

Muslim Organisations, Multiculturalism and the UK State¹

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Introduction:

In this paper I examine the changing relationship between Muslim organisations and the State in the United Kingdom. The first part of my analysis presents an overview of the ways in which the structure of the British State, in terms of legislation, policymaking and the existence of an established church, has provided the framework within which Muslims have organised themselves since the 1960s. In particular, my account examines the New Labour government's emphasis on civic renewal and the related emergence of what I call the 'faith relations industry' at a time of greater securitisation since '9/11' and '7/7'. I also trace a shift in the main focus of Muslim leaders' engagement with the State, from more ethnically-oriented grassroots networks at the local level from the 1960s, to a more 'professionalized' national focus for representation of Muslims as 'Muslims' at the national level since the Rushdie Affair in 1989. My paper culminates with an examination of the rise and fall of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), a Muslim umbrella organisation which was inaugurated in 1997. Despite being courted by New Labour prior to '9/11' as a likely solution to the stated longstanding problem of finding a single Muslim interlocutor for UK government, since '7/7' especially the MCB has fallen out of favour with government. Indeed, because of its position on UK foreign policy and uncertainties about the Islamist heritage of many of its affiliates, as well as its willingness and ability to challenge the rhetoric of radicalisation, the State has recently sought to engage more plural platforms for Muslim representation.

From 'Race' to 'Faith' Relations: the UK State, Multiculturalism and the Established Church

As members of the Commonwealth, South Asian heritage Muslims – who make up around 70-75% of Britain's 1.6 million Islamic population – became *de facto* 'citizens' as soon as they settled in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s. However, immigration legislation since 1962 has progressively reproduced narrower conceptions of 'citizenship' (Husband, 1994). Indeed, recalling the administration of colonial affairs, state management of non-European immigrants in Britain has been organized in terms of the pragmatic recognition of essentialized 'cultural communities' rather than individual civil rights (Baumann, 1999). Anti-

discrimination legislation of 1966 and 1976 established the racial and ethnic basis of this paradigm and witnessed the emergence of a so-called 'race relations industry' to oversee minority affairs. As members of 'ethnic' groups, Jews and Sikhs were afforded protection by the law, but not Muslims, given the multiethnic and transnational nature of Islam.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, 'race' relations in Britain have also been administered in terms of state policymaking under the rubric of 'multiculturalism'. As Parekh (2000: 42) suggested in the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, the main political debate in this respect has been between 'nationalists' and 'liberals', both of whom emphasize the importance of social cohesion over plurality. 'Nationalists' have advocated an 'assimilationism' which maintains that 'minorities' should conform to British 'norms'. In contrast, 'liberals' have posited a public space which claims to be ideologically 'neutral' but is still overwhelmingly secular and prioritizes 'equality' at the expense of 'difference'. However, with South Asian heritage minorities especially advancing religion as a major basis for public recognition, Parekh (2000: 48) concluded that if Britain was to become a more inclusive and harmonious society, it must expose itself to a conversation between liberalism and greater pluralism. Indeed, in a postcolonial age of 'transnational citizenship', he asked the radical question, could Britain recognize itself as, a 'multicultural post-nation' (2000: 39)?

Perhaps not surprisingly, Parekh's report was not well received by 'nationalists' or 'liberals'. Moreover, the possibility of any progressive debate about the future of multi-ethnic Britain was quickly overtaken by local and global 'crises' when, in the summer of 2001, there were disorders involving Pakistani Muslim heritage youth in the 'northern towns' of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, events quickly followed by the attacks of '9/11'. By the end of 2001 the New Labour government had articulated a new concern for 'community cohesion' in a series of its own reports.² Without reference to Parekh (2000), Home Office Minister, John Denham, proposed the need for a debate about 'shared values' and 'common citizenship' in order to 'minimise the risk of further disorder' (2002: 1-2). Denham also maintained that the aim of the new policy of 'community cohesion' would not be to revisit assimilationism (2002: 21) but rather to promote a commitment to 'civic identity' (2002: 11-12) and 'civic renewal' (2002: 18). Here, it is possible to detect the influence of the 'communitarian' political philosophy that achieved prominence in the USA under the Clinton presidency.³ Indeed, ironically echoing the New Right backlash against local authorities' 'multicultural' policies in the 1980s (Husband, 1994), here was a UK-based communitarian

² These are available at: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/cohesion/keydocs.html.

