

# Muslims and the Politics of Difference

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THERE is an anti-Muslim wind blowing across the European continent. One factor is a perception that Muslims are making politically exceptional, culturally unreasonable or theologically alien demands upon European states. My contention is that the claims Muslims are making in fact parallel comparable arguments about gender or ethnic equality. Seeing the issue in that context shows how European and contemporary is the logic of mainstream Muslim identity politics.

## Muslims in Europe

European anxieties and phobias in relation to immigration and cultural diversity focus on Muslims more than any other group. This does, however, beg the question: in what way are Muslims a group and to whom are they being compared? Here I can do no more than note that there is no satisfactory way of conceptualising people of non-European descent, what Canadians call 'visible minorities', and therefore also of conceptualising the constituent groups that make up this category. Nevertheless, it is clear that the estimated 15 million people in the EU who subjectively or objectively are Muslim, whatever additional identities they may have, form the single largest group of those who are the source of public anxieties.

Muslims are not, however, a homogeneous group. Some Muslims are devout but apolitical; some are political but do not see their politics as being 'Islamic' (indeed, may even be anti-Islamic). Some identify more with a nationality of origin, such as Turkish; others with the nationality of settlement and perhaps citizenship, such as French. Some prioritise fundraising for mosques, others campaigns against discrimination, unemployment or Zionism. For some, the Ayatollah Khomeini is a hero and Osama bin Laden an inspiration; for others, the same may be said of Kemal Ataturk or Margaret Thatcher, who created a swathe of Asian millionaires in Britain, brought in Arab capital and was one of the first to call for NATO action to protect Muslims in Kosovo. The category 'Muslim', then, is as internally diverse as 'Christian' or 'Belgian' or 'middle-class', or any other category helpful in ordering our understanding of contemporary Europe; but just as diversity does not lead to an abandonment of social concepts in general, so with that of 'Muslim'.

My contention, then, within the limitations of all social categories, is that Muslim is as useful a category for identifying 'visible minorities' as country of origin—the most typical basis for data collection and labelling. It points to

people whose loyalties, enmities, networks, norms, debates, forms of authority, reactions to social circumstances and perception by others cannot all be explained without invoking some understanding of Muslims. Yet Muslims in Europe do not form a single political bloc or class formation, although they are disproportionately among the lowest-paid, unemployed and under-employed. Muslims do have the most extensive and developed discourses of unity, common circumstance and common victimhood among non-EU origin peoples in the EU. This sense of community may be partial, may depend upon context and crisis, may coexist with other overlapping or competing commitments or aspirations; but it is an actual or latent 'Us', partly dependent upon others seeing and partly causing others to see Muslims as a 'Them'.

For many years Muslims have been the principal victims of the bloodshed that has produced Europe's asylum seekers (think of Palestine, Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Afghanistan) and so are vulnerable to the anti-refugee mood and policies in the EU today. This, of course, also affects Muslim residents and citizens, and the situation has been thrown into sharp relief by September 11 and its aftermath, including the Iraq war. There are many reports of harassment and attacks against Muslims;<sup>1</sup> and Muslims, who have expressed both vulnerability and defiance, have become a focus of national concern and debate in many countries. They have found themselves bearing the brunt of a new wave of suspicion and hostility, and strongly voiced if imprecise doubts are being cast on their loyalty as citizens.

There has been widespread questioning about whether Muslims can be and are willing to be integrated into European society and its political values. In particular, whether Muslims are committed to what are taken to be the core European values of freedom, tolerance, democracy, sexual equality and secularism. Across Europe, multiculturalism—a policy suitable where communities want to maintain some level of distinction—is in retreat and 'integration' is once again the watchword. These questions and doubts have been raised across the political spectrum, voiced by individuals ranging from Berlusconi in Italy and the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn to eminent *Guardian* intellectuals such as Hugo Young and Polly Toynbee. In the UK, many politicians, commentators, and letter-writers and phone-callers to the media, again from across the political spectrum, have blamed these concerns on the perceived cultural separatism and self-imposed segregation of Muslim migrants and on a 'politically correct' multiculturalism that has fostered fragmentation rather than integration and 'Britishness'.

## National contexts

The same wind is blowing across the continent, yet the landscape is not uniform. Of the three most populous European countries, Germany, France and the UK, the former two have, in both absolute and relative terms, a larger foreign-born population and population of non-European origin than the UK.

