



CIS Lectures

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MULTICULTURALISM AND THE 'WAR ON TERROR'
RELIGIOSITY AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

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The bombings in London on 7th July 2005 marked a turning point in mainstream discussion about radical Islam. In the four years since the September 11 attacks, there was a persistent belief that Islamic terrorism was ultimately a foreign problem, imported to these shores. Samuel Huntington's widely cited thesis of the 'clash of civilisations' regarded Islam as a powerful, unwavering force in the Middle East that was now challenging the West. More sympathetic observers tended to see terrorism as a desperate political strategy carried out by people in deprived countries. The London attacks undermined this dichotomy between 'West and the rest' by bringing home the fact that the jihad had found some fertile ground in this country, amongst people who have had enjoyed the benefits of living in a modern, secular society.

Mark Sageman's study of 172 Al Qaeda operatives around the world indicates the difficulty of developing a sociological or psychological profile of the contemporary jihadist (Sageman, 2004). These individuals come from a wide range of backgrounds; different nationalities, religious denominations, levels of education, and socio-economic status. Sageman is therefore only able to identify three major consistencies, all of which appear counter-intuitive: the jihadists are usually radicalised in Western countries; they are likely to have had a relatively secular upbringing; and the majority were not recruited 'top down' but actively sought out terrorist networks. Such findings suggest that we cannot isolate the factors that determine the contemporary jihadist to any particular country, lifestyle or religious denomination. Rather, the contemporary jihadist is a product of wider cultural forces, emerging spontaneously in response to his own environment. What is more, these cultural forces operate in the West, as much as anywhere else.

'Islamicisation' of identity

There is little evidence to show that Islamic terrorist groups constitute a mass social movement in Western society. In surveys conducted in Britain after the London bombings, the majority of ordinary Muslims fully denounced the attacks and disputed the religious legitimacy of Salafist Jihad groups.¹ As Roy (2004) and Kepel (2004) point out, today's Islamism should not be confused with former incarnations of political Islam, which were once popular social movements in the Middle East. Today's terrorists are marked out by their separation from wider society, as they tend to act in isolation from other familial and communal networks and find succour within their own jihadist clique.

But whilst the number of potential terrorists remains small, such actions can be construed as an extremely acute expression of a broader shift towards the 'Islamicisation' of identity (Roy 2004) throughout Europe, and a growing interest in neo-religious ideas, particularly amongst a younger generation. Various indicators demonstrate this: increased wearing of headscarves amongst Muslim women; greater cultural identification with transnational Muslim identity, or the 'Ummah'; the growing membership of Islamic political groups and youth associations; increased awareness of anti-Western and anti-Semitic attitudes; and greater demands for Sharia-compliant education and legal frameworks.² While such indicators rise and fall in different European countries according to the social and political context, they do suggest a

cultural shift is taking place in second and third generation Muslims. This is particularly important when taking into account that approximately one third of Muslims in Britain is under the age of sixteen. Unlike their parents, they are more likely to identify with their religion than with an ethnic or national label.

The tensions between old religion and new religiosity are apparent in East London. Religion has a stronger visible presence in places like Tower Hamlets in East London where over 65,000, or 22.8% of the UK's Bangladeshi Muslim population, lives. To some extent, this is to be expected; as the population grows richer, it is able to move from the makeshift mosques in private rooms, to larger and more suitable premises. Religious festivals and ceremonies have also developed as a way to preserve cultural identity. At the same time, ties to the old country have weakened in many ways. Approximately half of the local Muslim population was born in Britain. Less money is sent back home: about 20% of earnings, compared to approximately 85% in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, whilst many of the younger generation are secularised and live 'westernised' lifestyles, there has also been the growth of Islamist activism. Local Islamist activists accuse local community leaders of being too secular. They have criticised the long-running Bengali New Year celebrations for being a 'syncretic' event, incorporating Hindu traditions and promoting 'unrespectable' behaviour (Garbin, 2005: 3)

