Vorlesung von Amartya Sen

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<u>A Freedom-based Understanding of Multicultural Commitments</u>[1]

Amartya Sen

1

Demand for multiculturalism is strong in the contemporary world. It is much invoked in the making of social, cultural, and political policies, particularly in West Europe and America. This is not at all surprising, since increased global contacts and interactions, and in particular extensive migration, have placed diverse practices of different cultures next to each other. The general acceptance of the exhortation to "love thy neighbor" emerged when the neighbors led more or less the same kind of life. But the same entreaty to love one's neighbours now requires people to take an interest in the very diverse living modes of people who, no matter where their families originated, have now become proximate. The globalized nature of the contemporary world does not allow the luxury of ignoring the difficult questions that multiculturalism raises.

One of the foundational issues concerns how human beings are to be seen. Should they be categorized in terms of inherited traditions and ancestral religion of the community in which they happen to be born, taking that unchosen received identity to have automatic priority over other affiliations involving politics, profession, class, gender, language, literature, social involvements, and many other connections? Or should human beings be seen as persons with many affiliations and associations, the relative priorities between which they must themselves determine (taking the responsibility that comes with the exercise of choice)? Also, should we assess the fairness of multiculturalism primarily by the extent to which people from different cultural backgrounds are "left alone," or - to take a different perspective - the extent to which contributions are made to facilitate their ability to make reasoned choices, through

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[1] **Talk preceding the Meister Eckhart Award in Cologne on 28 November 2007.**

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positive support from social opportunities of education and participation in civil society? There is no way of escaping these rather foundational questions if multiculturalism is to be fairly assessed. While some observers have come rapidly to the view that multiculturalism is deeply problematic if not downright mistaken, the whole question turns very much on how we see human beings in society and how our understanding of social associations are translated into principles through which we can assess multicultural interactions and their role in the contemporary world.

2

The history of the practice of multiculturalism in different forms offers telling examples of how foggy reasoning can tie people up in terrible knots of their own making. The importance of cultural freedom, which, I would argue, is central to the dignity of all people, has to be distinguished from the championing of cultural diversity for its own sake, or celebrating each person's cultural inheritance as something that must be adhered to, irrespective of whether the persons involved would choose those particular practices given the opportunity of critical scrutiny, and given an adequate knowledge of other options and of choices that actually exist in the society in which they live. The demands of cultural freedom include, among other priorities, the task of <u>resisting</u> the automatic endorsement of past traditions, along with, of course, the possibility <u>affirming</u> past traditions after considered scrutiny.

There are three ways of thinking of multiculturalism that can be seen in contemporary discussions. The divisions to which I refer here are not about supporting or opposing multiculturalism seen as a clearly defined entity, but about understanding the value of multiculturalism in very different terms, depending on how we define it.

One approach to multiculturalism values diversity of culture for its own sake - the more the merrier. This way of thinking of the value of multiculturalism gives priority to the pattern of variation of cultures within a society. It pays no particular attention to individuals in the society except as constituent elements in a societal pattern. I shall call this approach that of "potpourri preference." In this perspective, individuals are only tiny components in a valued medley, no matter whether they like their respective positions in that pattern or not. Indeed, under this approach, human beings are seen not as thinking creatures who reflect and exercise choice, but as mere <u>containers</u> in which culture occurs. The pursuit of cultural diversity for its own sake is rather like arranging a collection of bottles of varying sizes and appearances and then admiring the varieties that are on display; no individual bottle is of special interest. The celebration of variety for

its own sake is quite indifferent to whether people would prefer, or value, or choose to be a part of any particular mélange. In many intellectual circles in the modern world we constantly encounter muliticulturalists of this school of thought who tell us that they "value diversity," and this commitment certainly sounds like a highly appealing idea. But we have to ask whether diversity for its own sake is, in fact, a reasonable priority.

