

## ***Liberalising Islam: creating Brits of the Islamic Persuasion***

In common with other religions, Islam has always generated debate and dispute over the nature of true religious belief and practice. Increasingly, this has focussed around responses to modernity and the Western liberal tradition, and argument has centred on what makes up the unquestionable core of Islam and what is open to reinterpretation in response to different historical and geographical circumstances. Theories of Islamic modernism were already well established in pre-Independence India, where Muhammad Iqbal put forward his vision of a spiritually inspired but engaged humanism, and the more conservative Maududi began to develop traditional Islamic jurisprudence so as to take account of modern social and political realities. Since then many different modernising movements have evolved both in Muslim majority countries and among immigrant communities, and these have interacted with each other and with other streams of Islamic reformism. But what is a new and significant development, is the large-scale involvement of Western governments and their agents.

This short article will centre on government-sponsored attempts to promote the development of a liberal version of Islam among British Muslims. In some ways, as my sub-title suggests, comparisons can be drawn with attempts around 100 years ago by established Anglo-Jewry to encourage East European Jewish immigrants to become Englishmen of the Mosaic persuasion. The more assimilated middle-class Jews were concerned not only to promote greater integration, but also to ensure that their co-religionists became the right sort of Englishmen and did not integrate instead into international socialism. They were anxious to tame overtly foreign religious and cultural practices, but the radicalism that they were afraid of was distinctly secular. Today, in contrast, it is religion that is providing the inspiration for revolutionary movements, and the concern of the establishment - including sympathetic Muslim organisations - is that British Muslims should not only consider themselves British but embrace the right sort of Islam. Such concerns are not limited to Britain; however, developments in Britain and the West are important in themselves, and are increasingly seen as key to the development of Islam more generally.<sup>1</sup>

The immediate spur for government involvement is the attempt to pre-empt the growth of 'Islamic extremism', and most explicitly, of Islamic inspired terrorism. However, the various schemes and approaches build on developments in forms of governance already taking place across the Western world, where faith groups are being brought in to play a part in new partnership arrangements. And this had already generated a need for Muslim partners that governments could do business with.

Official recognition of faith groups can be seen as developing from the institutionalising of ethnically defined groups under liberal multiculturalism. It responds to, but also reinforces, an increasing emphasis on religious identity within ethnic minority groups, and introduces a generally more conservative slant in tune with currently dominant political thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Tariq Ramadan argues that 'Western Muslims will play a decisive role in the evolution of Islam worldwide because of the nature and complexity of the challenges they face, and in this their responsibility is doubly essential.' *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* Oxford University Press (2004) p 225

The incorporation of multiculturalist ideas about community politics into the partnership structures that make up the new forms of governance has facilitated the imposition of a central pro-business agenda. A growing critical literature has shown how these structures are used by neoliberal governments to incorporate, control and contain possible sources of conflict, tying potential activists into preset systems and strengthening more compliant organisations.<sup>2</sup> Pragmatic politicians have always recognised and exploited community leaders and organisations for their own ends, but under new structures of governance, community groups and structural hierarchies are openly bolstered and given official recognition. This can be used to strengthen more conservative organisations that are less likely to dispute government priorities, and community interests can be used to cut across class divisions and discourage the development of a more class-based politics that might threaten elite interests. Under this system, the link between the British government and its Muslims subjects is increasingly mediated through the mosque and other faith-based organisations.

Governments have always preferred to deal with more conservative forces than encourage the development of alternative groups that might challenge elite interests; and what we are seeing here is an example of those same political practices that have resulted in the promotion of traditional tribal and religious leaders in Afghanistan and Iraq.

‘Faith Communities’ are being given an increasingly prominent role in government thinking at all levels. This has been encouraged by co-ordinated lobbying by different faith groups – including through the Inter Faith Network<sup>3</sup> – but the lobbying has fallen on receptive ground (and not just because of the personal faith of Tony Blair as prime minister). A report for the Home Office Faith Communities Unit in 2004 observes that ‘Some areas of policy are now routinely recognised by Departments as requiring the input of the faith communities, for example as partners in urban regeneration’, and it puts forward recommendations ‘designed to make [existing] processes even more effective across government’.<sup>4</sup> The promotion of faith schools is probably the most high profile – and controversial – example of these policies in action, but they take many forms, some more obvious than others. In the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, where over a third of the population is Muslim, the Borough Council holds regular discussions with the local Council of Mosques, which it helped establish in 2001, and the 8,000m<sup>2</sup> London Muslim Centre, built beside the East London Mosque in 2004, received funding from the Borough Council, the London Development Authority, the European Development Fund and the Government’s Surestart programme. The Centre is used as a channel for the provision of local facilities by authorities ranging from the health service to the job centre, and the mosque’s Imam has been personally involved in visiting homes as part of the Improving School Attendance Partnership. At the same time, youth groups and holiday projects run by enthusiastic young Islamists have received funding from the Borough Council and other secular bodies. This is all in line with the observation in the Home Office document quoted above that ‘Central Government is increasingly

