Revisiting the UK Muslim diasporic public sphere at a time of
terror: from local (benign) invisible spaces to seditious
conspiratorial spaces and the ‘failure of
multiculturalism’ discourse

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Public exposés of hidden spaces where diasporic Muslims allegedly enunciate extreme anti-Western rhetoric or plot sedition, highlight an ironic shift from a time, analysed in my earlier work, when the Pakistani diasporic public sphere in Britain was invisible and local while nevertheless being regarded as relatively benign: a space of expressive rhetoric, ceremonial celebration and local power struggles. Suicide bombings on the London underground and revelations of aborted conspiracies have led to a national media debate in which Muslim ‘community’ leaders for the first time have come to be active participants. They respond to accusations by politicians and journalists that multicultural tolerance has ‘failed’ in Britain, and that national Muslim organisations are the prime cause of this alleged failure. Addressing this ‘failure of multiculturalism’ discourse, the paper questions, first, whether talk of multiculturalism in the UK is really about ‘culture’ at all? Second, the paper explores why Muslim integration into Britain – the so-called success or failure of multiculturalism – has come to be ‘tested’ by Muslim national leaders’ willingness to attend Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations. The public dialogue reflecting on these issues in the mainstream and ethnic press, the paper proposes, highlights a signal development in the history of the UK Muslim diasporic public sphere: from being hidden and local to being highly visible and national, responsive to British politicians, investigative journalists and the wider British public.

Keywords: diasporic public sphere; multiculturalism; British South Asians; British Muslims; Islamic terror; Islamophobia; media representations; Holocaust Memorial Day

Preamble

This paper is based on a reading of selected documentary sources since 2004, drawn from the diasporic ethnic press and the mainstream British press and media. Among these are articles reporting on court trials of foiled British Muslim terror plots and clandestine media recordings of hidden, allegedly subversive, diasporic Muslim rhetoric. But the aim of the paper is not to highlight tabloid-style scaremongering against Muslim immigrants. Instead, the paper’s central project is to trace a developing public dialogue between British politicians and leaders of the Muslim community published in the mainstream and ethnic press and media. Its ultimate purpose is to highlight the

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impossibility of thinking of multiculturalism as business-as-usual at a time of global terror.

Revisiting the diasporic public sphere

In 1992, I presented a paper bearing the title ‘On Mosques and Cricket Teams: Nationalism and Religion among British Muslims’ that became the basis for a lengthy exploration of what I called the diasporic public sphere. Published as ‘Fun Spaces’ (Werbner 1996), it anticipated the more detailed discussion of the diasporic public sphere in my book, *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims* (Werbner 2002). Following Habermas (1989 [1962]), the stress was on the local face-to-face, imaginative and creative aspects of the hidden, invisible public arenas diaspora Pakistanis create for themselves. At the time, the Pakistani community in Manchester, UK, the subject of my study, was encapsulated and inward looking, concerned with its own affairs, while being law-abiding and moderately pious. In the book I traced the process of ‘visibilisation’ of this arena of identity, fun, local factional politics and personal rhetoric in outraged response to the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* in 1988 and the first Gulf War in 1991. Against Habermas’s critique of the mass media as subverting the early bourgeois sphere, the book highlighted the way that diasporic Pakistani women and youth draw on the aesthetics of South Asian popular and mass culture to mobilise in autonomous arenas of their own, in resistance to male elders.

This was before the 9/11 bombings of the twin towers and the ‘war on terror’. Following those cataclysmic events, I argue in the present paper, Muslim diasporic spaces changed both in the public perception and in their scale; what had been invisible but nevertheless benign, autonomous local spaces of debate, even if at times they were critical of the West, came increasingly to be regarded as conspiratorial. At the same time, the scale of debate shifted from the local to the national, with the diasporic public sphere now constituted by a series of polemical accusations and counter-responses by British politicians and Muslim national leaders, published in the national broadsheet and ethnic press. This painful dialogue concerned the invisible but allegedly seditious spaces and agendas diasporic Muslims were secretly fostering, and the implications of their ‘revealed’ existence for ‘multiculturalism’ in Britain.

The pluralisation of the public sphere

The 1990s was a period in which Habermas’s notion of a unified (national) public sphere was subjected to scrutiny by feminist and diaspora theorists, who argued for the need to conceptualise the pluralisation and complexity of the public sphere. In an edited volume that reconsidered Habermas’s concept (Calhoun 1992), Nancy Fraser (1992) argued that women and other marginalised groups historically created a counter-civil society to the official, hegemonic public sphere. A truly functioning democracy, Fraser argued, requires such ‘subaltern counterpublics’ in which oppositional interpretations of ‘identities, interests, and needs’ are formulated (p. 123). Similarly, Seyla Benhabib (1992, p. 94) proposed that the increasing porousness and complexity of the public sphere allows women and other marginalised groups to set new agendas. Rather than a single public arena, the point made by these feminist theorists was that such separate and diverse spaces are essential for subalterns to thrash out their own perspectives on public policies and the public good.
If the public good, according to Habermas, was defined through public debate between rational citizens, later conceptualisations took account of its aesthetic and affective dimensions as well (for an overview see Dahlberg 2005). Paul Gilroy (1993), for example, had spoken of a black ‘alternative’ public sphere of ‘story-telling and music-making’ (p. 200). Fraser (1992) argued similarly that ‘public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion. In addition, as ‘arenas for the formation and enactment of identities’ (p. 125), they are in some sense a ‘theatre’ (p. 110). This accords also with Alberto Melucci’s (1997) view that the work of identity is one of first discovering and then negotiating shared identities. Dahlberg cites Young’s argument that rational-critical discourse fails to take into account that ‘meaning is always in excess of what can be understood discursively, spilling over beyond the symbolic’ (Dahlberg 2005, p. 115; citing Young 1987). Public assemblies, Bruno Latour proposes, are as much about ‘things’ as people or the politics of representation (Latour and Sánchez-Criado 2007). In her theorisation of public arenas in India, Sandria Freitag (1989), it will be recalled, argued that processions and public rituals encompass both the ‘political’ and ‘religious’, the formal and informal, elite and popular concerns (p. 14). My study of the local Pakistani diasporic public sphere similarly highlighted its poetics – the way that political passion and rhetoric allow speakers to reach out persuasively to their audiences.

In the light of these arguments, the public sphere may be defined as constituted by ten key features: (1) Public good, defined through (2) Public debate between rational citizens, in a (3) Plurality (of subaltern counterpublics and spaces), characterised by (4) Porousness; (5) Performance; (6) Poetics; (7) Passion; leading to (8) Political mobilisation; (9) Protest; and (10) Proliferation of organisations within civil society.

Clearly, a recognition of the pluralised nature of the diasporic public sphere allows for a theorisation of diaspora, community and culture not as homogeneous, unified, monolithic, harmonious forms of sociality but as heterogeneous and conflictual. Among British Pakistanis, the debate has been not only between the religious and less pious but between democrats, socialists, and nationalists, women and men, young and old, with each group positioned differently and having its own partial, meroscopic political viewpoint.

Most diasporas engender a wide range of voluntary organisations which represent different interests and perspectives. Thus Khachig Tölölyan (2000) speaks of a ‘diasporic civil society’, constituted by a myriad of voluntary organisations. In the case of Pakistanis in Britain, who are both South Asians and Muslims, the historical migratory process of incorporation into British society as Muslims has been marked by internal diversification and a shift towards increasing religiosity, which can be traced through a series of stages:

- Proliferation (of religious spaces)
- Replication (of South Asian Islam’s sectarian and ideological diversity)
- Diasporic encounter (with Muslims from the Middle East)
- Confrontation and dissent (following the Rushdie affair)
- Identity-led religiosity
- Adoption of Muslim diacritical ritual practices and attire in public
- Voluntary ‘self-segregation’
- The politicisation and racialisation of Islam in Britain
- Confrontation and dissent (following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq)
As South Asians, however, Pakistanis have followed an entirely different trajectory, and this has lead to the emergence of two distinct diasporic public spheres in which British Pakistanis participate situationally – one, of ‘hybridity’, fun and mass popular South Asian culture, the other ‘pure’ and Islamic. Both, in a sense, are politicised but their politics differ and are expressed in different media. The South Asian popular cultural sphere is expressed publicly through diasporic novels, films, television, newspapers, and classical and popular song and dance groups; its politics are focused above all on the familial politics of gender, class, consumption and intergenerational relations, and secondarily, on racism within British society.

The Muslim public sphere, by contrast, has been characterised in Britain by intensified religiosity and reformist, puritanical preaching, part of a worldwide discourse generated partly in response to intractable international political conflicts in the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Iraq. The diaspora has not been immune to this pervasive global radicalisation of political Islam, popularised and vernacularised in theological texts and in increasingly restrictive lifestyle options, and encouraged, perhaps, also by increased levels of literacy among young Muslims worldwide, the rise of an extra-terrestrial Islamic media, the extensive use of the internet by radical Islamic groups, and – in Pakistan – the huge expansion of neo-fundamentalist madrasas and training camps.

