

**The search for common ground**  
Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media

*A report commissioned by the Mayor of London*



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**Greater London Authority  
November 2007**

Published by  
**Greater London Authority  
City Hall  
The Queen's Walk  
More London  
London SE1 2AA**

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**[www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk)**

**ISBN: 978 1 84781 054 0**

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## Acknowledgements

This report arises from a project commissioned by the Greater London Authority. The project was co-ordinated by the Insted consultancy and was undertaken by the team below.

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Acknowledgement is due also to the six journalists who gave freely of their time for chapter 4 and to officers at the Greater London Authority who provided assistance and support throughout the project's duration.

*Views expressed or implied in this report are the responsibility of the Insted consultancy. They do not necessarily represent the views of all the individuals who worked with Insted for this project, nor the views of the Greater London Authority.*

## Foreword by Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London

London's prosperity and social cohesion depend on its role in the global economy and its ability to integrate diverse communities, reflecting its global economic position. Anything that sows division among London's diverse communities harms London.

The rise of Islamophobia in Europe and the negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media harm community relations in London. I commissioned this study to examine the role of the media in promoting or harming good community relations with London's Muslim communities.

One of the most startling findings of this report is that in one typical week in 2006, over 90 per cent of the media articles that referred to Islam and Muslims were negative. The overall picture presented by the media was that Islam is profoundly different from and a threat to the west.

The research undertaken for this report highlights examples of good practice and makes recommendations to news organisations as to how they can play a role in more fairly portraying Muslims and Islam through self-regulation and the development of codes of professional conduct. Increasing Muslim representation in the media is essential to overcome the elementary ignorance upon which so much Islamophobia – as with other forms of prejudice and bigotry – feeds.

In light of rising intolerance to differences of religious faith – today directed primarily, but not exclusively, against Muslims – I recently took part in launching a coalition to defend the freedom of religious and cultural expression. The coalition will work to defend the right of every individual to freely pursue their beliefs, as long as they do not interfere in the rights of others to do likewise.

I hope this study will stimulate further debate and the development of policies to help foster and encourage responsible journalism.



**Ken Livingstone**  
Mayor of London



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## Executive summary

In 2006 the Greater London Authority (GLA) commissioned a study of media coverage of Islam and Muslims in the UK media. The study was co-ordinated by the Insted consultancy. It took place between 1 May 2006 and 30 April 2007 and involved:

- a review of recent opinion polls
- study of recent books and articles
- a survey of the news in one week
- consideration of stories about political correctness
- interviews with Muslim journalists
- analysis of a TV documentary.

The underlying questions for investigation were:

- Do the media promote informed debate about the building and maintenance of Britain as a multicultural society? Or do they oversimplify, giving insufficient information about the background to the news and pandering to readers' and viewers' anxieties and prejudices?
- How community-sensitive is media reporting about multiculturalism and British Muslim identities? Is it likely to foster anxiety, fear or hostility within particular communities – for example, in the views that non-Muslims have of Muslims, or that Muslims have of non-Muslims?
- Does media coverage hinder or promote mutual understanding? Does it increase or decrease a sense of common ground, shared belonging and civic responsibility?

### Findings and conclusions

The project found examples of good practice. These included: the decision by every British national paper not to reprint the caricatures about Islam created in Denmark in 2005 and widely published in 2006 in most other European countries; the exercise of responsibility after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005; a range of one-off news items, features, projects and investigative articles. But in most though not all of the UK print media, and for most, though not all of the time, the project found that:

- 1 The dominant view is that there is no common ground between the West and Islam, and that conflict between them is accordingly inevitable.
- 2 Muslims in Britain are depicted as a threat to traditional British customs, values and ways of life.
- 3 Alternative world views, understandings and opinions are not mentioned or are not given a fair hearing.

- 4 Facts are frequently distorted, exaggerated or oversimplified.
- 5 The tone of language is frequently emotive, immoderate, alarmist or abusive.
- 6 The coverage is likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims.
- 7 The coverage is at the same time likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way to weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism.
- 8 The coverage is unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims.
- 9 The coverage is likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government's community cohesion policies and programmes.
- 10 The coverage is unlikely to contribute to informed discussion and debate amongst Muslims and non-Muslims about ways of working together to maintain and develop Britain as a multicultural, multifaith democracy.

### **Principal recommendations**

In the light of this report:

- 1 News organisations should review their coverage of issues and events involving Muslims and Islam, and should consider drawing up codes of professional conduct and style guides about use of terminology. Such codes of professional conduct should be based on their own best practice.
- 2 News organisations should take measures, perhaps within the framework of positive action in equalities legislation, to recruit more journalists of Muslim heritage who can more accurately reflect the views and experiences of Muslim communities.
- 3 News organisations should also consider how best to give Muslim staff appropriate professional support and to prevent them being pigeon-holed as specialists in minority issues rather than concerned with the full spectrum of an organisation's output.
- 4 Organisations, projects and programmes concerned with race relations should see and treat anti-Muslim prejudice as a form of discrimination, and as serious as other forms of discrimination.

- 5 The new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) should focus explicitly on, amongst other concerns, combating anti-Muslim prejudice, both in society generally and in the media in particular.
- 6 The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) should give a higher profile to combating anti-Muslim prejudice in the media and the general climate of public opinion.
- 7 News organisations should treat seriously complaints relating to distorted coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media.
- 8 Consideration should again be given to amending the Press Complaints Commission's (PCC) terms of reference so it can consider distorted and inaccurate coverage of groups and communities as well as of individuals, and can consider complaints from third parties.
- 9 Organisations and institutions concerned with education should give consideration to how they can develop a) critical media literacy and b) religious literacy in the programmes, courses and curricula that they provide.

(The report defines religious literacy as 'skills in understanding and assessing religious statements and behaviour; discerning the difference between valuable and harmful aspects of religion and religions; appreciating religious architecture, art, literature and music without necessarily accepting all the beliefs that they express or assume; and making reasonable accommodation between people holding different religious and non-religious worldviews.')

## **Chapter summaries**

### *Chapter 1: Common ground*

Do non-Muslims in Britain and the wider world see Islam as a threat, or is there a sense of common ground? Recent opinion polls in Britain and further afield suggest there has been a decline in optimism about the possibility of finding shared ground in recent years. However, Britain is more optimistic about finding common ground than many other countries – and there is particularly positive feeling about this in London.

Much is made of the alleged clash between Islam and the West. But is it really a clash of civilisations, cultures and religions – or are the key tensions political, related to power, territory and resources? Public opinion in Britain and several other countries largely supports the latter view, yet this is rarely mentioned in the media.

Media coverage of Muslim and Islam-related issues has often been a cause for concern. For example, in early 2007, a front-page story about a new publication from the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) was inaccurate and distorted. Judging by the tone and content of messages posted by the paper's readers on its website, the story caused much alarm, with anger and abuse directed at Muslims as a result. The messages showed that anxiety relating to Islam is mixed with fear about multiculturalism, so-called political correctness, and worries and uncertainties about British identity.

### *Chapter 2: A normal week?*

To explore the context and implications of representations of Islam and Muslims in the media, a study was made of the British press over the course of a week. The week beginning Monday 8 May 2006 was chosen at random about a month in advance. A count was made of every article mentioning 'Islam', 'Muslims', derivatives such as 'Islamic' and 'Islamist', and words and phrases with an obvious association with Islam, for example 'Sunni' and 'Shi'a'. On the basis of these criteria, 352 articles were identified. They were categorised according to type of paper, whether they were about domestic or international affairs, whether the context was negative, positive or neutral, and whether the articles expressed a sense of threat or crisis. The principal findings included:

- There were substantial differences between daily newspapers with regard to how many articles mentioning Islam or Muslims they contained during the week in question. There were just over 50 articles in the *Guardian*, over 40 in *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent*, but less than 20 in the *Sun*, *Mirror*, *Express* and *Star*.
- Tabloids and broadsheets differed not only in the amount of coverage they provided but also in whether they focused on domestic or international affairs. Close to 60 per cent of articles in tabloids pertained to Britain and 40 per cent to the wider world. In the case of the broadsheets, however, the proportions were the other way round: 60 per cent were about the wider world, and 40 per cent about Britain.
- Of the 352 articles that referred to Islam and Muslims during the week in question, 91 per cent were judged to be negative in their associations. Only four per cent were judged to be positive, and five per cent were judged neutral.
- In 12 of the 19 papers studied during the week there were no positive associations.
- In the tabloids, 96 per cent of all articles were judged to be negative, compared with 89 per cent in the broadsheets. It is relevant to bear in mind in this connection that the combined circulation of the



tabloids is about three times greater than that of the broadsheets (May 2007 figures).

- It was judged that almost half of the articles represented Islam as a threat. Of these, about a third pertained to Britain and two-thirds to the wider world.
- The overall picture presented in the media during the week in question was that on the world stage Islam is profoundly different from, and a serious threat to, the West; and that, within Britain, Muslims are different from – and a threat to – ‘us’.

### *Chapter 3: ‘Britishness is being destroyed’*

Recently, a theme has been developed in the British media that British society and the British way of life are under threat. Blame is often laid at the door of the pernicious influence of ‘political correctness’. Four newspaper stories expressing such views in relation to relatively trivial incidents were examined. The actual stories were:

- the alleged banning of piggy banks by a building society in a Lancashire town
- the alleged banning of Christmas by a local council in London
- the use of BP (Before Present) instead of BC (Before Christ) at a museum in the West country
- the Crown Prosecution Service taking a 10-year-old boy to court for playground insults in Salford.

