Liberalising Islam: Creating Brits of the Islamic Persuasion

This paper explores the responses of Western governments to the politicisation of their Muslim citizens. The immediate aim of current policies is to pre-empt the growth of 'Islamic extremism', but they also build on developments in the incorporation of faith groups into new forms of partnership governance. While I share governmental concern about the risks of young Muslims being attracted by those who advocate violent interpretations of Islam, I argue that current policies will only make this more likely. I argue that the increasing role for faith groups within Western political structures encourages division along faith lines, and that government attempts to promote a 'moderate' Islam from above are more likely to alienate those they seek to reach. And I argue that the rise of political religion of all kinds has to be understood as a consequence of the decline of an effective Left movement through which to channel frustrations with local and international inequalities. With socialism, even of the social democratic variety, off - and deliberately removed from - the agenda, some of those who once looked to socio-economic solutions, are now turning to other ideologies. I argue that the only way for western nations to prevent this, and open up real spaces of hope, is to return to addressing those basic socio-economic issues and concentrate on increasing equality both within their own borders and in their foreign policy.

While these arguments can be applied to Western governments in general, some differences of approach have been highlighted, and the chapter focuses on a case study of government-sponsored attempts to promote the development of a liberal version of Islam among British Muslims.

I have described the rise of political religion as a response to inequalities. The British government does itself talk about 'addressing the grievances that ideologues are exploiting'[1]; however this is not reflected in their actions. They continue with a foreign policy that has been widely criticised for taking a neo-colonial approach and for bringing more problems to the areas in which it has intervened. They have also introduced anti-terror laws that encroach on long established civil liberties, and, because these are more often targeted at Muslims, encourage Muslim alienation from the political system; just as the old stop-and-search on suspicion, or 'sus' laws alienated a generation of young blacks. And, most importantly – but least discussed in relation to this subject – they are following the hegemonic neoliberal agenda . This acts to increase inequality, and (like other so-called centre-left parties) New Labour has gone out of its way to eliminate socialist ideas of wealth redistribution from its ranks, and therefore from British politics.

Islam and Islamism

In common with other religions, Islam has always generated debate and dispute over what constitutes 'true' religious belief and practice, and produced movements for reform and renewal. Such developments arise within their specific historical and

---

[1] HM Government (2008) The Prevent Strategy: A Guide for Local Partners in England, 6

political contexts and are influenced by events beyond the confines of religious thought and custom. Increasingly, for over a century, religious debate has focussed around Islamic responses to modernity and to the Western liberal tradition. Arguments centre on what makes up the unquestionable core of Islam and what is open to reinterpretation in response to different historical and geographical circumstances. 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.

Increasingly prominent, have been various kinds of Islamism. The definition of this term has been the subject of much debate, but I am using it here to refer to all those different forms of Islam in which people believe that it is not possible to separate a private religion from public action because religion bears on every aspect of life, and that to be a Muslim is a matter of politics as well as of faith. In popular debate, the term Islamism has tended to become demonised – as 'fundamentalism' was before it - to suggest an unacceptable and dangerous form of Islam[2], and Islamists of all kinds are often popularly regarded as potential terrorists. But, however much we may disagree with someone's political ideas, or with the concept of a system in which the ultimate frame of reference is interpretation of scripture, this does not make the person who holds those ideas a terrorist, and political ideology should be debated with, not outlawed. This last point is crucial for all ideologies and for a healthy society. Practically, too, driving an ideology underground (as has been suggested with respect to Hizb ut-Tahrir[3]) can encourage the development of violent protest, and is also unnecessary: we already have laws in place to deal with incitement to violence. This chapter uses the term Islamism to mean any version of Islam that argues for the impossibility of separating religion and politics, and it acknowledges that Islamists, like those of other political ideologies and faiths, or of none, can be, and often are, active members of wider civil society.

