To what extent is there tension between liberalism and multiculturalism?

Liberalism champions the individual as sovereign (JS Mill) whereas multiculturalism places the community/culture first. It would appear from that there is always going to be tension between the two ideologies. However despite their different starting points for political philosophy, “liberal multiculturalism” has been able to emerge based on the ideas of equality, justice and pluralism. However these only accommodate for shallow diversity (subjective entities such as food and clothes) and on deep issues such as religion and “intolerant” practices, the two see large amounts of tension. The tension centres on the rights of the individual and the community and moral monism against moral relativism. Pluralist multiculturalism shall be used throughout as a form of “pure” multiculturalism. This is where no value judgement is made by anyone or any group about anyone or any group, therefore allowing communities to live and act as they would if they were in their place or origin. This theory of multiculturalism is most heavily put forward by Bhikhu Parekh in his book “Rethinking Multiculturalism”. To show the large degree of deep tension between liberalism and multiculturalism, the battle between individual and community, equality and justice as harmony and tension, moral monism and relativism, the role of supra-nationalism, constitutionalism and the breadth if the ideologies shall be looked at.

Liberalism as an ideology focuses on the individual and their rights, whereas multiculturalism places emphasis on community and their values. Multiculturalism is based on communitarianism which is a rejection of individualism with a willing transferral of sovereignty from the individual to the community. This is the core point of tension between the two ideologies. Liberalism sees identity through the individual; therefore rights are given to the sovereign individual. Multiculturalism is a community based philosophy so identity if formed through being part of a coherent cultural group. This instantly makes the liberal belief in negative freedom (the core for all beliefs of all liberals) incompatible as it relates to individuals being free to act as they wish as long as they don’t harm others freedoms. It is not possible to transfer the same theory to communities in a liberal society as a community may act with “negative freedom” towards other groups but may perform actions which go against the personal liberty of individuals within their own or other group. Communitarian thinkers (such as MacIntyre and Sandel) attack liberals on the grounds that they advocate atomism and not community identity or rights. Liberals (such as JS Mill) attack multiculturalists on the opposite grounds that they do not protect the individual. Multiculturalists believe that culture shapes peoples values, traditions and view on life and it is this by which individual identity is formed. This gives people pride in their culture meaning that champion it above themselves. Liberals simply see life as individuals who are sovereign through their own free will and do not account for the role outside influence plays in creating who the individuals are further than the idea that power corrupts. This is a key dividing line between liberalism and multiculturalism as where sovereignty lies is disputed.

The debate over individual and community reaches a pinnacle over the issue of tolerance. Liberals champion the individual as sovereign and all have negative freedom so another individual or community cannot infringe on that without the state stepping in. Multiculturalists, as communitarian, take the view that as the community is sovereign the individual does not have the same personal liberty so actions which liberals would see as against personal freedoms are often acceptable if they are culturally acceptable for the group who perform them. This brought up the issue in the UK of female circumcision. The Somali population in London who practiced it said it was
part of their culture and should be respected but it was banned by law as it was illiberal. Liberals are "tolerant" but this tolerance ends at the point of the actions being intolerant of other individuals. Some cultures perfect actions which liberals would see (due to cultural and moral monism) to be illiberal and therefore they cannot be adhered to in a liberal society. This prevents cultures from acting how they would "at home" so multiculturalism is a pluralist sense is not adhered to. There is agreement between the liberalism and multiculturalism to be tolerant but this breaks down as liberals do not believe that you can be tolerant of the intolerant.

