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Identity choice, intercultural learning and inclusive citizenship:

Advocacy by British civil society for ethno-religious accommodation in the workplace

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Abstract

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with the leaders of civil society organisations that represent or advocate for ethno-religious minorities in Britain, this article reconstructs the justifications they put forward for religious freedom and accommodation in the workplace. Findings suggest that, in line with theories of multiculturalism, progressive and pro-diversity political actors view ethno-religious accommodation as a way of promoting individual choice of religious and national identities, intercultural dialogue and learning, and inclusive conceptions of citizenship. In this sense, they conceive demands for accommodation as part of a struggle for respect or recognition, and workplaces as a key site where this struggle unfolds.

Keywords

Ethno-religious accommodation, multiculturalism, deliberation, recognition, national identity, Muslims.

1. Introduction

Whether and why religious practices that conflict with employer policies should be accommodated, either through individual exemptions or a general revision of

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those policies, has been a contentious issue in predominantly Christian but highly secularised Western societies. While some controversies have concerned the demands of observant Christian workers, many have involved claims made by ethno-religious minorities, especially Muslims. Notable examples have included requests to adjust working time to Islamic worship and holidays, cater to Islamic dietary norms, offer prayer spaces, and allow visible expressions of the Muslim faith in dress (e.g. the hijab, jilbab or niqab) and grooming styles (such as long beards).[4] In addition to enabling Islamophobic rhetoric and triggering the creation of high-profile public commissions,[5] these debates have encouraged many public and private employers to develop sweeping bans on religious expression in the workplace, often justified by a language of 'secularism' or 'neutrality.'[6]

In part to counteract their limited representation in political institutions, Muslims have responded by lodging a series of complaints in domestic and international courts, alleging violations of their fundamental rights to religious freedom and protection from discrimination on the grounds of religion.[7] The relative weakness of international legal duties has come to the fore in a series of cases upholding blanket bans on the display of religious symbols such as hijabs and turbans by teachers and students.[8] This being said, the European Court of Human Rights has proved willing to push back against interferences with religious freedom that were not couched in secularist terms. In the 2013 case of *Eweida*,[9] it found that British Airways' temporary refusal to allow the wearing of a visible cross by a Coptic Christian employee violated Article 9 (on religious freedom) and Article 14 (on non-discrimination) of the European Convention on Human Rights. The ruling marked a significant departure from previous judicial expectations that aggrieved employees should simply look for a new job.[10]

These judicial developments have received considerable attention from legal and political theorists, who have reconstructed and critically assessed the

4 K. Alidadi, M. C. Foblets & J. Vrielink (Eds.). (2016*). A test of faith? Religious diversity and accommodation in the European workplace*. Routledge; K. Alidadi (2017). *Religion, equality and employment in Europe: The case for reasonable accommodation*. Hart.

5 S. Lefebvre & P. Brodeur (Eds.). (2017). *Public commissions on cultural and religious diversity: Analysis, reception and challenges*. Routledge.

6 L. Vickers (2014). The relationship between religious diversity and secular models: An equality-based perspective. In M.-C. Foblets, K. Alidadi, J. Nielsen & Z. Yanasmayan (eds). *Belief, law and politics: What future for a secular Europe?* Ashgate, 123-128.

7 K. Alidadi & M. C. Foblets (2012). Framing multicultural challenges in freedom of religion terms: Limitations of minimal human rights for managing religious diversity in Europe. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights, 30*(4), 388-416.

8 P. L. Dupont (2018). Perpetuating anti-Muslim discrimination through the interpretation of religious equality in the European Court of Human Rights. *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 7(1), 27-46.

9 *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom*, App no 48420/10 (ECtHR, 15 January 2013).

10 R. McCrea (2014). Religion in the Workplace: *Eweida and Others v United Kingdom*. *The Modern Law Review*, 77(2), 279.

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arguments put forward by claimants (see section 2 of this paper). Existing academic analyses, though insightful, have paid comparatively little attention to non-legal and extra-institutional discourses in civil society. From an empirical and normative perspective, this comparative neglect is consequential since the arguments put forward by highly specialized and committed activists are often more informed, detailed and transformative than those of generalist courts and policymakers.[11] Therefore, they can reveal experiences and aspirations that are rarely articulated by other stakeholders and are often excluded from the political arena, as well as foreshadowing future developments in human rights litigation.[12] Civil society arguments can also shed indirect light on everyday workplace negotiations, which sometimes involve third-party experts.[13] Although sociological research conducted in Belgium suggests that business concerns often take priority in such negotiations,[14] the way in which these interests are weighed against worker demands depends partly on broader political values and norms, whether or not these surface explicitly.[15]

This article explores how grassroots charities, faith-based umbrella organisations and think tanks supporting ethno-religious communities through tailored service provision and political advocacy justify the need for religious freedom and accommodation in and beyond the workplace. It also examines whether their rationales align with those found in legal and political theory, with a focus on the multiculturalist tradition, broadly defined.[16] Our analysis seeks to enable cross-fertilization between descriptively 'thick' forms of political sociology and more normative political theory, an approach developed within the Bristol School of Multiculturalism that has alternatively been characterised as contextual political theory or normative sociology.[17] In line with this approach,[18] we foreground the bottom-up political agency and claims of organised ethno-religious minorities. Although we bring these claims into dialogue with liberal principles, we refrain from treating specific interpretations of liberalism as a boundary condition for their legitimacy.