In response to the growth of various forms of Islamism, recent years have seen a new factor impacting on developments within Islam, as Western governments and their agents attempt to engage with and influence core debates in Islamic thought. Although there are many colonial precedents for government involvement with Islam,[4] government approaches towards Islam today appear to be more deliberately and essentially interventionist.

States of Secularism
Inevitably, government responses to Islamism vary from nation to nation. So, for example, British pragmatism can be contrasted with French policies that are built on an assertively secular republicanism and on an imperial tradition that aimed to incorporate its colonies politically and culturally into a greater France. However, even in France, Nicolas Sarkozy has been attempting to redefine the principle of *laïcité* – the hard won separation of state and religion that has been enshrined in French law

---

[2] The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2004) reduces Islamism to 'Islamic militancy or fundamentalism'.

[3] Tony Blair proposed a ban following the London bombings in 2005, but was ultimately dissuaded by the Home Office and police, who argued that a ban 'would serve only as a recruiting agent if the group appealed against the move'. The *Observer*, 24 December 2006

[4] Such as the support given by the British Imperial government to Aligarh Muslim University and the limitations imposed on the scope and practice of Muslim family law under the Raj.

since 1905. In 2003, as Interior Minister, he promoted the establishment of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*) as the official representatives of French Muslims on religious matters; however this only gave them a similar official voice to that already in place for Catholics, Protestants and Jews. Then, in 2004, he published a book, *The Republic, Religions, Hope* (*La République, la religions, l'espérance*), that broke with established principles. This argues for a public role for faith-based organisations, and for a change in the law to allow the state to help fund the establishment of mosques, so making them independent of foreign influence and allowing French Muslims to catch up with better resourced religious groups. Sarkozy explains that 'a humiliated identity is a radicalised identity, and therefore dangerous', and the proposed mosques are presented as providing the alternative to clandestine meetings in basements and garages. The aim is to promote an 'open-handed' French Islam, and avoid the Islam of the 'closed fist'. Sarkozy uses the language of rights and responsibilities, and in exchange for its rights French Islam must submit to the values of the Republic. It was also Sarkozy who instigated the debates that resulted in the ban (from 2004) on the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in schools, which was especially targeted at the hijab. His response to the riots that took place in 2005 in the *banlieues* (suburban estates) where much of France's immigrant population live, demonstrated little empathy with those who have endured severe socio-economic marginalisation; and the arguments in his book that religious authorities are needed to instil moral order, can be seen as an example of conservative authoritarianism, in line with some of his other views that have invited parallels with the American right.[5]

In the US, despite the legal separation of church and state, politicians make public display of their religion, and religious groups take an active part in election campaigns and in pushing their moral agenda. 'In God we trust' first appeared on US coins in 1864, and was declared the national motto by Congress in 1956.[6] There has always been a strong reliance on faith organisations to play an important role in civil society, and since 2001 this has been supported by Bush's Faith-based and Community Initiative.[7] As in the British case that is the focus of this chapter, recent American policy has promoted 'moderate' Islam, both internationally and nationally. *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, a policy monograph produced by the Rand Corporation in 2007, although generally critical of actual achievements so far, argues that lessons can be learnt from the way the US and its allies built up 'democratic networks' during the last great 'battle of ideas' in the Cold War. The authors propose that the most effective route to wider geographic influence would be to concentrate on working with Muslim intellectuals, activists and leaders in the Muslim diaspora, and to try to reverse the flow of ideas so that these chosen moderates can impact on Islam in the Middle East.[8] These are all common themes in the anti-Islamism literature

---

[5] BBC News, 28 October 2004; De Beer, Patrice (2008) 'Sarkozy and God' *opendemocracy.net*; *L'Express*, 1 November 2004, '*Religions, République, intégration: Sarkozy s'explique*'. This last (from which I have taken the quotes) is a long interview with Sarkozy following the publication of his book. It not only explains his views but, in the questions asked, helps illuminate the French secularist context.
[6] http://www.ustreas.gov/education/fact-sheets/currency/in-god-we-trust.shtml [accessed November 2008]
[7] *The President's Faith-based and Community Initiative in 50 States: a report to the nation*, White House, June 2008
[8] Rabassa, Angel, Cheryl Benard, Lowell Schwartz and Peter Sickle (2007) *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* Santa Monica: Rand Corporation [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG574 (accessed

described below (Kundnani 2008), and the substitution of a new enemy to replace the old Communist Block feeds the needs of the powerful military-industrial complex.