It has been argued that the increasing religiosity of Muslims can be explained by the overwhelming influence of Salafist groups operating from abroad and funded by Middle Eastern organisations, particularly in Saudi Arabia (Glees, 2005). Certainly, there is an abundance of information targeting young Muslims through literature, bookshops, the internet, student societies and charitable organisations. But the absorption of ideas cannot be explained simply by their profusion. Why should the medieval pretensions of the Salafist narrative appeal to a modern, secularised Muslim in the East London? We should also recognise that the 'Islam' of contemporary Islamism is not a constant and unchanging ideology as portrayed by some culturalists such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. The Wahabist doctrine promoted today is itself adapted in order to suit the particular moral and political questions that concern the audience (Kepel, 2004). In short, we cannot take for granted the success of any ideology by its mere existence; rather we need to explain why it takes root through an historical understanding of social relations (Fields, 1990).

The rise of religiosity does not represent the continuation of traditional religious beliefs from abroad, nor is it a re-branding of old anti-colonial struggles. Neither is it a homogenous trend; the religiosity we are witnessing today contains a number of contradictory features. It is an expression of the new politics of identity, which has transformed the individual's relationship to society.

Religion as identity

It is the search for identity that drives contemporary 'religiosity' (Roy, 2004) and shapes the way in which religion is understood and practised. For instance, many younger Muslims are less concerned with participating in the low-key, communal aspects of their religion, than with the desire to assert publicly their individual identity and have it recognised by others. This is a departure from previous generations, who had largely adapted their habits to accommodate to life in a non-Muslim society. For example, an increasing number of young Muslim girls choose to wear the full hijab today as an expression of their religious faith, although their mothers do not. In interviews, they often explain their choice for wearing it as one of asserting their own personal identity, rather than because of community or family pressure, or even, in fact, identifying with other Muslims. Their religiosity is not really driven by social mores or their belonging in a community, but from a personal commitment or sacrifice that requires public recognition.

The religiosity of younger Muslims also seems much more centred on the self or the clique structure, rather than the wider, established community. One indicator of this is the rejection of the traditional mosque elders in the UK, who are regarded as moribund by younger, more radical Muslims. As Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, the head of the Muslim Parliament said, 'most mosques are not equipped to deal with young people... Our mosques are largely tribal and controlled by old men on the dole with no understanding of the changing world around them'. Younger Muslims regard the mosque as being more concerned with local social and community issues, rather than political or spiritual ones. In the case of extremists, their religious identity actually encourages a move away from traditional community ties and social networks. These groups tend to be more individuated and strict in their religious practice. They

tend to meet away from larger local mosques and in smaller 'clique' structures, such as university organisations or private meeting places like gymnasiums, or even the Internet.

This new religiosity is cut loose from traditional social ties and looks increasingly to more abstract notions of community. Again, the more radical Islamists demonstrate this paradox well. They denounce Muslims in their own country as secularised apostates who have lost the true path, but at the same time, they are keen to identify with an abstract 'ummah', which is composed entirely of victimised Muslims abroad, such as in Palestine or in Chechnya, with whom they have had probably little or no actual contact. As Roy (2004) points out, despite the anger of young Muslims about the way 'their people' are treated in Palestine, they are unable to point to where the country is on a map. The identification with victimised people abroad in fact reveals the self-oriented character of contemporary religiosity. The engagement with the plight of others is about the perceived victimisation of the self. The assertion of identity is a strategy to draw attention to this fact.

Multiculturalism and identity

As older forms of political and national identity come under attack, people turn to other ways to search for meaning and belonging. It is clear that people are looking for an explanation of the world and their place in it. However, the self-orientation of today's Muslim identity also has to be understood in the wider context of multiculturalism, which engages people on the basis of their cultural difference.

The importance of identity has been nurtured by state policies over the last two decades, which privilege the importance of different cultural identities. Muslims are being defined as a 'community' requiring special recognition. This has been institutionalised through support for Muslim groups, faith schools, major cultural projects like the Festival of Muslim Cultures initiated in 2004, and most recently, the extension earlier this year of the racial hatred law to cover religious hatred. High profile institutions like London's Metropolitan Police have given Muslim women the option of wearing the hijab (or Muslim men, a turban) instead of a traditional uniform cap, even though this is not common practice for police in most Muslim countries (The Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, 2005: 61). In particular, young people are encouraged to look inwards to their own cultural and religious heritage for their identity. This approach is not just promoted by community leaders or their parents, but perhaps more importantly, by their teachers, the media, cultural institutions and youth services. The proliferation of diversity policies and multicultural programmes has developed an institutional and cultural structure through which identity politics flourishes.