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11 P. L. Dupont (2022). Religious governance and the politics of equality in education. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *45*(5), 966-987.

12 C. Nardocci (2026). Accommodating religious minorities before the EU Court of Justice: Any standing for non-governmental organizations and legal entities? *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, *19*(1), 1-17.

13 A. C. Budabin & Z. Safir (2026). Religious assertion from below: Religious actors representing new religious minorities in workplace accommodation, *International Journal for Religious Freedom, 19*(1), 95-113.

14 I. Adam & A. Rea (2018). The three "i" s of workplace accommodation of Muslim religious practices: Instrumental, internal, and informal. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *41*(15), 2711-2730.

15 Alidadi, *Religion, equality and employment in Europe*, 233.

16 Geoffrey B. Levey (2025). *Research handbook on multiculturalism.* Edward Elgar.

17 T. Modood & S. Thompson (2018). Revisiting contextualism in political theory: Putting principles into context. *Res Publica*, *24*, 339-357; T. Modood (2022). Bristol School of Multiculturalism as normative sociology. *Civic Sociology* 3(1), 57379.

18 G. Brahm Levey (2019). The Bristol School of Multiculturalism. *Ethnicities*, *19*(1), 205.

The empirical context is the contemporary United Kingdom, a society that has been identified alongside Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and Finland as comparatively hospitable to multicultural policies for minorities formed through immigration (including Muslim minorities).[19] Assuming a general correlation between public policies and socio-political values in democratic states, such a context appears favourable to the unearthing of complex diversity narratives which may be difficult to find in societies where ethno-religious assimilation is more strictly enforced, such as Austria, Italy, France, Denmark, Switzerland and the Netherlands.[20] Since British Muslims, who make up 6 percent of the population and overwhelmingly identify as non-white,[21] have nevertheless grappled with similar forms of racialised Islamophobia to their counterparts in other soci-eties,[22] our findings arguably hold broader relevance for the comparative politics of ethno-religious accommodation in the workplace.

The article proceeds in four main steps. Section 2 briefly reviews how the case for religious accommodation has been developed in multiculturalist theory. Section 3 explains how the views of civil society actors presented in this article were gathered and analysed. Sections 4 to 6 reconstruct civil society rationales for religious accommodation, paying specific attention to its manifestations and implications in the workplace. The conclusion highlights areas of convergence, as well as some differences, between academic and civil society arguments.

2. Theoretical perspectives on religious accommodation

Previous research examining UK civil society discourses around the governance of ethno-religious diversity has shown that despite the Europe-wide rejection of the term 'multiculturalism' in the early 2000s,[23] the ideas around cultural recognition, accommodation and inclusion that developed within multiculturalist theory continue to animate grassroots politics.[24] These ideas are often qualified, rather than displaced, by a concern to foster everyday contact between racial, ethnic and religious groups, most fully theorised by

19 Multiculturalism Policy Index. Available at: http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/.
20 Ibid.
21 M. Asaria, M. Asaria, S. Shafi, J. Sherif, F. Sunderji, & Z. Uddin (2024). *British Muslims: Striving for fairness*. Muslim Council of Britain, 8. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mwd46h76.
22 T. Modood (2005). *Multicultural politics: Racism, ethnicity and Muslims in Britain.* Edinburgh University Press; T. Modood, A. Triandafyllidou, & R. Zapata-Barrero (2006). *Multiculturalism, Muslims and citizenship*. Routledge; N. Meer (2010). *Citizenship, identity and the politics of multiculturalism: The rise of Muslim consciousness*. Palgrave Macmillan; K. Elshayyal (2019). *Muslim identity politics: Islam, activism and equality in Britain*. I. B. Tauris.
23 S. Vertovec & S. Wessendorf (2010). *The multiculturalism backlash: European discourses, policies and practices*. Routledge.
24 P. L. Dupont, T. Sealy, & T. Modood (2023). The relation between multiculturalism, interculturalism and cosmopolitanism in UK diversity politics. *Identities*, *30*(6), 785-804; T. Sealy, P. L. Dupont, & T. Modood (2025). Difference and diversity: Combining multiculturalist and interculturalist approaches to integration. *The Sociological Review*, *73*(1), 104-122.