Yet issues of racial discrimination, ethnic identity and multiculturalism have less salience in those two countries than in the UK. One aspect of this is that national debates on these topics have a lesser salience, and that such debates are less frequently led by non-whites or non-Europeans, who are more the *objects of*, rather than *participants in*, the debates. Another aspect is the relative lack of data about ethnicity and religious communities, and consequently of research and literature. Yet this is not a simple matter of scale. Each of the countries in the EU has a very different *conception* of what the issues are, depending upon its history, political culture and legal system.<sup>2</sup>

The German experience is dominated by the idea that Germany is not a country of immigration, and so those newcomers who can show German descent are automatically granted nationality while the others are temporary guest workers or refugees; none are immigrants. Hence, out of its population of 80 million, Germany has 5 million without German citizenship. This includes about 2 million Turks and Kurds, some of whom are now third-generation Germans but who until recently were excluded from citizenship by German self-conceptions of nationality as *descent*. In contrast, France has a history of immigration which it has proudly dealt with by a readiness to grant citizenship. But it has a republican conception of citizenship which does not allow, at least in theory, any body of citizens to be differentially identified, for example as Arab.

In Germany, the perception is that if you are of Turkish descent you cannot be German. In France, you can be of any descent but if you are a French citizen you cannot be an Arab. In each case, US-style—and now UK-style—composite identities like Turkish German, Arab French or British Indian are ideologically impossible. The giving up of pre-French identities and assimilation into French culture is thought to go hand in hand with the acceptance of French citizenship. If for some reason assimilation is not fully embraced—perhaps because some people want to retain pride in their Algerian ancestry, or want to maintain ethnic solidarity in the face of current stigmatisation and discrimination—then their claim to be French and equal citizens is jeopardised. The French conception of the republic, moreover, also has integral to it a certain radical secularism, *laïcité*, marking the political triumph over clericalism. The latter was defeated by pushing matters of faith and religion out of politics and policy into the private sphere. Islam, with its claim to regulate public as well as private life, is therefore seen as an ideological foe and the Muslim presence as alien and potentially both culturally and politically inassimilable.

The British experience of ‘coloured immigration’, in contrast, has been seen as an Atlantocentric legacy of the slave trade, and policy and legislation were formed in the 1960s in the shadow of the US Civil Rights Movement, black power discourse and the inner-city riots in Detroit, Watts and elsewhere. It was, therefore, dominated by the idea of ‘race’, more specifically by the idea of a black–white dualism. It was also shaped by the imperial legacy, one aspect of which was that all colonials and citizens of the Commonwealth were

'subjects of the Crown'. As such they had rights of entry into the UK and entitlement to all the benefits enjoyed by Britons, from NHS treatment to social security and the vote. (The right of entry was successively curtailed from 1962 so that, while in 1960 Britain was open to the Commonwealth but closed to Europe, twenty years later the position was fully reversed.)

Against the background of these distinctive national contexts and histories, it is quite mistaken to single out Muslims as a particularly intractable and uncooperative group characterised by extremist politics, religious obscurantism and an unwillingness to integrate. The case of Britain is the one I know in detail and can be illustrative.

The relation between Muslims and the wider British society and British state has to be seen in terms of the developing agendas of racial equality and multiculturalism. Muslims have become central to these agendas even while they have contested important aspects, especially the primacy of racial identities, narrow definitions of racism and equality, and the secular bias of the discourse and policies of multiculturalism. While there are now emergent Muslim discourses of equality, of difference and of, to use the title of the newsletter of the Muslim Council of Britain, 'the common good', they have to be understood as appropriations and modulations of contemporary discourses and initiatives whose provenance lies in anti-racism and feminism.

While one result of this is to throw advocates of multiculturalism into theoretical and practical disarray, another is to stimulate accusations of cultural separatism and revive a discourse of 'integration'. While we should not ignore the critics of Muslim activism, we need to recognise that at least some of the latter is a politics of 'catching up' with racial equality and feminism. In this way, religion in Britain is assuming a renewed political importance. After a long period of hegemony, political secularism can no longer be taken for granted but is having to answer its critics; there is a growing understanding that the incorporation of Muslims has become the most important challenge of egalitarian multiculturalism.

## British equality movements

The presence of new population groups in Britain made manifest certain kinds of racism, and anti-discrimination laws and policies began to be put into place from the 1960s. These provisions, initially influenced by contemporary thinking and practice in relation to anti-black racism in the United States, assume that the grounds of discrimination are 'colour' and ethnicity. Muslim assertiveness became a feature of majority-minority relations only from around the early 1990s; and indeed, prior to this, racial equality discourse and politics were dominated by the idea that the dominant post-immigration issue was 'colour racism'. One consequence of this is that the legal and policy framework still reflects the conceptualisation and priorities of racial dualism.