The second approach to multiculturalism takes the form of valuing the idea that people should stay locked within the culture in which they were respectively born. This way of thinking of multiculturalism does take notice of human beings, not just their aggregate medley, and in this perspective diversity is not valued for its own sake. If the amalgam of everyone's ancestral cultural backgrounds happens to be a potpourri, then that is just fine, but more extensive potpourris are not to be artificially generated for the sake of extending diversity. This approach, that of "cultural conservatism," does take note of individual background. It does not, however, value individual <u>choice</u>, which may or may not be exercised in the conservative direction. Free choice may or may not lead to each person's choosing to live with the cultural beliefs and practices of the community in which he or she happened to have been born. The question to ask here is this: can the value of multiculturalism be based on denying the importance of human reasoning and the freedom to choose one's own life style?

The third approach to multiculturalism emerges directly from just that question about the freedom of choice. And it is with that approach I shall be mostly concerned in this talk. A freedom-based understanding demands that people should be able to decide on their own lives, and multiculturalism is valued precisely because of the freedom that people enjoy to decide on what they would choose given the variety of cultures between which a person can choose (including developing new departures and syntheses). A freedom-based understanding puts its focus on the importance of freedom in human life - a point of view I have defended in my work in social choice theory, but also in two more easily accessible books, <u>Development as Freedom</u> (published in 1999) and <u>Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny</u> (published last year), both available in German translation. This approach to multiculturalism is, thus, a corollary of valuing human freedom. It differs sharply from any mechanical championing of diversity for its own sake (thus, going against the potpourri preference), and differs also from glorifying some imagined obligation to stay locked in one's inherited culture, no matter what one's reflected and scrutinized priorities may be (thus, going against cultural conservatism).

In the perspective of human freedom, the merit of diversity must depend on precisely <u>how</u> diversity is brought about and sustained. If a young woman in a conservative immigrant family in Britain wants to go out for a date with an English boy, her choice can hardly be faulted on grounds of multicultural freedom. In contrast, the attempt by her guardians to stop her doing this (a common enough occurrence) is hardly a multicultural move, since it wants to keep the cultures separate in (what can be called) a "plural monocultural" form. And yet, it is the parents' prohibition that seems to strike the most sympathetic chord in the minds of many dedicated "multiculturalists" today. This can be only because freedom of human beings to choose their own lives is somehow not seen to be important. Such a freedom-neglecting approach can be the result of the confusion generated by the potourri approach (valuing diversity for its own sake), or by the anti-choice view championed by cultural conservatism (based on insisting on the necessity to stay within one's inherited fold and accepting, as a result, all the restrictions on human behaviour that such conservatism entails).

The central issue in the understanding of multiculturalism in the contemporary world is the value of freedom. If freedom is taken to be important then both the potpourri approach and the automatic priority of cultural conservatism would have to be rejected. Multiculturalism demands many social policies for the support of human freedom, if this freedom-based understanding of multiculturalism is accepted. The freedom-based view have been under attack from different sides in contemporary debates, not least in Europe today. The attack sometimes come from those who are dedicated opponents of multiculturalism in any form and want each society to be strictly "unicultural," allowing no freedom of choice to anyone to embrace any other form of life. But attacks on the value of freedom also come from those who see themselves as multiculturalists but who define the valued object in terms of potpourri preference or cultural conservatism. In defending human freedom we should not end up losing sight of the fact that that implicit attacks on the importance of freedom come from very different directions.

3

The history of multiculturalism in Britain is interesting to examine in this context, because that country was a pioneer in promoting multiculturalism in a freedom-based understanding at one stage, but now seems immersed in a rather counterproductive phase, based on confusions about the content of an acceptable multiculturalism. The positive phase of multicultural integration in Britain has been followed by a phase of separatism and confusion. Post-colonial Britain began wonderfully well in giving all

residents the freedom of their reflected cultural choice and also the opportunity to integrate immigrant communities through non-discriminatory treatment in health care, in social security, and even in voting rights. The last was a contribution of the visionary policy of having a Commonwealth of Nations, itself a multicultural initiative with distinctly British leadership, which made it possible, among other things, for all residents who are citizens of the Commonwealth (including almost the entirety of the non-White immigrant population in Britain - from the West Indies, or West Africa, or East Africa, or the Indian subcontinent, or South-east Asia) to participate in British politics and to vote in general elections.