Equality appears to be a point of agreement between liberalism and multiculturalism due to there being no discrimination over creed, colour or sexual orientation. However equality can often be taken "too far" in the eyes of liberals through Will Kymlicka’s theory on “minority rights”. He identified three types of minority right, each of which has been attacked by liberal thinkers (indirectly). The first is self-governing rights to the people of a nation who have been oppressed. They deserve extended power over their historical land which was taken away from them. This often takes the form of devolution (such as with the Basque people in Northern Spain). The work of liberal thinker such as Locke who advocated imperialism as a way of bringing people to the “good life” has been used against this first minority right. If the right is for something which itself had a liberal justification then there is no need for an extra right to compensate for it. The second minority right is polyethnic rights which are awarded to immigrant cultures and allows them to maintain cultural distinctiveness. This often means exemption from current laws, for example Sikh men are allowed to carry a ceremonial dagger which goes against the possession of a knife law in the UK. It is an exemplary right given to particular culture. It means nothing to another culture to be able to have possession of this dagger so is allowed. This allows each culture to define its own “good life”. This has been attacked by liberals because it does not allow for societal integration; therefore it will lead to ghettoization and social chaos. Also these polyethnic rights often allow for practices which are illiberal and intolerant in liberal eyes so cannot be justified to the, whereas to a multiculturalist they are vital to allow cultural and moral relativism and allowing communities to form their own “good life”. The final minority right identified by Kymlicka is representation rights. These are specific to liberal democracies as they address the problems of underrepresentation in parliament and other assemblies. Kymlicka argues for positive discrimination to bring the level of representation of minorities up to where it statistically should be. For example in the UK Westminster Parliament, 2% are ethnic minorities, compared to 11% in the UK as a whole. This positive discrimination has been heavily attacked by liberals who say that it goes against the key tenant of meritocracy by giving some people (minorities) an advantage in what ideologically should be a level playing field. A general criticism of all minority rights by liberals is that it is unfair and against the liberal principle of equality to give some people more rights than others. Multiculturalists say that there is no equality if they are not granted these minority rights. The basic belief in equality if an area of agreement between liberals and multiculturalists, however the differing degrees to how far this equality goes (meaning minority rights) is an area of tension. Liberals believe that they are not equal or fair as some people are given an advantage whereas liber and pluralist multiculturalists believe that minorities have faced oppress historically and under current laws and disadvantage in representation (due to constitutionalism) is not equal or fair and these minority rights grant it to them. Equality and fairness is an area where on the surface there is agreement but not when looked into in more detail and what each group is asking for.
Tensions immerge between liberalism and multiculturalism on the issue of monism and moral relativism. Monism is the belief that there is only one way to achieve the “good life”. It has been advocated by Greek philosophers, such as Plato who believed in the power of knowledge and reason above all else. In Liberalism it is seen clearly through the works of Locke and JS Mill. Locke believed that a society could only be coherent if it had a clearly defined territorial boundary, a cohesive centralised and unified structure of authority “entitled in peace and war to speak and act in the name of the community”. This can be taken to mean that a “rational” society is not governed by traditions and customs but by “positive laws”. This means negative freedom which is the right to do as you like up to the point of infringing on someone else’s freedoms. Locke took this monism and used it to justify English colonialism of American Indians. He stated that because they roamed the land and did not have a coherent political structure they needed to be colonised to the “good life” of the English. This is tension between liberals and multiculturalists because Locke saw that they did not fit with his model of society and therefore wished to colonise. A pluralist multiculturalist would see that the Indians it was not their land because they laboured on it, but they laboured on it because it was there land. A pluralist multiculturalist would not make a moral judgement that one way of life is “better” than another so would not advocate the colonisation which classic liberal, such as Locke, have. Liberals making a moral judgement on issues also manifests itself in a different way in modern society. Liberals believe in being tolerant of others and their practices. However a line is drawn when the activities of others are not deemed “tolerant” themselves. In the UK female circumcision was banned despite Somali’s living in England saying it was part of their culture. The UK is a liberal democracy but was not tolerant of what it deemed to be intolerant on a moral monist grounds. This is heavily tied in with the belief in the individual over the community. What is happening to the individual is intolerant so therefore the community cannot do it as the individual in liberalism is sovereign. A final area where liberalism and multiculturalism clash over the issue of moral monism and moral relativism is in the works of JS Mill. Mill was a “qualified utilitarian” (Parekh) and believed that diversity was desirable. This shows no tension with the normative view of multiculturalism that difference is a good thing. Mill believed that it was good because it stimulated creativity and curiosity. This was in line with his view that the individual was sovereign above all else because with this new creativity there would be an “emergence of exceptional minds” (On Liberty). However he did not advocate moral relativism. He believed that the creativity and excellence of diversity would only be brought about if the culturally superior group remained “dominant” over other cultures within society. This was so that the dominant culture could take charge and preach monism (for Mill this would be monism of liberal values; individualism, rationalism, tolerance etc.) which would lead to the “good life”. Mill and pluralist multiculturalists are coherent up to a point but Mill himself was never a moral relativist so there is tension over moral monism in classic liberalism and pluralist multiculturalism.