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<sup>2</sup> Geddes, Mike (2006) ‘Partnership and the limits to local Governance in England: Institutional Analysis and Neoliberalism’ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30:1 pp 76-97

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.interfaith.org.uk>

<sup>4</sup> Home Office Faith Communities Unit (2004) *Working Together: Co-operation between Government and Faith Communities* p8

exploring ways of using the experience and resources of faith communities “on the ground” to deliver services’.<sup>5</sup>

If government is to work with and through faith organisations, this naturally raises questions about exactly which groups it should choose to work with. Such questions have been abruptly brought into focus by fears of ‘Islamic terrorism’ and the consequent attempts to promote ‘moderate’ Islamic groups and ideas at the expense of ‘extremism’. Ruth Kelly, as Secretary of State for Communities made the Government’s position very clear when she spoke to an invited audience of British Muslims on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2006:

It is not good enough to merely sit on the sidelines or pay lip service to fighting extremism. That is why I want a fundamental rebalancing of our relationship with Muslim organisations from now on... In future, I am clear that our strategy of funding and engagement must shift significantly towards those organisations that are taking a proactive leadership role in tackling extremism and defending our shared values.<sup>6</sup>

For the previous nine years the New Labour government had seemed content to follow the lead of the Conservative administration in actively promoting the development of the Muslim Council of Britain – officially founded in 1997 - as representatives of Britain’s Muslims. This umbrella group has brought an impressive number of Muslim organisations under its cover, but is by no means representative of all branches of Muslim opinion. However, unlike those who were critical of the Islamist approach of the MCB leadership (and their links with groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan and Bangladesh), the Council had proved a well-organised lobbyist and seemed set to take on a role similar to that of the Jewish Board of Guardians. Such a high profile inevitably attracted critical media attention – not least on Panorama<sup>7</sup> – and by 2006 the tables had turned. Kelly’s speech made clear, through its reference to those who boycotted the Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations, that the MCB was no longer regarded as one of the Government’s favoured partners. This came three months after Kelly had given a speech at the launch of the anti-Islamist Sufi Muslim Council, whose claim to represent the silent majority of British Muslims has been met with considerable scepticism.<sup>8</sup> Islamists - who regard public political action as inseparable from their religious beliefs - are out, and instead the government seeks to make political links with religious groups that are nominally non-political. In their response to Kelly’s October speech, the MCB accused her of ‘engaging in a merry go round to find Muslims who agree with you’.<sup>9</sup>

The MCB is, however, too important to be totally excluded from the Government loop and the draft constitution of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Body was publicly welcomed by the new Communities Minister, Hazel Blears, in October 2007, although its four member steering committee included representatives from

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid* p8

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/archived/speeches/corporate/values-responsibilities>

<sup>7</sup> John Ware’s programme for Panorama, ‘A Question of Leadership’, was transmitted in August 2005

<sup>8</sup> Their website is currently ‘down for Refurbishment’ (April 2008)

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Muhammad Abdul Bari, Secretary General of the MCB to Ruth Kelly 14<sup>th</sup> October 2006 downloaded from [www.mcb.org.uk](http://www.mcb.org.uk)

both the MCB and the MCB affiliated Muslim Association of Britain.<sup>10</sup> The MCB leadership is walking a difficult tightrope between not upsetting government and alienating their support base.