Despite the fact that they lived in Manchester, that is, in the diaspora, first generation, local-level Pakistani leaders rarely addressed issues of local concern such as racism in their public events. Instead, they tended to orate about national events back home and international events such as the Middle East crisis and the plight of Palestinians. Within the invisible spaces of debate and ceremonial celebration they had created, these lay speakers, usually local businessmen or aspiring working class big men, assumed a larger than life dramatic presence, and their rhetoric was heroic and often millennial and apocalyptic (Werbner 2004). The critique of the West and along with it, of the failure of Islam or of Arab regimes, drew on a familiar globalised Muslim rhetoric.

After the Rushdie affair, with its public protest and marches, Muslims’ visibility in Britain died down temporarily. It resurfaced once again in protest against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of 9/11. The emergence of an established Muslim national press at about the same time did not, of course, mean the disappearance of local arenas of diasporic debate. But as local organisations came together in national umbrella organisations, so too they were superseded at the national level by a more unified leadership and a ‘mediatised’ Muslim diasporic public sphere. Moreover, from being invisible and benign, the hidden spaces of the old diasporic public sphere came to be redefined by the British media and politicians as hidden and conspiratorial. The conclusion drawn was that multiculturalism had therefore failed. This shift in public rhetoric and perception is the subject of the present paper.

Public arguments: Islam and the media

Uncovered plots

The debate about the diasporic public sphere in Britain today has to be seen in the context of international politics and the ‘war on terror’. It took some time after 9/11 to discover that there were British citizens fighting in Afghanistan or on the side of the Taliban. Since then, the number of suicide bombers who were British citizens or
residents of Britain has increased: there were two in Tel Aviv and following them, Richard Reid, the shoe bomber; the four suicide bombers of July 7; six others, three Somali and an Ethiopian, unsuccessfully attempted suicide bombing a fortnight later (sentenced in 2007). With a little over 1.5 million Muslims living in Britain, almost 1000 have been arrested on suspicion of terror, and while most have been released without charge, more than fifty have been charged and many have now been sentenced. One set of terror plotters, mainly Londoners, used a warehouse to store more than half a tonne of ammonium nitrate fertiliser chemicals to make a large car bomb, allegedly to blow up a London nightclub. Seven men aged between 19 and 34, six of them with family roots in Pakistan, went on trial at the Old Bailey in February 2006 for this offence (Sciolino and Grey 2006). One Algerian resisting arrest shot a policeman in Manchester. In East London, a policeman shot one Bangladeshi terror suspect in the shoulder. The suspect and his brother were later released, a case apparently of mistaken information by a ‘reliable’ informant, but not before their home, names and faces were publicised in a major media event. As early as 2002, a Wahhabi/Salafi preacher of violent jihad, ‘energetic promoter of incendiary videos across the country to Muslim groups, inciting them to kill Jews, Hindus and other infidels’ was arrested, and was tried in 2003 (Lewis 2007, pp. 130–131).

In August 2006, an alleged plot to blow up 12 aircraft above five US cities was foiled after a massive surveillance operation. 24 young British Muslims, mostly British-born Pakistanis, were arrested in dawn raids in Birmingham, High Wycombe and London. Others were arrested in Pakistan. The dawn operation caused travel chaos at airports. British Airways cancelled 400 flights out of Heathrow. Passengers have been prohibited since from carrying liquids on board. John Reid, the Home Secretary, echoing the London Metropolitan police deputy commissioner, Paul Stephenson, said: ‘This was intended to be mass murder on an unimaginable scale’ (Laville et al. 2006), ‘Worse than 9/11’. ‘Let us have no doubt that we are probably in the most sustained period of severe threat since the end of the Second World War’, Mr. Reid is reported to have said (Whitaker et al. 2006). The British Pakistani Al-Qaida nexus had by now, according to The Independent, been firmly established (Whitaker et al. 2006). Yet the jury in the court trial of the suspects which took place at the Old Bailey in September 2008 remained deadlocked on the prosecution’s central allegation (The Times, 9 September 2008, front page).

This type of scaremongering by security personnel and politicians has persisted, conveying the clear message that all British Muslims are potentially hidden terrorists. In February 2007, nine suspects were arrested in another mediated dawn operation for allegedly being involved in a plot to behead a Muslim soldier serving in the British army. A further man was later arrested and five were charged and stood trial at the Old Bailey on 23 February 2007. Three were released, one of whom accused Britain of being a ‘police state’. In November 2006, MI5 (the British equivalent of the FBI) claimed in a front-page article in The Guardian (Norton-Taylor 2006) to have identified ‘30 major terrorist plots being planned in Britain’, and to be ‘targeting 1,600 individuals actively engaged in promoting attacks here and abroad’. These 30 plots ‘are the most serious of many more planned by some 200 British based “networks” involved in terrorism’ (!). Most plotters were said to be British-born and connected to Al-Qaida in Pakistan. Young teenagers were being ‘groomed to be suicide bombers’. According to opinion polls cited by MI5, ‘more than 100,000 British citizens considered the July 2005 attacks on London were justified’ (Norton-Taylor 2006). This gloomy assessment by the head of MI5 at the time, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller
(she subsequently retired early) was backed up by increasingly histrionic statements by politicians and media reports on surveillance of university students (Dodd 2006). A further conspiracy was by young (foreign-born) Muslim doctors who planted a series of car bombs, two of them in London’s West End. One crashed his car into Glasgow airport. This plot too was foiled and the men involved arrested.

Media exposés and an emergent national public debate

Media investigative reports highlighted the connection of apparently respectable Muslim organisations with extremist anti-Western sects, or their secret links with fundamentalist organisations in Pakistan. Hence, according to a *Guardian* report (Lewis 2006) *Tablighi Jamaat* (the ‘Fellowship of Preaching/Proselytising’) is being monitored ‘after it emerged that seven of the 23 suspects under arrest for allegedly plotting to blow up transatlantic airliners were affiliated to this movement’ (Bajwa 2006c). In their response in the ethnic press, the organisation’s leaders denied the allegations and reaffirmed the non-political nature of their movement, including its rejection of Wahabbism (supposedly a sign of their extremism).

A *Tablighi* leader, Emdad Rahman (2006), claimed in *The Muslim Weekly* that the organisation is ‘one one of the most avant-garde Islamic movements in the world, a non-political group, shunning violence and engrossed in nothing more than proselytising and calling Muslims to return to Islam’. In an article that protested the transparency and openness of this now global organisation, one member is cited as asking: ‘People who go to Church carry out atrocities. Does this mean that the Church is a terrorist body?’ (Rahman 2006, p. 13). Nevertheless, the lengthy trips that Tabligis engage in, with young people often spending more than a month on the road in Pakistan, and the movement’s strong links to the Deobandi, a religious tendency linked to the Taliban, has made such protestations about a peaceful past less convincing to the growing cohort of expert ‘Islam watchers’.

A second media exposé was of the roots of the Muslim Council of Britain’s leadership in *Jamaat-i-Islami* (the ‘Muslim Fellowship’), an early fundamentalist organisation and political party founded in British India by a journalist, Mawlana Mawdudi, who first espoused the Islamisation of the state (Bright 2005). Despite its mixed history of incitement against groups like the *Ahmadiyya*, *Jamaat-i-Islami*, somewhat like Hamas, has a reputation for sobriety and honesty, and is remembered for delivering services to the needy and aid to refugees at the time of the Partition of British India. Nevertheless, the movement is also associated with the Pakistani army’s violent massacres in Bangladesh during the civil war in 1971, and the extreme violence on campuses of its militant student wing, *Islami Jamiat-i-Tulabah* (‘students’) during the Zia years (President Zia was a member of JI) (Nasr 1994, p. 69). According to various websites the JI, like other Islamic Pakistani movements, indirectly sponsors camps training young men to fight in Kashmir through its militant wing, *Hizb-ul-Muhajideen*, though its camps have not been the main training grounds for young British Pakistani jihadists. The British organisation created by the movement, UK Islamic Mission (UKIM), which is centred in Leicester, along with its various youth wings and offshoots (see Hussain 2007), claims to be a separate organisation, distancing itself from the parent movement and aiming to integrate into all walks of British society (ur-Rahman 2007a). The success of some of its members in founding the UK umbrella organisation, the Muslim Council of Britain (henceforth MCB), may be related more to their organisational capacity than their political views. Nevertheless,
leaders are accused of dividing humanity into believers and unbelievers (kaffir) (Bright 2005) and their puritanical ideology is also manifested in their public attack on homosexuality in Britain and their attempts to censure Muslim cultural festival celebrations allegedly transgressing strict Islamic codes of conduct. Such emergent divisions among Muslims reveal the validity of a post-Habermasian approach that stresses the pluralisation of the diasporan Muslim public sphere in the UK. Diaspora Muslims include a wide range of nominally non-violent groups that are nevertheless violently opposed, at least rhetorically, to any Muslims they regard as transgressive or deviant.

Whereas there is no doubt about the media exposés, the timing of the shift in Government opinion is less clear. Chetan Bhatt (2006) claims that as late as 2006, the Home Office and Foreign Office defined ‘reformist Islam’ including Jamaat-i-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood, as ‘moderate’ (p. 98). By contrast, tracing the history of the emergence of the MCB and its relations with Government, Jonathan Birt (2005) reports that as early as October 2001, ‘Number 10 stopped returning MCB’s calls’, following the organisation’s failure to endorse the war in Afghanistan (p. 96), and by 2002 its links with extremist organisations were publicly recognised by the Foreign Office (pp. 98–99). Against that, Sean McLoughlin, who also traces the process of the organisation’s emergence partly on the basis of its own magazine, The Common Good, views the MCB and its affiliates as more positive, constructive organisations, less beholden to their subcontinental roots (McLoughlin 2002).