'interculturalist' critics of multiculturalism.[25] While organisations vary with regard to the respective emphasis they place on multicultural recognition and intercultural contact, contemporary diversity politics is best described as simultaneously shaped by multiculturalism and interculturalism, as well as related normative paradigms such as anti-racism and cosmopolitanism. Since the accommodation of minority religious practices in and beyond the work-place, a specific but important aspect of religious governance, has primarily been discussed by multiculturalist thinkers, this overview of the literature will focus on multiculturalist work.

Broadly speaking, legal and political theorists of multiculturalism have put forward four distinct reasons for conceiving accommodation as a fundamental principle of justice: psychological integrity; equal political participation; cultural dialogue and enrichment; and recognition and belonging. Whereas the first two reasons are endorsed by nearly all theorists, the latter two play a more peripheral role in the pro-diversity literature, in the sense that they are articulated by fewer theorists and may not be relevant for all practices or in all workplaces. Since these secondary or contingent reasons generally build on the primary, more widely applicable ones, this brief literature review will start by setting out the core reasons and use them as a basis on which to scaffold the secondary ones.

The fundamental empirical and normative insight underlying defences of religious accommodation is that religious practices frequently express deep, meaningful or existential commitments, and that prohibiting or disrupting them would compromise believers' psychological integrity. In some cases, living out these commitments (including at work) is perceived as a moral obligation, and renouncing them would amount to acting against the believer's convictions or conscience. Even when this sense of moral duty is absent, religious workers may view the practice as required by a community that allows them to pursue significant purposes, and they may wish to maintain the practice in order to retain their position as respected members of this community. While the perceived importance, morality and social implications of specific practices inevitably evolve over time, adapting to this evolution while maintaining existential meaning, self-coherence and self-esteem normally requires adherents to develop authentic narratives that can help them to make sense of the change. Since this is almost impossible to do when the change is externally imposed and rapid, workers can perceive organisational requirements interfering with their

25 T. Cantle (2012). *Interculturalism: The new era of cohesion and diversity*. Palgrave Macmillan; R. Zapata-Barrero (2016). Theorizing intercultural citizenship. In N. Meer, T. Modood and R. Zapata-Barrero (eds) *Multiculturalism and interculturalism: Debating the dividing lines.* Edinburgh University Press, 53-76.

religious practices as unacceptable and certain employment opportunities as therefore out of their reach.[26]

In democratic societies and organisations attuned to the wellbeing and preferences of citizens and workers, strong commitments, convictions and social norms are normally taken into account during policymaking and are therefore unlikely to be compromised by general rules and practices. However, this pattern does not necessarily hold for ethno-religious minorities, whose commitments are regularly overlooked by policymakers due to ignorance, incomprehension, indifference or hostility. Seen in this light, the obligation to heed and accommodate ethno-religious practices appears as a way to empower oppressed minorities, ensure that their interests are adequately weighed when formulating and implementing laws and policies, and allow them to act as equal citizens. In some cases, this can be achieved by devising a new general policy that will be acceptable to all interested parties. In other cases, divergences in commitments may be such that workers' wellbeing and democratic equality can be achieved only by applying different rules (for example, around working times or dress codes) to different religious groups.[27]

Enhancing the deliberative processes that precede the adoption of organisational policies can not only allow the peaceful co-existence of diverging commitments but can also transform these commitments and reduce the conflicts between them over time. As indicated above, subjectively important beliefs and practices typically evolve, and the exchange of views on both religious and secular commitments can lead parties to incrementally revise their own values and behaviour, provided that the dialogue is respectful and genuine. In this sense, religious accommodation and associated deliberations provide an opportunity for all groups to explore different perspectives and ways of life, obtain fresh insights into the strengths and limitations of their own group, and sometimes

26 A. Robinson (2007). *Multiculturalism and the foundations of meaningful life: Reconciling autonomy, identity and community.* UBC Press, 56-63; A. Eisenberg (2009). *Reasons of identity: A normative guide to the political and legal assessment of identity claims.* Oxford University Press, 91-117; L. Beaman (2011). Assessing religious identity in law: Sincerity, accommodation, and harm. In A. Eisenberg and W. Kymlicka (eds), *Identity politics in the public realm: Bringing institutions back in.* UBC Press, 238-259; J. Maclure (2011). Reasonable accommodations and the subjective conception of freedom of conscience and religion. In A. Eisenberg and W. Kymlicka (eds), *Identity politics in the public realm: Bringing institutions back in.* UBC Press, 260-280; P. Jones (2015). Liberty, equality and accommodation. In V. Uberoi and T. Modood (eds), *Multiculturalism rethought: Interpretations, dilemmas and new directions.* Edinburgh University Press, 126-156; C. Laborde (2017), *Liberalism's religion*. Harvard University Press, 197-217; J. Waldron (2002). One law for all? The logic of cultural accommodation. *Washington and Lee Law Review*, *59*(1), 3-34.