In contrast with the unequal history of political rights of settled immigrants in many other European countries, there is much to celebrate in the British achievement in giving legal immigrants their economic, social and political rights as rapidly as possible. The speed with which it was made sure that the resident immigrants in Britain also share the economic and social rights of health care, social security and pension systems is something quite admirable in British multicultural experience, and they add substantially to the openness of political participation. Despite these early moves in post-imperial Britain, there were still some blemishes, for example in implicit racism in policing, and these were clearly linked to the riots in 1981, particularly in Brixton and Birmingham. These problems were addressed in a further visionary move in 1981 through a Commission led by Lord Scarman. Not all the things that the Scarman Report was worried about have been eradicated (race can still make a difference, just as class and gender continue to do), but there has been persistent British engagement, beginning well before "multiculturalism" became a popular slogan, with trying to achieve the treatment of all people legitimately resident in Britain as equals, irrespective of their colour, ancestry, cultural background, or linguistic or religious affiliation.

Indeed, Britain has been in the forefront of promoting inclusive multiculturalism, with a mixture of successes and difficulties, which are of relevance also to other countries in Europe and the United States. Discussions of British policies on multiculturalism, thus, have a much wider reach, and arouse much greater interest and passion, than the boundaries of the ostensible subject matter would lead one to expect. Six weeks after the terrorist attacks in London in the summer of 2005, the distinguished French daily *Le Monde* published an important editorial called "The British Multicultural Model in Crisis," where it assessed the issues with balance and fairness, but focused on the fact that many people see in Britain's problems the possibility that multiculturalism has gone too

far in that country. I would argue, in contrast, that the real issue is not whether multiculturalism has gone "too far" in Britain, but what particular form multiculturalism should take. Is multiculturalism nothing other than tolerance of the diversity of cultures? Does it make a difference who chooses the cultural practices, whether they are imposed on young children in the name of "the culture of the community," or whether they are freely chosen by persons with adequate opportunity to learn and to reason about alternatives? What facilities do members of different communities have, in schools as well as in the society at large, to learn about the faiths and non-faiths of different people in the world and to understand how to reason about choices that human beings must, if only implicitly, make.

Britain, where I first came as a student in 1953, has been particularly impressive in making room for different cultures. The distance traveled has been in many ways quite extraordinary. I recollect (with some fondness, I must admit) how worried my first landlady in Cambridge was, in 1953, about the possibility that my skin color might come off in the bath (I had to assure her that my firmly affirmative colour was agreeably sturdy and durable), and also the care with which she explained to me that writing was a special invention of European civilization ("the Bible did it"). For someone who has lived intermittently but for long periods through the powerful evolution of British cultural diversity, the contrast between Britain half a century ago and Britain today is just amazing.

The encouragement given to cultural diversity has certainly made many contributions to the lives of people. It has helped Britain to become an exceptionally lively place in many different ways. From the joys of multicultural food, literature, music, dancing and the arts to the noisy enchantment of the Notting Hill Carnival, Britain gives its people of all backgrounds much to relish and to celebrate. Also, the acceptance of cultural diversity (as well as voting rights and largely non-discriminatory public services and social security, referred to earlier) has made it easier for people with very different origins to feel at home. The kind of race riots that happened in France recently would not be particularly likely in the Britain of today - and that certainly is an important achievement. It is also worth noting here that this is not because Britain is less integrated than France (as is sometime claimed); France may have a more monolithic interpretation of national culture, but it is British integration in politics (including voting rights for nearly all resident non-white immigrants) and in state-financed national health

service and social security (with little evidence of race-wise discrimination) that has made this particular achievement possible.

And yet these accomplishments still leave some of the central issues of multiculturalism entirely unresolved. And those unresolved questions, which are important in themselves, are rather central for the extent of disharmony and disquiet that still exist in Britain, and have a motivational connection with the violent deeds that London experienced, in the form of terrorist sabotage (or attempted sabotage) in recent years, carried out by some people born and brought up in England.