Recognition of the wider importance of religious developments in the Muslim diaspora is shared by Tariq Ramadan, who many have regarded as a key example of an influential, moderate, diaspora Muslim. He 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' (Ramadan, 2004: 225). Ramadan is currently Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford, he has been a member of the EU High Level Advisory Group on Dialogue between Peoples and Culture, and has spoken at meetings organised by the British-government-backed Radical Middle Way. He has also had his US visa revoked - shortly after taking up an academic post in Indiana - and been briefly banned from France, demonstrating the confused and contradictory thinking that inflicts political responses to Islam.

The developments in Western liberal thought that have provided the intellectual backing for these confused governmental interactions with Islamism have been explored by Arun Kundnani. He argues that, unlike the neocons, who subscribe to the view put forward by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington that Islam is intrinsically antipathetic to Western civilisation, influential Western writers of a more liberal tradition have discovered a new ideological enemy in a generic Islamism. Any Islamic political engagement, without further qualification, is taken to be 'analogous to Stalinism or fascism' and 'regarded as an appropriation of modern European totalitarianism that is basically alien to "traditional Islam" ' (Kundnani 2008: 42). Kundnani (2008: 47-52) gives special attention to Paul Berman's 'best-selling' *Terror and Liberalism*, published in 2004, which he describes as a 'major source' for such thinking, and shows to be based on a frightening mix of decontextualised half-digested facts and shoddy argumentation.

Muslim Britons
Confusion and contradiction haunts governmental responses to the growth of political Islam, as politicians everywhere are trying desperately to learn their way. A rapid turnover of policy initiatives could be said to be a general characteristic of Britain's New Labour government, but Britain's Muslims have found themselves at the centre of an exceptional whirl of policy experiments. Many of these can be understood as government-sponsored attempts to promote the development of a liberal version of Islam.

In some ways - as my sub-title suggests - comparisons can be drawn with the situation around 100 years ago, when established Anglo-Jewry attempted to encourage East European Jewish immigrants to become Englishmen of the Mosaic persuasion. 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; however the radicalism that they were afraid of was distinctly secular. Today, though, it is religion

---

5 November 08)] The Rand Corporation is a research foundation originally founded by the US Air force, and especially associated with defence policy.

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 also embrace the 'right sort' of Islam.

The most important spur for government involvement in this is clearly the wish to pre-empt the growth of 'Islamic extremism', and most explicitly, of Islamic inspired terrorism; however their various new schemes and approaches build on developments in forms of governance already taking place across the Western world. Partnership structures play an important part in neoliberal political systems, and faith groups are being brought in to take on partnership roles. Even before recent developments, this had generated a need for Muslim partners that governments could do business with.

Multiculturalism, faith organisations and neoliberal governance

Official recognition of faith groups can be seen as developing out of the institutionalisation of ethnically defined groups that was encouraged by policies of multiculturalism. The historical shifts of personal and political identity formation that have taken place over the last few decades have been the subject of considerable study (Glynn 2002). Black-white dualism of the 1960s and 70s gave way in the 80s to multicultural 'new' – and not so new - ethnicities and the celebration of difference. These, in turn, have increasingly morphed into an emphasis on religious identities, which has been encouraged by international politics and was well advanced before 9/11.[9] Government recognition of religious identity as a primary organising principle responds to, but also reinforces, the increasing emphasis on religious identity within ethnic minority groups. The prioritising of 'community' and faith-based interests can be used to cut across class loyalties and discourage the development of a more class-based politics that might threaten elite interests; and multicultural policies can also be used to provide an administration with a progressive veneer without the need to address fundamental socio-economic structures. The turn towards faith groups also allows governments to promote more socially conservative forces that are in tune with currently dominant political thinking. While individual 'community' or faith groups may support progressive as well as more conservative ideas, multiculturalism as a system distracts political attention from fundamental socio-economic problems and divisions, and holds back progress towards greater social equality.