27 C. Eisgruber & L. Sager (1994). The vulnerability of conscience: The constitutional basis for protecting religious conduct. *University of Chicago Law Review*, *60*, 1245-1315; A. Shorten (2010). Cultural exemptions, equality and basic interests. *Ethnicities*, *10*(1), 100-126; J. Jacob Levy (2010). Multicultural manners. In M. Seymour (ed), *The plural states of recognition.* Palgrave, 61-77; P. T. Lenard (2025). Deliberative and contextual approaches to multiculturalism. In G. B. Levey (ed). *Research Handbook on Multiculturalism.* Edward Elgar, 138-145.

adopt new practices. In the ideal scenario, the results enrich both majority and minority cultures, broaden the opportunities available to their members, build empathy, cooperation and solidarity between religious and non-religious groups, and reduce polarisation. When deliberations are conducted in an inclusive way, such ongoing cultural critique and dynamism can be especially beneficial for 'minorities within minorities,' or people subjected to multiple and intersectional discrimination.[28]

Finally, the intercultural learning facilitated by ethno-religious minorities' active participation in public debates, as well as their visible presence in public spaces and positions of authority, can increase their social status, reduce perceptions that they pose a cultural or material threat, and make national and other collective identities more ethno-religiously inclusive. While detailed cultural discourses, close interpersonal relationships and deep self-disclosure are especially effective in this regard, the mere display of recognisable religious symbols (such as the hijab) in the performance of everyday labour can be enough to transform collective prototypes and create shared belonging. Since being seen as and feeling that one is part of a community promote participation in that community, the accommodation and recognition of ethno-religious minorities can be a self-sustaining process that gradually erodes religious prejudices and the broader connection between religious identities and inequality.[29]

3. Methodology

The views on religious accommodation presented in this article were collected through semi-structured interviews with senior representatives of civil society organisations representing religious minorities or otherwise active in the field of race equality and diversity in Britain. A list and brief description of the organisations are provided in Table 1. All organisations supported religious minorities' economic participation directly or indirectly, not only through campaigning and political advocacy but also by producing rigorous research on the topic (British Future, Runnymede Trust, Race Equality Foundation); mentoring minority work-

28 B. Parekh (2000). *Rethinking multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory*. Macmillan, 264-294; A. S. Laden (2007). Negotiation, deliberation, and the claims of politics. In A. S. Laden and D. Owen (eds), *Multiculturalism and political theory.* Cambridge University Press, 198-218; M. Malik (2014). Religious freedom and accommodation in the United Kingdom. In M.-C. Foblets, K. Alidadi, J. Nielsen and Z. Yanasmayan (eds), *Belief, law and politics: What future for a secular Europe?* Ashgate, 89-90; M. Deveaux (2006). *Gender and justice in multicultural liberal states*. Oxford University Press, 89-126; S. Song (2007). *Justice, gender, and the politics of multiculturalism*. Cambridge University Press, 41-84; A. Shachar (2004). *Multicultural jurisdictions: Cultural differences and women's rights.* Cambridge University Press, 117-145.

29 E. A. Galeotti (2002). *Toleration as recognition*. Cambridge, 115-136; M. Tariq (2007), *Multiculturalism: A civic idea*. Polity; Cécile Laborde (2008). *Critical republicanism: The hijab controversy and political philosophy.* Oxford University Press; P. L. Dupont (2016). Human rights and substantive equality in the adjudication of ethnic practices. *Nordic Journal of Human Rights*, *34*(4), 289-313; T. Modood & T. Sealy (2024). *The new governance of religious diversity.* Polity, 99-121.

ers in key employment sectors such as journalism, culture, education and charities (Black South West Network, Muslim Engagement and Development); supporting victims of discrimination (Stand against Racism and Inequality); offering diversity training in the public and private sectors (Nilaari, Brent Multi Faith Forum); or advising the unemployed (Somali Advice and Forum of Information).

The sample was designed to capture the accommodation rationales of progressive and pro-diversity elites, as opposed to all elite views. This targeted approach primarily derives from our aim of exploring the social embeddedness of arguments developed in the political theory of cultural diversity, and the contextual ways in which they are articulated. Sampling civil society elites rather than the broader citizenry allows us to uncover comparatively detailed and systematic rationales that are informed by sustained reflection, collaboration with minority workers and participation in political debates. In this sense, the sample maximises the methodological strengths of semi-structured interviews as opposed to less targeted forms of data collection, such as the retrieval of written policy statements. Given the predominance of majority perspectives in political and media discourses, focusing on minority narratives can also shed light on frequently overlooked normative paradigms and therefore expand our understanding of contemporary political ideas. Since the dominant perspectives themselves are largely and intentionally omitted from our sample, the analysis should not be interpreted as reflecting the whole landscape of accommodation politics in Britain.