4

One important issue concerns the distinction between freedom-based multiculturalism, on one side, and plural monoculturalism, on the other. Does the existence of a diversity of cultures, which might pass each other like ships in the night, count as a successful case of multiculturalism? Since, in the matter of identity, Britain is currently torn between interaction and isolation, the distinction is centrally important (and has an obvious bearing on the question of terrorism and violence). Similar questions arise elsewhere as well - even here in Germany - but Britain has had to encounter these problems in a particularly strong form.

Consider a culinary contrast, by noting first that Indian and British food can genuinely claim to be multicultural. India had no chili until the Portuguese brought it to India from America, but evidently the Indians immediately liked it and chose to use it in a wide range of Indian food; its powerful presence can be seen in many types of curries favoured in the subcontinent. Also, tandoori cooking might have been perfected in India, but it originally came to India from West Asia. Curry powder, on the other hand, is a distinctly English invention - the credit for this ready-made recipe made out of a mixture of Indian cooking ingredients must go to the British Army mess where the soldiers ate and learned to develop a taste for what they saw as curry, and became great devotees of the chili, by then Indianized in the subcontinent. Now curry is officially described by the British board of tourism as genuine British cuisine, and if we visit a ready-cooked food store in London today, the preponderance of items with subcontinental connection would be hard to miss.

In contrast, having two styles or traditions coexisting side by side, without the twain meeting, must really be seen as plural monoculturalism. The vocal defense of multiculturalism that we frequently hear these days is very often nothing more than a plea for plural monoculturalism. Being born in a particular social background is not, in itself an

exercise of cultural liberty, since it is not an act of choice. In contrast, the decision to stay firmly within the traditional mode would be an exercise of freedom if the choice is made after considering other alternatives. In the same way, a decision to move away - by a little or a lot - from the standard behavior pattern, arrived at after reflection and reasoning, would also qualify as such an exercise. Indeed, cultural freedom can frequently clash with cultural conservatism, and if multiculturalism is defended in the name of cultural freedom, then it can hardly be seen as demanding unwavering and unqualified support for staying steadfastly within one's inherited cultural tradition.

A second question relates to the fact that while religion or ethnicity may be an important identity for people (especially if they have the freedom to choose between celebrating or rejecting inherited or attributed traditions), there are other affiliations and associations that people also have reason to value. Unless it is defined very oddly, multiculturalism cannot override the right of a person to participate in civil society, or to take part in national politics, or to lead a socially nonconformist life. No matter how important multiculturalism is, it cannot lead automatically to giving priority to the dictates of traditional culture over all else.

The people of the world cannot be seen merely in terms of their religious affiliations_as a global federation of religions. For much the same reasons, a multi-ethnic Britain can hardly be seen as a collection of ethnic communities. Yet the "federational" view has gained much support in contemporary Britain. Indeed, despite the tyrannical implications of putting persons into rigid boxes of given "communities," that view is frequently interpreted, rather bafflingly, as an ally of individual freedom. There is even a much-aired "vision" of "the future of multi-ethnic Britain" that sees it as "a looser federation of cultures" held together by common bonds of interest and affection and a collective sense of being.

But why should a person's relation to Britain be mediated through the culture of the family in which he or she has been born? A person may decide to seek closeness with more than one of these pre-defined cultures or, just as plausibly, with none. Also, a person may well decide that her ethnic or cultural identity is less important to her than, say, her political convictions, or her professional commitments, or her literary persuasions. It is a choice for her to make, no matter what her place is in the strangely imagined "federation of cultures."

The state policy of actively promoting government-supported "faith schools" in Britain, freshly devised for Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh children (in addition to pre-existing

Christian ones), illustrates this approach, which is not only educationally problematic, it also encourages a fragmentary perception of the opportunities of living in a desegregated Britain. Many of these new educational institutions are coming up precisely at a time when religious prioritization has been a major source of violence in the world (adding to the earlier history of such violence in Britain itself, including Catholic-Protestant divisions in Northern Ireland themselves not unconnected with segmented schooling). Tony Blair, as Prime Minister of Britain, was certainly right to note that "there is a very strong sense of ethos and values in those schools." However, education is not just about getting children, even very young ones, immersed in an old inherited ethos. It is also about helping children to develop the ability to reason about new decisions any grown-up person will have to take. The important goal is not some kind of a mechanical parity in relation to the "old Brits" with their old faith schools, but the objective of what would best enhance the capability of the children to live "examined lives" (to the use that wonderful concept powerfully presented by Socrates) as they grow up in an integrated country.