³ For an assessment of the relationship between 'communitarianism' and New Labour, see Goes (2000) and Bevir (2005). This is further explored in a lecture by former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/civilrennewagenda.pdf.

¹ The main body of this article is reproduced from sections of McLoughlin (2005a) although the material was significantly updated 2007-08.

critique of the 'old' Labour culture of 'rights', now said to have neglected citizens' 'responsibilities' and so reinforced ethnic 'segregation'.

In such a context, and with Islamophobia and appeals to the clash of civilisations on the rise, any remaining taboos against publicly challenging aspects of minority culture or religion understood to inhibit 'cohesion' or represent a threat to security were finally broken. In February 2002, a Home Office White Paper, 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven' proposed a new citizenship ceremony for Britain and an oath of allegiance (implemented 2004), language tests (especially for ministers of religion including *imams* – again implemented 2004) and a debate on transcontinental and forced marriages (Forced Marriage Act 2007).⁴ Together with a raft of new anti- and counter-terrorism measures, this means that Muslim communities have been subject to unprecedented levels of intervention and regulation by the British State. Building on the already existing Anti-Terrorism Act (2000), the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Bill (2001) and then the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2005) proscribed specific organisations, allowed for increased powers to stop and search and of detention, as well as creating the new offences of incitement to terrorism and seeking or providing terrorist training (see Birt, 2005).

Of course, Britain is somewhat unusual amongst liberal democracies in that religion has an 'established' position in the structure of the secular state (Modood, 1997). The Anglican Church has a pivotal place in narrations of Englishness and its complex relations with political power are reflected still in public institutions from the Monarchy to the House of Lords and the large number of voluntary-aided state schools. Another outcome of Anglicanism's historical privilege has been that no system of formally recognizing 'other faiths' exists in the UK. Even in the context of growing pluralism it has been the Church of England that has brokered relations between the State and other religions. For its part, and for all its own domestication to the State, Anglicanism is distrustful of the secular and can see the advantage of ecumenical and multi-faith alliances. Indeed, in making claims for public recognition in the spaces and guises allowed and encouraged by a secularising society, Muslim organisations have undoubtedly benefited from the presence of an established Church. Thus there is Muslim support for 'establishment' both as a symbolic recognition of God's sovereignty and a more tangible critique of secularism's presumed 'neutrality' (Modood, 1997). Lacking the capacities and infrastructure of the Church of England, Muslims have learned how to negotiate with the State as was the case during the successful campaign for a 'religion' question at the 2001 Census.⁵

Even beyond the specialized sphere of multi-faith relations, however, there has been a new openness to religion – or at least its more social or civic versions (Birt, 2006) – in State governance over the last two decades or so. Against the

context of Thatcherism's disavowal of community and riots in the inner-cities, the Church of England marked a return to social activism with the 1985 report, *Faith in the City*. While 'other faiths' were not a major concern of the report it did identify ways in which the Church could facilitate their engagement in the public sphere. So it was, in 1992, that still under a Conservative administration, the Department of Environment, in collaboration with the Church and the Interfaith Network for the UK (founded 1987), formed the Inner Cities Religious Council (ICRC) (Taylor, 2002).⁶ With a view to tapping into religious communities' resources – people, networks, organizations, buildings – as a part of urban regeneration, the ICRC provided the first government forum for establishment led multi-faith representation and consultation on a national level although it did not command significant resources.

Since 1997, when New Labour came to power, government has engaged 'faith' much more publicly and controversially so much so that it is possible to speak of a 'faith relations industry' (McLoughlin, 2005a). 'Communitarian' thinking regards religious communities as a particular source of social capital, especially in deprived areas where other forms of social infrastructure may be absent (Putnam, 2000). Indeed, in New Labour's first year of office, the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions issued advice to all local authorities on 'involving faith communities' in neighbourhood renewal.⁷ By October 2003, 'the religious issues section of the Home Office Race Equality Unit was reconstituted to incorporate the new Faith Communities Unit' (FCU), suggesting that a civic version of 'faith' was becoming as important as 'race' in the state's management of minority ethnic affairs.⁸ Legitimated by the 2001 Census, which recorded 76.8 per cent religious affiliation in Britain,⁹ the faith relations industry therefore exists to: i) engage the many (socially excluded) non-European minorities in Britain (especially 'Muslims') whose principal mode of communal identification and organization has been 'faith' based; ii) facilitate government consultation with the main faith groups as stakeholders and bearers of social capital; and iii) promote 'community cohesion' through interfaith activity. In this discourse 'good' faith – which promotes integration and convergence in the context of continuing domestication by the secular state (Baumann 1996; Taylor 2002; Birt, 2006) – is also distinguished from 'bad' religion – which is disruptive and divisive

⁶ See, www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/page.asp?id=524. ok

⁷ www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbpol_608134.hcsp. N.B. The ICRC subsequently moved to Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM).