Each story was shown to illustrate the claim that ‘common sense’ is being threatened by ‘the PC brigade’. More seriously, in the treatment of each story the attack on political correctness was combined with an attack on Muslims – either explicitly or implicitly. In fact, the reportage of all four incidents involved serious factual inaccuracies and distortions. These were uncovered by interviews with, and statements by, people who were directly involved.

The research concluded that many of the alleged signs of misplaced political correctness are unsubstantiated, even though real fears exist. These arise not from so-called political correctness, nor from the presence of Muslims in modern Britain, but from social and economic change, globalisation, and new international relationships.

### *Chapter 4: Being a journalist, being a Muslim*

If you’re of Muslim heritage, what’s it like to work as a reporter on a mainstream newspaper? Are you treated differently? Is there any opportunity to influence your paper’s policies and practices? Interviews with journalists from Muslim backgrounds revealed a wide range of

experiences and perceptions, told almost entirely in their own words. The interviews led to the conclusion that if media coverage of Islam and Muslims is to improve, there are practical advantages to the journalistic staff of newspapers more accurately reflecting the proportion of Muslims living in Britain, since:

- they are more likely to deal with Islam and Muslim-related issues with sensitivity, fairness and awareness of complexity
- they are more likely to establish a rapport and to win trust when dealing with Muslim members of the public
- they can advise and challenge colleagues, including senior editors, about the ways certain stories should and should not be covered
- they can have an impact on the organisational culture of the paper, making it more open-minded and self-critical.

It is important, however, that senior managers in news organisations should:

- understand that there is a wide range of opinion, outlook and practice amongst journalists of Muslim backgrounds, as with people of Muslim backgrounds more generally. For example, not all practise the religion, and no single individual should be treated as a representative or ambassador.
- recognise that journalists of Muslim backgrounds are professionally journalists who happen to be Muslims rather than Muslims who happen to be journalists
- resist pressures to limit people's career prospects by pigeon-holing and typecasting them into a narrow range of work.

### *Chapter 5: 'Full and fair debate'*

It is often the case that the media give the impression that people of Muslim heritage can be divided into two contrasting groups: good/bad, 'moderate'/'extremist', 'Sufi'/'Islamist'. There are many objections to this over-simplification. One danger is that it can lead to further simplification and ungrounded claims – for example that the term 'Muslim extremist' is largely tautologous (saying the same thing twice), and that 'moderate Muslim' is a contradiction in terms. This tendency was seen, for example, in reportage on the 'A Question of Leadership' episode of the television programme *Panorama*, broadcast on 21 August 2005.

The programme was about representation of British Muslims in two separate senses: a) how they are portrayed and b) how Muslim voices and views are presented to others, particularly the Government. The latter sense of 'representation' necessarily involves considering questions of leadership and management in umbrella organisations such as the Muslim

Council of Britain, and the roles and responsibilities of office-holders in such organisations. The producer of the programme called for ‘a full and frank debate’ about representation in the latter sense. Issues of who speaks for Muslims and who the Government should listen to are certainly of great importance and do need debating. This *Panorama* programme, however, did not facilitate or support the level of debate that is required.

### *Chapter 6: Histories, stories and Islamophobia*

What are the key issues to look for in any study of the representation of Muslims and Islam in the media? This chapter makes four distinctions:

- between two types of narrative: ‘histories’ and ‘stories’. Histories afford a meta-view of a situation, seeing it as part of a longer, ongoing narrative. Stories, on the other hand, are individual items in newspapers and on TV and radio.
- between content (what something says) and form (the way the subject is approached and engaged with)
- between dominant and alternative worldviews. For example, a dominant worldview might say ‘Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims’, whereas the alternative view might say ‘There are both real and perceived threats on both sides’.
- between open and closed forms of engaging, thinking, talking and writing. For example, one mark of engaging openly would be not deliberately distorting, or recklessly over-simplifying, incontestable facts.

The term ‘Islamophobia’ in its current sense was coined in about 1990. It can be a useful shorthand term for referring to coverage that:

- presents narratives about Islam and Muslims as threats at the same time as ignoring or misrepresenting alternative narratives
- does so with closed not open ways of thinking, talking and engagement
- is likely to increase insecurity and vulnerability amongst Muslims
- is likely also to provoke anxiety, fear and panic amongst non-Muslims
- is unlikely therefore to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of discrimination against Muslims
- is unlikely to contribute to an informed debate about ways of maintaining and developing Britain as a multicultural, multifaith democracy.

### *Chapter 7: Responsible journalism*

Where Islam is concerned, anxiety is the key issue, and the professional responsibility of journalists is to promote informed debate, as distinct from pandering to prejudice and provoking anxiety by being alarmist. An exemplary media response was shown in much of the coverage immediately after 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005.

How can responsible journalism be fostered? The principal themes to be considered include those listed below.

- Freedom of speech: there is an important distinction to be made between having a right and exercising it responsibly.
- Dealing with anxiety: could it be that the unsettling nature of rapid social and cultural change is the underlying cause of malaise and unease, rather than specific events or communities?
- Religious literacy: increased understanding is needed of the range of ways in which religion may affect a person's values and perspectives.
- Critical literacy: building up interpretative skills so the public can question media portrayals of issues and engage in debate.
- The making of complaints: the public needs to be encouraged to engage in debate, express opinion and complain to the Press Complaints Commission when the media go a step too far.
- Codes of professional practice to be developed to promote accountability in the media.

In the light of these discussions, the chapter makes the recommendations listed near the start of this summary.

### **Conclusion**

In March 2007 the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, declared that 'we urgently need a new approach to tackling the violent extremism that seeks to undermine our society and this approach must be based as much on winning hearts and minds as on security measures'.

She said further that the Government 'must put a new emphasis on local solutions' and that 'our aim must be not just to stop people committing violence but also to challenge the ideologies that drive them'. She acknowledged that successive governments, including the present one, 'have not always got this balance right'. Governments have 'put too much faith in action,' she added, 'not enough in debate'.

The purpose of the debate, she continued, would be to challenge, isolate and neutralise 'ideologies of hatred' amongst 'a tiny minority' of Muslims. She drew an analogy with far right extremism – 'the British public rejects their ugly message'.

The stress on debate as well as on action was and is welcome. The mainstream media will have a major role to play in it. The debate in the mainstream media will be disingenuous, however, if it assumes that

hostility and suspicion towards Islam and Muslims are to be found only amongst a small minority of non-Muslims, the so-called far right.

There also needs to be substantial debate about prejudices and anxieties – sometimes amounting to panic – amongst many non-Muslims. This will have to include consideration of how the mainstream media are by no means always responsible in the ways in which they treat stories and issues concerning Muslims and Islam.

If they are to contribute constructively to the debate, the mainstream media must put their own house in order. They need to be supported, encouraged and empowered in this by their readers, viewers and users.



# 1 Common ground – issues, concerns and opinions

## No one batted an eyelid

In his book *Only Half of Me: being a Muslim in Britain* (2006), journalist Rageh Omaar recalls a brief episode he witnessed on a London bus. It was a cold and dark afternoon, ‘the kind of winter’s day when it seems the sun has struggled to rise at all’. He was sitting on the lower deck and suddenly became aware of eight teenage schoolgirls clattering and tumbling down from the top deck, shouting to each other and talking loudly on their mobile phones. They were full of gaiety and laughter and were from a range of backgrounds. Some were of Somali heritage. Omaar writes:

‘The Somali girls switched back and forth, in and out, from a thick London accent to Somali. One of them turned to her white friend and screeched: “Those bacon crisps are disgusting! Just keep that minging smell away from me girl, I tell ya!” and then fell about laughing. They discussed each other’s clothes and another girl in their class, then one of the Somali girls shouted, “*Bisinka!* did you really say that?” In one breath she went from a Somali Muslim word, *Bisinka*, which means “By God’s Mercy” or “With God’s help”, and which Somalis say when something shocking happens, to English. None of her friends, black, white or Muslim, batted an eyelid.’<sup>1</sup>

However, Omaar is well aware of conflicts and problems. He is not starry-eyed – references to 7 and 21 July 2005 run through his book with grim frequency. But he also takes pains to accentuate common ground and shared interests, the aspects of London life that are ordinary, positive and hopeful, as in the vignette cited above. Amid vivid reminders of linguistic, religious, cultural and ethnic differences and interactions, none of the school students he saw on the bus was in any way fazed – ‘none... batted an eyelid’. Cultural differences can be threatening and can cause deep discomfort and anxiety – for Muslims, Omaar stresses, as well as for everyone else. But that is not the whole story. It is possible to realise, he says, that our worlds are not in conflict.

Implicitly throughout, and from time to time directly, Omaar attends to the texts, talk and imagery through which relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are represented – and not represented – in the British media. Being a journalist himself he knows well the practical context in which journalists work:

- commercial competition between papers and between channels
- the bottom lines of ratings and circulation figures
- the relentless pressure of deadlines

- the political expectations and requirements of proprietors and editors
- lack of time to check facts or investigate backgrounds and sources, and to separate out fact from comment
- the need to shape content to space rather than space to content
- the pressure to entertain, simplify and please rather than to inform, challenge and educate
- the inevitability of inaccuracy and distortion even with the best will in the world
- the continual emphasis on immediacy, sensation, novelty, human interest.