Interviews were conducted on Zoom between May and September 2021, and each one lasted approximately one hour. The questions were designed to gauge respondents' positions on four pro-diversity paradigms broadly distilled from political and social theory, namely multiculturalism, interculturalism, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, without naming the paradigms themselves. Only the questions related to the first two paradigms, reproduced in Table 2, directly tap into views on religious accommodation and are discussed here. Many of the questions referred to culture and ethnicity rather than religion, and only one question directly mentioned the workplace. Yet given the frequent intertwining of racial, ethnic and religious identities, as well as the religious (and specifically Muslim) character of several organisations in the sample, respondents often mentioned religion spontaneously. Likewise, employment was a recurring theme in respondents' narratives. To maintain the natural flow of the conversation, both the phrasing and the order of the questions varied across interviews. Follow-up questions were also asked when appropriate to clarify responses or probe specific views more deeply.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. As a first stage, views were coded against the four paradigms and synthesised in an internal report for the research team. Second, multiculturalist and intercultural-

ist views within the report were re-coded against theoretical rationales for religious accommodation, and references to the workplace were specifically singled out. The most developed and salient views were then used to reconstruct civil

Table 1. Civil society leaders interviewed*

Organisation	Self-description	Location	Interviewee	Role
Black South West Network	Black-led racial justice charity	Bristol	Sado Jirde	Director
Brent Multi Faith Forum	Organisation advocating for 21 faith communities in the London Borough of Brent	London	Frank Dabba Smith	Member and former chair
Bristol Muslim Cultural Society	Charity advising public bodies on issues affecting Muslim communities in Bristol	Bristol	Ismaeel Akram	Director of Operations
British Future	Think tank specialising in public attitudes toward immigration, integration, race and identity	National	Sunder Katwala	Director
Muslim Council of Britain	Umbrella body for British Muslim organisations including mosques, schools, charitable associations and professional networks	National	Zara Mohammed	Secretary General
Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)	Charity supporting Muslim involvement in British media and politics	National	Anonymised	Anonymised
Nilaari	Minority-led charity delivering social care support, talk therapies and training to adults and young people in Bristol	Bristol	Shelagh Hetreed	Training Coordinator and Business Officer
Race Equality Foundation	Charity promoting race equality in social support and public services	National	Jabeer Butt	Chief Executive
Runnymede Trust	Race equality think tank	National	Halima Begum	Chief Executive
Somali Advice and Forum of Information	Community-based organisation founded in Brent and led by British-Somali mothers	London	Rhoda Ibrahim	Chief Executive Officer
Stand against Racism and Inequality	Community-oriented agency providing support to victims of hate	Bristol	Alex Raikes	Director
St Paul's Carnival	Charity bringing African Caribbean history and the heritage of Carnival to communities	Bristol	LaToyah McAllister Jones	Executive Director

* Adapted from P. L. Dupont, T. Sealy, & T. Modood (2023). The relation between multiculturalism, interculturalism and cosmopolitanism in UK diversity politics. *Identities, 30*(6), 785-804.

Table 2. Interview guide
Do you think people can/should have hyphenated or multiple identities, such as British-Muslim, British-Asian, or Black British, or should everyone just be British? Why or why not?
Do you use race, ethnicity or religion to identify those you work for and, if so, why? If not, why not?
Do you think governments should target some policies to specific ethnic, religious or racial groups? Would this be a form of equal or unequal treatment? Can you provide some good or bad examples?
Should laws and policies actively help people retain their identities and cultures? What are the advantages and risks of doing this? What can it look like in practice?
Should people be protected from having their cultural identities disparaged in the public sphere? If so, how? What (if anything) should the state do to promote positive discourses on minority cultures?
Do you think cultural diversity is an advantage or a problem and a source of conflict? Can you give me some arguments and examples?
Is there enough contact between people from different national and cultural backgrounds in the public space, such as in parks, streets or markets?
Do you think people from different national or cultural backgrounds are sufficiently present/visible in public sector jobs? If not, is it a problem?
In managing diversity, do you think policies should focus on differences between people or on what is common and shared?
Can you think of policies promoting contact between people from different national and cultural backgrounds? Can you give me two examples of good practice in this sphere?

society discourses evoking each theoretical rationale. Like our approach to sampling, this analytical method is especially suitable for unpacking the normative assumptions underlying political claims, some of which are often left implicit and best identified through inter-discursive interpretation. However, it does come at the cost of backgrounding individual organisational perspectives and potentially obscuring areas of disagreement. Because data collection and analysis were guided by multiculturalist and interculturalist concepts, the findings may also overplay the centrality of these ideas in organisations' concerns and claims.