⁸ See the recommendations of the steering group on the engagement between government and faith communities at: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs3/workingtog_faith040329.pdf. N.B. In May 2006 the FCU was moved to the new Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and renamed the Cohesion and Faiths Unit. Also based at the DCLG, the ICRC was renamed Faith Communities Consultative Council.

⁹ For the main 2001 Census data on religion see www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/faith/index.html.

⁴ Available at: www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm53/5387/cm5387.pdf.

⁵ See, for example, the MCB's account of the lobbying process at: www.mcb.org.uk/census2001.pdf.

of this project and so can not be considered 'real' religion at all. At the same time, there are still many elements of 'harder' secularism in government and Britain's public culture per se, something reflected in continued opposition to the legislation on incitement to religious hatred which was finally passed in 2006 after two previously unsuccessful attempts.¹⁰

From the Local to the National: 'Old' and 'New' Muslim Leaderships in Britain

Various forms of communal organising have been evident amongst Muslims in Britain since the 1960s, from informal networks of patri-lineal kinship groups and regional associations to elected councillors and anti-racist Asian workers and youth organisations. However, for Muslims as 'Muslims', mosques have been the most important grassroots institutions, with numbers mushrooming especially since the reuniting of families by the 1980s (McLoughlin, 2005b). Although it may not remain the case in the current climate, the British State has hitherto stopped short of officially recognizing existing, or creating newly elected, 'Muslim' representative institutions or bodies as in some other European countries. Nevertheless, at the local level in the 1980s, and on the national level since the late 1990s, government has periodically leant public legitimacy to un-elected Muslim bodies such as Councils of Mosques, mainly through consultation but sometimes by channelling resources in their direction.

Not unlike the leaders of the Pakistan movement, leaders representing the Muslim 'community' in the public space of Britain have usually been 'lay' rather than religious specialists although, as we shall see, this is beginning to change.¹¹ The 'authority' of the lay leadership has drawn upon a 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) that overlaps with, but is distinctive from, the traditional leadership associated with the '*ulama* and Sufi *shaykhs*. Amongst the first generation of economic migrants, the men who emerged as the chairmen of mosque committees in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and subsequently acted as the interlocutors of local government, often shared certain characteristics. These characteristics at once reflected their South Asian cultural heritage and yet set them apart from other first generation migrants, the majority of whom were illiterate and of rural peasant farming origin: membership of a powerful and well-established regional and/or patri-lineal kinship (*biradari*) group; a reputation as a well connected and effective political operator – a 'strong man'; some limited education,

including basic competence in English; and, finally, experience of engagement with members of 'wider society', perhaps through a public service occupation (for example, transport) or, more usually, a small business (for example, owning a shop or restaurant).

This sort of cultural capital allowed a first generation of grassroots Muslim leaders to build up mosque institutions which sustained the life-worlds, and maintained the localized hegemony, of dislocated male migrants in particular (McLoughlin, 2005b). For this segment of the Muslim population, the 'resources' of the Islamic tradition were selectively employed to maintain ethnic boundaries, legitimate the authority of South Asian cultural 'norms' and reinforce conservative adaptation strategies. Moreover, within the 'doing deals culture' (Ouseley, 2001: 10) operated by some local councils as they sought to recognize large Muslim populations in public institutions such as schools, the engagement of mosques and their leaders has routinely been limited to competition for scarce resources, securing 'rights' and participating as required in multicultural photo-calls to 'celebrate the community' (McLoughlin, 2005b). In this context 'Islam' became incorporated as part of the dominant discourse of what Baumann (1999) calls 'difference multiculturalism' and 'engagement' was limited to a rhetorical transaction between community leaders and the state. There was limited impact on or interest in what went on behind the scenes in the privacy of the diasporic public sphere.