Like the present paper, these scholarly accounts rely heavily on the media. The extent to which a genuine dialogue in the public sphere was emerging in Britain between British Muslim organisations and a critical press and media became evident after a media exposé of a range of Muslim national organisational leaders. A hard-hitting BBC Panorama programme, ‘A Question of Leadership’, exposed the Jamaati roots of representative members of the Muslim Council of Britain and the often vitriolic, anti-Western, anti-Semitic and intolerant views expressed by a range of different British Muslim leaders and Saudi visitors preaching at public meetings, gatherings and mosques, beyond the public eye. Responses by Muslim leaders to questions about suicide bombings, religious intolerance and the politicisation of Islam by the programme producer could be construed as fudged and evasive. Following the airing of the programme (Panorama 2005), the Muslim Council of Britain refuted the accusations against it in a detailed letter which the broadcaster published on its website, alongside the producer’s reply (BBC NEWS 2005). In the back-and-forth correspondence that ensued, one somewhat ironic development was that the website became a forum for a theological debate about the arcane historical views of the movement’s founder, Mawdudi, with the MCB and BBC citing, in turn, book, chapter and verse - phrases, sentences and counter-sentences - to prove or disprove the allegedly ‘fascist’ aspects of Mawdudi’s vision of an Islamic state (BBC News 2005). Throughout this dialogue, MCB leaders refused to condemn the founder of the movement.

In a later article in The Muslim Weekly, the MCB President denied the programme’s accusation that the Jamaat and its British affiliate, the UK Islamic Mission (UKIM), are opposed to ‘plurality, multiculturalism, universal human rights and peaceful co-existence’ as ‘false and mischievous’ (ur-Rahman 2007b). ‘In Islam’, he says, ‘the idea of human rights, cultural diversity and plurality of the human family, long predated anything similar in modern political thought’ (ur-Rahman 2007b). He points out that the Koran describes Christians and Jews as People of the Book, Ahl...
al-Kitab (though he fudges the extent to which they nevertheless remained second-class citizens in the medieval Muslim world).

A third British media exposé, this time by Channel 4, reported on another Pakistani movement, \textit{Ahl-e-Hadith} (‘People of the Prophet’s Sayings’), a Pakistani group close to Wahabbism espousing a Saudi brand of Islam. The programme reported that the organisation allegedly hosted travelling clerics preaching hatred of the West at various UK mosques, including the Birmingham mosque headquarters of the movement (Bajwa 2007a). Most shocking about the sermons broadcast on Channel 4 was the constant references to ‘\textit{kaffir},’ ‘\textit{kuffar},’ and ‘\textit{kufaristan}’ – unbeliever or infidel, the land of unbelief – as defining features of Britain and its citizens.\textsuperscript{9} Some preachers seemed to be preaching the ultimate Islamic takeover of the British state.\textsuperscript{10} In defence, Muslims organisations said they rent their premises out without necessarily endorsing the opinions of visiting preachers, and that, in any case, sentences were taken out of context (Bajwa 2007a). Nevertheless, the unbridgeable chasm between ‘us’ and ‘them’ exposed by the infidel rhetoric shocked British observers and was seen as a clear signal of Muslims’ refusal to integrate.

Against these accusations, in a letter in \textit{The Muslim Weekly}, a local Birmingham anti-war association defended \textit{Ahl-e-Hadith} mosque leaders ‘for their faith and community work’ while its imam was said to work ‘closely with peace organizations and government authorities’. In another major response, also published in \textit{The Muslim Weekly}, Shouaib Ahmed (2007, pp. 12–13), the General Secretary of \textit{Ahl-e-Hadith}, denied the alleged Saudi link, along with responsibility for anything the 100 visiting speakers had said in their sermons. He stressed the organisation’s inter-faith work and described ‘\textit{kaffir}’ as a ‘neutral term’ (p. 13), opposed to ‘\textit{mu’min}’ (believer), applied to anyone who ‘rejects Allah and his message’. He blasted the media for highlighting ‘a few theoretical statements about hypothetical jihads and hypothetical Islamic states, while keeping silent about the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, predominantly Muslims, who have been slaughtered (not in theory but in actuality) in recent years in the Middle East, usually in the name of “liberation from oppression” and “establishing a democratic state” and never at the express invitation or request of this silenced (by death) majority’ (p. 13). He ended by invoking eras of Islamic tolerance, and claimed to be a member of a law-abiding, peaceful community, that works closely with the police and government services.

\textit{Ahl-e-Hadith}’s general secretary’s article in \textit{The Muslim Weekly} was followed by three other articles rebuffing accusations by the media: one by the UK Islamic Mission, written by its President, Shafiq ur-Rahman (2007a, pp. 14–15), one by Dr Ahmed Al-Dubayan, Director General of the London Islamic Cultural Centre and Central Mosque (\textit{The Muslim Weekly} 2007a, p. 15), and one by the Muslim Council of Britain (\textit{The Muslim Weekly} 2007b, p. 15). The first article speaks of an ‘open season of Muslim-bashing and Islamophobia’, and of Jihad as ‘the greatest red herring of our post-modern Islamophobic discourse’ (ur-Rahman 2007a, p. 14), which in fact is a ‘holistic concept’ that refers to the ‘duty to do goodness and forbid evil’. He distinguishes ‘military jihad’ (\textit{Qital}), the ‘lesser jihad’, which can only be ‘waged in a just and noble cause’, with rules ‘clearly laid down’, from civil struggle, the ‘greater jihad’ (\textit{Jihad-e-Akbar}), which is ‘lifelong’. ur-Rahman claims, somewhat ambiguously, that ‘in our own British context, British Muslims are under no Islamic obligation to take part in any conflict or struggle overseas’, but adds: ‘It would not be Jihad should someone tried [try] to commit violence or indulge in any unlawful, let alone a subversive activity on the British soil’ (p. 14). In the same newspaper, the London
Islamic Cultural Centre denies its Saudi connections (The Muslim Weekly 2007a, p. 15), while the MCB accuses Channel 4 of an ‘attempt at promoting sectarianism among British Muslims’. At the same time, it vows not to allow ‘divisive agendas’ or ‘unacceptable and inflammatory language’ from mosque pulpits or on DVDs.

As with Mawdudi’s writings, in this case too Muslim theological concepts have become, post 9/11, matters of public debate in Britain. Muslims are compelled in their defence against accusations of nefarious agendas to spell out more liberal interpretations of commonly used Koranic and Arabic concepts, terms and ideas, in order to prove to a sceptical English public and media how they may be construed as acceptable and tolerant.

Seditious spaces?

At the start of the post-9/11 debate on Muslim radicalisation, it was assumed by politicians and the media alike that mosques were the main sites of incitement – that young Muslims were inflamed by ‘ignorant’, uneducated clerics coming from abroad. This was a notion Pakistani leaders, generally disdainful of their clerics, were happy to promote. The notorious Finsbury Park mosque, raided spectacularly by helicopter, seemed to confirm this image. Led by Abu Hamza al-Masri, a radical Egyptian Palestinian preacher sentenced to deportation in 2007, it appears to have been the home of many of the early suicide bombers, who were clearly influenced by his rhetoric. Abu Hamza was ultimately arrested, having gone into hiding for more than a year, and jailed for seven years in 2006 on six charges of soliciting murder, incitement to racial hatred, possessing ‘threatening, abusive or insulting recordings’ and a document useful to terrorists. When evicted from the mosque, he preached to crowds in front of it in the street for several months. In February, 2007, The Independent and The Times reported the arrest on charges of ‘encouraging terrorism’ of a radical cleric, Abu Izzadeen, 31, born Trevor Brookes to Jamaican parents, and once the bodyguard of Omar Bakri Muhammad, leader of the now-banned Al-Muhajiroun group and later spokesman for Al-Ghurabaa and leader of the Saved Sect, also now banned. He was the subject of an exposé by ITN, the Independent Television Network, in a video made in 2004, in which he described the Secretary of State for Defence at that time, John Reid, as an ‘enemy of Islam’ and the British government as crusaders ‘come to kill and rape Muslims’. In the video he is reported to have said that ‘Whoever joins them – he who joins the British Army, is a mortal kaffir, and his only hokum [punishment] is for his head to be removed’ (Morris 2007, p. 10). The cleric was said to have also participated in the protests outside the Danish embassy and had reportedly praised the suicide bombers of 7 July (Morris 2007, p. 10).

In response to the moral panic surrounding mosques and hate preachers, a new body was launched in Britain: MINAB, the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Body, comprising 1,600 British mosques and Islamic centres that, according to the ethnic press, ‘aims to stop mosques being used by fundamentalist extremists by helping to reduce their reliance on using ministers of religion from abroad’ and increase the skills of local imams (Khanna 2006a, p. 5). Imams are described as ‘coming from nowhere and spreading hatred’. The new organisation received publicity even in the national press. It was founded by four Muslim umbrella associations: the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the British Muslim Forum and the Al-Khoei Foundation (representing moderate Shias in Britain) – ‘as part of the Home Office’s Tackling Extremism Together programme’, though

One by one, new spaces of sedition have been uncovered or discovered by the British state and media. Added to the list of extremist mosques have been new Islamic bookshops, allegedly selling hate literature and so-called martyrdom DVDs. The 7/7 suicide bombers met in an Islamic bookshop, having been expelled from their mosque’s basement. In a Birmingham raid in 2007, the police targeted an Islamic bookshop, as well as a cybercafé and a food shop. In the public imagination, new sites of sedition seem to be multiplying in places where, previously, benign cultural or religious celebrations were held.