4. Psychological integrity: Protecting ethno-religious identification

Like theorists of multiculturalism, the civil society leaders interviewed generally concur that people should be free to choose, maintain and cultivate ethno-religious identities. British Future asserts that 'the strength of someone's faith identity or heritage from their parents should be up to them,' and Bristol Multi Faith Forum considers that migrants and minorities should have the right to preserve their culture if they wish. Others specify that people should also be able to express their identities openly. According to Stand Against Racism and Inequality, 'The more we can explain our identity and be able to be out and proud about it, the better. … You want to be able to take your whole person to work, to different parts of your life and feel safe about that.' The Muslim Council of Britain points out that 'Islam isn't a religion that you keep in a cupboard, it's literally one that you live just from wearing the headscarf.'

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Respondents expressed wide agreement that religious and national identifications need not be mutually exclusive, and that many people want to retain and express their religious identities while participating in national life. Hence, MEND strongly rejects the either/or choice between being Muslim and British: 'British Muslims want to be British Muslims. They want to be British and they want to practice their faith and there is no conflict between the two.' The organisation's representative illustrates this with their own volunteers, who are 'wholly participating in British society, wanting to get involved in politics, wanting to get involved in media – many of our volunteers are highly professional'. British Future notes that hyphenated citizenship identities have been quite common in Britain, particularly for minorities whose faith is prominent. The Muslim Council of Britain ratifies this state of affairs:

> Many of us [Pakistanis], we feel really British. It depends how cultural you are in your upbringing and stuff. For me this is home, this is where I am building a life and that's why those multiple identities are really important, because a British Pakistani is very different from a Pakistani Pakistani. We're really different in our thinking, ideas and vision.

Nevertheless, respondents consider that the relative importance of each identity in a person's life should also ultimately be an individual choice. Bristol Muslim Cultural Society notes that 'some people are more than happy to be classed as British Muslim whereas others just want to be classed as British,' and Brent Multi Faith Forum, with a hint of irony, takes the view that people should be free to closely affiliate with their 'own community' or to join into 'some mythical British [community] whatever that is.' More generally, St Paul's Carnival and Runnymede Trust note that everyone's identity is multi-layered, and several respondents (Runnymede Trust, MEND, Race Equality Foundation and Muslim Council of Britain) emphasise that different aspects of identity surface in different contexts. As the Muslim Council of Britain representative puts it:

> I went to do the Hajj pilgrimage and found that you are so British when you are in a foreign place! We queue, we like organisation, and I've worked in an international team and I like an agenda. And then my Scottishness comes out when the football's on, and my cultural identity when it comes to food and weddings and traditions.

According to Black South West Network, ethnic identities often take on special significance when a person is racialised and marginalised, so that the notion of

identifying exclusively as British is a 'quite idealistic' one that would probably come from a white British person.

Referring specifically to the workplace, respondents underscore that expressing religious identities often makes people vulnerable to exclusion. MEND claims that Muslim women face a triple gender, ethnic and religious employment penalty, and Runnymede Trust observes that those who wear a hijab do not seem to attain desired jobs or to progress in their careers at the same rate as their white counterparts. To counter these patterns, St Paul's Carnival insists that employers, especially in the public sector, should raise awareness of inequality and be more inclusive of minorities, for example in how they accommodate religious dress, holidays and diets. MEND explains how it engages with local stakeholders such as police forces, councils and schools, pointing out that councils could generate greater inclusion through simple gestures:

> There are really simple things that we have been doing across society with such ease – for example, big companies, or even councils or political functions, whenever there is an event, not always having it in a pub, not always having alcohol. That is something that would make these environments a lot more inclusive for Muslims. When you have a conference, having tea and coffee instead of a bar. … Just making sure that in everything that we do we are being as inclusive as possible. That can be something for all faiths, for example Jewish communities having prayer spaces or not holding important events on Friday for the Jewish community.

Several respondents (Somali Advice and Forum of Information, Stand against Racism and Inequality, and Nilaari) explicitly endorse the adoption of laws and policies supporting or requiring such initiatives and therefore preventing forced assimilation. As Nilaari puts it:

> If you become citizens you're supposed to integrate but then you should have your identity protected, so that might be the way you dress, if you want to wear a niqab it should be okay, and of course it is okay, except actually it isn't unless you're in Easton [a diverse area within the city of Bristol] where you're used to seeing them.

5. Cultural dialogue and enrichment: Learning from ethno-religious difference

Civil society leaders do not view religious accommodation merely as a way for different groups to peacefully co-exist but also as a vehicle for intergroup dia-

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logue, learning and transformation. Hence, Nilaari claims that people want to be 'valued, respected and listened to' and St Paul's Carnival insists that the role of schools and education is to build beyond tolerance:

> Tolerant is the least thing that you can be. … If I am tolerant of you, I would say that I don't like you very much and I just have to deal with you being in my environment. So the role of the education system is to build … respect and empathy for the multiple people that live within communities.