Looking at the classic liberal thinkers would suggest that the liberal belief in rationality is country to multiculturalism but modern liberal Rawles disagrees with this. In a Theory of Justice he states that plurality was “inescapable” and “desirable”. He argued for the former because humans arrive at different yet equally plausible conceptions of the “good life” by exerting their rational powers. The latter is because everyone possesses different talents so they can “bring forth a part” of themselves which they “have not been able to cultivate”. This shows that modern liberals and multiculturalists have agreement over the idea of pluralism being a good thing for society. The tension arises when this is put into practice. Rawles would say that it is wrong to make a moral judgement on another
culture but it has to be done in order for society to function cohesively. If no value judgements were made then ghettoization would occur because there would be no universal law to govern all peoples. This is where there is tension with modern liberals and pluralist multiculturalists, over the implementation of moral and cultural relativism.

Both liberal nationalism and cosmopolitan multiculturalism believe in international bodies as a desirable end point, however the way they reach their conclusions are very different. Liberal nationalists take self-determination from the people to its logical extreme to international cooperation and then internationalism and the creation of a supranational body. Cosmopolitanism reaches its internationalism differently. Cosmopolitanism is a “bastard hybrid” with “pick and mix” multiculturalism (Waldron). This means that individuals take on multi-identities which have the effect of blending cultures and nation-state boundaries until there is internationalism. Whereas liberalism creates internationalism through international consensus around self-determination, cosmopolitanism is incompatible with this as it is formed through community integration, not individual self-determination. Despite this, liberalism and cosmopolitanism do have one major area in common. Due to cosmopolitanism replying on the assimilation of cultures it is not possible at deep level. This is because you cannot integrate language and it is very difficult to do so with religion. Therefore both liberalism and cosmopolitanism are multicultural on shallow terms. The way they achieve internationalism is different so there is only agreement on the end goal and how it manifests itself on in shallow forms of diversity.

Liberals believe in regulating the power of the state as “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Lord Acton) and this often manifests itself in the form of constitutionalism. Constitutionalism would appear to be compatible with multiculturalism by protecting rights of minorities but this is not the case. Tully in his series of Cambridge lectures “Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity” states that because constitutions and foundations of nation-states are formed by either the majority or the military victorious side, minorities will lose out. The constitution and formation of government will always favour the majority. Modern constitutionalism does not respect cultural divides (meaning no minority rights are codified) as individual rights which are formed from a liberal dominated political theory which is often not applicable to minorities who practice different forms of political philosophy with different aims. This is a link between constitutionalism and moral monism as a constitution is monism but codified. There is a large amount of tension between liberalism who believe constitutionalism is necessary to curb the power of the executive and multiculturalists who see the constitution as codification of moral monism.

A final tension between liberalism and multiculturalism comes from the fact that multiculturalism was born (in part) out of the pluralistic views of European-Liberalism. Tom Brook argues that “multiculturalists are cultural pluralists whose perspectives and arguments are drawn entirely from the modern European tradition which brought us the Enlightenment and liberal [political theory...far from being free of ethnocentric bias”. This shows multiculturalism as a Euro-middle-class centric ideology which goes against the Liberal belief that they are doing the best for the world. Multiculturalism was born out of a narrow liberal tradition which does not give it the breadth that it aspires to through cultural relativism and minority rights, whereas the whole of the liberal ideology would say that it is world-centric and so there is conflict between the two.

In conclusion, the lines of agreement between liberalism and multiculturalism are only clear on superficial, soft diversity grounds. They run parallel as philosophical spaces attacking and agreeing
with each other at certain points. These include tolerance of many different types of clothes, music and foods. When delved into liberalism takes a monism stand (for classic liberals such as Locke and Mill based on rationalism) that they cannot be tolerant of the intolerant so tension emerges between liberals and pluralist multiculturalists (such as Parekh who says monism is “not able to redeem its promise to show that there is only one correct way...to understand human nature”). There is again broad consensus on areas such as supra-nationalism and cosmopolitan multiculturalism believing in an international body but they arrive at these conclusions from very different angles which have within them tensions over nationalism and tolerance. The liberal idea of plurality and the normative approach to multiculturalism appear compatible but Tully, when applying this to the liberal belief in constitutionalism, argues that a constitutional will always favour the majority and therefore deny pluralism to the minorities as they are invariably oppressed. Liberal multiculturalism is not the “pure” multiculturalism which pluralist is and this is shown by the fact that liberalism can only accommodate shallow diversity and tension emerges over “deep” diversity such as religion, language and cultural practices.