Despite his personal knowledge of the daily pressures under which journalists work, Omaar believes the media could do a better job. In effect, though not in so many words, he proposes that the following questions about the media should be asked:

- Do the media promote informed debate about the building and maintenance of multicultural democracy and, within this context, about relations between Muslims and non-Muslims? Or do they promote a 'bias against understanding' by oversimplifying, giving insufficient information about the background to the news and pandering to readers' anxieties and prejudices?
- How community-sensitive is media reporting about multiculturalism and British Muslim identities? Is it likely to foster anxiety, fear or hostility within particular communities – for example, in the views that non-Muslims have of Muslims, and that Muslims have of non-Muslims?
- Does media coverage hinder or promote mutual understanding, and increase or decrease a sense of common ground, shared belonging and civic responsibility?
- How accountable to a range of different communities are the media, for example through publishing letters and articles which present a range of views, quoting a range of opinions, standpoints and sources, and correcting errors?<sup>2</sup>

### **The commissioning of this report**

With the above questions in mind, the Mayor of London issued a short paper in 2005 inviting tenders for research on the representation of Muslims in the UK media. It began with a general statement of concern and of the Mayor's responsibilities:

'The Mayor of London is responsible for promoting equality in London, and promoting good community relations and making London a safer city are amongst his priorities. The Mayor is committed to ensuring all London's communities are able to play a full part in the life of the capital, including London's Muslim communities. London is the proud



home to a Muslim population of over 600,000 – the largest in the UK and one of the largest in Europe. London takes pride in its multicultural and religious diversity, which are amongst its greatest assets.

‘The Mayor is very concerned about the possibility that media and political coverage of Muslim communities following 11 September 2001 may be linked to rising levels of Islamophobia and community tension in London, with an increased risk of hate crime...

‘Therefore, the Mayor wishes to commission a research report on Islamophobia and the media to combat Islamophobia and negative stereotypes, to challenge existing attitudes and promote diversity in the media and assess the impact of press coverage and political commentary on community relations in London.’

The overall purpose of the research study, the paper continued, would be to contribute towards:

- combating negative stereotypes of Muslim people and Islamic issues in the press, reducing media bias and highlighting examples of good practice
- identifying sources of negative stereotypes and Islamophobic press output
- raising awareness about the impact of proposed legislation on incitement to religious hatred and religious discrimination
- challenging existing attitudes within the media industry, and promoting diversity within the media profession to reflect London’s communities.

The Insted consultancy, based in London, was commissioned to carry out the research. Insted for its part assembled a team with nine members. Between them the members had experience and expertise in Islamic studies, journalism, law, media relations, media studies, race relations and religious studies, and were from a range of religious and ethnic backgrounds. The research was carried out between 1 May 2006 and 30 April 2007.

In consultation with officers at the GLA the team designed a project that combined quantitative studies with textual analysis and interviews. For practical and budgetary reasons the project was concerned with the print media much more than with radio and television. It was also much more concerned with the depiction of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims within Britain rather than globally. The general pattern of the report is set out in the executive summary on earlier pages.

Throughout his book, Rageh Omaar asks and considers whether 'Islam' and 'the West' are inherently incompatible with each other. Inverted commas are necessary, since both terms are shorthand for immensely complex and variegated realities. Also, the realities are interrelated and merge with each other. Picturing the world as consisting of two large monolithic entities with little or nothing in common is arguably part of the problem. There are both Muslims and non-Muslims who consider that the two worldviews are incompatible and that violent conflict is inevitable – in a famous phrase, there is a clash of civilisations. People who hold this view include scholars, journalists and other opinion-leaders, and politicians in all parts of the political spectrum. Also, this view is part of general public opinion and appears to be strengthening.

There have been two major international surveys investigating public opinion. In summer 2006 the Pew Global Attitudes Project, based in Washington DC, found that in most countries there is a widespread perception (more than 50 per cent) that relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are bad.<sup>4</sup> The survey involved five countries in the West (France, Germany, Spain, United Kingdom and United States) and five countries associated with Islam (Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan and Turkey). In addition, opinions were polled in India, Nigeria and Russia. Table 1.1 shows the pattern of replies in 11 of the 13 countries, revealing that larger proportions of people in the West than in Islamic countries consider relations between Muslims and Westerners to be generally bad.

**Table 1.1 Relations between Muslims and Westerners, international comparisons 2006**

Respondents were asked: 'Do you think that relations these days between Muslims and non-Muslims around the world and people in countries such as the United States and Europe are generally good or generally bad?'

Country	Relations perceived to be generally bad (%)	Relations perceived to be generally good (%)	Neither, don't know or declined to answer (%)
Germany	70	23	7
France	66	33	1
Turkey	64	14	22
Nigeria	63	17	20
United Kingdom	61	28	11
Spain	61	14	25
Egypt	58	31	11
Jordan	54	39	7
United States	55	32	13
Russia	53	18	29
Indonesia	53	39	8
Pakistan	25	30	45

source *The Great Divide: how Westerners and Muslims view each other*, Pew Research Center, Washington DC, June 2006

One of the striking findings of the Pew Survey was that when people were asked their opinions of the 'other' civilisation, there was a great similarity in their replies, in the sense that each held of the other much the same range of negative views. High proportions both in the West and in Islam saw the other side as fanatical, violent and arrogant. In addition, high proportions of Muslims saw the West as selfish and greedy.

A further study of international comparisons was published by the BBC World Service in February 2007. This asked about whether people believed there is a) common ground or b) inevitable violence between the West and Islam. It also asked about the relative importance of cultural differences on the one hand and political conflicts and interests on the other.<sup>5</sup> The poll was conducted by Globescan between November 2006 and January 2007, and involved some 28,000 people in 27 different countries. The majority view in nearly all countries was that there is no inherent incompatibility between Islam and the West, and that current tensions arise essentially from conflicts over political power and interests, not from differences of religion or culture. Comparative levels of optimism for certain countries are shown in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2 Islam and the West, comparative levels of optimism in different countries, February 2007**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Common ground between Islam and the West can be found (%)</b>	<b>Violent conflict between Islam and the West is inevitable (%)</b>
Italy	78	14
United Kingdom	77	15
France	69	23
Lebanon	68	26
United States	64	31
Egypt	54	43
Nigeria	53	37
Germany	49	39
Russia	49	23
Turkey	49	29
United Arab Emirates	47	27
Kenya	46	35
Indonesia	40	51
India	35	24

*source* BBC World Service, 19 February 2007

With regard to whether current tensions are primarily about culture or primarily about political power and interests, public opinion in Britain was broadly the same as in other countries. Fifty-two per cent of British respondents said they saw the essential issue as to do with politics, and 29 per cent as to do with differences of culture or religion. Comparisons with other countries are shown in Table 1.3.

**Table 1.3 Views of culture and politics, international comparisons, February 2007**

In an interview, respondents were asked: 'Thinking about the tensions between Islam and the West, do you think they arise more from differences of religion and culture or from conflicts about political power and interests?'

<b>Country</b>	<b>Tensions arise more from differences of religion or culture</b>	<b>Tensions arise more from conflicts about political power and interests</b>
United States	38	49
Australia	35	50
Germany	34	55
France	29	56
United Kingdom	29	52
India	25	32
Italy	22	58
China	14	62
Lebanon	14	78

*note* All figures are percentages  
*source* BBC World Service, 19 February 2007

Respondents were also asked whether they believed that fundamental differences between the overall cultures of Islam and the West are responsible for current tensions, or whether the tensions are caused by intolerant minorities. If they replied they saw intolerant minorities as the problem they were asked further to specify whether the fault as they saw it lay mainly a) with Muslim minorities, b) with Western minorities or c) with minorities on both sides. Public opinion in Britain was predominantly (70 per cent) that the essential problem when posed in these terms is intolerant minorities on both sides. Only nine per cent of British respondents agreed with the view that the fundamental problem is to do with differences between the two overall cultures. Some international comparisons are shown in Table 1.4.

**Table 1.4 Perceptions of causality underlying current tensions, February 2007**

Respondents were asked: 'Would you say the current global tensions between Islam and the West are caused more by fundamental differences between these two cultures as a whole, or by an intolerant Muslim minority, or by an intolerant Western minority, or intolerant minorities on both sides?'

Country	Intolerant minorities on both sides	An intolerant Muslim minority	An intolerant Western minority	Fundamental difference between two cultures
United Kingdom	70	8	1	9
Australia	68	10	2	14
France	68	10	0	7
United States	54	12	7	17
Italy	45	20	0	23
Germany	44	18	4	25
Turkey	35	2	20	23
Lebanon	24	15	20	35
Indonesia	23	28	4	35
India	12	19	12	27

The results of opinion polls are frequently difficult to interpret, particularly when they involve international comparisons. The Globescan project did, however, permit cautious optimism. High proportions of people throughout the world considered that common ground could be found between the West and Islam. Such optimism was particularly strong in Britain, and it was stronger in Britain than in almost every other country.