To date, it is lawful to discriminate against Muslims *qua* Muslims because

the courts do not accept that Muslims are an ethnic group (though oddly, Jews and Sikhs are recognised as ethnic groups within the meaning of the law). While initially unremarked upon, this exclusive focus on race and ethnicity, and the exclusion of Muslims but not Jews and Sikhs, has come to be a source of resentment. Muslims do enjoy some limited indirect legal protection *qua* members of ethnic groups such as Pakistanis or Arabs. Over time, groups like Pakistanis have become an active constituency within British 'race relations', whereas Middle Easterners tend to classify themselves as 'white', as in the 1991 Census, and on the whole have not been prominent in political activism of this sort, nor in domestic politics generally. One of the effects of this politics was to highlight race.

A key indicator of racial discrimination and inequality has been numerical under-representation, for instance in prestigious jobs and public office. Hence, people have had to be (self-)classified and counted; thus group labels, and arguments about which labels are authentic, have become a common feature of certain political discourses. Over the years, it has also become apparent through these inequality measures that it is Asian Muslims and not, as expected, Afro-Caribbeans, who have emerged as the most disadvantaged and poorest groups in the country.<sup>3</sup> To many Muslim activists, the misplacing of Muslims into 'race' categories and the belatedness with which the severe disadvantages of the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have come to be recognised mean that race relations are perceived at best as an inappropriate policy niche for Muslims, and at worst as a conspiracy to prevent the emergence of a specifically Muslim sociopolitical formation. To see how such thinking has emerged we need briefly to consider the career of the concept of 'racial equality'.

The initial development of anti-racism in Britain followed the American pattern, and indeed was directly influenced by American personalities and events. Just as in the United States the colour-blind humanism of Martin Luther King Jr came to be mixed with an emphasis on black pride, black autonomy and black nationalism as typified by Malcolm X, so too the same process occurred in the UK (both these inspirational leaders visited Britain). Indeed, it is best to see this development of racial explicitness and positive blackness as part of a wider sociopolitical climate which is not confined to race and culture or non-white minorities. Feminism, gay pride, Québécois nationalism and the revival of a Scottish identity are some prominent examples of these new identity movements which have become an important feature in many countries, especially those in which class politics has declined in salience; the emphasis on non-territorial identities such as black, gay and women is particularly marked among anglophones.

In fact, it would be fair to say that what is often claimed today in the name of racial equality, again especially in the English-speaking world, goes beyond the claims that were made in the 1960s. Iris Young expresses well the new political climate when she describes the emergence of an ideal of equality based not just on allowing excluded groups to assimilate and live by

the norms of dominant groups, but on the view that 'a positive self-definition of group difference is in fact more liberatory.'<sup>4</sup>

### **Equality and the erosion of the public–private distinction**

This significant shift takes us from an understanding of 'equality' in terms of individualism and cultural assimilation to a politics of recognition; to 'equality' as encompassing public ethnicity. This perception of equality means not having to hide or apologise for one's origins, family or community, and requires others to show respect for them. Public attitudes and arrangements must adapt so that this heritage is encouraged, not contemptuously expected to wither away.

These two conceptions of equality may be stated as follows:

- the right to assimilate to the majority/dominant culture in the public sphere, with toleration of 'difference' in the private sphere;
- the right to have one's 'difference' (minority ethnicity, etc.) recognised and supported in both the public and the private spheres.

While the former represents a liberal response to 'difference', the latter is the 'take' of the new identity politics. The two are not, however, alternative conceptions of equality in the sense that to hold one, the other must be rejected. Multiculturalism, properly construed, requires support for both conceptions. For the assumption behind the first is that participation in the public or national culture is necessary for the effective exercise of citizenship, the only obstacle to which are the exclusionary processes preventing gradual assimilation. The second conception, too, assumes that groups excluded from the national culture have their citizenship diminished as a result, and sees the remedy not in rejecting the right to assimilate, but in adding the right to widen and adapt the national culture, and the public and media symbols of national membership, to include the relevant minority ethnicities.

It can be seen, then, that the public–private distinction is crucial to the contemporary discussion of equal citizenship, and particularly to the challenge to an earlier liberal position. It is in this political and intellectual climate—namely, a climate in which what would earlier have been called 'private' matters had become sources of equality struggles—that Muslim assertiveness emerged as a domestic political phenomenon. In this respect, the advances achieved by anti-racism and feminism (with its slogan 'the personal is the political') acted as benchmarks for later political group entrants, such as Muslims. As I will show, while Muslims raise distinctive concerns, the logic of their demands often mirrors those of other equality-seeking groups.

