds and actions of ordinary Australians. It is the intention of my current research to investigate these issues. In this paper I have sought to outline some of the tensions between religion and an Australian multicultural landscape dominated by territorialised discourses of national belonging.

Opening up discussion to the legitimacy of religious difference in multicultural policies helps to decentre national identities in policy discourses. This preliminary analysis has found that in some cases religion is conflated with national ethnic identities in order to bring religion into a coherent system of understanding, whilst in other cases religion is deterritorialised as a destabilising force untied to traditional allegiances to nation, or even cast as a global threat awaiting, or worse, participating in, the destruction of our national community. Through a focus on religious difference, this research seeks to decentre the dominance of national identities to bring national identity politics into engagement with its

alternates, such that national discourses of belonging become a starting point, rather than an ending point, in multicultural policies and wider public discourse. This paper, and the research associated with it, seeks to broaden the scope of multicultural discourse at a time when the politics of difference is being supplanted by an already problematised politics of assimilation.

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