### Stories in autumn 2006

The poll for Globescan in Britain took place between 21 December 2006 and 9 January 2007. In the previous five months there had been a string of stories in the UK media suggesting that common ground between Islam and the West is shaky or non-existent. In August a splash in the *Daily Express*, announced that BRITAIN IS AT WAR WITH ISLAM. Stories in ensuing months included:

- remarks by senior politicians about Muslim women wearing the *niqab*, starting with an article by Jack Straw (5 October)
- the use of images of the *niqab* by many newspapers to epitomise the whole of Islam and its alleged incompatibility with western values<sup>6</sup>
- much controversy about whether a classroom assistant in Kirklees should be allowed to wear the *niqab* when teaching

- BNP leaders found not guilty on a charge of inciting racial hatred by claiming that Islam is ‘a vicious, evil religion’
- a Metropolitan Police officer given (it was alleged) special treatment because he was a Muslim
- a statement by the head of MI5 about Muslim extremists
- a lecture by the Pope in which he quoted a 14th century Christian emperor who said Muhammad had brought the world only ‘evil and inhuman things’ and which drew support from the former Archbishop of Canterbury<sup>7</sup>
- in an apparent retaliation for the Danish cartoons, the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad held a convention for holocaust deniers, repeating his claim that Israel’s days are numbered: ‘Just as the Soviet Union was wiped out and today does not exist, so will the Zionist regime soon be wiped out.’ (13 December)
- a speech by the Prime Minister which was reported in sections of the media as a warning to Muslims to integrate or leave<sup>8</sup>
- claims that sharia law had been introduced in Britain, or was about to be
- frequent attacks on the MCB, sometimes combined with the claim that basically there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim
- a ‘campaign for a real Christmas’, which in part was a thinly disguised campaign against British Muslims
- a Channel Four *Dispatches* documentary, claiming that imams trained in Wahhabi ideology are now preaching in major British mosques, for example the Green Lane Mosque in Birmingham.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after the Globescan survey was completed, but before the report was published, David Cameron was reported as declaring that certain Muslim organisations are similar to the BNP. A day later, the Policy Exchange think-tank published a report which was portrayed in the media as showing widespread disaffection amongst young British Muslims, and evidence that policies of multiculturalism had failed.<sup>10</sup>

After all the negative reporting of the previous few months, the Globescan survey published at the end of February could be interpreted as suggesting Britain had turned a significant corner. But only two days after the publication of its report there was a vivid reminder of negative and pessimistic attitudes in the general population. On Wednesday 21 February the front-page splash in the *Daily Express* was MUSLIMS TELL US HOW TO RUN OUR SCHOOLS. The lead sentence, printed in bold, was: ‘Demands for a ban on “un-Islamic” activities in schools will be set out by the Muslim Council of Britain today’. The inverted commas round ‘un-Islamic’ clearly implied the term was a quotation from the publication. In point of fact, it did not appear. Nor did the publication refer to ‘banning’ anything. Its concern, rather, was to provide helpful guidance for

headteachers and governing bodies on understanding the needs of Muslim pupils. The *Express* referred to 'calls for all children to be taught in Taliban-style conditions'. It did not explain what 'Taliban-style conditions' might be, and its statement that the document was about 'all children', as distinct from Muslim children, was false. *Express* readers were invited to write in with their comments. Box 1.1 shows the tone and content of most (over 90 per cent) of the messages posted on the *Express* website.

**Box 1.1 'Sick to the back teeth' – messages on the *Daily Express* website, 21–23 February 2007**

'I am sick to the back teeth of hearing about Muslims this, and Muslims that. Every day we hear of another atrocity committed in the name of Islam.'

'... the gradual and creeping Islamification of this country...'

'This is an absolute kick in the teeth to anyone who is proud to be British! Our armed forces are fighting in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan to rid the world of regimes who force this way of life on people and at the same time the extremists have got into positions of power in Britain and are doing the same under our noses in our own back yard! How would our troops feel if they spend 6 months fighting just to find their own kids preaching the Koran when they get home? Enough is enough, endorse our culture or get out of our Britain!'

'This country is being destroyed by all this multicultural political correctness. Muslims are not British despite having a British passport. I don't want their culture taking over. I wish I could abandon this country. It's just a giant shanty town all disconnected and destined for dire cultural destruction and disputes.'

'The do-gooders, PC brigade and Blair are destroying this once-magnificent country.'

'I am sick to death of this particular religious group attempting to dictate to us how our institutions and way of life should be run. All we get from them are demands, demands, demands. And all we get from our milksop politicians is concession after concession after concession. If our way of life is not suited to them, then get out and, preferably, take our politicians with them. How much more do we have to put up with!!!'

'I long for the day we take our Christian, Anglo-Saxon country back into our own hands. This insidious attack on the overall education of our



children is yet a further example that things have gone too far. In my opinion, Islam is the greatest threat to world peace and the freedom of the individual since the Nazis – in fact it is more of a threat than the Third Reich and Communism put together.’

‘Come the revolution us Brits will fight with no mercy.’

‘Unless you want to see your kids brought up by the Taliban et alia, then you must be prepared to fight for your country and your beliefs. Sorry, but this is driving me into the BNP camp as well. I never thought I’d see the day, but as our politicians are continually betraying us, then I see no other recourse.’

‘The Islamic tail is wagging the British Bulldog.’

‘Instead of assimilating into our culture, Muslims whine and complain and expect everyone else to adapt to them. They should return to the homeland of their beloved prophet Mohammed.’

‘If they want to live under Islamic law then they should move back to an Islamic country. And may their god go with them.’

The messages quoted in Box 1.1 all imply that those who wrote them do not believe that common ground between Islam and the West exists, or could be created. The messages were written following an inaccurate and distorted news item. Many of the underlying feelings and opinions in them probably existed before the news item was published, however, for newspapers mirror as well as mould. Nevertheless, by reflecting their readers’ opinions and fears – or what they believe to be their opinions and fears – newspapers endorse and reinforce them. The *Express* could have given an accurate account of the MCB publication if it had wished. (It is relevant in this connection that the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* both gave accurate accounts and quoted commendations from senior educationists.) It could have: explored the substantial common ground that exists between Western and Islamic traditions of learning, nurture and education; illuminated points of difference and disagreement; avoided provoking alienation and anxiety amongst its Muslim readers; and avoided giving credence to the fears and misperceptions of non-Muslims. The *Express* could have engaged, that is to say, in responsible journalism. There is discussion in Chapter 7 of what responsible journalism entails.

### The niqab, autumn 2006

Following Jack Straw's article about the *niqab* in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* in early October 2006, widely re-published or quoted from in all national papers in the following days, a woman wearing a full face-veil became a symbol in the media for Islam generally, and even at one stage for all people of minority ethnic backgrounds. Straw, said Joan Smith in the *Independent*, had told 'the truth about how many of us feel about the veil in all its forms: the *hijab*, *niqab*, *jilbab*, *chador* and *burqa*.'<sup>11</sup> She continued: 'I can't think of a more dramatic visual symbol of oppression, the inescapable fact being that the vast majority of women who cover their hair, faces and bodies do so because they have no choice.' She concluded:

'The practice of covering women is a human rights issue in two senses, not just as a symbol of inequality, but because accusations of racism, cultural insensitivity and Islamophobia are commonly used to silence its critics. But if I loathe the *niqab* and the *burqa* when I see women wearing them in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would be hypocritical to pretend I don't find them equally offensive on my local high street.'

Other commentators wrote in similar terms. Brief extracts from some of their articles plus a number of comments from other points of view are shown in Box 1.2. Tina Beattie, who is Reader in Christian Studies at Roehampton University, commented that 'the veiled woman is part of the "otherness" which the so-called western man of reason projects onto his eastern counterparts, by depicting the Arab-Islamic world as feminised and irrational. This oriental figure, the subject of many works of literature and art, represents seduction and threat, mystery and challenge, so that it is very difficult to see her humanity clearly through the west's own cultural veils.'<sup>12</sup> She ended her article with reference to issues of conflict and confrontation, and to the need 'to listen and learn' and 'to struggle to understand one another'. In effect though not in intention, her words were a vivid summary of themes to be addressed in a study of how relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are represented in the media:

‘The relationship between Islam and secular democracy need not be one of conflict and confrontation, and Muslims cannot simply be divided between moderates and extremists. The woman with a veiled face represents something too complex to be deciphered simply on appearances alone.

‘We have to understand who she is, what she believes and values, how she positions herself in the world. Simply removing her veil will not tell us any of those things. Indeed, her bare face may mask interesting and significant differences which, paradoxically, her veil reveals.

‘We need to listen and learn, to struggle to understand one another in the recognition that threats to our common humanity are growing. The most obvious are war, violence and environmental catastrophe. A less visible but equally corrosive threat is the closure of minds and hearts to the experience, thinking and values of those regarded – even for the way they choose to dress – as alien.’

### **Box 1.2 ‘Analysed, defended, covered, uncovered’ – views about the veil**

#### *Battleground*

‘Muslim women are fast becoming the battleground on which the future of Islam and Muslims in the UK and beyond is being fought... There seems to be no end in sight to the speculation about what Muslim women want, need or stand for. The trouble is that for the most part we are objects of the discussion – “things” to be discussed, rather than participants who are involved. It’s something the hysterical pundits and reactionary mullahs share: Muslim women are analysed, defended, protected, covered, uncovered, and championed by others.’

Fareena Alam, *Guardian Online*, (Comment is Free), 13 December 2006

#### *Inherently separatist*

‘The Christian values that once defined national identity have simply collapsed, creating a cultural vacuum which Islam – Britain’s fastest-growing and most assertive religion – is busily filling. Those who defend the Muslim veil are grossly misreading the situation. It is not some picturesque religious garment equivalent to the often curious attire worn by members of other religions. It is associated instead with the most extreme version of Islam, which holds that Islamic values must take precedence over the secular state. Only a small minority of British Muslim women choose to wear this veil. But unlike other religious attire, it is thus inherently separatist and perceived by some as intimidatory. That is why it is unacceptable.’

Melanie Phillips, *Daily Mail*, 16 October 2006

*Shrouds*

'If the female body is so sinful it must be completely covered, or if its exhibition shows the whorishness of all women, we make all sexuality something which is women's fault. The idea that men cannot control sexual impulses while women must does nothing to liberate women – or men – from a horrific round of repression, guilt, blame and shame... The much-called-for Islamic reformation lies in the hands of women, not men... Wasn't the point of bombing Afghanistan to liberate women from their burkas? We are all feminists now. These garments are shrouds. They stop the wearer from living a full life. That goes for Lancashire as much as Kabul.'