This is an argument with which the main proponents of multiculturalism seem reluctant to engage. So, for example, Tariq Modood acknowledges that the effects on life chances of parental class and education 'are usually much greater than the effects of race or ethnicity' (Modood 2007: 58) but dismisses the view that class identities are a primary form of political mobilisation that should not be divided by 'assertions of race, political femininity, gay pride politics and so on' (Modood 2007: 69). No reference is made to the achievements of those who have addressed multiple inequalities through a unified socio-economic perspective, and instead class-based politics is simply relegated to a past that 'soon gave way to an understanding that these [other] positions were a genuine and significant part of a plural centre-left egalitarian movement' (Modood 2007: 69). Meanwhile, Will Kymlicka presents a teleological view of the evolution of liberal democracies in which 40 years of

---

[9] Western responses to Palestine and Bosnia have been important factors in the development of British Muslim political identities.

multiculturalism 'has often helped deepen democratic citizenship and created more just and free societies' (Kymlicka 2008: 280). While there have clearly been huge changes in racial and ethnic relations, this seems rather too complacent when describing a period for almost three-quarters of which the gap between rich and poor has been widening; a period that has led us into a recession where, in the absence of a significant Left alternative, social frustrations will increasingly turn towards scapegoat politics and intolerance of all kinds. Even Arun Kundnani's article in *Race and Class*, which provides such a strong critique of dominant views of Islamism, only finds it necessary to quote Shivanadan's rhetorical defence of black anti-racism (and mention the Left-wing past of key anti-Islamist liberals) before welcoming, as unproblematic, the possibilities for a new political engagement in progressive British politics mediated through a Muslim identity (Kundnani 2008: 58).

Pragmatic politicians have always recognised and exploited community leaders and organisations for their own ends, but under new systems of governance, some community groups and structural hierarchies are being openly bolstered and given official recognition. Incorporation of community organisations into partnership structures helps neoliberal governments impose their pro-business agenda, and it is no accident that Britain appears to be following a US model in increasing the role of faith groups in the maintenance of civil society. Local government has been reduced to little more than strategic management, and a growing critical literature has shown how partnership mechanisms are being used to incorporate, control and contain possible sources of conflict, tying potential activists into preset systems and strengthening those organisations more ready to comply with government policy (see, for example, Allen 2008; Collins 2007). Mike Geddes has described how scope for real political debate is being restricted and the state is able to 'maintain tight control over local institutions and actors who might challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism' (Geddes 2006: 93). While only very limited control is conceded to community groups, as important decisions are made elsewhere, these structures do impact on power dynamics within 'communities', strengthening groups seen as more favourable to government policies at the expense of those who could be regarded as more critical. Under this system, the link between the British government and its Muslims citizens is being increasingly mediated through the mosque and other faith-based organisations.

Western governments have always preferred to deal with more conservative forces than encourage the development of alternative groups that might challenge elite interests, and this is true at all levels. What we are seeing here is a less dramatic example of those same political practices that have resulted in the promotion of traditional tribal and religious leaders in Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, the resurgence of Islam internationally, as a political force, cannot be understood without looking at the decline of those secular left forces that once attracted many Muslims who wanted to oppose existing political hegemonies. And this decline has been a long-term aim of Western foreign policy. Anyone tempted to doubt the deep-seated resistance that has been deliberately built up towards left ideas only had to listen to the horror that greeted the suggestion, during the US presidential election campaign, that Barak Obama might introduce redistributive taxation. And Europe is not immune. In 2006 Seumas Milne reported in the *Guardian* newspaper that the Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly had 'voted to condemn the 'crimes of totalitarian communist regimes,' linking them with Nazism and complaining that communist parties are still