Respondents describe minorities' participation in public life, and the learning it enables, as a source of cultural dynamism and enrichment. Brent Multi Faith Forum sees difference as reflecting the 'absolute richness, strangeness and mystery of all creation' and explains how it can be celebrated in and through workplaces:

> My engagement with the police very much involved training officers, especially young officers, in the different faiths. I worked with an imam, so here was a rabbi and an imam; we would take turns, whether it was in the synagogue or in the mosque, and we would spend the morning with the officers. [We would discuss] the principles of our faiths and also the fact that they could ask any question that they wanted, no matter how awkward, and we could be really open. The whole idea was about making relationships between people rather than dispensing facts and recipes. Then we would serve a wonderful lunch, [which might be] bagels, smoked salmon and cream cheese, or it would be curries. By the time we were finished with this programme, the vast majority of the officers did not want to go back to work; they wanted to stay. So, it was about making relationships and when we did introductions, the officers would discuss their own sorts of backgrounds. We did that a number of times and worked with hundreds of officers. We also did faith fairs at the Wembley police station, which is a huge station. We set up booths for all these different groups. Food was a part of it and giving away various samples of things, and the officers absolutely loved it.

Bristol Muslim Cultural Society points out that 'if we are all classed [only] as British, it may not allow us to explore those different values and experiences.' For the Runnymede Trust, a public space should be created to value minority religions 'because otherwise, they are being practised in the domestic, private space

where they cannot be shared with anybody.' To enable this, public space should be constantly renegotiated and evolving rather than static:

> There is an implicit assumption that the cultural terrain is neutral already, when it's not because no public space or country or institution is void of any culture or history. There is already culture and history [baked in] institutions and processes. So when there is a suggestion that, you know, could we make some space and room for other aspects of Britain or France's fantastic culture – that's evolving as we speak … countries evolve as we speak. If there is then an adverse nervous reaction to that, we're essentially saying that we want to be reactionary to any change that should be a normal part of social process.

The Muslim Council of Britain sees workplaces as ideal sites to tackle disparaging discourses toward minorities, as they bring together people with different views, cultures and identities:

> The willingness and the openness to want to understand, not everybody is going to want to understand different religions and different cultures, some people are just not … they just want to go to work, live their life whatever it is. So there has to be a willingness and an openness to not see difference as a threat, and to want to engage and to learn. I think at the workplace is probably the best place to start, you know, where you've got people that are different in views, never mind in just culture and identities. So creating spaces that really support and champion learning and all that kind of stuff, I think, is really positive.

Along similar lines, Runnymede Trust observes, 'If you look at middle class socio-economic dynamics, there's a lot of contact there in the professional workplace, around black lawyers, white lawyers or black accountants, white accountants.'

Respondents still identified a number of obstacles to interaction and learning in the workplace and beyond. Demographically, British Future highlights that the elderly tend to be less exposed to intergroup contact than the young. Geographically, mixing may be more common in urban environments, but St Paul's Carnival points to a Runnymede Trust report[30] describing its home city of Bristol as

30 Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity/Runnymede Trust (2017), Bristol: A city divided? Ethnic minority disadvantage in education and employment. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/43e4dv8f.

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one of the most segregated in the country. Stand against Racism and Inequality concurs, noting that many nationalities and cultures can be found in the shops and streets of Bristol's multi-ethnic areas, but in its two biggest shopping centres as well as most restaurants, staff members are overwhelmingly white.

6. Recognition and belonging: Developing a multi-faith British identity

As explained above, religious minority representatives and advocates emphasise the possibility and importance of hybrid ethno-religious and national identities. However, they also deplore that dominant conceptions of Britishness often deny and impede such complex, multiple identifications. As MEND puts it, 'The frustration is trying to be Muslim, but being told they can't be too Muslim. The fact that parents are struggling to get prayer space in schools for their children … . There is an active repression of Muslim identities, assuming that it is not compatible with being British.'

Bristol Muslim Cultural Society observes that having multiple identities may prevent people from doing certain things, as certain identities have negative connotations. Being seen as British may be advantageous to progress in jobs and careers, yet 'if we don't accept who we are as individuals, then really we are just feeding into the systemic racism problem.' The representative from St Paul's Carnival complains that the call for everyone, including migrants and those of different ethnicities, to identify as British comes with an implicit requirement to 'set down your heritage':

> At the moment, identity is at the forefront of how politics is done in the UK; you're either with us or against us. And for those who are British and something else, there is no space to be something else because the push is 'this is our space and you need to be like us.' Even if you put on the clothes of being thoroughly British, you will never fit in, because it's not a part of how you grew up and also the country doesn't accept people like that.