Young peoples’ organisations have also become increasingly suspect. Two splinter groups of *Al-Muhajiroun*, *Al-Ghurabaa* (The ‘Strangers’) and the Saved Sect, were banned by the Home Office in July 2006, on the grounds that they openly promoted violent jihad aimed at creating a worldwide Islamic state. Most protesters outside the Danish embassy in London, as reported in court trial proceedings, were members of *Al-Muhajiroun* or its offshoots. Despite pressure from the government of Pakistan to ban it, the claims of another UK splinter organisation, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (HT, ‘Party of Liberation’) to be non-violent were provisionally accepted by the UK government. One dissenting Muslim voice in the press argued, however, that ‘Anyone involved in Islamic da’wah (call to Islam) for the past 25 years knows that HT is an organisation that foments revolution and bloodshed. That’s why they had posters up and down the country saying that leaders [of Muslim countries] must be removed, must be overthrown’ (Bajwa 2006b, p. 3). In November 2006, *Newsnight* and *File on Four* alleged that HT in Croydon was ‘promoting gang violence by making recruits commit crimes to test their loyalty and teaching them that non-Muslims were “worthless”’, an allegation denied by an HT spokesman (Bajwa 2006b, p. 5).

After HT, FOSIS, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies, which represents 90,000 university students (Lewis 2006, p. 11), was the next to be criticised, partly for its defence of HT, which is banned on campuses by the National Union of Students (NUS). In April 2006, FOSIS was ‘widely accepted as a moderate organisation’, according to Paul Lewis of *The Guardian*, and ‘praised for its promotion of interfaith dialogue and campaigns against Islamophobia.’ The organisation achieved a large presence in the NUS and yet it has been constantly suspected of radical tendencies. In rejecting the reinstatement of HT, the NUS president-elect, Gemma Tumelty described HT, according to the press, as ‘homophobic, sexist and racist’ (Lewis 2006, p. 11). FOSIS has claimed it is being spied upon by police, although this was denied (Badshah 2006).

The flood of media exposés of alleged Muslim radicalised organisations and spaces has become a veritable cascade. It is almost impossible to open a British newspaper without finding some new revelation. While it is obvious that in reality, few of the sites where British Muslims gather are places of conspiracy, by now adult and youth organisations, mosques, bookshops and cybercafés, have all been identified by the police, the courts and the media as diasporic spaces of conspiracy and anti-Western hatred. Following these, Islamic schools and even youth camps in the Lake District have been added to the list of dangerous sites. One school, the *Jameah Islamiyah* School in Essex, was accused of allowing terrorist training in its extensive grounds. It was finally closed in February 2007. A Saudi-funded private school,
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King Fahd Academy in Acton, was warned to remove books that describe Christians as ‘pigs’ and Jews as ‘Monkeys’, and was accused of fomenting hatred in the classroom. The Schools Minister announced that 45 independent schools, including Islamic institutions, had been closed since 2004 by government order (Frean 2007, p. 7). Perhaps most disconcerting was news in the national media that recruiting camps for potential terrorists were regularly held in the Lake District. Five suspects in the 21/7 failed suicide plot in London were identified in one such camp (Laville 2007). There were reports of Islamist rafting trips in North Wales, and terrorist training on farms in Kent and the Brecon Beacons. What could be more English than camping trips in Wordsworth’s English countryside among thousands of other carefree holiday-makers? The Englishness of many of the young Muslim conspirators, the majority Pakistanis born and bred in Britain, has been one of the most remarked-upon findings to emerge. Young men involved in terror plots or suicide bombings appear to be quite ordinary. Most come from relatively well off, lower-middle class homes, rather than poverty-stricken inner cities. Most are not particularly marginal, being students, teachers or small businessmen, and quite a few are mature, in their late twenties and early thirties, married, some with children. There is nothing to distinguish them, on the surface, from the vast majority of British Pakistani South Asian Muslims. The lead suicide bomber on July 7 played cricket with English friends the night before the bombing. Even the culprits’ piety has not been self-evidently unusual.

In the light of almost daily revelations, the Sisyphean task facing national Muslim organisational leaders, that of counteracting the widespread public image of pervasive, hidden, Islamic terror, is huge. Instead of lobbying for and promoting Islamic interests, they find themselves and their organisations condemned by politicians and the media alike for their radical roots and failure to promote diasporic Muslim integration and multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism in an age of terror

Given these revelations, the ‘failure of multiculturalism’ discourse has taken root in Britain, promoted by politicians, the media and academics, and is a central aspect of the debate between Muslim leaders and British politicians. In scrutinising this discourse, one needs first to deconstruct its implicit assumptions. Hence, in a recent paper published in Sociological Review (Werbner 2005), I argue for the need to go beyond the usual arguments against state-sponsored multiculturalism, and to consider multiculturalism as played out in historical moments of crisis and confrontation, in which culturally intractable oppositions and incommensurabilities surface. I labelled the theorising of such intractable dilemmas as ‘multiculturalism in history’, to distinguish it from the more quotidian debates about state funding allocations for cultural activities, or special educational programmes and dietary or clothing dispensations affecting ethnic minorities. For the Muslims of Britain, multiculturalism-in-history was inaugurated by the Rushdie affair, following the publication of The Satanic Verses. Alleging blasphemy punishable by death, Muslims in Britain seemed deliberately to insist upon values alien to the majority population. They burnt books and demanded the death of the author. The July 7, 2005 London suicide bombings by young British Pakistanis were carried out in the name of Islam and as retribution for the sufferings of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East. Once again this seemed to underline an unbridgeable chasm between European values of citizenship and the rule of law, and Muslims’ vengeful transnational politics. The Danish cartoon
affair was yet another manifestation of seemingly incommensurable values, this time in the field of art and representation.

Diasporic Hindus and Sikhs have each in turn also sparked apparently intractable multicultural conflicts in Britain. In the Sikh case, the conflict surrounded a play, Behzti (‘Dishonour’), written by a young Sikh woman, Gurbreet Kaur Bhatti, which depicted the rape and murder of a young woman by a priest in the Gurdwara (Sikh temple). Produced by Birmingham Repertory, the play was cancelled after Sikhs responded with a massive show of public outrage and threatened violence (Asthana 2004, p. 13). In the case of Hindus, the clash of values arose in response to a solo exhibition by one of India’s most celebrated contemporary artists, Maqbool Fida Husain, whose one-man retrospective in London included portrayals of the Goddesses Durga and Draupadi in the ‘characteristic nude imagery associated with his work’ (Khanna 2006b, p. 2). Asia House Gallery withdrew the exhibition after highly vocal protests by Hindu Human Rights, the National Council of Hindu Temples and the Hindu Forum of Britain (Khanna 2006b, p. 2).

The notion of multiculturalism-in-history is intended to separate day-to-day tolerance of cultural diversity and arguments over minor state funding allocations from exceptional cultural clashes that seem irresolvable. Historically, such confrontations are usually never resolved; they only ‘go away’, entering the collective subconsciousness of a community as a bitter sediment. This was certainly true of the Rushdie affair. The 2007 award of a knighthood to Salman Rushdie, almost twenty years after the confrontation over The Satanic Verses, ignited once again the bitterness British Muslims felt over the affair, despite their muted public response.

One problem with the notion of multiculturalism is that it often leads to an intellectual cul-de-sac. Detractors of multiculturalism argue that culture is not identical with community; it is not a bounded or territorialised entity; it cannot be reified since it is constantly changing and hybridising, an ‘open text’. While such deconstructive arguments are undeniable, they evade the question, first, of why certain issues evoke such passionate commitment and sharp disagreement, and, linked to that, is it accurate to speak of culture, when at issue are historical conflicts sparked by deeply felt religious feelings, in confrontation with liberal secularism or Western geopolitics? David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party (the largest opposition party) in Britain, was able to say in the same breath, we will support the Notting Hill carnival (a cultural event), we reject multiculturalism as a failed policy. The ‘culture’ he invokes is seemingly innocuous and non-polemical, exclusive of race, ethnic chauvinism, or religion; hence an acceptable idiom in which to describe ‘difference’ in neutral terms. But when talking about multiculturalism and its failures, more often than not the underlying attack turns out to be against diasporic Muslims’ alleged self-segregation in social ghettos or their ‘extremist’ defence of their religious commitments (there are countries, of course, in which language has the same effect). The fact that the underlying problematic of religion is not acknowledged publicly in Britain (as it might be in South Asia) so that ‘culture’ becomes a euphemism for religion or community, entangles government ministers and opposition leaders alike in strange contradictions of which they seem entirely unaware.