5

The confusions that British experience with multiculturalism illustrate have been affecting other countries as well. Canada was, in fact, the first country to formally adopt a freedom-based commitment to multiculturalism (this happened in 1971), and it was resolved that everyone in Canada would be free to live - and when needed, actually assisted - to live their chosen life styles, irrespective of "their racial or ethnic origins, their language, or their religious affiliation." Indeed, for many years it looked as if the whole of Western Europe was also moving towards this constructive freedom-inclusive interpretation of multiculturalism. Indeed, multiculturalism was soon adopted as official policy by most member-states of the European Union, even though the content of that elusive concept was not very fully defined. Be that as it may, multiculturalism, with somewhat undefined elaboration but a general inclination towards human freedom, rapidly became a declared goal across the western world.

Those sunny days are now gone, certainly in Europe. What happened? There are several sources from which the challenge to multiculturalism came. Some of the opposition did come from the hostility of the expected orthodox, indeed right-wing, resistance based on straightforward "localism," with an insistence that Europe has room only for traditional European values and life styles, overlooking the extent to which European priorities and practices have been influenced historically by ideas come from

elsewhere over the centuries (indeed even Christianity came from the Middle East to Europe).

However, this explicit opposition was not the only problem that multiculturalism in a freedom-oriented form faced. In addition to unreasoned localism, a freedom-based view of multiculturalism has suffered from diversion into other interpretations of multiculturalism with little commitment to human freedom. Much confusion has been generated by very different - and sometimes rather foggy - understanding of the content of multiculturalism, discussed earlier. As the slogan of multiculturalism gained ground, the confusion regarding its demands also became increasingly influential. Multiculturalism came to be increasingly seen as the assertion of non-critical acceptance of the religious practices of immigrant communities by the members of these communities in their actual life style, along with a weaker form of acceptance by all others of the paramount importance of that way of seeing human beings, in terms of their ancestral religion, no matter where they lived. This way of characterizing persons only in terms of one identity, in particular religion, has the effect of making any statement on that religion - whether in the form of serious discussion or (as has also happened) extremely silly cartoons - has the effect of appearing to be a way of simply demeaning people thus classified by one identity only. Once people have been defined by one fixed identity, with no other socially recognized characteristic, there is no way of dissociating any kind of critical remarks on the foundations of that one identity from the worth and dignity of human beings thus categorized.

This is essentially a story of two confusions. The first is the confusion between cultural conservatism and cultural freedom. As was already discussed, being born in a particular community is not in itself an exercise of any kind liberty, since that is not an act of choice. In contrast, the decision to stay firmly within the traditional mode would be an exercise of freedom, if indeed the choice is made after considering other alternatives. In the same way, a decision to depart from inherited values and behaviour patterns, arrived at after reflection and reasoning, would also qualify as exercise of multicultural freedom.

The second confusion lies in ignoring the fact that while religion may be an important identity for people (especially if they have the freedom to choose between celebrating or rejecting inherited or attributed traditions), there are other affiliations and associations - cultural, political, social, economic - that people also have reason to value. Nor is religion all there is to culture. The Canadian declaration on multiculturalism in 1971 explicitly referred to language in addition to religion as a part of culture with which

the declaration was concerned. Indeed, it is worth remembering, in this context, that even though Bangladeshis in Britain are now officially categorized simply as "British Muslims," the Bangladeshis fought for - and earned - their independence, as it happens also in 1971, not for a religious cause, but for linguistic freedom and secular politics.