A visitor to the Tower Hamlets community summer fete in 2005 would have assumed that the vast majority of local people were Muslim, so dominated was the event by Islamic stalls, literature, community groups and entertainment. The event organisers had put up signs saying 'no alcohol allowed' and indicating a 'men only area'. This council-sponsored event was supposed to reflect the diverse communities of the area but was clearly dominated by one particular cultural identity.

There has certainly been much criticism of multiculturalism in recent months. Even the chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Trevor Phillips, challenged the concept and announced Britain was in danger of 'sleepwalking into segregation'. However, the process of segregation is more easily blamed on the alien values of extremist Muslims, rather than the culture of wider society. For instance, there has been strong criticism of the government's unwitting support of extremist Islamist groups (see BBC Panorama's expose in 2005 about the extremist views of the Muslim Council of Britain), which ends up nurturing the most stridently religious elements in the community. However, these critics have then suggested that the government find more 'moderate' Muslims instead. It is rarely considered that the problem is not with the kind of Muslim groups the authorities are courting, but the idea that foregrounding cultural identity is any way to connect to citizens at all.

The solution is not to find 'nicer' Muslims with more palatable views, but to challenge the notion that Muslim people can only be engaged with on the basis of their identity. The unwillingness to do this reflects the disavowal of the possibility of developing a meaningful political culture that can allow people to transcend their private, cultural differences.

The political subject is conceived of in terms of demanding recognition of its different and special cultural needs. In turn, it is rewarded for its difference with greater recognition. The dynamic is mutually reinforcing – the more alienated and different you can prove you are, the more you are listened to.

The politics of identity, in this sense, has fuelled a sense of victimhood amongst younger Muslims, who can only engage in the political sphere on the basis of their claims of difference and alienation. They are less likely than their parents to be victims of racist attacks or severe racial discrimination, but they are more likely to see themselves in terms of victimisation. This is evident in the widespread concern over Islamophobia. Despite concerns about rising attacks on Muslims after 7/7, there were few major incidents reported to the police. Instead, there was a general sense of feeling under siege – a feeling no doubt exacerbated by Muslim groups who used this as a way to raise their profile with the government. Indeed, the British government's working groups set up after 7/7 to tackle extremism reported that more money was needed to fund lobby groups that promote a positive Muslim identity. The Religious Hatred Bill brought in earlier this year was also intended to 'protect' Muslims from grievous offence and reassure them they were being listened to.

We might question whether, by agreeing that Muslims need special protection, the authorities risk reinforcing their sense of vulnerability in a hostile society. Being told you need a law to safeguard you from others does little for one's peace of mind. It also alienates Muslims from other sections of society. This year, many newspapers picked up on councils banning Christmas celebrations in case they offended religious (i.e. Muslim) groups. The Tate Modern gallery withdrew a work by the artist, John Latham, because it was deemed to possibly cause offence, even though no Muslim had actually complained. Dudley Council banned all images of pigs in their offices after one worker complained about a shipment of pig-shaped stress toys. The over-anxious attempts by bureaucrats not to offend Muslims provokes resentments. Such over-compensation does little to create a genuinely tolerant and healthy climate. Instead it oversensitises people to their differences and fuels hostilities.

When is a Muslim not a Muslim?

The government's working groups after 7/7 suggested that Muslims needed greater recognition of their cultural identity. It suggested media promotion of positive images of Islam, and even teaching Arabic to young women to boost their confidence.

Yet such recommendations miss an obvious paradox about Muslim identity, which is that as many Muslims identify more with their religion, so they are also increasingly secularised. Roy explains this contradiction well, when he says, 'Islam is experiencing secularisation, but in the name of fundamentalism. It is a bit confusing for everybody' (2004: 41). Many Muslims no doubt live increasingly secular lives that do not conform strictly to sharia law. For instance, 70% of Muslim house owners have a normal mortgage, despite religious restrictions on paying interest (The Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, 2005: 102). Even some Muslims' adherence to religion is based on what might be called contemporary secular values. The teenage girl growing up in Bethnal Green, who decides to wear the hijab is just as likely to justify her choice in the distinctly Western language of 1970s feminism, than because it's God's will. A number of younger women have seen the hijab as a protest against Western-style sexual exploitation.