Political hubris
The recent ‘failure of multiculturalism’ discourse enunciated by British politicians of the left and the right, reflects a political hubris which is shared by many academic
critics of multiculturalism. The unreflective assumption of these critics is that the cultures of minorities, defined in the broadest sense of the term to include religion, can be made to disappear by fiat if politicians and policy-makers refuse to support them, either rhetorically, on official occasions, or with small dollops of cash. In reality, historically, the very opposite has often been the case. The cultures of minorities are strengthened by the need to mobilise internally for the sake of culture or religion in the absence of public funding. Singling out Muslim religious associations for censure as British politicians have chosen to do, arguably merely legitimises their representative status in the eyes of the public they serve. The censured organisations gain kudos for being powerfully independent, and not just yea-saying patsies who pusillanimously approve government policy. Ministers’ critique of Islamic religious organisations rather than ethnic ones (for example, Pakistani or South Asian) implies, ipso facto, that for the British state, it is religion that reflects ‘culture and community’.

There are very good reasons why diasporic Pakistanis in Britain, who are observant Muslims, choose to highlight their religious identity in civil society and the public sphere: first, because as pious believers this is their most valued, high-cultural identity; but importantly also, there are in Britain laws which set out entitlements for religious groups. Among these are the right to found voluntary-aided state schools, supported by government funds; the right to worship, to build places of worship, and so forth. Oddly enough, despite all the recent uproar about the failure of multiculturalism, there are no laws in the UK that enshrine the cultures of immigrants, though limited legal rights to cultural, political and territorial autonomy have been granted to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In other words, multicultural citizenship in Britain, as elsewhere, recognises the rights of indigenous territorialised peoples and settled minorities, aboriginals, Native Americans and so forth, to a measure of self-rule, autonomy and formal representation in the public sphere. Only secondarily does multicultural citizenship apply to diasporic minorities and urban immigrants who are not settled territorially and make no territorial claims. The UK Race Relations Act protects ethnic and racial minorities – and this includes most Muslims. The recent law against incitement to religious hatred does not necessarily include what Muslims themselves regard as religious offence or vilification. On purely pragmatic grounds, then, immigrants fighting to gain equal rights in the UK will choose to struggle in arenas where there already exist established rights, some of which are denied them. In such cases there is no need to establish the ground rules and principles; merely to insist on their universal application.

One perhaps less obvious implication of multicultural citizenship is that everybody, even the majority, has a culture. The old assimilationist melting pot nationalism assumed that the majority way of life was normal in a taken-for-granted, transparent way; it was not a ‘culture’ but just the rational way of being, ethically and morally. Majority culture and religion were, in other words, unmarked. Minorities had cultures and these were different, often irrational, and hence a problem. The sooner they got rid of these bizarre ways of living, the better. Unlike hegemonic nationalism, multiculturalism’s innovation as a philosophical movement is that it applies to all citizens, even the majority.

This principle, of the equality of citizens’ cultures, appears to have been abandoned by British politicians in the aftermath of the July 7 bombings. The hitherto accepted right of minorities to foster their unique cultures or traditions alongside the majority culture and religion is now being effectively questioned, with constant demand that minorities make a serious effort to abandon their separateness. In a
further twist that highlights the ambiguity of the culture concept, young Muslims themselves are rejecting their parental culture and tradition, in a paradoxical move that seems to deny culture in the name of religion.

The attack on multiculturalism

In his book, *Globalising Islam*, Olivier Roy (2004) argues that neo-fundamentalist global Islamic movements have deterritorialised themselves by denying their cultures and traditions. In many ways, this is not a new argument. What makes fundamentalist movements modern, contrary to appearance, is the fact that – like modernist movements – they deny the validity of historical continuity; in a word, ‘tradition’. In referring to a sacred book allegedly enunciated by God Himself 1500 years ago, and to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad from that distant, inaccessible period, such movements claim to purify themselves from unlawful accretions over the centuries. These accretions have, of course, been part of the localising of Islam, its embeddedness in different places and responsiveness to local cultural milieus. Paradoxically, Roy argues, this deterritorialised purification movement has led to the secularisation of Islam since so much of everyday life is left out of the Islamists’ utopian vision of the past-as-future. In his view, the stress comes to be on personal, individual religiosity, perhaps a kind of Protestantism.

Whether or not Roy is right, his analysis raises an interesting question: can there be a religion that is not also cultural? Pakistanis have always reiterated to me that Islam is a whole, all-inclusive, way of life, and this indeed was the argument put by the Muslims of India in claiming a national homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. But if Islam is a whole way of life, then surely it refers to the customs and traditions of particular localities? In a sense, both claims are equally dubious: religion is not the same as culture, at least not in the modern world, but nor is it entirely separable from it. Islamism may reject the Pakistani-style chiffon headscarf, but it substitutes for it another head covering which becomes over time a uniform, i.e. a custom. This custom can, however, be shared by persons from different places and backgrounds.

Nevertheless, I believe that it makes sense to distinguish between culture and religion, in a way that an Islamist does. This is because, as discursive formations in certain fundamental senses they are not the same, and particularly so in the case of the three monotheistic religions. In these, religious belief is about a relationship with a transcendent being that demands conviction and commitment, experienced in highly emotional ways. It may be, as Durkheim (1915) famously argued in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, that God is merely the embodiment of community; and it is probably true that culture, in the sense, first and foremost, of language, but also food, music, art, architecture, spices and perfumes, clothing and so forth, also embodies a community – though not necessarily the same one. But religion and culture are not the same for the simple reason that cultural practices are not hedged in a similar way with sacred taboos, dangerous no-go areas. Culture is not pitted against moral transgressions and ethical violations, although those who perform it awkwardly can be laughed at for their gaucheness. Religion is threatened by believers’ internal doubt, which may or may not be fuelled by externally inspired scepticism. Culture is threatened by the physical destruction of objects or buildings, by forgetfulness, and perhaps more than anything in the modern world, by radical dislocations and changes in social organisation. A person may have multiple cultural competences, and switch between them
situationally, or she may be a cultural hybrid, the product of even or uneven fusions of two or more cultural worlds. There have been periods in the history of religion when boundaries between, for example, Islam and Hinduism in South Asia, or Judaism and Christianity in the Near East, were blurred. But in the modern world it would seem odd to be a Muslim, a Jew and a Christian simultaneously, however syncretic one’s faith.

The gap between culture and religion raises the question of what exactly is meant by multiculturalism in Britain? Whereas cultural ‘traditions’ may be open to negotiation in the diasporic context, religious customs anchored in Holy writ and said to originate in a transcendental covenant, may be conceived of as non-negotiable. When encapsulated religious minorities negotiate a place in their new nation with the majority society, the more pious among them insist on the religious basis of customs (such as veiling) that in reality may have evolved historically. Culture for them assumes the aura of divine commandment, impervious to politicians’ invocations of ‘community cohesion.’

The problematic tendency to conflate religion and culture in debates on multiculturalism and identity politics in the UK includes academics like myself as well - from defenders of multiculturalism as religion such as Modood (2005) or Parekh (2000) to their critics on the left (e.g. Yuval-Davis 1997). The ‘mystification of culture’ as Bhatt (2006, p. 99) calls it, conflating religious pluralism with identity politics, imperceptively merges two quite separate, historically constructed discourses (Asad 2003). On the one hand, a discourse on religion which recognises that modern religions are institutionalised, bounded and textualised, subject to constant internal divisions and schismatic tendencies, more or less ‘extreme’, ‘doctrinaire’ or ‘humanist-liberal’; ‘pure’ or ‘syncretic’, ‘relaxed’; ‘universalistic’ or ‘particularistic’ interpretations; and, on the other hand, a discourse on ‘culture’ which recognises its fuzzy, historically changing, situational, hybridising and unreflective aspects. Arguably, issues usually regarded as a matter of multicultural policy, for example the dispensation to wear exotic headdresses to school or work (turbans, veils, skull caps) more rightly belong in the constitutional domain of religious pluralism. Cultural conventions on headdress, which do not carry that non-negotiable imperative quality, can be ignored.

The attack on multiculturalism in Britain since 2006 has been led by three prominent public figures, speaking for wider constituencies: Ruth Kelly, until 2007 Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and thus a representative of the Labour government, David Cameron, leader of the Opposition and of the Conservatives, and a third multiculturalist critic (not discussed here), Trevor Phillips, a British Guyanese, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, and since 2006 of the newly formed Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

Ruth Kelly began her campaign against multiculturalism by calling, in August 2006, for the closing of Islamic schools that promote ‘isolationism and extremism’, and for an ‘honest debate’ over whether multiculturalism ‘encouraged separatism’. Her speech was occasioned by the launch of a ‘Commission on Integration and Cohesion’ (Bajwa 2006d, pp. 1–2). In October 2006, she told police and council leaders to target Muslim ‘hot spots’ – schools, universities, mosques and colleges, and, in an open letter to the MCB, accused the organisation of being ‘passive in tackling extremism, yet expect[ing] government support’ (Bajwa 2006d, pp. 1, 3). While criticising Muslim schools, the Secretary of State, a devout Catholic, emphasised that ‘Muslims are entitled to the same rights as Anglicans, Catholics, Hindus and Jewish groups, which all have state schools’ (Bajwa 2006d, p. 2). In February 2007, Kelly...
announced that state money would be switched from groups like the Muslim Council of Britain to ‘local programmes backed by local councils,’ particularly to ‘work with those who may be excluded from colleges, schools and mosques and may be vulnerable to grooming by extremists’ (thus denying the obvious truth that most persons charged with terror in Britain were (ex)students and not marginal) (Wintour 2007, p. 12).