Political leaders in Europe, when favourably inclined towards what is seen as multiculturalism, frequently address each separated group of co-religionists as a community of their own, with their own practices (not open to critical scrutiny), only with the additional demand that religious politics should take a "moderate" form). Religious spokesmen of immigrant groups apparently have a higher standing, for example, in British official reckoning - and greater access to the corridors of power - than ever before. The policy of promoting "faith schools" (discussed earlier) represent, in effect, the priority of paying greater attention to a rather mechanical religious "parity" as desired by the so-called "community leaders" (that is, religious big shots) than to the essentials of schooling and the training of children on how to reason freely - the most important part of school education. Also, the partitioning role of separated schooling, which has already done much to sow discord in North Ireland in the political distancing of Catholics and Protestants (by instilling a sense of divisive categorization assigned at infancy) is now being allowed and, in effect, encouraged to sow alienation on a much bigger scale.

What is needed now is not an abandonment of multiculturalism, nor the dumping of the goal of equality irrespective of "racial or ethnic origins, language, or religious affiliation," but the overcoming of the two confusions that have done so much harm already. This is important both because freedom should count, but also for avoiding both the French style rebellion of the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised and the growing menace of violently separatist thoughts that some times spill into barbarously brutal deeds, as they did in Britain in 2005. It is important to recognise clearly that the success of multiculturalism in Britain, to the extent it was achieved, was linked with its attempt to provide opportunities and freedom, including the freedom to integrate, not from any insistence on state-defined separateness. The current focus on separatism is not a contribution to multicultural freedoms, but just the opposite.

In defending a freedom-based understanding of multiculturalism we have to take full note of the fact that the undermining of that perspective comes not only from those who are explicitly hostile to multiculturalism as a social priority (plentiful though they may be), but also from those who support multiculturalism in the form of singular identities and categorized separation. Appreciating how confused the understanding of

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multiculturalism has become, and how unfortunate the consequences of that confusion can be, should be a good first step in the practice of freedom-based multiculturalism. It used to be said that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. This applies as much to cultural liberty as to any other kind of freedom.

Der Meister Eckhart Preis

Der Meister Eckhart Preis ist benannt nach dem gleichnamigen Prediger, Prior und Professor, der zwischen 1260 und 1328 lebte. Meister Eckhart lehrte vor allem in Erfurt, Köln, Paris und Straßburg. Der Dominikaner Eckhart gilt als der führende Kopf der deutschen Mystik und als prägend für die heutige wissenschaftliche Sprache.

Der mit 50.000 Euro dotierte Preis wird seit 2001 im Turnus von zwei Jahren vergeben. Er wurde von der Identity Foundation ausgelobt, um die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Thema Identität in der meinungsbildenden Öffentlichkeit zu fördern. Geehrt werden Persönlichkeiten, die in ihren Arbeiten existenzielle Fragen der persönlichen, sozialen und interkulturellen Identität aufgreifen und durch ihr Wirken einen breiten öffentlichen und internationalen Diskurs beleben. Bisherige Preisträger sind der amerikanische Philosoph Richard Rorty (2001), der französische Ethnologe Claude Lévi-Strauss (2003) und der deutsche Philosoph Ernst Tugendhat (2005), der als einer der wichtigsten Vertreter der Sprachanalytischen Philosophie in Deutschland gilt.

Über die Identity ≡ Foundation

Die Identity Foundation ist eine gemeinnützige Stiftung zur Wissenschaftsförderung, deren Schwerpunkt auf Forschungen zum Selbstverständnis von Personen, Gruppen und Institutionen liegt. Sie konzentriert sich auf Einzelprojekte in verschiedenen sozialen, gesellschaftlichen und wirtschaftlichen Kontexten, darunter Fachtagungen und Symposien, empirische Untersuchungen und (Forschungs-)Projekte, die Förderung der Medienberichterstattung über grundlegende oder aktuelle Identitätsthemen und die Beteiligung an kunstwissenschaftlichen oder spirituellen Projekten mit besonderen Bezügen zur Frage der Identitätsbildung und -Entwicklung.
Die Stiftung wurde 1998 ins Leben gerufen vom Gründer der Kommunikationsagentur Pleon Kohtes Klewes, Paul J. Kohtes, und seiner Frau Margret.

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