More than any event, however, the Rushdie Affair of 1988-89 illuminated the strengths and weaknesses of a Muslim community leadership grounded in grassroots networks and associations. If the early 1980s witnessed the local state consult representatives of Islam on questions of public recognition, by the end of the decade the numbers of 'Muslim' councillors was also beginning to rise (Lewis, 1994). However, there was not a single Muslim Member of Parliament and no national body with the authority to represent Muslims to an increasingly centralized government. A national umbrella organization, the Union of Muslim Organisations of the UK and Eire (UMO), had been set up in 1970, but as Nielsen remarks it was 'essentially irrelevant because all the major aspects of government which affected Muslims were based at local level until well into the 1980s' (1999: 40).

Having been informed of the offending passages in *The Satanic Verses* by co-religionists in India (Ahsan and Kidwai, 1993), an alliance of mainly 'reformist Islamist' and 'neo-traditionalist' heritage elites recognized both the realities and the opportunities of this situation. Feeling that they possessed the professional, scholarly and social skills necessary to do business with government ministers, senior civil servants, publishers and the media, the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) was formed in London. However, despite the letter-writing, petitions, telephone-calls and meetings, the UKACIA's peaceful lobbying failed to make an impact on the Conservative government of the day. Indeed, this

¹⁰ The Racial and Religious Hatred Act came partially into force on 1 October 2007 having had various restrictions placed upon it by amendments imposed in the House of Lords. The previous attempts at legislation had been made as part of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Bill (2001) and the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill (2004-5).

¹¹ However, a number of younger Muslim '*alims* (scholars) in the Deobandi tradition especially - who combine classical training with higher degrees from British universities - now speak on community affairs in their localities and work as chaplains in public institutions or through organisations like the MCB on a national level.

'new' leadership was eventually outmanoeuvred by the 'old' grassroots' leadership associated with Bradford Council for Mosques (BCM) which had mobilized working class Muslims during the *halal* meat and Honeyford affairs earlier in the decade (McLoughlin, 2002). Strategies of 'accommodation' having failed, BCM resorted to protest and publicly burned Rushdie's book, something the UKACIA's middle-class leadership neither sanctioned nor approved of.

Into the 1990s, the UKACIA took its campaigning to the legal system, arguing in the High Court that Britain's blasphemy laws, still protecting only the Church of England, should be reformed and extended to defend Islam. While this project, too, was unsuccessful, the organization doggedly persisted with engaged representational strategies on the national level, seeking recognition especially in terms of legislation on 'religious' (as well as racial and ethnic) discrimination (UKACIA, 1993). Indeed, all Muslim activists were disappointed by their slow rate of progress during this period. However, himself frustrated at the continuing divisions between Islamic organizations, Conservative Home Secretary, Michael Howard, advised Muslim activists to speak with one voice should they wish to exercise more influence over government (*Q-News*, 25 March 1994).

Within a couple of months this intervention had prompted the UKACIA to form a National Interim Committee on Muslim Affairs. Having consulted over 1000 organizations on the need for a new national umbrella body (*The Muslim News*, 31 May 2002), and studied the constitutions of similar organizations such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the committee finally inaugurated the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) in 1997. Regarding its constituency as 'British citizens with an Islamic heritage', the stated aims and objectives of the MCB included 'a more enlightened appreciation of Islam and Muslims in the wider society' and – consistent with the civic model of religion modelled by the established Church – 'better community relations and work[ing] for the good of society as a whole'.¹²

The Rise and Fall of the Muslim Council of Britain:

Ten years after its inauguration the MCB is still run by key office bearers and a skeleton support staff who, for the most part, work on a voluntary basis.¹³ Its first two general secretaries, Sir Iqbal Sacranie OBE (1998-2000, 2002-04, 2004-06) and Yousef Bhailok (2000-02), were able to assume the role only because they were prosperous middle-aged businessmen. The present incumbent, Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari MBE (2006-08), is an educationalist, and former airforce officer, with a

doctorate in physics (*Open Democracy* 3 July 2006). Indeed, a cursory glance at the biographies of its leadership begins to reveal the particular cultural capital of the MCB's most senior leadership all of whom were born abroad. Sacranie and Bhailok are of 'African-Asian' ('twice-migrant') and 'Gujerati Indian' origin respectively, both relatively small but significant 'ethnic' segments of the British-Muslim population exhibiting a more upwardly mobile trajectory than the larger 'Pakistani' or 'Bangladeshi' constituencies. Abdul Bari is of Bangladeshi heritage but hails from near Dhaka, the capital, rather than the more peripheral district of Sylhet where most British-Bengalis can trace their roots. All three general secretaries have experience not only of grassroots mosque institutions but also organizations with national profiles in sectors such as charity and education (*The Common Good*, 1(2): 2; *The Daily Telegraph* 10 November 2007). Notably, Sacranie – general secretary for more than half of the life of the MCB – was also Joint-Convenor of the UKACIA.¹⁴