## Religious equality

So, one of the current conceptions of equality is a difference-affirming equality, with related notions of respect, recognition and identity—in short, what I understand by political multiculturalism. What kinds of specific policy demands, then, are being made by or on behalf of religious groups and Muslim identity politics in particular, when these terms are deployed?

I suggest that these demands have three dimensions, which get progressively 'thicker'.

### *No religious discrimination*

One Muslim organisation concerned with these issues is the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR). Set up in 2000 'for the purpose of raising awareness of and combating Islamophobia and racism, monitoring specific incidents of Islamophobia and racism, working towards eliminating religious and racial discrimination, campaigning and lobbying on issues relevant to Muslim and other multi-ethnic communities in Britain', its mission statement sets out this first dimension of equality.

The very basic demand is that religious people, no less than people defined by 'race' or gender, should not suffer discrimination in job and other opportunities. So, for example, a person who is trying to dress in accordance with their religion or who projects a religious identity (such as a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf, a *hijab*), should not be discriminated against in employment. At the moment in Britain there is no legal ban on such discrimination, and the government said until recently that the case for it was not proven.

The legal system thus leaves Muslims particularly vulnerable because, while discrimination against *yarmulke*-wearing Jews and turban-wearing Sikhs is deemed to be unlawful *racial* discrimination, Muslims, unlike these other faith communities, are not deemed to be a racial or ethnic group. Nor are they protected by the legislation against religious discrimination that does exist in one part of the UK: being explicitly designed to protect Catholics, it covers only Northern Ireland. The best that Muslims are able to achieve is to prove that the discrimination against them was indirectly against their ethnic characteristics: that they suffered discrimination by virtue of being, say, a Pakistani or an Iraqi.

While it is indeed the case that the discrimination against Muslims is mixed up with forms of colour racism and cultural racism, the charge of race discrimination will provide no protection if it is clearly the individual's religion, not their race, that has led to the discrimination. Moreover, some Muslims are white and so do not enjoy this second-class protection; and many Muslim activists argue that religious freedom, being a fundamental right, should not be legally and politically dependent on dubious concepts of race and ethnicity. The same argument applies to the demand for a law in Britain

(as already exists in Northern Ireland) making incitement to religious hatred unlawful, to parallel the law against incitement to racial hatred. (The latter extends protection to certain forms of anti-Jewish literature, but not anti-Muslim literature.)

After some years of arguing that there was insufficient evidence of religious discrimination, the British government has had its hand forced by Article 13 of the EU Amsterdam Treaty (1997), which includes religious discrimination in the list of the forms of discrimination that all member states are expected to eliminate. Accordingly, the government will implement a European Commission directive to outlaw religious discrimination in employment by December 2003. This is, however, only a partial 'catching-up' with the existing anti-discrimination provisions in relation to race and gender. The proposed legislation will be confined to employment and vocational training (not extended to discrimination in provision of goods and services), and will not create a duty upon employers to take steps to promote equality of opportunity.

### *Parity with native religions*

Many minority faith advocates interpret equality to mean that minority religions should get at least some of the support from the state that longer-established religions do. Muslims have led the way on this argument, and have made two particular issues politically contentious: the state funding of schools and the law of blasphemy. After some political battle, the government has agreed in recent years to fund a few (so far, four) Muslim schools, as well as a Sikh and a Seventh Day Adventist school, on the same basis enjoyed by thousands of Anglican and Catholic schools and some Methodist and Jewish schools. (In England and Wales, over a third of state-maintained primary and a sixth of secondary schools are in fact run by a religious group—but all have to deliver a centrally determined national curriculum.)

Some secularists are unhappy about this. They accept the argument for parity but believe this should be achieved by the state withdrawing its funding from all religious schools. Most Muslims reject this form of equality in which the privileged lose something but the under-privileged gain nothing. More specifically, the issue between 'equalising upwards' and 'equalising downwards' here is about the legitimacy of religion as a public institutional presence.

Muslims have failed to get the courts to interpret the existing statute on blasphemy to cover offences beyond what Christians hold sacred, but some political support exists for an offence of incitement to religious hatred, mirroring the existing one of incitement to racial hatred. The government inserted such a clause in the post-September 11 security legislation, in order to conciliate Muslims who, among others, were opposed to the new powers of surveillance, arrest and detention. As it happened, most of the latter was made law, but the provision on incitement to religious hatred was defeated in



Parliament. It was reintroduced in a private member's bill from a Liberal Democrat, Lord Avebury, which also sought to abolish the laws governing blasphemy. Although unsuccessful, these provisions may yet return to Parliament in some form.