The search for appropriately ‘moderate’ Muslims does not stop at the selection of sympathetic partners. If there are not enough ‘moderates’, more should be created, and government intervention has encroached on the development of Islam itself. Immigration law has been used to ensure that all ministers of religion coming from abroad meet a minimum English language standard,<sup>11</sup> and, in a move that stresses government commitment to working through faith communities, Tony Blair promised £1 million toward university teaching in Islamic studies geared towards Britain’s practicing Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Government support – practical and financial – can also be found behind projects for promoting favoured ‘moderate’ Islamic scholars and ideologies. Thus the Radical Middle Way, with its professional website and busy programme of discussions and other events, which describes itself as ‘a Muslim grassroots initiative’ and ‘fiercely independent’, gets most of its funding from government.<sup>13</sup>

Outside involvement in the development of Islamic ideology is not restricted to government organisations. The Quilliam Foundation, a privately funded ‘counter extremism think tank’ founded by reformed ex-‘extremists’ includes among its advisors some well-known names of the liberal (and less liberal) establishment: Paddy Ashdown (former leader of the Liberal Democrats), Timothy Garton-Ash (academic and journalist), the director of Demos, the editor of Prospect, the director of Civitas and the Conservative MP, Michael Gove.<sup>14</sup> This project follows on from the widespread attention given to *The Islamist*, the book by the Foundation’s Deputy Director, Ed Husain, that chronicles his personal religious and political journey. Inspired by his own experience, and his re-found spiritual Sufism, Husain sees a potentially dangerous causal link between Islamism of all kinds and extremist violence carried out in the name of Islam. He argues that Islamism dehumanises non-Muslims and that ‘extremist rhetoric’ is ‘the preamble to terrorism’.<sup>15</sup> His conflation of critical ideas and political dissidence with their expression in violent political action encourages a dangerously authoritarian response that will have found echoes in those sections of government and media that have promoted the increasing curtailment of civil liberties in the name of the ‘war on terror’.

So, what are the wider impacts of all this? First, the political promotion of faith groups of all kinds, and the emphasis on a person’s religious affiliation, is helping to consolidate the power of religious organisations and foreground religious identity. The official argument that the incorporation of faith-based bodies contributes to ‘social cohesion’<sup>16</sup> and that ‘Muslim identity politics can support and encourage

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<sup>10</sup> Blears’ speech to Preventing Extremism Conference, 31 October 2007  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/preventingextremism>

<sup>11</sup> This rule was introduced in August 2004

<sup>12</sup> The Guardian 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> June 2007. He was responding to a report commissioned by the government from Ataulah Siddiqui: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/uploads/DrSiddiquiReport.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/about\\_us.php](http://www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/about_us.php) (downloaded 29th March 2008) ‘RMW is funded primarily by a grant from the UK Government’s Global Opportunities Fund and DCLG.’

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org> downloaded 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008

<sup>15</sup> Ed Husain (2007) *The Islamist* London: Penguin pp 264 and 278

<sup>16</sup> Home Office Faith Communities Unit (2004) p3

integration'<sup>17</sup> seems, at best, naïve, if not dangerously sophistic. Religious mobilisation may, indeed, encourage participation in the political process, and many Islamic groups do encourage their followers to become exemplary members of civil society. However, they become involved first and foremost as Muslims, and the government approach seems designed to perpetuate and institutionalise their religious difference. Faith groups may see a mutual benefit in such a system (and this lies behind the Archbishop of Canterbury's ill-fated support for greater recognition of Sharia Law<sup>18</sup>), but anything that highlights Muslim difference and especially that appears to be giving special support for Muslims as Muslims is likely to generate a negative reaction in the wider population. More broadly, too, as already noted, the promotion of religious organisations is being used by neoliberal regimes as an important method of social control, through a combination of social conservatism, strong hierarchical organisation and the colonial practice of divide and rule. This must be of concern to anyone hoping for the development of a more progressive opposition to neoliberalism.

And what about the attempts to create a more 'liberal' or 'moderate' Islam as a counter to Islamic radicalism? There are clearly practical difficulties here. There are problems in the defining of terms and drawing of boundaries – one person's 'moderate' may be another's 'dangerous radical'; and there are problems arising from the mere fact of government or other forms of 'outside' involvement putting off the very groups that that involvement was intended to help. But beyond this we need to ask if a 'liberal' Islam could anyway provide a successful counter attraction. To do this we need to understand why young Muslims may be attracted to Islamic radicalism. These are not necessarily people for whom religion is already of overriding importance; indeed it has been argued that 'a lack of religious literacy and education appears to be a common feature among those who are drawn to extremist groups'.<sup>19</sup> Most, like radicals of all kinds, are in search of an ideal - of a better world-view, and a better code for living and plan of action – something that can provide a real alternative to the decadence of capitalist consumerism. Can a more liberal Islam provide this? Even Tariq Ramadan's carefully argued and Islamicly grounded approach, which many might find religiously bold, seems too politically timid to inspire. His socially responsible Islam would attempt to resist neoliberal capitalism by stages through an ethical business approach that is similar to that adopted by socially concerned church groups.<sup>20</sup>

