

#LSEreligionLecture: "We need to re-imagine understandings of the British identity" – Tariq Modood

In October, Tariq Modood gave a lecture at LSE entitled *Equality for Secular Belief and Minority Faiths? Reflections on the Commission on Religion in British Public Life* as part of LSE's Religion and the Public sphere lecture series. Here, **Afiqah Binti Zainal** reviews the event.



Craig Calhoun and Tariq Modood in conversation at LSE in October

The **Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB)** was convened in 2013 by the Woolf Institute of Cambridge to consider the place and role of religion in contemporary Britain, to consider the significance of emerging trends and identities, and to make recommendations for public life and policy. In a rapidly evolving diverse society, changing views on religion and belief will inevitably affect public policy and pressure public institutional changes. Professor Craig Calhoun opened the event by reviewing how the LSE's Religion and the Public Sphere lecture series aim to evaluate the way in which religion figures in British public life. As a member of the Commission, Tariq Modood was invited to share some of the intellectual and philosophical reflections that lay the foundations for the CORAB report and their continuing work.

In his lecture, Modood introduced the purpose and founding of CORAB, unpacked the complexities of the terms 'religion' and 'belief' against the rapidly changing British society, and discussed the challenges of recognising 'secular belief' alongside 'minority faiths' through institutional accommodation. Finally, Modood noted CORAB's recommendations on improving the British community's religious literacy in order to foster greater common understanding and harmonious living within a plural society.

Modood began his lecture by tying in CORAB's founding with the fulfilment of one of the recommendations of the **2000 Commission for Multi-Ethnic Britain (CMEB) report**. The CMEB report noted the importance of instilling a sense of belonging to society, that requires a recognition of plurality of communities as well as individuals, and challenging racism and related structural inequalities. Building on this, CORAB faces the task of addressing the challenge of living with difference against Britain's transforming religious landscape. First, the general decline in Christian affiliation, belief and practice; second, the increased diversity of minority religious faiths; and third, the increase in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities. At the same time, it

must be recognised that Britain is historically and still predominantly a Christian country, while having to contend with now being a multi-faith secular society. The conversation on Britain's multiculturalism centers around the aforementioned contentions.

For CORAB, the concept of the 'secular' does not refer to a separation of state and religion and the confinement of religion to the private sphere. Rather, CORAB holds two inclusive views on the secular. First, it forwards the understanding that religion can positively contribute to the public good, if it adheres to the liberal democratic constitutionalist norms and framework. Second, CORAB takes secular as belief – adopting the position that religious belief and secular belief should be treated on par.

It is evident that the changing religious landscape in Britain would incur policy challenges, particularly on the inclusion and accommodation of practice-based religions within minority communities. Moreover, Modood emphasised that concepts of recognition and belonging are beyond simply understanding religion and belief, but also understanding their connotations with issues of racial and ethnic identity. For one, the meaning and importance of religion may vary amongst groups and individuals within groups. More often for minorities, religion is not just about personal belief, but also about community, identity and group membership. Further, recognition of the inclusion of growing numbers of minority faiths in the British community requires substantial institutional changes, especially for practice-based religions. In light of this, how should Britain manage the increasing presence of minority faiths? In what way can it allow for institutional changes and adaptation while keeping in mind the decline in Christian affiliation and an increase of those proclaiming to hold non-religious or secular beliefs?

As posited by Modood, CORAB's approach to thinking about the nature and worth of religion and belief alongside group identities is extremely valuable in tackling these challenges. CORAB's report gives previously unnoticed importance to the view of *secular as belief*. Public provision needs to be protected and extended to not just the non-Christian faiths, but also non-religious beliefs. This avoids the conundrum of equality vis-à-vis integration and the granting of group-differentiated rights or praxis-based accommodation.

Modood closed his lecture by putting forth his view of a greater need to increase the level of religious literacy of the British public, particularly amongst opinion-formers and policy-makers. As per the CORAB recommendation, a reviewed understanding of religions is extremely necessary. It should be recognised that religion is not necessarily problematic, it can serve as a public good. Fostering a healthy dialogical approach to revisiting and rethinking the plural British national identity should be the common goal.

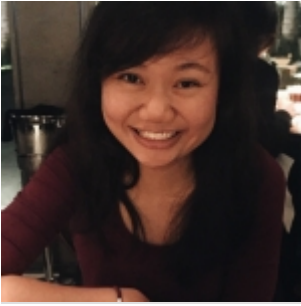
In the discussion that followed, Modood qualified that there exists no hard binary with a forced choice between the 'secular' and the 'religious'. Rather, it is generally acknowledged that individuals hold multiple identities; one can be religious and still strongly hold secularist beliefs. Further, it was expressed that Britain holds a fairly liberal stand to multiculturalism. Where there exists religion, it should be accommodated within a liberal democratic framework. The current challenge is demonstrating an equal commitment to secularist belief alongside religious belief, when religion can be seen to want to exert greater presence in the public sphere.

In summary, Modood stressed the need to re-imagine understandings of the British identity to include minorities and accommodate changing perceptions of belief in people's lives. The challenges of recognising the multiplicity of religion and belief through institutional accommodation is an ongoing project. How can we include ethno-cultural minorities in popular understandings of the political community? Will institutional changes compromise national identity? And will pluralism deliver greater fragmentation and confusion? As is the case for every country, the challenge of integrating the multiplicity of belief is, and forever will be, an on-going process.

Listen/watch the lecture [here](#)

About the author





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