In a series of investigative articles published on 20 October 2006 (Josephs and Peled 2006, pp. 3–4), the Jewish Chronicle analyses the fall from grace of the MCB and links it to one major single symbolic event: the organisation’s continued refusal to attend Holocaust Memorial Day, calling for it to be renamed Genocide Memorial Day. The weekly claims that Kelly warned the organisation’s leaders that they would lose Whitehall financial support if they continued to boycott the event. It analyses the strong support of the MCB leaders for the Palestinian struggle, various anti-Semitic comments made by its leaders, their support for Hamas (one leader had attended a memorial to Sheikh Ahmed Yassin), their anti-homosexual stance and anti-Rushdie comments, as ‘cause for disquiet’ – indicators of the continued conservatism ‘verging on fundamentalism’ of the national leaders of the MCB. The accusations highlight the blurring of boundaries between contingent political behaviour and religious extremism in the eyes of politicians and the media. Among the MCB’s associate members, the paper tells us, is the Muslim Association of Britain which has consistently refused to condemn Palestinian suicide bombing. Nevertheless, the JC also recognises the MCB’s inter-faith work.

Holocaust Memorial Day has become, then, the litmus test of Muslim willingness to ‘integrate’. Unlike in the US, where the Jewish lobby is very powerful, in the British case it is the British government that established HMD and that has lead the demand that the MCB attend its state commemorations. For South Asian Muslims, it is perhaps not immediately obvious that to participate in the state HMD ceremony is to identify not only with Britain but with a free, democratic Europe. Whereas the MCB leaders represent their non-attendance as a gesture of protest on behalf of the Palestinians, for British leaders it implies a rejection of the nation’s heroic historical act of liberating the camps and defeating fascism for Europe and the world. Perhaps most interesting sociologically is the clear understanding by British politicians that, above all, it is the public reconciliation between two diasporas – the Jewish and the South Asian Muslim – that signals existentially Muslim willingness to integrate into their new nation. Press reports of Jewish-Muslim inter-faith dialogue attest to an apparent rapprochement, if not in the Middle East, then in the diaspora. A headline in The Muslim Weekly, for example, reported that ‘Judeo-Muslim groups unite to create European platform’ in which a new organisation, the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony, surfaced for the first time, with Alif-Alef as its Jewish counterpart (The Muslim Weekly 2007c, p. 7). Among other participants was a reporter from Radio Salaam Shalom, the UK’s first Muslim-Jewish radio station.

Financially, however, it is evident that there was no practical pressure that could be exerted on the MCB: the Jewish Chronicle reveals that at stake in the government’s threatened gesture of non-recognition were relatively small sums of money granted to the MCB to support projects on citizenship and equality: £148,160 in 2005–6, £50,000 in 2006–7 (the group originally applied for £500,000). It also received £170,000 from the Department of Trade and Industry (Josephs 2006, p. 4).

‘Multiculturalism’ was revealed as a policy of paltry financial support for an organisation representing 400 Muslim umbrella organisations, networks and mosques.
Yet its leaders’ alleged sin of non-attendance on Holocaust Memorial Day was not entirely deviant or out of line with wider public sentiment in Britain: a YouGov poll for the *Jewish Chronicle* showed that a third of the general public supported renaming Holocaust Memorial Day Genocide Day with 14 per cent wanting it dropped altogether (Bajwa 2007b, p. 3). So too, the Palestinian struggle (if not suicide bombings) is widely supported in Britain, where Israel is increasingly seen by many as a rogue state, while the war on terror in Iraq and (to a lesser extent) Afghanistan are widely condemned.

In an open letter to Ruth Kelly in *The Muslim Weekly* in October 2006, a copy of which was sent by the Secretary General of the MCB, Muhammad Abdul Bari, to all mosques, local, regional and national Muslim organisations across Britain, Mr. Bari defends the organisation’s democratic structure and ‘successful initiatives in schools, prisons, hospitals, mosques and local communities’. He reminds the Minister of a series of top ranking British dignitaries and commissions that saw a direct link between British foreign policy and the rise of home grown terror. On Holocaust Memorial Day he says:

> Your suggestion that the MCB is not fully committed to religious tolerance and community cohesion merely on the basis of a single criterion of non-attendance at the HMD is both inaccurate and absurd. Since when has the achievement of community cohesion been dependent on attending the Holocaust Memorial Day? (*The Muslim Weekly*, 20 October 2006, p. 12)

He continues, ‘We cannot accept that some people are more worthy of remembrance than others’, and claims that ‘a particular political interest group and certain allied journalists have tried to intimidate the MCB into remaining silent about the ongoing injustice and human rights abuses perpetrated against the Palestinian people’. Nevertheless, the MCB is ‘absolutely committed to working together to maintain good relations with Britain’s Jewish community’. The successful London Olympic bid, he says, drew upon ‘London’s record of diversity and confident faith… made because of the extensive network of partnerships forged by the formidable Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, and faith bodies like the MCB’. He goes on to remind the minister of the MCB’s record of calming violence following the various global terror attacks, encouraging voting, liaising with the police, distributing leaflets and guidance on ‘rights and responsibilities’, all in an effort to combat extremism. Hence, the decision to terminate funding indicates that only those organisations that ‘support your government can expect to receive public funds’ (*The Muslim Weekly*, 20 October 2006, p. 13). Such funding in any case was only for specific projects, not ‘core funding’, particularly justified because of the high levels of Muslim deprivation nationwide. He ends by accusing the government of fostering and promoting ‘new Sectarian Muslim bodies with barely concealed links to US neo-cons’ (the reference is probably to the sudden emergence of the Sufi Muslim Council of Britain), engaging in a ‘merry go round’ to find Muslims that agree with it while stigmatising the entire community in ‘drip-feed’ ministerial pronouncements.

### The emergence of a national mediated Muslim public sphere in Britain

This powerful public letter, like the others cited here, highlights the ability of a centralised Muslim umbrella organisation to reach its constituency nationwide, through the press and other media (including the mail). It also highlights the sense of
secure citizenship felt by the Muslims of Britain, who do not fear confrontation with the government, and are not intimidated by threats of funding withdrawal.

The condemnation of the MCB underlines the difficulty for an organisation of transforming itself from being a lobby for the Muslims of Britain, aimed at defending them against discrimination and Islamophobia, to being the community watchdog, controlling the radicalisation of some members and the rhetoric of the majority at a time of global crisis. The organisation’s public relations seem virtually non-existent. For example, the Secretary of the MCB omits to mention in defence of the Muslim community in Britain, mostly of Pakistani origin, that the Muslims of India under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, openly supported the Allied Forces’ battle against Nazism and Fascism in Second World War. Constituting more than a quarter of the Indian army, by the end of the war Muslim soldiers numbered almost half a million, and they were among the 160,000 total casualties of the Indian army, buried in war cemeteries in fifty countries extending from the Pacific Islands to Europe and the UK, according to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Several Muslims were awarded the Victoria Cross (see Husain 1998). Nor does Mr. Bari point to the fact that the Holocaust had been politicised by Israel and the Jewish diaspora, their victimhood stressed as a way of justifying the oppression of Palestinians. Neither of these strong arguments in defence of the MCB’s unwillingness to attend the commemorations has ever been raised, possibly pointing to the organisation’s continued Jamaat hard-liner views.

On the other hand, the double standards used in British public policy are surely not lost on British Muslims either. Not long after her rejection of multiculturalism as a failed policy, Ruth Kelly was involved in a failed attempt, said to be backed by Tony Blair, to exempt the Catholic and Anglican churches from new rules on gay adoption, on the grounds that it would require the adoption agencies ‘to act against the principles of Catholic teaching’ (Woodward and Carrell 2007, p. 1), or that ‘freedom of conscience cannot be made subject to legislation’ (Archbishop Sentamu on Radio 4’s Today programme, 24 January 2007). Kelly’s failed attempt appears to send out a message that multiculturalism is fine for Catholics but not for Muslims.

David Cameron, the Tory opposition leader, also joined the tirade against multiculturalism. In a public speech in the Birmingham Lozells area which had recently been torn by interethnic violence between blacks and Asians, he echoed academic writings in arguing that, although it sounds like a good idea, multiculturalism, instead of promoting the ‘right of everyone to be treated the same despite their differences’, divides, often treating ethnic or faith communities as ‘monolithic blocks rather than individual British citizens’, and allocating housing along ethnic lines. He went on to list Muslim organisations viewed as extremist, including the Muslim Council of Britain, FOSIS, the Muslim Association of Britain, the Islamic Society of Britain, the Islamic Human Rights Commission, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and Tablighi Jama’at (Neville-Jones 2007, pp. 30–31). Yet his pronouncement of the failure of multiculturalism, which referred only to religious organisations, blurred the boundary between culture and religion and glossed over the reality that religious communities in Britain already have established rights, underpinned by legislation.