Suzanne Moore, *Observer*, 8 October 2006

*Claustrophobe in a coalmine*

'Jack Straw makes a statement about women wearing the full veil that in ordinary circumstances would have been unexceptional. He says that the niqab is a "visible statement of separation and of difference" and is "bound to make better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult"... How many people could be surprised that a Labour politician, committed to democracy and the emancipation of women, should follow the logic of his principles and condemn the practice? Plenty, it turns out. Britain is as jittery about multiculturalism in 2006 as a claustrophobe in a coalmine.'

Nick Cohen, *Observer*, 24 December 2006

*Veils suck*

'Mr Rushdie said: "He [Jack Straw] was expressing an important opinion which is that veils suck – which they do. Speaking as somebody with three sisters and a very largely female Muslim family, there is not a single woman I know in my family or in their friends who would have accepted the wearing of a veil. The battle against the veil has been a long and continuing battle against the limitation of women so, in that sense, I am completely on his side. I think the veil is a way of taking power away from women."'

*Today Programme*, BBC Radio 4, 10 October 2006

*What it must be like*

'I've been trying to imagine what it must be like to be a Muslim in Britain. I guess there's a sense of dread about switching on the radio or television, even about walking into a newsagents. What will they be saying about us today? Will we be under assault for the way we dress? Or the schools we go to, or the mosques we build? Who will be on the front page: a terror suspect, a woman in a veil or, the best of both worlds, a veiled terror suspect?'

Jonathan Freedland, *Guardian*, 18 October 2006

A striking comment on the *niqab* controversies of autumn 2006 was made by the cartoonist Andrzej Krauze in the *Guardian* (9 October 2006). It showed four white men with bared teeth pointing their fingers in vain at a woman clad in *niqab*. It was as if they were picking her out at an identification parade and that her sole misdemeanour was that she was different from themselves. The massive fixed grins on their faces implied they were gaining immense personal and collective satisfaction from angrily joining together to find someone to blame and exclude. The notion that irrational scapegoating is a major ingredient of anti-Muslim hostility is considered further in Chapters 3 and 7 of this report.

### Concluding note

The next four chapters of this report discuss responsible and irresponsible journalism in a range of different contexts. Meanwhile, it is appropriate to return to the scene on a London bus with which this chapter began – the cheerful acceptance of difference and diversity, accompanied by celebration of common ground, with no one batting an eyelid. Omaar ends his book by noting that ‘Muslims are unfamiliar to and seen as alien by so many people in this country’ and that ‘their experiences as individuals are rarely heard.’ And yet, he continues:

‘Without allowing these voices in politics, on our streets, in our schools, in our newspapers and on television, we are lost. It is only when the voice of the individual is lifted above the waves of condemnation that all of us can begin to see more clearly, and perhaps start to realise, that our worlds are not in conflict after all.’

This report is frequently about, to use Omaar’s phrase, ‘waves of condemnation’. However, it also contains the voices of individuals. An aspiration throughout is to assert and to show that, despite frequent evidence and claims to the contrary, ‘our worlds are not in conflict after all’.



## 2 A normal week? – threats and crises in Britain and the world<sup>13</sup>

### A quantitative study

This chapter describes a quantitative study of how Islam and Muslims were represented in the British press during one week.<sup>14</sup> The week in question ran from Monday 8 May to Sunday 14 May 2006. It was chosen at random about a month in advance. Every article in every paper, and every supplement or magazine accompanying every paper, was looked at.

A count was made of all articles that mentioned 'Islam', 'Muslims', derivatives such as 'Islamic' and 'Islamist', or words and phrases that have an obvious resonance or association with Islam, for example 'Sunni' and 'Shi'a'. Terms that are frequently but not exclusively associated with Islam or Muslims, for example 'radical', 'fundamentalist' and 'extremist', were included in the study only where the context was such that it was reasonable to assume that an association with Islam or Muslims would be made. The study also included articles where the names of people were obviously Muslim even if their religious identity was not explicitly stated. Using these criteria, 352 articles were identified. They were categorised according to type of paper; whether they were about domestic or international affairs; whether the context was negative, positive or neutral; and whether they expressed a sense of threat or crisis. In addition, images accompanying the articles were counted and categorised.

Of the 352 articles, 288 (82 per cent) were news reports. The others included 27 (eight per cent) editorials or comment pieces, 26 (seven per cent) features (i.e. non-news coverage typically in supplements or the more central pages of a newspaper), and five (1.5 per cent) cartoons. There is a summary of findings in Box 2.1.

### Box 2.1 Summary of findings from a quantitative study

There were substantial differences between daily newspapers with regard to how many articles mentioning Islam or Muslims they contained during the week in question. There were just over 50 articles in the *Guardian*, over 40 in *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent*; but less than 20 in the *Sun*, *Mirror*, *Express* and *Star*.

Tabloids and broadsheets differed not only in the amount of coverage they provided but also in whether they focused on domestic or international affairs. In the case of the tabloids, close to 60 per cent of articles pertained to Britain and 40 per cent to the wider world. In the case of the broadsheets, however, the proportions were the other way

round: 60 per cent of articles were about the wider world, and 40 per cent about Britain.

Of the 352 articles that referred to Islam and Muslims during the week in question, 91 per cent were judged to be negative in their associations, and only four per cent were judged to be positive. Five per cent were judged neutral. The principal instances of negative association were to do with terrorism in Britain, and with Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. In 12 of the 19 papers studied during the week there were no positive associations.

In the tabloids, 96 per cent of all articles were judged to be negative. This compared with 89 per cent of broadsheet articles. It is relevant to bear in mind that the combined circulation of the tabloids is about three times greater than that of the broadsheets (May 2007 figures).

It was judged that almost half of all articles represented Islam as a threat. Of these, about a third pertained to Britain and two-thirds to the wider world.

The overall picture presented in the national press during the week in question was that on the world stage Islam is profoundly different from, and a serious threat to, the West; and that within Britain Muslims are different from and a threat to 'Us'.

The average number of articles each day was 56. On Friday 12 May, following the publication of two official reports into the events surrounding the London tube train bombings of 7 July 2005, there were slightly more references to Islam or Muslims than on any other day in the week. Over the weekend, the number of articles was lower but largely the same for both Saturday and Sunday, with 37 on Saturday and 36 on Sunday. There are full details in Table 2.1.



**Table 2.1 Articles in one week referring to Islam or Muslims, by paper, day and total**

<b>Title of paper</b>	<b>Mon</b>	<b>Tues</b>	<b>Wed</b>	<b>Thurs</b>	<b>Fri</b>	<b>Sat</b>	<b>Sun</b>	<b>total</b>
<i>Financial Times</i>	8	5	10	8	4	2	-	<b>37</b>
<i>Independent</i>	11	6	6	13	9	3	-	<b>48</b>
<i>Star</i>	1	2	1	3	2	2	-	<b>11</b>
<i>Mirror</i>	4	4	3	2	2	1	-	<b>16</b>
<i>Express</i>	5	3	1	1	2	2	-	<b>14</b>
<i>Mail</i>	5	9	1	4	8	4	-	<b>31</b>
<i>Telegraph</i>	5	8	4	9	12	5	-	<b>43</b>
<i>Sun</i>	2	6	2	4	1	4	-	<b>19</b>
<i>Guardian</i>	11	7	11	7	12	4	-	<b>52</b>
<i>Times</i>	4	9	7	6	9	10	-	<b>45</b>
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Star on Sunday</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Express</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	<b>4</b>
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>News of the World</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	<b>7</b>
<i>Sunday People</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>-</b>
<i>Observer</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	<b>7</b>
<i>Sunday Times</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>352</b>

Of the 352 articles, 214 (57 per cent) were accompanied by an image, as shown in Table 2.2. Significantly more articles in the broadsheets than in the tabloids were accompanied by an image: the *Guardian*, *Independent* and *The Times* were responsible for 43 per cent of all images and photographs. The *Daily Star* provided the lowest number of images accompanying coverage – just one per day. It is worth noting, however, that the *Star* did not cover ‘news’ in the same way as its counterparts; since its articles were rarely longer than a few lines, it is unsurprising that so few of them had accompanying images.

**Table 2.2 Images in one week referring to Islam or Muslims, by paper, day and total**

<b>Title of newspaper</b>	<b>Mon</b>	<b>Tues</b>	<b>Wed</b>	<b>Thurs</b>	<b>Fri</b>	<b>Sat</b>	<b>Sun</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Financial Times</i>	2	1	9	3	1	-	-	<b>16</b>
<i>Independent</i>	6	4	5	7	9	2	-	<b>33</b>
<i>Star</i>	-	1	-	1	1	2	-	<b>5</b>
<i>Mirror</i>	2	3	3	2	1	1	-	<b>12</b>
<i>Express</i>	4	3	1	1	1	1	-	<b>11</b>
<i>Mail</i>	4	3	1	3	3	2	-	<b>16</b>
<i>Telegraph</i>	1	3	4	3	9	5	-	<b>25</b>
<i>Sun</i>	1	3	1	2	1	3	-	<b>11</b>
<i>Guardian</i>	5	3	5	5	8	4	-	<b>30</b>
<i>Times</i>	2	5	7	2	7	7	-	<b>30</b>
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<b>1</b>
<i>Star on Sunday</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Express</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<b>1</b>
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<b>1</b>
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<b>1</b>
<i>News of the World</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	<b>5</b>
<i>Sunday People</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>-</b>
<i>Observer</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	<b>6</b>
<i>Sunday Times</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	<b>6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>214</b>

### **International and British contexts**

Articles were categorised according to whether they pertained to Britain, to affairs in other countries or in the world generally. In a few instances, however, the context was generic, rather than set in a particular part of the world. When articles focused upon the events of 7 July 2005 and their aftermath, it was difficult to establish whether the context should be considered British or international, particularly when these events were linked to al-Qaeda and the 'war on terror'. In order to maintain consistency throughout the analysis, it was decided that articles primarily focusing on 7/7 would be categorised as having a British focus, since the event occurred in Britain and involved British citizens.