In January 2002 I attended a meeting of Al-Muhajaroun in Ilford, where I observed first hand how idealistic young British Muslims were persuaded to take action on behalf of their Muslim brothers and sisters. Tony Cox, who was with me, observed that, despite the obvious differences, it reminded him of meetings of Militant Tendency in the 1980s – not just the young men in their working clothes in the stark hall, but the serious and focussed class-based rhetoric and the promise of being part of a structured resistance. In the paper I published later that year I wrote:

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<sup>17</sup> Tufyal Choudhury (2007) *The Role of Muslim Identity Politics in Radicalisation (a study in progress)* paper commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government p 5

<sup>18</sup> Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, put forward his ideas in a Lecture at the Royal Courts of Justice on the 7<sup>th</sup> February 2008, entitled 'Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective' <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575>

<sup>19</sup> Tufyal Choudhury (2007) p 6

<sup>20</sup> Tariq Ramadan (2004), especially pp 174-199

In his condemnation of hoarding money, his denouncement of interest as the 'ball and chain of economic enslavement' and his repeated references to Muslim oppression, the speaker at Al-Muhajiroun's East London meeting appealed to a radical instinct for a fairer society.<sup>21</sup>

I argued in that paper, that whether they chose the way of practical grassroots action and reformism offered by the Young Muslim Organisation or opted for a more revolutionary path, those who turned to Islamism were looking for a sense of purpose in an alienating world that offered them little hope for the future. And, crucially, I linked the turn towards political Islam to the weakness of the socialist movement, and its inability to provide a force that working-class Muslim youth would recognise as a credible channel for their anger. It may be contended that this does not account for the large number of middle-class Muslims attracted to Islamist movements, but radical and revolutionary movements always attract a section of middle-class support, especially among students, and this is particularly true for minority groups facing a level of discrimination that cuts across the classes.<sup>22</sup> That radical Islamic groups appeal to many of the same sources of discontent as radical socialists is nicely illustrated by the leaflet distributed by Hizb ut-Tahrir at the big anti-war march in London in 2003. The main focus of its attack is capitalist colonialism, and it is not until the final sentence that it invites the reader 'to study the Islamic Ideological solution'.<sup>23</sup>

The linking of the rise of Islamism with the decline of the Left is an argument that few people who do not themselves support Left politics seem prepared to engage with. I noticed, for example, that the review of research into Muslim political mobilisation that was commissioned by the Government and produced in 2007 includes long quotes from my 2002 paper, but makes no allusion to its main argument.<sup>24</sup> The liberal establishment, and not least the New Labour Government, does not want to accept that people are looking for major structural changes and that with the absence of a Left alternative people may turn to other ideologies. (This situation encourages far right nationalism as well as Islamism, and these different radicalisms can each be boosted by the growth of the other.) An extreme example of the blinkered establishment approach is provided by Will Hutton, who argued in the Observer that some strands of Islamic thought were simply provoked into being by the 'self-evident superiority' and success of modern Western values.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, radical Muslims have long been aware of the potential competition from Left ideas, especially from practical experience of Middle Eastern politics and the writings of men such as Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shari'ati.<sup>26</sup>

If we want to address the causes that attract young Muslims to radical and even violent Islamist groups, we need to look not only at British foreign policy (and persuading the government to stop being in denial as to its impact) and not only at the

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<sup>21</sup> Sarah Glynn (2002) 'Bengali Muslims: the new East End radicals?' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25:6 p 985

<sup>22</sup> As exemplified by the high number of Jews in the Russian revolutionary movements.

<sup>23</sup> Other socialist parallels in Hizb ut-Tahrir rhetoric have been observed by Jamil Iqbal (informal discussion of his research July 2007)

<sup>24</sup> Tufyal Choudhury (2007)

<sup>25</sup> Will Hutton 'Why the West must stay true to itself' *The Observer* 17<sup>th</sup> June 2007

<sup>26</sup> Sayyid Qutb (1964) introduction to *Milestones*, Ali Shari'ati (1980, translated by R Campbell) *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique* Berkeley: Mizan Press

alienating effects of authoritarian anti-terrorism policies that especially focus on Muslims. We need to look at the deliberate suppression of any effective secular Left alternative to the materialism and inequalities of free-market capitalism. Liberal politics cannot provide that alternative, but what the current political system has done is suppress Left opposition and leave space for the rise of other radical forces.

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