Like the media and Labour politicians, Cameron too accused the MCB of bad faith. FOSIS, the Muslim students’ umbrella organisation was under suspicion, as we have seen, for links to the Muslim Brotherhood and for supporting the right of Hizb ut-Tahrir to operate on university campuses, while the UK Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) in 2006 had challenged the government in the High Court for
allowing US aircraft carrying bombs to Israel to stop at UK airports during the
Lebanese war, which the organisation defined as an ‘act of terrorism’. Its attempted
injunction to halt such stopovers was rejected (The Muslim Weekly, 1 September 2006,
p. 2).

Instead of Muslim organisations, Cameron announced that the Conservative party
would reach out directly to ‘individuals’, bypassing organisations altogether. His
speech drew on a report in January 2007, based on a widely criticised poll, that found
that 37 per cent of Muslim 16- to 24-year-olds said they would prefer to live under
Sharia law; 86 per cent said religion was the most important thing in their lives; nearly
a third thought that those converting to another religion should be executed. On the
other hand, 84 per cent said they had been well treated in British society. Munira
Mirza, author of the report said, ‘The government should engage with Muslims as citi-
en, not through their religious identity’ (Bates and Agencies 2007, p. 5). This
commendable notion of reaching out to ‘individuals’ was exemplified by Cameron’s
spending a night with an ordinary Pakistani family in Birmingham, with much media
coverage. But his attack on multiculturalism hides the reality that national Muslim
organisations do not need government endorsement to continue with their activities.
They cannot be made to disappear. Instead, the rejection of multiculturalism is merely
read by an already alienated Muslim diaspora as an attack on Islam. This is the
dilemma faced by the British government. Moreover, with its move towards ad hoc
funding of local groups, the British government and the opposition appear to be
returning to the earlier, unsatisfactory reality of local multiculturalism – the local-
level scrabble by local associations for small dollops of cash, poorly monitored.
Ironically, this direct funding of groups at the local level is likely to cost far more than
the funding of a single umbrella organisation like the MCB.

Tory criticism of Muslim organisations, including the MCB, was contained in
a conservative policy report entitled ‘Uniting the Country’. The report condemned
what it calls ‘identity politics’ and drew a comparison between the extreme right
British National Party and separatist Muslim organisations that promoted sharia law
and demanded special treatment, claiming they are a ‘mirror image’ of the BNP
(Neville-Jones 2007; see McVeigh and Woodward 2007, p. 12).18 This followed an
earlier report by a right-wing think-tank, Civitas, that claimed that ‘Multiculturalism
fosters racial divides and even hatred’ (no byline, The Muslim Weekly, 19 May 2006,
p. 3).

In their response in The Muslim Weekly, the MCB describe the claim that their
organisation espouses the institution of Sharia law as a ‘red herring’ while FOSIS
argued it was ‘disproportionate’, given that there is not a single mainstream Muslim
organisation calling for the implementation of Sharia law. The MCB described the
report as ‘ill informed’, defended the organisation’s record and claimed it only lobbies
for ‘parity in the application of the law and equal respect’ (Bajwa 2007c, pp. 1, 3).

Nevertheless, the continuous pressure and criticisms of the MCB appeared to have
taken their toll, with reports of disagreements among senior Muslim leaders over
HMD attendance. In a ‘secret meeting’, a third of its senior figures reportedly voted
to cease the boycott, which was upheld by 23 to 14 votes (Dodd and Muir 2007, p. 12).
There were, however, speculations that ‘the current momentum would see the MCB’s
position reversed by next year’ (Dodd and Muir 2007, p. 12). Several leaders thought
the organisation should not be seen to ‘cave in’ to government pressure, while others
described the boycott as an unnecessary ‘self-inflicted wound’ (Dodd and Muir 2007,
p. 12). The Muslim Weekly reported a decision to hold a wider consultation with its
400 plus affiliate bodies (Bajwa 2007b). This came, according to the newspaper, because ‘Holocaust Memorial Day this year acknowledged and remembered other acts of genocide and terror with particular emphasis this year on Darfur’. Hence the MCB, in a letter to HMD’s acting Chief Executive, admitted that ‘common grounds were being reached’ (Bajwa 2007b). On her part, the CEO emphasised that Holocaust day was an ‘opportunity to reflect on more recent genocides…and it is our duty to stand up to those groups and individuals who encourage division and hatred in our communities’ (Bajwa 2007b).

As early as 2005, vocal Muslim critics of the MCB like Dr Ghayyasuddin Siddiqui of the Muslim Parliament, accused Iqbal Sacaranie, Secretary General of the MCB, in an article in the Asian weekly Eastern Eye, of ‘living in a dreamworld if it [the MCB] thinks just because it has different ideas, Holocaust Day will be scrapped. Why do our representatives always take a negative position?’ he asks. ‘We should recognise what happened to the Jews in Germany. …Just because Palestinians are suffering should not mean the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust should not be remembered. …Let’s work together to create another day’ (Verma 2005, p. 2).

In 2007, Shahid Malik, outspoken Labour MP for Dewsbury,20 condemned the MCB in a column in the Times of London: ‘Whether they like it or not their current position looks like anti-Semitism… the old guard is stuck in a timewarp’ (Dodd and Muir 2007, p. 12). In his commentary, the MP recalls his keynote speech at the National Holocaust Centre’s memorial event, with some 20 young Muslims in the audience. He defended the police as doing a good job fighting terror in tragic circumstances, before stating baldly that Ruth Kelly ‘has set down the rules for engagement with government. Attending Holocaust Day is a prerequisite.’ (!) Rather than extremist, the MCB in his view ‘has chosen the easy, populist path of solely “defending” Muslims’. Rather than introspection, it had reinforced the ‘victim narrative’ that dominates Muslim discourse. Justifying the introduction of a £5 million budget to empower Muslims at local level, Malik (2007, p. 23) argued that the government should ‘never again’ be dependent on one group. Later that year the MCB approved its attendance of Holocaust Memorial Day, but withdrew it in 2009 following Israel’s bombing in Gaza (Brickman 2009).

This exchange between representatives of different British Pakistani constituents (moderate Muslims, Labour supporters and more radical Islamic groups) outlines the emergent contours of a pluralised Pakistani national diasporic public sphere in Britain. It is an open space of dialogue, in the sense that debates take place in public, in the press and media, and can be joined by British politicians and columnists as well. Although conducted in rational terms, the tone of the dialogue betrays the painful and highly emotive issues at stake. The argument within the Muslim diasporic sphere has gathered pace, as Philip Lewis (2007) documents, with monthly magazines like Q News, and newsletters, reports, pamphlets, novels and blogs by women’s groups, community activists, moderate religious leaders, all involved, along with travelling preachers like Hamza Yusuf, who mobilise very large audiences promoting a less separatist, more open and tolerant Islam.

**Conclusion: intractable dilemmas and the diasporic public sphere**

The present paper has documented the engagement and serious dialogue that has emerged in Britain since July 2005 between British politicians and leaders of the Muslim community through the media, ethnic and mainstream press. It highlights, I
have argued, the impossibility of thinking of multiculturalism as business-as-usual in a time of global terror, a theme I have reiterated elsewhere as well. Politicians would naturally like the Muslims of Britain to be contained within the envelope of the nation-state, to live scattered among the wider population and to be concerned mainly with religious education and pastoral care. They reject not only the intense religiosity of many Muslims, including the second generation, but their living in an enclave and their diasporic commitments – not just to their country of origin but to Muslim communities elsewhere, especially Palestine, but also Iraq. They demand a non-politicised religion, which they label ‘culture’. And because Muslims in Britain are far more pious than most other British citizens and are equally emotional about their transnational loyalties, then it seems multiculturalism has not only failed but supposedly foments hatred and division. Of course, at another level everyone – Muslims and non-Muslim alike – shares the knowledge that intractable international conflicts are impinging on the consciousness of young Muslims in Britain and encouraging a few of them towards – in their own eyes – heroic deeds of self-sacrifice, which to everyone else appear as unacceptable atrocities. How to reach these young people is a predicament shared by all British citizens, including Muslims. Attending Holocaust Memorial Day is not on the surface going to make any difference to these youngsters. Indeed, one may argue that as a form of peaceful protest, a way of expressing alienation non-violently, politicians should welcome this show of defiance as preferable to suicide bombings. Against that, however, it may be said that the British state has stumbled inadvertently onto a crucible of citizenship: to attend Holocaust Memorial Day in shared commemoration alongside the Queen, the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other dignitaries, under the canopy of Jewish prayers, led by the Chief Rabbi of Britain; to share momentarily the memory of Jewish suffering, is tantamount to committing oneself to an inclusive British and European identity, to a primary allegiance that takes precedence over divisive conflicts elsewhere and which denies the anti-Semitism prevalent in the Muslim world today.

In a sense, too, it may well be that politicians feel on safer ground when they criticise religion, even if they label it ‘culture’. They know from their own experience of European history that religion can be more or less extreme, more or less tolerant, more or less politicised. Second, the term culture is also used to imply ‘community’: ethnic communities are expected by British politicians to exert moral control over their members. The failure of the Muslim community in Britain to control some of its youngsters is a failure of community and hence also of culture and multiculturalism. Clearly, it is absurd to believe that the paltry sums of money given by the government to Muslims organisations whose members are, after all, tax payers, can shake the foundations of Muslim faith in Britain. Muslims raise vast sums of money in voluntary donations, running into millions of pounds each year, for charitable causes and communal projects like mosque building. For the latter, they also sometimes access overseas donations. Ruth Kelly cannot determine the fate of Islam in Britain. The only use multi-cultural and multi-faith state or local-state funding can have is positive: to require that organisations service a wider range of ethnic minority users than their own internal fund-raising would demand; to create alliances, to enter into dialogue with unlikely partners, to engage in joint efforts with other groups in order to provide help and services to the needy. Rather than fomenting hatred, top-down state multiculturalism is designed to attenuate divisions between ethnic and religious groups and propel them into dialogue. But no amount of state funding can stop groups from
asserting their diasporic loyalty and sense of co-responsibility vis-à-vis diasporas beyond the nation-state in which they have settled. World politics, not religion per se, are at the heart of the current multicultural debate.