Articles were less skewed towards an international – as distinct from British – context than had been the case in previous research on this subject. For example, in the *Guardian* and *The Times*, between 1994 and 1996, the split between British and international articles was 13 per cent and 87 per cent respectively.<sup>15</sup> Immediately after the events of 11 September 2001 – between 12 September and 25 October – 10 per cent

of the *Guardian's* coverage had a British focus, and 90 per cent was international.<sup>16</sup> In the period of this analysis, the balance was much more even. Of the 52 articles about Islam in the *Guardian* in the week of 8-13 May 2006, 22 (42 per cent) pertained to Britain. This is shown in Table 2.3, which also shows the balance for all other papers.

**Table 2.3 Focus of articles in each newspaper: Britain, international or generic**

Title	Focus of article			Totals
	Britain	International	Generic	
<i>Financial Times</i>	5	31	1	<b>37</b>
<i>Independent</i>	14	32	2	<b>48</b>
<i>Star</i>	9	2	-	<b>11</b>
<i>Mirror</i>	7	9	-	<b>16</b>
<i>Express</i>	8	5	1	<b>14</b>
<i>Mail</i>	19	10	2	<b>31</b>
<i>Telegraph</i>	17	23	3	<b>43</b>
<i>Sun</i>	10	9	-	<b>19</b>
<i>Guardian</i>	22	28	2	<b>52</b>
<i>Times</i>	23	21	1	<b>45</b>
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	0	2	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Star on Sunday</i>	2	0	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	2	0	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Express</i>	3	1	-	<b>4</b>
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	2	0	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	1	1	-	<b>2</b>
<i>News of the World</i>	6	1	-	<b>7</b>
<i>Observer</i>	3	4	-	<b>7</b>
<i>Sunday Times</i>	3	5	-	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>352</b>

The data in Table 2.3 can be simplified in order to reflect the distinction that is frequently made between broadsheets or former broadsheets on the one hand and tabloids on the other.

**Table 2.4 Focus of articles by type of newspaper**

Publication type	Focus of article			TOTAL
	Britain	International	Generic	
Tabloid	68	41	3	<b>112</b>
Broadsheet	90	141	9	<b>240</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>352</b>

Table 2.4 shows that in the tabloids there were 112 articles about Islam and Muslims, with roughly a 60:40 split between British and international or generic. Of the 112 articles, 68 (61 per cent) pertained to Britain, with the other 44 (39 per cent) being international or generic. There were twice as many articles in the broadsheets (240 compared with 112) and the split between British and international was close to 40:60: of the 240 articles in the broadsheets, 150 (62.5 per cent) were international or generic and the other 90 (37.5) pertained to Britain.

### **Associations of articles**

Each article was categorised in relation to its associated context and subject matter as either a) positive in its representation of Islam, b) negative or c) neutral. The overwhelming number of articles documented had a negative association and the entire coverage of 12 out of the 19 newspapers was negatively associated (see Table 2.5). This was particularly the case in the *Mail*, *Mirror*, *Sun* and *Star*. The papers with the lowest proportions of negative associations were the *Independent* and *Guardian*. The *Express* also had a low proportion, but in their case the actual number of articles was much smaller (14 compared with 52 in the *Guardian* and 48 in the *Independent*).

**Table 2.5 Positive, neutral or negative associations of articles, by paper**

Title	Association of articles (%)			Number of articles
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
<i>Financial Times</i>	89	5.5	5.5	<b>37</b>
<i>Independent</i>	80	2	8	<b>48</b>
<i>Star</i>	100	-	-	<b>11</b>
<i>Mirror</i>	100	-	-	<b>16</b>
<i>Express</i>	71	21	8	<b>14</b>
<i>Mail</i>	97	-	3	<b>31</b>
<i>Telegraph</i>	91	7	2	<b>43</b>
<i>Sun</i>	100	-	-	<b>19</b>
<i>Guardian</i>	85	12	3	<b>52</b>
<i>Times</i>	89	7	4	<b>46</b>
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	100	-	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Star on Sunday</i>	100	-	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	100	-	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Express</i>	100	-	-	<b>4</b>
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	100	-	-	<b>2</b>
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	100	-	-	<b>2</b>
<i>News of the World</i>	100	-	-	<b>7</b>
<i>Observer</i>	100	-	-	<b>7</b>
<i>Sunday Times</i>	100	-	-	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>352</b>

All articles in the Sunday newspapers were categorised as having a negative association. Across all the newspapers the breakdown between positive, neutral and negative associations was four per cent, five per cent and 91 per cent respectively. However, this overall picture obscures differences between tabloids and broadsheets, as shown in Table 2.6. Five per cent of articles in the broadsheets had a positive association but only one per cent of the articles in the tabloids.

**Table 2.6 Positive, neutral or negative associations, by type of paper**

Publication type	Association of articles (%)			Number of articles
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
Tabloid	96	3	1	112
Broadsheet	89	6	5	240
<b>Totals</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>352</b>

### Images

As mentioned above (Table 2.2) the 352 articles were accompanied by 214 images. These too were categorised as positive, negative or neutral in their associations (see Table 2.7). Whilst the overwhelming associations remained negative, there was proportionately more use of material categorised as neutral: 14 per cent for images in comparison with five per cent of text. However, this needs clarification: the images accompanying articles were not necessarily linked, either overtly or even tenuously, with Muslims or Islam. For example, the images accompanying many of the articles relating to the situation in Iraq were of the casualties of war, the destruction of buildings and actions of the military. Whilst Muslims may have been identifiable in these images, the images themselves could not be appropriately described as having either Muslim or Islamic subject matter. However, since such images accompanied articles that did have an explicit Muslim or Islamic theme or focus, as defined above, they were categorised accordingly.

**Table 2.7 Positive, neutral or negative associations of images (percentages)**

All newspapers	Association of images			(Number)
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>214</b>

**Table 2.8 Positive, neutral or negative associations of images, by type of paper (percentages)**

Publication type	Association of images			Total
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
Tabloid	88	8	4	30
Broadsheet	77	17	6	70
<b>Totals</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>100</b>

As with the articles, the association of the images within both the tabloids and broadsheets was overwhelmingly negative (see Table 2.8). However, the percentage of negative images was lower when compared to text. The tabloids were more likely than the broadsheets to accompany articles with images that had negative associations.

### Topics and subject matter

Given that the week of this study coincided with the publication of the reports into the 7/7 terrorist attacks, it was no surprise that just under a quarter of the 352 articles were relevant to this story (see Table 2.9). Another significant news story occurring in that week was the ongoing war in Iraq. Yet another was the unfolding crisis following the decision by Iran to pursue its programme of nuclear development. Iranians maintained that the programme was for energy purposes yet most other sources considered that it was for military purposes. In total, these three news stories were responsible for 45 per cent of all newspaper coverage relating to Islam or Muslims during the week in question. Articles concerned with 7/7 were typically explicit in making reference to either Islam or Muslims; in articles on Iraq and Iran a recurring theme was the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.

On many occasions, 'Sunni' and 'Shi'a' were accompanied by the appellation 'insurgent', a term that appeared to be interchangeable with 'fundamentalist'. The latter term was used in the week in question in the *Guardian* (G2 Monday 8 May) and the *Daily Mail* (Tuesday 9 May). Similar meanings were identifiable in the use of 'radical', 'extremist', 'Islamist' and 'Saddamist' (*The Times*, Monday 8 May).

Table 2.9 indicates stories about which there were at least four articles in the course of the week. The percentages in the right hand column are in relation to the 352 articles in the study as a whole.

**Table 2.9 News content by story**

<b>News content</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Bombs on 7 July 2005	69	19.6
Iraq	49	13.9
Iran	42	11.9
Palestine	22	6.2
Afghan hijackers	20	5.7
Prince Naseem sentencing	15	4.3
Guantanamo Bay	14	4.0
Women	12	3.4
War on terror	11	3.1
Abu Qatada	10	2.8
9/11	9	2.6
Human rights	6	1.7
Islamic schools	5	1.4
Somalia	5	1.4
Afghanistan	4	1.1
Crime – UK	4	1.1
Egypt	4	1.1
Muslim world	4	1.1
Pakistan	4	1.1

Table 2.9 shows that in addition to stories relating to the London bombs, Iraq and Iran, there were stories about the boxer Prince Naseem (included because of his Muslim name and the repeated references to him being Muslim), the trial of Abu Qatada, Guantanamo Bay, the 'war on terror' and 9/11. Of all of these, only the Prince Naseem story was outside the association of Islam and Muslims with violence, war and terrorism.

It is relevant to recall that in the preceding week there had been local government elections in which politicians campaigning on an overtly anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic basis had achieved some success. But increased electoral support for such views was referred to only once in the national media in the week of 8-14 May. This was in an article that suggested that the popularity of such views had been boosted by 'Asian crime' (*Daily Mail*, Saturday 13 May 2006).