The tendency of government to engage with Muslims as a religious group misses the three-dimensional, contradictory character of human beings living through cultural transition. Indeed, it is not known how many Muslims drink, smoke, have pre-marital sex, or do not pray five times a day. They may be 'culturally' or 'ethnically Muslim' but they may not be particularly observant. It would be difficult to find any religious authority or organisation that can claim to represent this diverse group.

Islamism as anti-Western sentiment

The secularisation of Muslims goes hand in hand with the politicisation of religion. Salafist doctrine appeals primarily because it is a political, not religious ideology. But it is important to realise that this political ideology is shaped entirely by the preoccupations of the West itself, namely its self-loathing, romanticism and irrationalism.

Hatred of the West is not exclusive to radical Muslims. The anti-globalisation movement also emotes about America as imperial oppressor. The electoral success of George Galloway's Respect party in the constituency of Bow and Bethnal Green in 2005 fused together a younger religiosity with anti-globalisation politics. The manifesto included concerns ranging from the protection of the environment to the war in Iraq, leaving aside potentially divisive issues such as gay rights or abortion. Bin Laden himself draws on the language and ideas of prominent Western writers, like Robert Fisk, of whom he writes 'the latter is one of your compatriots and co-religionists and I consider him to be neutral'. Ambivalence towards Western consumer society and its destructive consequences is common to both Islamists and anti-globalisation groups. Both are rooted in a Manichean worldview of the struggle between a neo-conservative cabal in Washington and a vulnerable, victimised world population. There is little complexity in this emotional analysis, in which everything is reduced to the sinister motivations of a profit-seeking elite.

More fundamentally, both Islamists and anti-globalisation groups express a prevailing cultural anxiety about social progress and reason. This has been a long established intellectual trend, since the post-war writings of Horkheimer and Adorno, who debunked the Enlightenment by claiming that the endpoint of Modernity was Auschwitz. Today, this pessimistic view is part of common parlance. When the Imperial War Museum in London opened its Holocaust exhibition in 2003, the poster showed the railway lines to Auschwitz with the accompanying slogan, 'See what man can do when he puts his mind to it'. It should not be a surprise that an increasing number of Muslims regard Western society as morally decadent, when this is the prevailing view within Western culture.

Terrorism begins at home

The popularity of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis can no doubt be explained by its simple reduction of a complex reality. It is easier for commentators in the West to see the reactionary, theological dogma of today's suicide bombers as a product of a foreign land. But the emerging picture of radical Islam – reinforced by the London attacks last year – is that this is an ideology with home grown roots.

There is a small minority of terrorists who are grounds for serious concern and require a security strategy. However, it is also necessary to grasp the social and cultural factors that fuel their worldview. This can be explained in relation to political developments in the West, arising out of identity politics, and spreading globally. At the same time, for most Muslims, the turn to religiosity does not necessarily result in violence or even alienation from the mainstream. Many are grappling with the contradictory demands of identity politics whilst living normal, everyday lives. Unfortunately, the straitjacket of diversity policies risks intensifying these problems rather than enabling people to resolve them.

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Endnotes

1. According to a survey conducted by YouGov for the Daily Telegraph on July 23rd 2005, 88% fully condemned the London attacks, whilst only 6% believed they were fully justified. A larger number (24%) did sympathise with the motives of the bombers but 70% of those polled said they would notify the police if they saw 'something in the community that made them feel suspicious'.
2. See The radicalisation of Muslim youth in Europe: the reality and the scale of the threat, Testimony of Claude Moniquet, Director General European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, April 27 2005, Hearing of the Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Emerging Threats, United States House of Representatives, p 2–3. Also see Muslims in Europe: The State of Research, Frank J. Bujijs & Jan Rath, October 2002, Russell Sage Foundation: New York