In this context, the ‘failure of multiculturalism’ discourse can also be seen to constitute an implicit postcolonial, post-imperial warning by British politicians to South Asian immigrants, perhaps recalling the long history of subcontinental communal violence. The message transmitted is that the reach of the state and media into hidden diasporic spaces is inescapable. Millennial, incendiary divisive rhetoric against the state, the West, Christianity, Judaism etc., of a kind potentially leading to violence will not be tolerated. This is also the basis for the clause on ‘glorification of terrorism’ in the recent British Terrorism Bill (Bajwa 2006a, p. 5). The ‘failure of multiculturalism’ discourse is thus meant to remind minorities that in future there will be no no-go areas within the diaspora that are closed to the press and media. Double talk – one message for them, one for us – is unacceptable from now on. Increasingly, information on secretive extremist or terrorist organisations is becoming widely available. *The Islamist*, a book by an ex-HT supporter, Ed Hussain (2007), documents in detail his six-year journey through a wide range of hard-line Islamist groups, including jihadist ones. It describes government policy as a ‘disastrous combination of laissez faire and political correctness’. Madelaine Bunting, journalist at *The Guardian*, points out that the book may be used to attack Islam (Bunting 2007), but in my reading it is evident that Hussain is deliberately pointing the finger at particular Muslim organisations and individuals and disclosing their hidden agendas.

The political thrust, then, is towards an open, transparent multiculturalism, legitimising press undercover reporting or engagement with spaces hidden from the public eye, and cultural-cum-religious debates with minorities on their own ground, sometimes on quite arcane issues, such as the writings of Mawdudi. The question is whether this constant digging beneath the surface, the day-to-day media reporting on Muslim seditious plots and plotters, Muslim opinion polls that reveal out-of-line opinions and conspiracy theories, tirades by politicians against so-called multiculturalism, or the invocations by politicians on the need to ‘learn’ to be good citizens, is in any way conducive towards a more positive integration of Muslims into British society? Such rhetorical attacks on a daily basis, many via the media, surely lead to a sense of siege and alienation among the vast majority of law-abiding Muslims, whatever their political sentiments.

It is unclear whether the dialogue recorded here between politicians and the organisational leaders of the Muslim community in the broadsheets, pitched in relation to the Jewish, Asian and Muslim ethnic press is, in fact, a dialogue. *The Muslim Weekly* claims a circulation of 40,000. Do the politicians read the lengthy defences penned by Muslim organisational leaders, which are addressed to them? A hint that they might indeed be doing so can be found in a quite lengthy article by Ruth Kelly herself, addressed to the Muslims of Britain on the pages of *The Muslim Weekly*. And since then the dialogue has continued, with an article in the *New Statesman and Society* eliciting a response in *The Muslim Weekly*.

Talal Asad makes the point that given that the public sphere is not an ‘empty space for carrying out debates’, but expresses the ‘memories and aspirations, fears and hopes – of speakers and listeners’. If this is so, then the introduction of new religious discourses disrupts ‘established assumptions structuring debates in the public sphere’. It ‘threatens the authority of existing assumptions’ (Asad 2003, p. 186). In the case of the war in Iraq, a secular war against a secular dictator has been redefined by Muslims
and some Christians (including, ironically, President George W. Bush himself) as a religious war. The attack on multiculturalism may be conceived of as a rejection by British politicians and the media of this invasion of the British public sphere by religious discourses. If the public sphere is defined as a space of rational argumentation, economics and politics, then faith and passion do not, it is implied, belong there (Asad 2003, p. 187). Nevertheless, it could also be argued that the reasoned responses of Muslim leaders, utilising the national platform of their own ethnic press, has carved out a space of civility in which the responses of these leaders to expositions of their alleged extremism are expressed passionately and yet rationally.

Notes
1. Versions of this paper were presented at Lancaster University, the University of Western Sydney and the Pakistan Workshop. I would like to thank the participants in these forums for their comments. I am also particularly grateful to Khachig Tölölyan for his acute and extremely helpful comments on an original draft of the paper.
2. The paper was presented at a conference on ‘European Islam, Societies and State’ in Turin, Italy, sponsored by the Agnelli Foundation.
3. Arjun Appadurai (1996) also uses this term. My paper was originally submitted to Public Culture.
4. Mawdudi’s many books have been extremely influential in fundamentalist circles, even beyond Pakistan.
5. A heterodox sect in Pakistan whose leader claimed to be a true Prophet, profaning the idea that Muhammad was the last Prophet of Islam.
6. According to an article in the Asia Times, under the supervision of the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence services, a JI member apparently commanded the al-Badr facility in Khost Province, Afghanistan, where he commanded an international cohort of Arab jihadis, including the founders of Hamas. He later abandoned the JI and threw his fortune in with another Islamist group, opposed by the Taliban, who later took over the facility (Shahzad 2004).
7. Bhatt castigates the Left as well as the Government for joining forces in the Stop the War Coalition with conservative nationalist religious groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, represented in the UK by the Muslim Association of Britain (on this see also Birt 2005). A different view would be, however, that the creation of channels for effective legal public protest was important in order to deflect young British Muslims from attempting to take the law into their own hands. I attended the largest million strong demonstration in London, arriving in one of the coaches from Manchester. What struck me most saliently was the absence of organised groups marching in solidary separateness, and the mingling of young Asians and Muslims as individuals with Guardian-reading CND types.
8. Initially, mosques were seen by outsiders as the main Muslim public forum, but as this paper demonstrates, there were many other Muslim spaces of debate which surfaced over time.
9. Philip Lewis (2007, p. 34) reports that the no less a luminary than the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia advised a British Muslim that Jews and Christians were kuffar who would be cursed, and go to hell.
10. A revisit by Channel 4 Dispatches of this earlier programme in September 2008, ‘Undercover Mosque: the Return’, found equally damning lectures inspired by Wahhabbi teaching at the Regent Park Central Mosque women’s teaching circle. This too led to sharp responses in the Muslim press.
11. Most recently, in August 2008, the European Court of Human Rights stayed Abu Hamza’s extradition to the United States.
12. The pressure group Liberty condemned the publicity surrounding this police round-up of suspects in a plot to behead a British Muslim soldier, expressing its ‘grave concern’ that journalists were briefed by Home Office advisors in advance of the raid (no byline, The Muslim Weekly, 30 June 2006, p. 2; see also Portillo 2007, p. 19). On Islamic bookshops see also Lewis (2007, p. 133).
13. Bagguley and Hussain describe this as a ‘wholesale rejection of the discourse of multiculturalism’ (2008, p. 159). Their focus is primarily on the local level and accusations that
local communities are refusing to integrate into British society. Hence the political call was for ‘community cohesion’.

14. The amended British Nationality Act, 2005 requiring persons seeking naturalisation to have a minimal knowledge of English may be classed as a ‘multicultural’ law perhaps.

15. The blasphemy law, part of common precedent law, is reserved for Anglicans only. This was an issue highlighted by the Rushdie affair, when Muslims demanded equal protection before the law. Despite talk of abolishing it, the law was never abolished.


17. It seems extremely unlikely that Mawdudi and the Jamaati Islami supported the British and Allied war effort. Nasr (1994) makes no mention of Mawdudi’s views on this matter. Mawdudi opposed Muslims being part of an army under the control of a non-Muslim power. When he founded the Jama’at in 1941, its constitution clearly stated that pure Muslims must boycott the institutions of a non-Islamic polity, including the army and legislature. For Mawdudi, the westernised leadership of the Muslim League’s vision of a Muslim state was against Islam (personal communication from Irfan Ahmad, ISIM, Leiden). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was sympathetic to the Nazis.

18. The Report makes fascinating reading. Like the BBC Panorama site, it cites key passages from the writings in English of Mawdudi, Qutb and Qaradawi, to prove the incompatibility between their ideologies and those of liberal democracy, and associates their rigid advocacy of a Sharia-based Islamic state and, in the case of Qaradawi, endorsement of Palestinian suicide bombers, death sentence for homosexuals and other extremist views, with the MCB and other Muslim organisations who ‘promulgate the teachings of Maudoodi and Qutb’ (the MCB praised Qaradawi as a moderate). See in particular Neville-Jones (2007, pp. 7–8). In contradistinction, Muhammad Ali Jinnah is quoted as a beacon of democracy and liberal values (p. 10). Its comments on the need to promote a moderate democratic vision of Islam are thoughtful (pp. 12–13).

19. Apparently, an Armenian attempt to be included was rejected.

20. In 2007, he was appointed Minister for International Development in Gordon Brown’s first government.

Notes on contributor
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References


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