### Broad themes: threat and crisis

Another way of categorising articles is in relation to the broad themes of threat and crisis. A dictionary definition of threat is ‘an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage or other hostile action... a person or thing likely to cause damage or danger’.<sup>17</sup> So, for example, the theme of ‘international threat’ would encompass stories on the Iranian nuclear crisis and global terrorism, as would references to ‘the clash of civilisations’, al-Qaeda, the ‘war on terror’ and 9/11, in view of the connotations of threat and hostility that these clearly imply. Where the threat was seen to be much more UK-specific, as in the case of coverage relating to 7/7, coverage was incorporated within the theme of ‘national threat’, although a distinct ‘international threat’ could also be apparent because of the associations being made between 7/7 and wider understandings of global Islamic networks.

A dictionary definition was also adopted for the term crisis: ‘a time of intense difficulty or danger.’<sup>18</sup> Coverage relating to the Middle East and the war in Iraq was included within this theme, as they were not reported as specifically presenting a threat to either the UK or the international community but were rather evidence of ‘intense difficulty’. The Iranian nuclear crisis was seen to be both an international threat as well as a ‘crisis’, as it straddled both a time of intense difficulty and also a potential danger to the international community. Table 2.10 shows that the vast majority of articles relating to Islam and Muslims (83 per cent) expressed a sense of threat or crisis. The percentages in Table 2.10 relate to the total of 352 articles included in this study.

**Table 2.10 News content by broad theme**

Theme	Percentage	Theme	Percentage
International threats	34.7	National threats	14.1
Crises	34.2	Islamic finance	0.1
Shariah law	0.3	Women’s rights	2.2
Human rights	4.0	Society – UK	3.5
Immigration	3.2	Jihad	0.1
Islam/Muslims – generic	1.2	Islamic schools	0.4
Polygamy	0.6	Racism – PC	0.1
Environment	0.1	Halal	0.3
Sport	0.1	Islamic design	0.1
Arts – all	0.3	Sexuality – homosexuality	0.1
Holocaust denial	0.1		

### Other themes

Other themes worthy of note were those concerned with human rights, immigration and the role of women in Islam. Because the first two were very closely linked, as with the previous themes, it was very difficult at times to identify any clear ground between them. Perhaps this was not surprising in view of the release of the Afghan hijackers, which was covered in 5.7 per cent of the week's articles. Coverage was coloured by responses to the human rights of the hijackers and this, in turn, fed into the issue of immigration into Britain. This latter observation reflects earlier pieces of research. A report by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) noted, regarding the interplay between British Muslims and asylum seekers or Britain's new immigrants: 'This process had brought about a convergence of enemies, and as such, a complementary convergence of stereotypes and objectives too. And in the large part, these were also Muslims, or at least perceived to be.'<sup>19</sup> There is often a blurring of the lines between issues relating to 'Muslims' and issues relating to 'immigrants' and each word can be code for the other.

This was clear in the coverage of the Afghan hijackers stories – especially in the accompanying image in all of the dailies of a 'Muslim'-attired man carrying a gun and wearing a black balaclava style mask. It was most clear in a cartoon that appeared in the *Daily Mail* (Thursday 11 May). Based on the idea that all asylum seekers and immigrants only come to Britain because of the perks that they are given, the cartoon shows a small rowing boat heading in the direction of a lighthouse on the iconic white cliffs of Dover. It is in the depiction of the passengers in the boat that the lack of differentiation between 'Muslim' and 'asylum-seeker' is most apparent. The two male passengers were almost identical to a cartoon by the same cartoonist – Mac – after 9/11 that dehumanised Muslims as 'parasites' that 'feed off their hosts'.<sup>20</sup> However, it is in the depiction of the female passenger that it is most obvious that the notions of 'Muslim' and 'immigrant' are interchangeable, for she is dressed in black with her head covered – a stock media image of Muslims. The caption is, 'Actually, we haven't reached Britain yet Miss Kelly. But we'd like granite worktops and white tiles in the kitchen...'

The caption indicates that what asylum seekers and Muslims are imagined to have in common is that they are here in Britain in a selfish and self-serving capacity. It implies also that the government of the day is 'a soft touch', unable or unwilling to protect the country's borders from threatening foreigners. The topical context for the cartoon was the appointment of Ruth Kelly, following a Cabinet re-shuffle, to the post of

Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. Her brief would include both housing and community relations.

A consequence of implying that all Muslims are a threat is that all activities distinctively undertaken by Muslims are seen as threatening, even such activities as attending a mosque for Friday prayers. An *Observer* article ('The bomber will always get through', Sunday 14 May) about the 7/7 bombers suggested that there were potentially many others in Britain 'living very much the sort of lives as the four young men who perpetrated the attacks'. The article went on to note that part of these 'sort of lives' included 'attending Friday prayers'. That something so normal for Muslims could be represented as something that embodies so much difference – and in the context of the representation, a threat also – highlights how embedded such meanings have become in the representation process.

Likewise the article 'Missed clues over the fanatical four' (*Daily Mail*, Friday 12 May) rested heavily on the premise that there remained a threat from other similar young Muslim males in the UK. In relation to Jermaine Lindsay, it noted, 'after he converted to Islam his behaviour changed' and 'religion increasingly became the main focus of his life'. Whilst none of these examples were explicitly anti-Muslim per se, there is a strong implication that 'Friday prayers', 'conversion' and 'religion' are warning indicators of those who might subsequently pose a threat. There were many obvious examples of an 'Us' and 'Them' dichotomy. These included the homogenising descriptor, 'the Muslim world' ('Iran's leader casts himself as Muslims' regional hero', *Financial Times*, Friday 12 May) and the question 'If, for example, Muslim children nearly always play together and seldom play with other children, the question needs to be asked, "Is there a reason for it?"' ('Nurseries told to root out racists aged three', *Daily Mail*, Monday 8 May). The first implies that the 'Muslim world' is a homogenous entity, the second that it is 'They' who have the problems and most definitely not 'Us'. Underpinning the representation of Islam and Muslims in such examples there are notions not only of difference but of opposition, hostility and threat.

One consequence of the blurred line between international news and British news mentioned above is that Muslims are represented as inescapably 'Other'. 'Their' way of life and who 'They' are becomes both apparent and seemingly problematic. 'They' become – as in traditional Western discourse about the Orient – the shadow self of all that 'We' are not and do not want to be. By the same token, it is imagined that Muslims see 'Us' as representing all that they are not, and do not want to be.

### A normal week?

In this 'normal' week, the vast majority of representations of Islam and Muslims were overly and overtly negative, cutting across tabloid and broadsheet with little apparent differentiation or clear ground between them. Crisis and threat informed, determined and overshadowed much of the reporting and subsequent understanding. In this same 'normal' week, Muslims both from Britain and abroad – indeed everywhere across the 'Muslim world' and also the globe – were seen to be one and the same, without difference or diversity. In this same 'normal' week, Muslims were being identified and confirmed as challenging all that 'we' are understood to be: challenging 'our' culture, values, institutions and way of life. It is 'common sense' that no common ground between Muslims and non-Muslims exists, or can exist.

The week in question may not have been normal in terms of the number of items counted. It was, however, normal in the sense that it showed what people in Britain think is normal – Islam is a threat. Opinion polls cited in Chapter 1 of this report show that this sense of what is normal has been growing. The next chapter shows how such normality is represented through various one-off stories about so-called political correctness. Later chapters show how it pervades the working lives of journalists (Chapter 4) and the assumptions in TV documentaries (Chapter 5).

One must ask to what extent the 74 per cent of Britons who claim that they know 'nothing or next to nothing about Islam' (of whom 64 per cent claim that what they do know about Islam and Muslims is gained through the media) take for granted those meanings that underpin the representations in every 'normal' week and assume that their understandings of Muslims and Islam are little more than basic 'common sense'. That so little of what was analysed would appear to be anything but 'normal' and common sense despite being so shrouded in negatively evaluated and associated meanings and understandings-is possibly the greatest indicator of the extent to which the discourse of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic ideas and meanings has become naturalised.

In the meanwhile, it is relevant to note an image that accompanied the article, 'Saudis see how their sisters live' (*The Times*, Wednesday 10 May 2006). Two young Muslim women wearing *hijab* are shown playing a game of pool in a youth club. This one image single-handedly challenges all notions and ideas of Muslims as essentially different from 'us'. Muslims are seen here as normal, 'people like us'. The image is a fitting reminder of how the world *could* be represented, though typically is not.

### 3 'Britishness is being destroyed' – worries in a changing world<sup>21</sup>

#### Introduction

'Britishness is being destroyed,' declared a leader column in the *Daily Express* in November 2005, 'in a misplaced bid to kowtow to other ethnic sensitivities. This pathetic attempt to appease everyone all the time is pleasing no one. It is just turning everything that is best about British life into something of which we are supposed to feel ashamed. And it is disgraceful.'<sup>22</sup> In the context of a front-page splash in the *Express* on the same day it was totally clear that the kowtowing and appeasing of which the paper disapproved was in relation to Muslims.

Fear of so-called political correctness in Western countries precedes anxieties about Muslims, and is associated with issues to do with policing, the nanny state, human rights legislation, gender equality, adjustments for people with disabilities – not just with issues around what the *Express* called 'ethnic sensitivities'. But increasingly in recent years anxiety about so-called political correctness has been combined with anxieties to do with Britishness and multiculturalism, and with Muslims.