While Sacranie and Bhailok have associations with the 'neo-traditionalist' Deobandi tradition – which remains well-represented amongst on the MCB central working committee – many other MCB activists are associated with 'reformist Islamist', and especially Jama'at-i Islami (JI) related, organizations.¹⁵ These include UK Islamic Mission, the Islamic Foundation, Young Muslims UK (YMUK) and the Islamic Society of Britain (ISB). Abdul Bari is also currently chairman of East London mosque which has a similar reformist Islamist heritage to these organisations in the Bengali tradition of JI. Indeed, based on an analysis of the membership of the MCB's Central Working Committee available at www.mcb.org.uk in January 2003 (McLoughlin 2005a), I estimated that one-third to one-half of members' affiliations could be described as 'reformist Islamist' heritage.¹⁶ This is a pattern that remains largely unchanged in 2007-08, most especially amongst nationally elected appointments. Moreover, the contents of the MCB's occasional (now discontinued) newsletter, *The Common Good*, revealed that it was the activities of such organizations that had the highest profile (McLoughlin, 2005a).

Several years ago the British-Muslim magazine, *Q News*, labelled the MCB as 'lassi Islamists' (March-April 2002: 22-3) – a *halal* version of New Labour's 'champagne socialists'. Such a representation is not entirely fair. JI-related organizations may be home to a significant body of activists who have the requisite aptitude and energy for the MCB's political work but they are

¹² See www.mcb.org.uk/aim.html and, more recently, Secretary General's Annual Report 2007-08 <http://www.mcb.org.uk/uploads/SGAGM2008.pdf>.

¹³ My brief account of the MCB here is based mainly upon a mapping of the organization's website, www.mcb.org.uk. The website houses general information about the MCB, its press releases, a list of affiliates, membership and committee details, news of particular campaigns, weekly updates and back copies of its occasional newsletter, *The Common Good* (now discontinued),

¹⁴ A national newspaper quickly 'promoted' Sacranie to 246th 'most powerful person in Britain' (*The Observer*, 24 October 1999).

¹⁵ JI was founded in pre-Partition India by Sayyid Mawdudi (d.1979), one of the pre-eminent ideologues of first generation Islamism in the twentieth century. After Partition, Mawdudi moved to Pakistan and the movement developed distinctive branches in the new nations of the subcontinent.

¹⁶ N.B. 'no member body and its branches could have more than five of its members elected to the Central Working Committee' (*The Common Good*, 1(3): 2).

undoubtedly in transition in the UK even the label reformist Islamism embraces a number of developing positions. In its early days especially, the organization also provided an outlet for a more unaffiliated, *new* rising middle-class of young, educated British-Muslims first politicized by events such as the Rushdie Affair, the Gulf War, Bosnia or 'the War on Terror'.¹⁷ To some extent, then, the MCB created a space for multi-ethnic, cross-sectarian alliances which prioritised an overarching Muslim politics of identity. However, unable to distance itself entirely from the ideologies of the movements in which many of its activists first cut their teeth, it has never attracted more than a few activists with links to the Sufi and Barelwi heritage which dominates amongst British-Pakistanis.

The MCB's consolidation of a 'new', professionalized and media-friendly Muslim representative body coincided with the election of New Labour in 1997. As we have seen, the party has been committed to an important role for faith in the more general project of civic renewal at a time when social capital was perceived to be in decline. However, as the elections of 1992 and 1997 had shown, it was also no longer in a position to take the votes of traditionally Labour-voting Muslims for granted (Nielsen, 2001). In any case, having received a positive response to its initial enquiries, the MCB soon found itself invited to regular meetings and receptions at the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, even representing the latter as a part of delegations to Muslim countries (McLoughlin, 2003). Various government departments, agencies and civil society organizations, all now required to engage multifaith (as well as multiracial and multiethnic) 'partners' as part of the 'stakeholder society', also started to consult the MCB which provided user-friendly access to the necessary Muslim 'voices'.