### *Positive inclusion of religious groups*

The demand here is that religion in general, or at least the category of 'Muslim' in particular, should be a category by which the inclusiveness of social institutions may be judged, as they increasingly are in relation to race and gender. For example, employers should have to demonstrate that they do not discriminate against Muslims by explicit monitoring of Muslims' position within the workforce, backed up by appropriate policies, targets, managerial responsibilities, work environments, staff training, advertisements, outreach and so on.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, public bodies should provide appropriately sensitive policies and staff in relation to the services they provide, especially in relation to (non-Muslim) schools, social and health services; Muslim community centres or Muslim youth workers should be funded in addition to existing Asian and Caribbean community centres and Asian and black youth workers.

To take another case: the BBC currently believes it is of political importance to review and improve its personnel practices and its output of programmes, including its on-screen 'representation' of the British population, by making provision for and winning the confidence of, say, women, ethnic groups and young people. Why should it not also use religious groups as a criterion of inclusivity and have to demonstrate that it is doing the same for viewers and staff defined by religious community membership?

In short, Muslims should be treated as a legitimate group in their own right (not because they are, say, Asians), whose presence in British society has to be explicitly reflected in all walks of life and in all institutions; and whether they are so included should become one of the criteria for judging Britain as an egalitarian, inclusive, multicultural society. There is no prospect at present of religious equality catching up with the importance that employers and other organisations give to sex or race. A potentially significant victory, however, was made when the government agreed to include a religion question in the 2001 Census. This was the first time this question had been included since 1851 and was largely unpopular outside the politically active religionists, among whom Muslims were foremost. Nevertheless, it has the potential to pave the way for widespread 'religious monitoring' in the way that the inclusion of an ethnic question in 1991 had led to the more routine use of 'ethnic monitoring'.

These policy demands no doubt seem odd within the terms of, say, the French or US 'wall of separation' between the state and religion, and may make secularists uncomfortable in Britain too. But it is clear that they virtually mirror existing anti-discrimination policy provisions in the UK.

In an analysis of some Muslim policy statements in the early 1990s, following the activism stimulated by the Rushdie affair,<sup>6</sup> I argued that the main lines of arguments were captured by the following three positions:

- a 'colour-blind' human rights and human dignity approach;
- an approach based on extension of the concepts of racial discrimination and racial equality to include anti-Muslim racism;
- a 'Muslim power' approach.

I concluded that these 'reflect not so much obscurantist Islamic interventions into a modern secular discourse, but typical minority options in contemporary Anglo-American equality politics, and employ the rhetorical, conceptual and institutional resources available in that politics'.<sup>7</sup>

All three approaches are present today, though some high-profile radicals have made a Muslim power approach more prominent, in a manner not dissimilar to the rise of black power activism after the height of the civil rights period in the United States. This approach is mainly nourished by despair at the victimisation and humiliation of Muslims in places such as Palestine, Bosnia, Kashmir and Afghanistan. For many British Muslims, such military disasters and humanitarian horrors evoke a strong desire to express solidarity with oppressed Muslims through the political idea of the *Ummah*, the global community of Muslims, which must defend and restore itself as a global player. To take the analogy with US black power a bit further, one can say that as black nationalism and Afrocentrism developed as one ideological expression of black power, so, similarly, we can see political Islamism as a search for Muslim dignity and power.

Muslim assertiveness, then, though triggered and intensified by what are seen as attacks on Muslims, is primarily derived not from Islam or Islamism but from contemporary Western ideas about equality and multiculturalism. While simultaneously reacting to the latter in its failure to distinguish Muslims from the rest of the 'black' population and its uncritical secular bias, Muslims positively use, adapt and extend these contemporary Western ideas in order to join other equality-seeking movements. Political Muslims do, therefore, have an ambivalence in relation to multicultural discourses. On the one hand, as a result of previous misrecognition of their identity, and existing biases, there is distrust of 'the race relations industry' and of 'liberals'; on the other hand, the assertiveness is clearly a product of the positive climate created by liberals and egalitarians.

This ambivalence can tend towards antagonism as the assertiveness is increasingly being joined by Islamic discourses and Islamists. Especially, as has been said, there is a sense that Muslim populations across the world are repeatedly suffering at the hands of their neighbours, aided and abetted by the United States and its allies, and that Muslims must come together to defend themselves. Politically active Muslims in Britain, however, are likely to be part of domestic multicultural and equality currents—emphasising discrimination in educational and economic opportunities, political

representation and the media, and 'Muslim-blindness' in the provision of health, care and social services; and arguing for remedies which mirror existing legislation and policies in relation to sexual and racial equality.