'legal and active in some countries'. He added: 'Demands that European ministers launch a continent-wide anti-communist campaign - including school textbook revisions, official memorial days and museums - only narrowly missed the necessary two-thirds majority.'[10]

The prominent role being given to 'Faith Communities' at all levels can be seen to be a tactical choice for those who wish to preserve existing structural hierarchies – even if it is not presented that way. Recognition of 'Faith Communities' has also been encouraged by co-ordinated lobbying by different faith groups – including through the Inter Faith Network[11] – 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 observed 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 put forward recommendations 'designed to make [existing] processes even more effective across government' (Home Office Faith Communities Unit 2004: 8). 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 readily 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 8,000m² 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 exploring ways of using the experience and resources of faith communities "on the ground" to deliver services' (Home Office Faith Communities Unit 2004: 8).

Searching for the right partner
If government is to work through faith organisations, this naturally raises questions about exactly which groups it should choose to work with. There are numerous organisations representing different Islamic traditions, but there have also been many attempts to bring them together into wider representative bodies, both locally and nationally. An important local example is provided by the Bradford Council of Mosques, founded in 1981 to cut across Muslim sectarianism and provide a vehicle for interaction with the public authorities on issues such as education. It received grant funding from the city council and (from 1983-8) its community workers were supported by central government (Lewis 2002). Increasingly, attempts were also made to create a national organisation – especially following 1988 and the Muslim mobilisation generated in response to the publication of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. By

---

[10] *Guardian* 16 February 2006
[11] http://www.interfaith.org.uk [accessed April 2008]

the mid 1990s, Philip Lewis was able to observe that 'There is now a plethora of bodies presuming to speak for all British Muslims' (Lewis 2002: 207).

By the late 1990s, with the active support of the Conservative Home Secretary, Michael Howard, the Muslim Council of Britain had emerged as the most significant link between British Muslims and the British government.[12] The product of years of negotiations, it was officially inaugurated in 1997, 6 months after the election of the Labour Government, with whom it developed a strong working relationship. 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 its critics – who were unhappy with the Islamist approach of the leadership and their links with groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan and Bangladesh - the MCB proved a well-organised lobbyist. It seemed all set to take on a role similar to that of the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

But the question of whom the government should choose as an appropriate Muslim partner has been put under the spotlight by the growing fears of 'Islamic terrorism'. 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 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.[13]

The MCB's high profile, and criticism of government policies, had inevitably attracted negative media attention – including John Ware's documentary entitled 'A Question of Leadership', which the BBC transmitted in August 2005 – 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 an appropriate organisation for the government to work with.

This came three months after Kelly had given a speech at the Westminster launch of the anti-Islamist Sufi Muslim Council,[14] whose claim to represent the silent majority of British Muslims has been met with considerable scepticism.[15] 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'.[16]

---

[12] Hansard 19 July 2007 Column 169WH

[13] http://www.communities.gov.uk/archived/speeches/corporate/values-responsibilities [accessed 12 November 2008]

[14] http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/sufi-muslim-council [accessed 27 March 2008]

[15] See, for example, 'From another shore – New Sufis for New Labour' by Shehla Kahn, *Muslim News* 25 August 2006

[16] Letter from Muhammad Abdul Bari, Secretary General of the MCB to Ruth Kelly 14 October 2006 downloaded from www.mcb.org.uk [accessed March 2008]

The Sufi Muslim Council is made up of traditionalists, and their first core principle is to adhere strongly to 'the classic Quranic teaching: "Obey God, obey His Prophet and obey those in authority over you".' 'This' they explain, 'is a fundamental principle to uphold the laws of the country in which one resides, with its safety and security in mind.' They oppose 'radicalised Islamist strains' and despite talking of 'tolerance', their condemnation of terrorism extends to 'all its forms, whether political, cultural, intellectual or ideological'.[17] Concepts such as 'intellectual terrorism' suggest alarming images of thought police.