By May 2004 the MCB had 395 affiliates at local, regional and national levels.¹⁸ Seeing itself as the 'first port of call' for government,¹⁹ it could certainly point to an increasing recognition of 'Muslims' on the national level since 1997.²⁰ However, the changing place of faith in the policymaking of the British government has been equally, if not more important, in shaping these developments. Moreover, the MCB was just one amongst many lobbies at Whitehall and was unable to significantly influence 'higher' arenas of debate such as foreign policy (Radcliffe, 2004). 'Loyalty' was always going to be part of New Labour's attempt to incorporate a 'moderate' Muslim leadership. So, while the MCB supported military intervention in Kosovo during 1999 (*The Muslim News*, 28 May 1999), and issued a statement of condemnation within hours of '9/11', its

'failure' to sell the war in Afghanistan to British-Muslims in late 2001,²¹ resulted eventually in the government publicly questioning the very 'authority' it had taken a key role in ascribing. Birt (2005), for example, argues that while attempts to 'groom' the MCB ultimately failed, this provoked 'coded' public messages from New Labour 'spin doctors' expressing 'disappointment' at the failure of the 'moderates' to marginalize an 'extremist' fringe.

For the MCB, such experiences highlighted the problems of state patronage. Indeed, all minority leaderships must strike a balance between strategies of accommodation and protest (Werbner, 1991). So it was then that the organization was to belatedly take a more public role in supporting the Stop the War Coalition. One of its own affiliates, the 'reformist Islamist' Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the Muslim Brothers) related, Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), had taken a lead in the alliance alongside the Socialist Workers' Party, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and others.²² At the same time, despite facing huge external demands from the state and wider society, the MCB was run (and continues to be run) on 'meagre resources'.²³ From fellow Muslim organizations it was also facing further criticism of its tendency to seek to compete with, duplicate or exercise control over their work (see, for example, *Q-News*, June 2004, in relation to the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia).²⁴ Certainly, the MCB had exhibited delusions of grandeur when it announced its own 'cabinet' in June 2003. Since its beginnings in the Rushdie Affair, it had played a significant role in adapting the liberal public reason of 'democracy', 'the rule of law' and 'race equality' (Modood, 2002; Radcliffe, 2004) to the project of Muslim identity politics. However, like anti-racism before it (Gilroy, 1992), it had also contributed to the fetishising and absolutising of 'Muslim' difference in Britain.

The UK State and Muslim Organisations After '7/7'

In 2007-08 the MCB remains the largest Muslim umbrella organisation but since the London bombings its integrity and capability as a 'moderate' leadership has been ever more seriously challenged. Despite the organisation's denunciation of the attacks as having no sanction in Islam and its reaffirmation of a commitment to dialogue and non-separation,²⁵ the MCB has been the subject of a number of media exposes. These include an article in *The Observer* (14 August 2005) and a BBC

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Sher Khan, Chair, MCB Public Affairs Committee, 26 June 2003.

¹⁸ See MCB Annual Report 2003-04 at: www.mcb.org.uk/agm2004.pdf.

¹⁹ See the Secretary General's Introduction to the MCB Annual Report 2002 at: www.mcb.org.uk.

²⁰ 1998, for example, saw Muslims achieve equality with Anglicans, Catholics and Jews when the first state-aided Muslim primary schools were established. In 1999 the first civil service post directed at the Muslim community was announced, an Islamic advisor to the prisons, where Muslim numbers have more than doubled in recent years.

²¹ See 'press releases' under 'media' at www.mcb.org.uk: 'MCB expresses total condemnation of terrorist attacks' (11 September 2001) and 'MCB opposes War on Afghans – Insists on Justice' (9 October 2001).

²² See Secretary General's Annual Report 2002-03 at: www.mcb.org.uk/2002-3.pdf.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Both Nielsen (2001) and Birt (2005), for example, report annoyance at attempts to assume the ownership of others' initiatives to establish a Muslim adviser on prisons (1999) and a temporary consulate in Mecca for British *hajjis* (2000).