### **A panicky retreat to a liberal public–private distinction**

If the emergence of a politics of difference out of and alongside a liberal assimilationist equality created a dissonance, as indeed it did, the emergence of a British Muslim identity out of and alongside ethno-racial identities has created an even greater dissonance. Philosophically speaking, it should create a lesser dissonance, for a move from the idea of equality as sameness to equality as difference is a more profound conceptual shift than the creation of a new identity in a field already crowded with minority identities. But to infer this is naïvely to ignore the hegemonic power of secularism in British political culture, especially on the centre-left. While black and related ethno-racial identities were welcomed by, indeed were intrinsic to, the rainbow coalition of identity politics, this coalition is deeply unhappy with Muslim consciousness.

While for some this rejection is specific to Islam, for many the ostensible reason is simply that it is a religious identity and in virtue of that should be confined to the private sphere. What is most interesting is that, if this latter objection is taken at face value, the difference theorists, activists and paid professionals are reverting to a public–private distinction that they have spent three decades demolishing. The unacceptability of Muslim identity is no doubt partly to do with the conservative views on gender and sexuality professed by some Muslim spokespersons, not to mention issues to do with freedom of expression as they arose in the Rushdie affair.<sup>8</sup> But these are objections to specific views. As such, they can be contested on a point-by-point basis; they are not objections to an identity. The fundamental objection of radical secularists to Muslim identity as a politicised religious identity is of course incompatible with the politics-of-difference perspective on the public–private distinction. It is therefore in contradiction with a thoroughgoing conception of multiculturalism, which should allow the political expression of religion to enter public discourse.

We thus have a mixed-up situation where secular multiculturalists argue that the sex lives of individuals—traditionally, a core area of liberal privacy—are a legitimate feature of political identities and public discourse, and seem generally to welcome the sexualisation of culture (if not the prurient interest in the sexual activity of public characters). Religion, on the other hand—a key source of communal identity in traditional, non-liberal societies—is to be regarded as a private matter, perhaps as a uniquely private matter. Most specifically, Muslim identity is seen as the illegitimate child of British multiculturalism.

Indeed, the Rushdie affair made evident that the group in British society most politically opposed to Muslims, or at least to Muslim identity politics,

was not Christians, nor even right-wing nationalists, but the secular, liberal intelligentsia. Muslims are frequently criticised in the comment pages of the respectable press in a way that few, if any, other minority groups are. Muslims often remark that if in such articles the words 'Jews' or 'blacks' were substituted for 'Muslims', the newspapers in question would be attacked as racist and indeed vulnerable to legal proceedings. Just as the hostility against Jews, in various times and places, has been a varying blend of anti-Judaism (hostility to a religion) and anti-semitism (hostility to a racialised group), so it is difficult to gauge to what extent contemporary British Islamophobia is 'religious' and to what extent 'racial'.

Even before September 11 and its aftermath, it was generally becoming acknowledged that of all groups, Asians face the greatest hostility, and many Asians themselves feel this is because of hostility directed specifically at Muslims. In the summer of 2001 the racist British National Party began explicitly to distinguish between good, law-abiding Asians and Asian Muslims (see BNP website). Much low-level harassment (abuse, spitting, name-calling, pulling off a headscarf and so on) goes unreported, but the number of reported attacks since September 11 was four times higher than usual (in the United States it has increased thirteenfold, including two deaths).

The confused retreat from multiculturalism has of course been given an enormous impetus by September 11. The events of that day led to widespread questioning, once again echoing the Rushdie affair, about whether Muslims can be and are willing to be integrated into British society and its political values, paralleling discourses in most of the EU. The New Labour government was at the forefront of this debate, as were many others who were prominent on the centre-left and had long-standing anti-racist credentials. For example, the Commission for Racial Equality published an article by the left-wing author Kenan Malik, arguing that 'multiculturalism has helped to segregate communities far more effectively than racism'. Hugo Young, the leading liberal columnist of the centre-left *Guardian* newspaper, went further and wrote that multiculturalism 'can now be seen as a useful bible for any Muslim who insists that his religio-cultural priorities, including the defence of jihad against America, override his civic duties of loyalty, tolerance, justice and respect for democracy'. More extreme again, Farrukh Dhondy, an Asian who had pioneered multicultural broadcasting on British television, writes of a 'multicultural fifth column' which must be rooted out, and argues that state funding of multiculturalism should be redirected into a defence of the values of freedom and democracy.<sup>9</sup>

### *'Faith schools'*

One of the specific issues that, as I mentioned, has come to be a central element of this debate is that of 'faith schools'; that is to say, state-funded schools run by religious organisations. While they must teach the national

curriculum and are inspected by a government agency, they can give some space to religious instruction, though not all do so. They are popular with parents for their ethos, discipline and academic achievements and so can select their pupils, often giving priority to children whose parents can demonstrate a degree of religious observance.