The Muslim Council of Britain notes how Muslims have had their Britishness and their British values called into question, 'so I think it kind of gets to a point where you're born in this country, your parents are born in this country, you've … what is it that's going to make me, how do I get in, you know, is the passport not enough? Recently with the football team, we've seen that if you're winning, you're great; if you're not winning, you're an immigrant.' According to this respondent, the problem is not new and has historically been faced by other religious minorities, such as Jews:

> If you were a postwar Jewish immigrant or Eastern European migrant, you probably felt a level of tension between your faith and your desire to be British. However, that has been resolved. Other groups arrived with plural identities that included the British identity. This is particularly true of the Windrush generation [who came to Britain from the Caribbean after World War II] that grew up with a real sense of being British and was disoriented when they arrived in a society that didn't have the same account of national identity. They thought they were already an in-group but were seen as an out-group.

To address these issues, according to British Future, the state should cultivate citizenship and national identities but should work hard at preventing them from being a barrier due to people's faith or national origins. In other words, it should invest in civic and inclusive versions of citizenship identities, with the aim that migrants' children should have as much ownership over the national identity as they choose to. In addition, the national identity should allow mixed-race people to identify with any part of their heritage, without that becoming a deficit in their British identity.

British Future suggests that there might be 'useful soft ways' of eliminating the assumption that one isn't really British unless one is in the majority group, and other respondents single out employment as a key area through which national identity could be pluralised. Hence, Runnymede Trust mentions Singapore as a country that has made space in the calendar of national holidays for different religions:

> I think we could do that in the UK, but we don't. So, for example, when you want to take a day off for Eid, it has to be your day off; it's not actually public holiday, right? We haven't made room for other people's religions and cultures. It falls on the individual to create that space within the national holidays for their celebrations.

Similarly, MEND indicates that employers and other national stakeholders could become more involved with Islamophobia Awareness Month as a way of pluralising national identity:

> There are very simple things that we can be doing to promote inclusion. One of the big things that MEND does is Islamophobia Awareness Month, which is a campaign that runs throughout November. The idea is that police forces, schools, councils, universities, political representatives, and basically all national stakeholders spend the month dedicated

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> to highlighting and raising awareness about Islamophobia in the UK and highlighting the contributions of Muslim communities in the UK. So getting involved with those campaigns and with Black History Month – all these things can contribute to creating a more inclusive society.

7. Conclusion

The civil society discourses analysed in this article demonstrate that justifying the accommodation of minority religious practices in workplaces is not an exclusively legal or academic concern but also an important area of advocacy in the British context. The discourses also reveal considerable alignment between the rationales for accommodation developed in multiculturalist theory and those endorsed by progressive and pro-diversity civil society leaders. Intriguingly, the contribution of ethno-religious accommodation to the mitigation of power inequalities and the promotion of democratic deliberation is discussed less often and systematically than are issues of identity choice and psychological integrity, cultural dialogue and enrichment, and recognition and belonging. While this comparative neglect may be partly an artifact of our interview guide, it could also reflect the protracted decline of British trade unions and the participatory values they embody and promote.

Delving into individual rationales sheds light on the potential strengths, shortcomings and appeal of various theoretical arguments. For example, civil society leaders insist on the meaningfulness of religious and national identities in many people's lives, but they equally emphasise the need for these identities to be freely chosen and expressed in context. In this way, they integrate both the multiculturalist insight that identities are frequently valued or cherished by their bearers and the interculturalist critique that policies should not confine people to externally ascribed groups.

One reason why minorities sometimes wish to express their religious identities, either at work or in the broader public space, is to be noticed and respected. Respondents in this study insist that Muslims often feel strongly British despite suffering discrimination and exclusion, and that they wish to make British identity more inclusive by participating in economic life (and other areas). Insofar as national policies such as official holidays and Islamophobia Awareness Month shape employer practices, leaders perceive a dialectical relationship between occupational and national identities. This view chimes with the argument, most developed within the Bristol School of Multiculturalism, that recognition is an ongoing struggle waged from the bottom up rather than a policy endpoint,[31] and

31 G. Brahm Levey (2018). The Bristol School of Multiculturalism. *Ethnicities*, 19(1), 204-207.

it suggests that demanding ethno-religious accommodation in the workplace constitutes an integral part of this struggle.

Civil society leaders also indicate that the struggle for recognition can be achieved only through dynamic and creative, rather than reactionary and defensive, forms of cultural transmission, as multiculturalists have continuously acknowledged and re-emphasised in response to interculturalist critiques.[32] Leaders insist that dominant cultures can be enriched through dialogue with ethno-religious minorities and that workplaces offer important opportunities for learning, whether in the context of targeted diversity-related events or informal interaction among diverse workers. Opportunities for such learning nevertheless vary by class, geography and age, suggesting a need to pay greater attention (in both theory and practice) to the dynamics of ethno-religious accommodation in specific industries, occupations and localities, as well as beyond the workplace itself.

32 T. Modood (2017). Must interculturalists misrepresent multiculturalism? *Comparative Migration Studies*, *5*(1), 15.

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