²⁵ See Secretary General's Annual Report 2005-06 at: <http://www.mcb.org.uk/uploads/SECGEN.pdf>

Panorama programme ('A Question of Leadership', 21 August 2005). Such investigations are not entirely new – see 'Who Speaks for Muslims', Channel 4, April 2002²⁶ – but they do reflect the way in which '7/7' has made previously hidden diasporic and transnational Muslim public spheres subject to a new level of visibility and scrutiny unknown even after '9/11'. In this respect, the MCB's failure and / or inability to challenge the moral, social and political demonisation of the West in the rhetoric of some of its affiliates was seen as especially problematic despite government itself turning a blind eye to the settlement of radicals in 'Londonistan' during the 1990s. The MCB's insistence on the legitimacy of violent resistance to occupation and injustice was also highlighted. Indeed Sacranie himself was attacked for attending a memorial in London for Shaykh Yasin, the founder of Hamas, while at the same time refusing to attend Holocaust Memorial Day because of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. In this respect the dilemmas of the MCB reflect the classic predicament of diasporas (Werbner, 2002), a double consciousness of local and global political loyalties which finds expression in a constant juggling of discourses of both cohesion and dissent.

Since the election of New Labour in 1997, different departments of UK State have had quite different attitudes to, and relationships with, the MCB and other Muslim bodies. For example, with its everyday experience of overseas diplomacy, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was always seen as having a more sophisticated understanding of Muslim affairs.²⁷ However, following '7/7', while there was an immediate move to ban organisations whose revolutionary rhetoric was seen as glorifying terrorism,²⁸ Prime Minister, Tony Blair, also eventually moved to adopt a more critical approach to the MCB (*The Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 2006). Shifting from an earlier position post '9/11' where Islam was clearly distinguished from terrorism in state discourse – and taking his cue to some extent from more self-critical Muslim voices²⁹ – he spoke publicly and deliberately of a tension between Islam and modernity, as well as the need for religious reform and Muslims' false sense of historic grievance against the West (*The Guardian*, 4 July 2006). Instructing Secretary of State for the DCLG, Ruth Kelly, to work with organisations other than the MCB, she subsequently made

it clear that government was intentionally 're-balancing' its partnerships with, and funding of, a range of Muslim organisations ('Britain; Our Values, Our Responsibilities', 11 October 2006). Defending the accusation that UK foreign policy is anti-Muslim and pointing to the state's commitment to anti-religious hatred legislation, Kelly insisted that support would be forthcoming only for those proactively working for integration and able to tolerate offence, as well as exerting genuine influence at the heart of their communities.³⁰

Indeed, just a few months earlier, with official support and encouragement, a direct rival to the MCB – the Sufi Muslim Council (SMC) – had been launched at a high profile event attended by various mainstream politicians (*BBC News Online* 9 July 2006). The SMC has links to the British Muslim Forum (BMF), an umbrella organisation for around 300 (mainly Pakistani Barelwi mosques) in the Midlands and northern England which has also featured in the work of the British Council. Supposedly representing the 'silent majority' of moderate Muslims who follow expressions of classical Islam rather than its more political (or Islamist) manifestations, in anointing the SMC government seemed ignorant of the fact that at different times and in different places Sufis, too, have been prominent in *jihadi* resistance. It is too early to say whether the SMC can succeed where others have failed in aggregating the fragmented networks of loyalty organised around particular sub-orders and *shaykhs*. Nevertheless, like '9/11' in America, '7/7' in Britain has been a catalyst for the specifically religious leadership of this hitherto reluctant constituency to enter the national public sphere in a bid to wrest dominant discourses on Islam from violent extremism. In the longer term, the SMC is unlikely to be able to avoid the predicaments of diasporic double consciousness exemplified by the MCB even if it is more prepared to accommodate itself to the state. Certainly, it has appeared happy to endorse the government view that established Muslim organisations have not yet done enough to counter radicalisation in their communities, seeing this above all as a problem of Muslims' access to the right theological resources and guidance. Alongside pictures of Sufi masters meeting various public figures, the SMC website includes warnings against the deviant extremism of Saudi funded Wahhabism and variants of Salafism – movements which also happen to be known for their anti-Sufi credentials.

The State's concern to work with a range of moderate Muslim organisations and promote more wide-ranging co-operation between them has also been articulated in the initiatives emerging from various recommendations on how best to tackle extremism announced in November 2005. These recommendations were

²⁶ Senior MCB officials including Bhailok were criticised for sharing a conference platform with Hamas. The suggestion was that although presenting themselves as 'Muslim moderates', the MCB actually has within its ranks many with radical sympathies. Similarly, younger MCB activists, Mahmud al-Rashid and Inayat Bunglawallah, who have come up through the ranks of YMUK and the ISB, were challenged for their association with the popular Muslim youth magazine *Trends*. It was alleged that during the 1990s the publication published 'anti-Semitic', or at least 'anti-Zionist', material.