Less than two years after the launch of the Sufi Muslim Council, British Muslims gained another high-profile government-approved organisation in the form of the Quilliam Foundation, launched to much fanfare in the British Museum. Speakers at the event even included the socialite, Jemima Khan, whose lifestyle hardly conforms to any sort of Islamic model, a choice perhaps not best calculated to win over potential radicals. The Foundation describes itself as a 'counter extremism think tank' founded by reformed ex-'extremists', and it 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, journalist, atheist, and self confessed 'secular liberal'), the director of Demos, the editor of Prospect, the director of Civitas and the Conservative MP, Michael Gove.[18] This project follows on from the widespread attention given to *The Islamist*, the book by the Foundation's Deputy Director, Ed Husain, which chronicles his personal religious and political journey. Husain has alienated many Muslims, who regard him as an apologist for the Iraq war, in light of his comment that 'Saddam Hussein effectively invited the US army to invade Iraq' (Husain 2007: 216). More worryingly, 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' (Husain 2007: 264, 278). His conflation of critical ideas and political dissidence with their expression in violent political action encourages a dangerously authoritarian response. This is the 'all forms of Islamism are unacceptable argument' - and it could easily be extended to attack other critical ideologies. It will have found echoes in sections of government and media that are already familiar with such views, and that have promoted the increasing curtailment of civil liberties in the name of the 'war on terror'.

Although the Foundation claims to be privately funded, it has clearly been given considerable practical support by government and, as its detractors point out, extraordinary access to important figures around the world. Shortly before the Foundation's launch, Inayat Bunglawala, who also acts as a spokesperson for the MCB, noted in an article in the *Guardian*:

> Some representatives of various UK Islamic groups were invited
> to see senior officials at the Department of Communities and Local
> Government recently to discuss the work they were doing with
> young people. Strong hints were dropped that they could obtain
> financial support from the government, but only if they were

---

[17] Sufi Muslim Council Core Principles, http://www.sufimuslimcouncil.org/aboutus.php [accessed 5 November 2008]
[18] http://www.quilliamfoundation.org [accessed 31 March 2008 and 8 November 2008]

prepared to work with - and thereby help lend credibility to - Ed Husain's soon to be launched Qulliam Foundation.[19]

The MCB is, though, 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 Secretary, Hazel Blears, in October 2007, although its four member steering committee included representatives from both the MCB and the MCB-affiliated Muslim Association of Britain.[20] The MCB leadership is walking a difficult tightrope between not upsetting government and not alienating their own base. Official recognition can bring power and resources, but also pressure to conform, and condemnation through association with unpopular policies. The different roles of helping Islamic organisations and representing Muslims to the outside world can also prove difficult to combine. Groups such as (the now defunct) Al Muhajiroun have always attempted to denigrate the MCB for their government links,[21] but if the Council are thought to be bending their principles in any way so as to conform with government expectations, they will lose much wider support. Public statements are received very differently by young working-class Muslims and the mainstream press, and internet blogs from all viewpoints are ready to pick up and spread every possible innuendo.

Meanwhile the merry-go-round has continued to turn, as government officials promote and nurture newly emerging groups or even put together groups of their own; and the search for those who can speak for the 'silent majority' has become a source of satire.[22] The strategy document, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, produced in May 2008, makes the government position clear:

> Violent extremists distort Islam in an attempt to justify their actions. We will facilitate debate and amplify mainstream voices against them. Government can help credible individuals to speak out. It can promote discussion and recognise and support people and organisations who speak authoritatively about Islam.[23]

Key activities mentioned in the document include, among others, supporting the Radical Middle Way project, establishing a Young Muslim's Consultative Group and supporting the establishment of a board of leading Muslim scholars. The accompanying 'Guide for Local Partners in England' explains how local authorities and others should also help appropriate individuals and groups to develop their skills in organisation and communication, and provide them with platforms for their views. The examples of local projects that have already been supported include an imam training programme, Islamic study circles and leadership programmes for young Muslims.[24]

The Radical Middle Way was started in 2005. It aims to reach young British Muslims through discussions and speaking tours with international Muslim scholars,

---

[19] *Guardian* 17 April 2008

[20] Blears' speech to Preventing Extremism Conference, 31 October 2007
http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/preventingextremism [accessed March 2008]

[21] An Al-Muhajiroun press release dated 22 September 2001 described them as a '*Sect* set up by the British government'.