Yet the violent disturbances in some northern English cities in the summer of 2001, in which Asian Muslim men had been among the protagonists, were officially blamed in part on the fact of segregated communities and segregated schools. Some of these were church-run schools and were 90 per cent or more Christian and white. Others were among the most under-resourced and under-achieving in the country and had rolls of 90 per cent or more Muslims. They came to be called, including in official reports,<sup>10</sup> 'Muslim schools'. In fact, they were nothing of the sort. They were local, bottom-of-the-pile comprehensive schools which had suffered from decades of under-investment and 'white-flight' but were run by white teachers according to a secular national curriculum.

'Muslim schools' then came to be seen as the source of the problem of divided cities, cultural backwardness, riots and lack of Britishness, and a breeding ground for militant Islam. Muslim-run schools were lumped into this category of 'Muslim schools' even though all the evidence suggested that their pupils (mainly juniors and girls) did not engage in riots and terrorism and, despite limited resources, achieved better exam results than local authority 'secular' schools. On the basis of these 'Muslim schools' and 'faith schools' constructions, tirades by prominent columnists in the broadsheet newspapers were launched against allowing state funding to any more Muslim-run schools or even to a church-run school, and demands were made once again that the British state be entirely secular. For example, Polly Toynbee argued in the *Guardian* that a precondition of tackling racial segregation was that 'religion should be kept at home, in the private sphere.'

## Reaffirming multiculturalism

The watchword has to be: Don't Panic. Perhaps we ought to brace ourselves for some excesses: I am reminded of the Marxist radicalism of my student days in the late 1960s and 1970s; as we know, that passed and many a radical now holds high office (and fulminates against young radicals!). But we must distinguish between criminal actions and militant rhetoric, between radical Islamists and the wider Muslim opinion; for the former, despite the bewitchment of the media, are as representative of Muslims as the SWP is of working-class politics. We must not give up on the moderate, egalitarian multiculturalism that has been evolving in Britain, and has proved susceptible to gradually accommodating Muslim demands.

Other than Muslims themselves, a leading actor in bringing Muslim concerns and racial equality thinking into contact has been the Runnymede Trust, recognising Islamophobia as one of the chief forms of racism today

when it set up its Commission on Islamophobia. The demand for Muslim schools within the state sector was rejected by the Swann Report on multiculturalism in the 1980s and by the Commission for Racial Equality even in the 1990s, but it is now government policy. Adapting the Census to measure the extent of socio-economic disadvantage by religious groups has been achieved, and support has been built up for outlawing religious discrimination and incitement to religious hatred. Talk of Muslim identity used to be rejected by racial egalitarians as an irrelevance ('religious not political') and as divisive, but in the last few years Muslim organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and FAIR, mentioned earlier, have co-organised events and demonstrations with groups such as the National Assembly of Black People. The protests against the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq have brought Muslims into the political mainstream, with Muslims sharing the same analysis as many non-Muslims.

Certainly, there must be an emphasis not just on 'difference' but on commonality too. British anti-racists and multiculturalists have indeed been too prone to ignore this; but to do so is in fact less characteristic of Muslims than of the political left (see, for instance, the various statements of MCB from its inception, and its decision to entitle its newsletter *The Common Good*).<sup>11</sup>

To take up some recent issues, of course wanting to be part of British society means having a facility in the English language, and the state must be protective of the rights of those oppressed within their communities, as in the case of forced marriages. But blaming Muslims alone for segregation ignores how the phenomenon in the northern cities and elsewhere has been shaped by white people's preferences as individuals, and the decisions of local councillors, not least in relation to public housing.

It is foolish to disparage and dismantle the cohesiveness of Muslim communities. We ought to recognise that there is an incompatibility between radical secularism and any kind of moderate multiculturalism in which Muslims are an important constituent. Integration cannot be a matter of *laissez-faire*; we must be willing to redefine Britain in a more plural way. The French approach of ignoring racial, ethnic and religious identities does not mean that they, or the related problems of exclusion, alienation and fragmentation, vanish. They are likely, on the contrary, to become more radical; and so the French may actually be creating the unravelling of the republic that they fear.

