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Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths

RUMY HASAN, 2010

London: Politico's Publishing (Methuen)

296 pp., £12.99 (pb)

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Rumy Hasan's book *Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths* starts with the Runnymede report *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, published in 2000, also known as "The Parekh-report" after its main contributor. In that report, Britain was characterised as a "multicultural society"—or rather, it advised the government to *declare* that the United Kingdom had become a "multicultural society". Hasan comments that "It seemed that 'multiculturalism' had taken very deep roots and was a fact of British life and society" (1). But in the years following the publication of this report, Hasan tells us, this proved to be far from reality. The report masked profound tensions in society. As a defining moment for a growing unease with multi-culturalism he refers to the suicide bombings of 7 July 2005 in London. After that, the Chair of the Commission for Radical Equality, Trevor Phillips, delivered his well-publicised speech on 22 September 2005, which included the influential characterisation of the situation that "we are sleepwalking our way to segregation". Hasan clearly sympathises with Phillips and indicates that his book is meant to be a rethinking of the debate on multi-culturalism. He aims to provide a critique of the theoretical and philosophical basis of multi-culturalism and to highlight some of its effects in Britain.

The book is sub-divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated to multi-culturalism and its consequences. The second part is concerned with "Muslim issues". Part III deals with obstacles and solutions.

Multi-culturalists mean well, as Hasan makes clear. At the same time, it may be surmised that they have inflicted considerable harm to migrant communities. The conclusion that forces itself on the reader after reading Hasan's meticulous analysis is that multi-culturalism is a grave mistake. There are at least four reasons for this.

Firstly, it is true that every human being is in need of 'recognition' (although one may object to this vague term, made common by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor). Not only 'minority groups', with which Taylor is erroneously concerned, but people in general are in need of 'recognition'. But this recognition must have something to do with what can uplift a human being, something s/he can be proud of. Being a member of an ethnic group or adhering to a certain religion is not something to be proud of. It is not something to be ashamed of either, of course, but being proud of your ethnic group or your religion comes dangerously close to racism. With their focus on ethnic background and religion the multi-culturalists—let me repeat: unwillingly and unconsciously—introduced something that enlightened liberalism (or "egalitarian universalism", to use Hasan's phrase) had expelled from European culture. Now it is back. And, as may be expected, not only as a source of inspiration for minority groups coming from migrant communities, but for the white majority as well. They also tell us now: 'roots too'.

Secondly, multi-culturalists did not stimulate people from minority cultures to make something of themselves. If your ethnicity or religion is enough, why make something of yourself as a human individual, as a 'person'? Although multi-culturalism was meant to boost the self-esteem of members of migrant communities, it has in fact let them down. It did not 'empower' them, but made them weaker.

Thirdly, multi-culturalism (and its concomitant cultural relativism) can lead to a situation where culturally based (and religiously sanctioned) injustices are condoned because people think they lack transcultural yardsticks to reject harmful cultural practices. When Joseph Raz (a multi-culturalist legal philosopher) says that "even oppressive cultures can give people quite a lot" (15), this can hardly be seen as an incentive to free cultures from oppressive elements. On the contrary, the likely effect is to soothe people with their cultural destinies.

Fourthly, the focus on the importance of the culture of groups (and not of individuals) raises the question: who is the ultimate guardian of that culture? Who can authoritatively state what the culture prescribes? Essential for the multi-culturalist ideology is that the national state (run by members of the majority group) lacks all credibility in this regard. And so this is considered to be the province of the 'community leaders' or the 'family elders'—and those are mainly traditionalist people, who, in Hasan's words, "actively seek to deny autonomy to their flock, especially to girls and women" (26). In other words, this leaves ethnic minorities, especially women, "at the mercy of dominant, invariably male, group leaders" (39).

Hasan's views are supported by other like-minded writers. The most sustained critique of multi-culturalism is Brian Barry's *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*, published in 2001. Other authors, like Christopher Hitchens, Irving Kristol, Anthony Grayling, Nick Cohen, H. E. Baber, John Searle, Terry Eagleton, Stanley Fish, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Dinesh D'Souza, Paul Scheffer,

Susan Moller Okin, Frits Bolkestein, Necla Kelek, Seyran Ates, and Caroline Fourest have also criticised multi-culturalism as an ideology, in essays and articles in scholarly and popular journals. Political leaders like Nicolas Sarkozy, Angela Merkel, and David Cameron have pledged to change their respective government policies and reject multi-culturalism as a failed approach to integration. But Rumi Hasan is, if I am not mistaken, the only living author with a book-length analytical treatment of multi-culturalism. And he deserves credit for that. His book is well written, cogently argued, and topical. It deserves to be widely read.

PAUL CLITEUR

Faculty of Law, Department of Jurisprudence, University of Leiden, Leiden, The Netherlands

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