[22] *Guardian* 16 May 2008

[23] HM Government (2008) *Preventing Violent Extremism* p 4

[24] HM Government (2008) *The Prevent Strategy: A Guide for Local Partners in England*

and through an up-to-the-minute internet presence, including Facebook and Youtube. Although it describes itself as 'a Muslim grassroots initiative' and 'fiercely independent' it is largely funded by the Foreign Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government.[25]

The Young Muslims Advisory Group was launched by the government in October 2008. In the government press release, the 22 young Muslims officially appointed to represent, empower and inspire their community are described by Hazel Blears, Communities Secretary, as 'the next generation of Muslim community leaders'.[26]

'Proper' Islam

The authors of *Preventing Violent Extremism* state, 'We are clear that it is not the role of Government to seek to change any religion'. But they go on,

> However, where theology is being distorted to justify violent extremist rhetoric or activity and threaten both Muslims and non-Muslims, Government should reinforce faith understanding and thereby build resilience.[27]

The search for appropriately 'moderate' Muslims does not stop at the selection and promotion of sympathetic partners. If there are not enough 'moderates', the government is ready to help create more; and if government does not seek to change Islam directly, they seem ready to help others to do so. Already, since 2004, immigration law has been used to ensure that all ministers of religion coming to Britain from abroad meet a minimum English language standard; and in July 2008, the BBC reported that the government 'is to fund a board of Islamic theologians in an attempt to sideline violent extremists.' Twenty 'leading thinkers' will be brought together at Oxford and Cambridge Universities to 'focus on examining issues relating to Islam's place in Britain and [a Muslim's] obligations as a citizen'.[28] I would not, of course, want to criticise the idea of government funding for academic research, but there has been a growing tendency across the social sciences to direct that research into providing support for government policy (Glynn 2008: 166). Reactions to the proposal were obviously mixed. The BBC reported qualified support from Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, a prominent MCB member, but opposition from Muhammad Abdul Bari, the MCB's Secretary General. The Islamist scholar, Azzam Tamimi, interviewed on BBC Radio called it a 'naïve initiative', explaining,

> …credibility is something that people decide, not governments. The government actually erodes the credibility of people by naming them as members of such government appointed commissions.

Hazel Blears, defending the government's plans, refused to engage with the idea that government involvement might put off just those people whom they most wanted to reach. Instead she claimed that what they were doing was bolstering the Muslim mainstream, and that 'People really do want - especially the young people - to get a *proper* interpretation of a *peaceful* Islamic faith.'[29] This (which chimes with the

---

[25] http://www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/about_us.php [accessed 29 March 2008];
http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/fco-in-action/casestudies/young-muslims-uk [accessd 12 November 2008]
[26] http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/987399 [accessed 12 November 2008]
[27] HM Government (2008) *Preventing Violent Extremism* p 4
[28] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7512626.stm [accessed 13 November 2008]
[29] *Today Programme*, BBC Radio 4, 18 July 2008 (her emphasis)

Home Secretary's earlier references to ideology based on 'a misrepresentation of religion'[30]) does indeed suggest a certain naïvety, not least in the idea that it is possible to reach a single 'correct', or 'proper', interpretation of any religion.