*The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, the report of the Commission on Multi-Ethnic Britain published in October 2000, is a high-water mark of thinking on these topics. It tried to answer the question: how is it possible to have a positive attitude to difference and yet have a sense of unity? Its answer was that a liberal notion of citizenship as an unemotional, cool membership was not sufficient; better was a sense of belonging to one's country or polity. The report insisted that this 'belonging' required two important conditions:

- the idea that one's polity should be recognised as a community of communities as well as a community of individuals;
- the challenging of all racisms and related structural inequalities.

Here we have a much more adequate concept of social cohesion than that which has emerged as a panicky reaction to the current Muslim assertiveness and which runs the risk of making many Muslims feel that they do not belong to Britain.

## Conclusion

The emergence of Muslim political agency has thrown British multiculturalism into theoretical and practical disarray. It has led to policy reversals in the Netherlands and elsewhere, and across Europe has strengthened intolerant, exclusive nationalism. We should in fact be moving the other way. We should be extending to Muslims existing levels of protection from discrimination and incitement to hatred, and the duties on organisations to ensure equality of opportunity, not the watered-down versions of legislation proposed by the European Union and the UK government. We should target more effectively, in consultation with religious and other representatives, the severe poverty and social exclusion of Muslims. And we should recognise Muslims as a legitimate social partner and include them in the institutional compromises of church and state, religion and politics, that characterise the evolving, moderate secularism of mainstream western Europe, resisting the wayward, radical example of France.

Ultimately, we must rethink 'Europe' and its changing nations so that Muslims are not a 'Them' but part of a plural 'Us', not mere sojourners but part of its future. A hundred years ago, the African American theorist W. E. B. Du Bois predicted that the twentieth century would be the century of the colour line; today, we seem to be set for a century of the Islam–West line. The political integration or incorporation of Muslims—remembering that there are more Muslims in the European Union than the combined populations of Finland, Ireland and Denmark—has not only become the most important goal of egalitarian multiculturalism but is now pivotal in shaping the security, indeed the destiny, of many peoples across the globe.

## Notes

- 1 *Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001*, Vienna, European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2002.
- 2 For the basis of at least medium-term pessimism about civic equality and multiculturalism in France and Germany, see T. Modood, 'Ethnic Difference and Racial Equality: New Challenges for the Left', in D. Miliband, ed., *Reinventing the Left*, Cambridge, Polity, 1994, pp. 87–8. For a less anglocentric view, see R. Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard

- University Press, 1992; C. Bryant, 'Citizenship, National Identity and the Accommodation of Difference: Reflections on the German, French, Dutch, and British Cases', *New Community*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1997, pp. 157–72; A. Favell, *Philosophies of Integration*, London, Palgrave, 1998 (2nd edn, 2001); R. Koopmans and P. Statham, eds, *Challenging Immigration and Ethnic Relations Politics: Comparative European Perspectives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000; R. Kastoryano, *Negotiating Identities: States and Immigrants in France and Germany*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002.
- 3 T. Modood, *Not Easy Being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship*, London, Runnymede Trust/Trentham Books, 1992; T. Modood et al., *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage*, London, Policy Studies Institute, 1997.
  - 4 I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.
  - 5 Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR), *A Response to the Government Consultation Paper, 'Towards Equality and Diversity: Implementing the Employment and Race Directives'*, London, 2002; Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, *Response to the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice*, London, 2002.
  - 6 I refer to the protests against the offensive character of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as perceived by many Muslims, following its publication in 1988, and the reaction of the West to those protests.
  - 7 T. Modood, 'Muslim Views on Religious Identity and Racial Equality', *New Community*, vol. 19, no. 3, April, 1993, p. 518.
  - 8 Though it is noticeable that Muslim homophobia gets far more condemnation than say, black homophobia, and Muslim sensitivities against offensive literature get far less sympathetic treatment than those of radical feminists against pornography and Jews against Holocaust revisionism, not to mention legal restraints against incitements to racial hatred: T. Modood, 'Muslims, Incitement to Hatred and the Law', in J. Horton, ed., *Liberalism, Multiculturalism and Toleration*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1993.
  - 9 F. Dhondy, 'Our Islamic Fifth Column', *City Limits*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2001. For a recantation of his Black Panther radicalism, see his 'A Black Panther Repents', *The Times*, 24 June 2002, T2, pp. 2–4.
  - 10 H. Ouseley, *Community Pride, Not Prejudice: Making Diversity Work in Bradford*, Bradford, Bradford Vision, Bradford City Council, 2001.
  - 11 Hence my plea that even at the time of Mrs Thatcher anti-racism must relate to a sense of Britishness, not just blackness, Muslimness etc.: Modood, *Not Easy Being British*.