²⁷ Indeed, with FCO approval, two MCB representatives went to Iraq in 2004 to plead for the life of British hostage Kenneth Bigley before he was eventually murdered.

²⁸ The threat to ban radical Islamists Hizb al-Tahrir (HT) was never imposed although it was on a more vehement offshoot of HT, al-Muhajiroun.

²⁹ See Lewis (2007) for short case studies including the City Circle, Q-News and the Muslim Youthwork Foundation.

³⁰ Groups reflecting other Muslim constituencies in Britain have also begun to organise. These include the Fatimah Women's Network, Progressive British Muslims and Muslims for Secular Democracy (*Open Democracy* 3 July 2006). In Early 2008 former radicals such as Ed Hussain – author of *The Islamist* (2007) – formed the Quilliam Foundation (named after a well-known convert to Islam of the early twentieth century) which styles itself as a 'counter-extremism think-tank'.

made by the seven 'Preventing Extremism Together' working groups which were established immediately following the London bombings. One such initiative seeking to reclaim the idea of radicalism for a more progressive agenda is the Radical Middle Way (RMW), a collective of multi-ethnic, cross-denominational organisations (including some of broadly Sufi and reformist Islamist heritage) which have a track record of working with Muslim students and youth.³¹ Funded in large part by government through the DCLG and other means, the RMW has organised road-shows of Islamic scholars in the classical tradition to tour Britain's cities in an effort to begin to counterbalance Wahhabi and Salafi theology. However, notably, most of these scholars – including a number of converts to Islam such as the American Sufi, Hamaza Yusuf – are from overseas, a fact which the MCB considered 'colonialist'.

Another proposal of the working groups was for a Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB), an independent, non-sectarian body for the training and accreditation of Muslim ministers of religion. On the one hand, preachers such as the 'Afghan-Arab' Egyptian exile, Abu Hamza al-Masri (sentenced 2006), have been prosecuted for soliciting murder and inciting racial hatred, as well as radicalising alienated Muslim youth. On the other, although in recent years some younger, well-educated imams have been taking up positions as chaplains in British public institutions, many more still have limited familiarity with the English language or the British cultural context. As such, they are not seen as well placed to counter the appeal of extremism. Against this context MINAB was finally established in 2007 with representation from the MCB and MAB, along with the BMF and the al-Khoei Foundation (a Shi'ite organisation). However, the future of MINAB is presently uncertain with a government appointed council of Islamic scholars overseen by Oxford and Cambridge universities seemingly being considered as an alternative (July 2008).

Conclusion:

The existence of an established church as part of the structure of the UK State is such that Muslim religious institutions find a voice in the 'secular' public sphere more readily than in some other European countries. However, the dispersed authority structures of Islam do not approximate that of a church. Nevertheless, precipitated by the Rushdie Affair especially, the move beyond localised grassroots representation, first by the UKACIA and then the MCB, increased the public profile of a self-appointed lay national 'community' leadership during the 1990s. Seeking public recognition for Muslims as 'Muslims', an emergent religious identity politics has both shaped, as well as itself being influenced by, the hegemony of the 'race' relations industry in Britain. During an initial honeymoon

period under New Labour faith relations gained a new prominence in public discourse not least because of its perceived value in the project of civic integration. However, the global conflicts associated with the War on Terror soon revealed how difficult it would be to domesticate a diasporic Muslim leadership with moral investments in the idea of the *ummah* – especially one with Islamist leanings like the MCB. Both the capacity / resources and authority of the organisation amongst ordinary Muslims was also always an issue. In the wake of '7/7' new levels of securitisation further exposed the anti-Western imaginaries of the diasporic and transnational Muslim public spheres to new levels of critical scrutiny. Yet, at the same time, it has also prompted a new self-critical reflexivity and willingness to engage amongst a religious leadership which had always eschewed secular politics. Summing up UK State policy, Birt (2006) argues that, overall, there is still a preference for facilitating the self-regulation and self-organisation of Muslim representative bodies rather than direct legal intervention in their affairs. However, this approach may be tested to its limits in the coming years.

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³¹ See the very slick and well-resourced website at: <http://www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/>. Key players have been Q-News, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies and Young Muslim Organisation.

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