Hopes and fears

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' (Home Office Faith Communities Unit 2004: 3) and that 'Muslim identity politics can support and encourage integration' (Choudhury 2007: 5) seems, at best, ingenuous, 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[31]), 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, where there is already considerable anti-Muslim feeling. 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 encouraging social conservatism and strong hierarchical organisation, and through the old 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 huge 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'; there are problems in addressing the vast diversity of Islamic tradition and practice, 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 over-riding 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' (Choudhury 2007: 6). This has, of course, been used as an argument for promoting 'moderate' Islam, but would 'moderate' Islam provide the opportunity for fundamental change that most of these people are looking for? Like radicals of all kinds, they 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, even dramatic,

---

[30] Jacqui Smith's speech at the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence, January 2008 (http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/Speeches/sp-hs-terrorism-keynote-jan-08 [accessed 14 November 2008])

[31] Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, put forward his ideas in a Lecture at the Royal Courts of Justice on 7 February 2008, entitled 'Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective' http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575 [accessed March 2008]

alternative to the inequalities and decadence of capitalist consumerism. Can a more liberal Islam provide this? Even Tariq Ramadan's carefully argued and theologically 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 (Ramadan 2004: 174-199).

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 and who worked for the far-left Militant Tendency in the 1980s, observed that, despite the obvious differences – especially in the proposed solutions - it reminded him of Militant meetings. It was 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:

> 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 (Glynn 2002: 985).

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 and frustrations. 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 – as exemplified by the high number of Jews in Russian revolutionary movements in 1917. 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'.

Philip Lewis, in *Young British and Muslim*, quotes an interview with the writer Hanif Kureshi from 1995, in which he observed the big change among British Pakistanis in further education colleges from when he had been a student twenty years earlier:

> In my day we were mostly leftists of some variety, but the collapse
> of Eastern European Communism has made that very difficult.
> Now they are turning to religion.[32]

It is not just Eastern European Communism (which had its own problems) that has collapsed, but an effective Left movement of any kind.

---

[32] Kureshi, interviewed by *Newsweek* 29 May 1995, quoted by Lewis (2007, 129).

Besides this example, though, 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 (Choudhury 2007). 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 a British newspaper that some strands of Islamic thought were simply provoked into being by the 'self-evident superiority' and success of modern Western values.[33] 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 (1980).

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 at persuading the government to stop being in denial as to its impact), and not only at the alienating effects of authoritarian anti-terrorism policies. 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. If we want to create real spaces of hope, then we need organisations prepared to campaign on structural socio-economic issues. These are the issues that have to be addressed in order to bring hope to everyone.

References

Allen, C. (2008) *Housing Market Renewal and Social Class*, Routledge, London and New York

Choudhury, T. (2007) '*The Role of Muslim Identity Politics in Radicalisation,*' paper commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government, London

Collins, C. (2007) ''The Scottish Executive is Open for Business': The Royal Bank of Scotland, and the Intensification of the Neo-Liberal Agenda in Scotland' in Cumbers, A. and Whittam, G. (eds.) *Reclaiming the Economy: Alternatives to Market Fundamentalism*, Scottish Left Review Press, Glasgow

Fishman, W. J. (1975) *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914*, Duckworth, London.

---

[33] *Observer* 17 June 2007

Geddes, M. (2006) 'Partnership and the limits to local Governance in England: Institutionalist Analysis and Neoliberalism', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, 1

Glynn, S. (2008) 'Soft-selling gentrification?' *Urban Research and Practice* 1, 2

Glynn, S. (2002) 'Bengali Muslims: the new East End radicals?' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25, 6

Husain, E. (2007) *The Islamist*, Penguin, London

Kundnani, A. (2008) 'Islamism and the Roots of Liberal Rage', *Race and Class* 50, 2

Kymlicka, W. (2008) Reply to review symposium on *Multicultural Odysseys*, *Ethnicities* 8

Lewis, P. (2007) *Young, British and Muslim*, Continuum, London

Lewis, P. (2002) *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims*, IB Tauris, London

Modood, T. (2007) *Multiculturalism: a Civic Idea*, Polity, Cambridge

Ramadan, T. (2004) *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam,* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Shari'ati, A. (1980) *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique,* (Translated by R. Campbell) Mizan Press, Berkeley