This chapter considers and illustrates key issues by considering four small episodes. Each was relatively trivial in itself. But each was portrayed in the media as illustrating the claim that 'common sense' is under attack from 'the PC brigade'. In two of the four instances the attack on political correctness was explicitly combined with an attack on Muslims. In a third it was implicitly to do with Muslims, though in principle was also to do with all non-Christian religions. In the fourth, the attack was primarily directed towards the police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). However, the bullying in a school playground against which the police and the CPS had taken action had an anti-Muslim dimension and it is for this reason that it is included here.

In addition, media coverage of all four episodes involved serious factual inaccuracies and distortions. With regard to each there is an extract from the original story as it first appeared. This is followed by consideration of how the story was commented on in leaders, articles by columnists and readers' letters. Finally, the truth behind the story is outlined, based on interviews with, and statements by, people who were directly involved. Three of the interviews have not previously been published. The fourth was published, to the paper's credit, in the *Mail on Sunday*. The chapter draws to a close with further discussion of the concept of political correctness. As a foretaste, Box 3.1 shows the ways the concept was used in relation to the four episodes to be examined.

### **Box 3.1 Making us trim our national culture**

#### **Piggy banks to be sacrificed**

‘So our piggy banks are to be sacrificed – not because we have become a nation that has forgotten how to save (which we have) but because they may be offensive to people whose religion forbids the eating of pork. This is nonsense, piffling nonsense but dangerous nonsense, too. It is unhealthy to indulge in the sort of political correctness that makes us trim our popular culture in ludicrous ways.’

*Daily Express, 24 October 2005*

#### **Council chiefs ban Christmas**

‘Britain’s proud heritage suffered a devastating blow yesterday after council chiefs banned Christmas. Critics immediately accused a politically correct local authority of being ashamed to be Christian. The council ordered Christmas lights in its town centres to be called “winter” or even “celebrity” lights to avoid upsetting other faiths. The astonishing diktat is one of a string of decisions by town hall bureaucracies which have undermined many age-old traditions. Their obsession has already seen crucifixes removed for being too Christian, Bibles taken out of some hospitals and even teachers told they can no longer “fail” children.’

*Daily Express, 2 November 2005*

#### **Now Christ is banned**

‘BC is used for dates leading up to the birth of Christ to help place the timing of eras throughout history and is internationally accepted. But officials at the Cheddar Caves museum in Cheddar Gorge, Somerset – one of Britain’s most popular tourist attractions – say that is not politically correct and have changed all exhibit dates to BP.’

*Daily Express, 4 December 2005*

#### **Sheer crassness of modern British bureaucracy**

‘Anybody who was ever called unkind names at school must be gasping with astonishment this weekend at the news that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has thought fit to bring criminal charges against a 10-year-old who is said to have called an 11-year-old schoolmate a “Paki” and “Bin Laden” in the playground... Every word uttered by Jonathan Finestein, the District Court Judge who is hearing the case at Salford Youth Court, rang with common sense. The decision to prosecute, he said, was “crazy”. It was “political correctness gone mad” (there are times when only a cliché will do to describe the sheer crassness of modern British bureaucracy).’

*Daily Telegraph, 8 April 2006*

### Piggy banks to be sacrificed

“‘Offensive’ Piggy Banks,’ said a headline on an inside page of the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* on Friday 21 October 2005, ‘get the chop.’ The first sentence, summarising the story that followed, explained: ‘Piggy banks are being removed from promotional displays in Blackburn town centre banks in case they cause offence to Muslim customers’. The article quoted spokespersons for NatWest and Halifax Building Society saying they were changing their current promotional projects but contained no evidence that the avoidance of possible offence to Muslims was the reason. The story was brought to the attention of the *Daily Express* and its sister paper the *Daily Star*.

The front page splash in the *Express* on the following Monday (24 October 2005) consisted of a one-word headline: HOGWASH. The explanatory subtitle was ‘Now the PC brigade bans piggy banks in case they upset Muslims’. It was the first of three front pages in the *Express* in the run-up to Christmas that year, each of them claiming that political correctness is harming Britain through a desire not to offend Muslims. There was a similar string of stories in the tabloid press in the run-up to Christmas 2006.<sup>23</sup> The opening sentences of the *Express* story about piggy banks are shown in Box 3.2.

#### Box 3.2 HOGWASH: Now the PC brigade bans piggy banks in case they upset Muslims



*Daily Express*, 24 October 2005

PIGGY banks are being banned in case they offend Muslim customers, it emerged last night. The decision by high street banks was condemned as “barmy” and “bonkers” by critics.

They warned that such moves would only fuel inter-community tensions. Branch bosses imposed the ban because they fear the time-honoured symbol for thriftiness could upset ethnic customers.

All promotional material bearing the figure has now been scrapped because the Koran forbids Muslims from eating pork and pigs are considered by them to be unclean.

Muslim leaders in East Lancashire, where there is a large immigrant community and the first bans were imposed, applauded the action by the Halifax and NatWest.

But the move was condemned by critics headed by a leading Church of England clergyman.

The Dean of Blackburn, the Very Reverend Christopher Armstrong, said: “This is petty and political correctness gone mad.

“The next thing we will be banning Christmas trees and cribs and the logical result of that process is a bland uniformity.

“We should learn to celebrate our differences, not be fearful of them.”

The news item quoted the Dean of Blackburn, as shown in Box 3.2, declaring that ‘this is political correctness gone mad’. There were also quotations from Andrew Rosindell, MP for Romford, and Mike Penning, MP for Hemel Hempstead. The use of criticisms from places as far apart as Blackburn, Essex and Hertfordshire implied that the story was nationwide. Rosindell said: ‘Those responsible for this decision are making themselves look extremely foolish. It is quite absurd. In no way can piggy banks be termed offensive... This is the sort of political correctness that makes normal-thinking people very angry. It’s barmy.’ Mike Penning described the decision as ‘bonkers’.

In addition, the *Express* quoted the secretary of the Lancashire Council of Mosques: ‘Within our faith there are strict rules about not consuming pork or coming into contact with pigs. This is a sensitive issue and I think the banks are simply being courteous to their customers.’ Spokespersons for Halifax and NatWest were quoted as saying, respectively: ‘We no longer have any advertising that features piggy banks or is piggy bank related’ and ‘The decision has been taken at local branch level.’

#### *How the story was developed and discussed*

‘So,’ commented the *Express* in a leader, ‘our piggy banks are to be sacrificed – not because we have become a nation that has forgotten how to save (which we have) but because they may be offensive to people whose religion forbids the eating of pork. This is nonsense, piffling nonsense but dangerous nonsense, too. It is unhealthy to indulge in the sort of political correctness that makes us trim our popular culture in ludicrous ways. It is important and correct that Britain has become more sensitive about language and symbols that are truly offensive to ethnic minorities and that decent Britons will no longer use. But piggy banks and



Winnie the Pooh's Piglet do not fall into that category. Removing them for bogus reasons is an insult to our intelligence and that of Muslim bank customers, too.' Readers' reactions included the following:

- 'What a sad state of affairs when we have to think all the time about what may offend some sections of society. I am convinced that the vast majority of Muslims have more important things to think about than whether or not we use the term "piggy bank". What next? Can we still give our children a "piggyback"? If not, what do we call it? Are we allowed to use the term "pig in the middle"? What are we to call a "pigtail"? It beggars belief that we are concerned with such trivial matters – or am I being pig-headed?'
- 'What a country we live in when, after a weekend of celebrating the life of one of the greatest Englishmen in history – Lord Horatio Nelson – we are now told that piggy banks are off limits for fear of offending Muslims ("Hogwash", October 24). Hogwash indeed! If I remember rightly a similar fate befell the harmless little golliwog. This is England. We are rightly proud of our heritage and yet we kowtow to the insane demands of people who want to live in our country but are not prepared to accept our ways. If they don't like who we are and what we stand for, why do they stay? Could the benefits and free healthcare have anything to do with it? I for one am tired of increasingly feeling like a foreigner in my own country. I suspect I am not alone.'

#### *What actually happened*

In a statement for this report, the NatWest Bank explained: 'This started with a local paper in the North. They rang us and we gave them a verbal statement which it appears they completely misinterpreted. From there it ended up in the *Star* and the *Express*, neither of which checked it with us. The story was nonsense.' The explanation continued:

'In September last year, piggy banks featured on posters in our branches as part of a nationwide savings campaign. When that campaign finished at the end of September, these posters were taken down to be replaced by new posters supporting the October branch campaign on personal loans. At this time we were contacted by a local paper asking if the decision to remove them was based on the posters causing offence. This, of course, was absolute nonsense and without any foundation whatsoever. The posters were removed simply to make way for the new posters supporting the next scheduled campaign. This happens with all campaigns throughout the year at NatWest. In fact, we have again had the piggy bank posters in all our branches throughout April this year [2006] in support of an April savings

campaign and again taken down when that campaign finished at the end of April.

‘How that was misinterpreted by the local paper that broke the story is still a mystery to us. It was then picked up by some national newspapers who regrettably did not contact us and give us the opportunity to respond before going to print.’

The story quickly spread across the world. In particular it received a substantial airing in Australia, where headlines included ‘Banks saving our bacon’ and ‘Banks lose faith in this little piggy’. It entered cuttings files and, in due course, serious books. For example, it was cited by Melanie Phillips in her book *Londonistan*: ‘Concern not to offend minority sensibilities has reached the risible point where piggy banks have been banished from British banks in case Muslims might be offended.’<sup>24</sup> Also, the international web-based magazine *Le Journal Chrétien* contained in March 2007 an article which expanded a false allegation about one bank and one building society in a town in East Lancashire into a European-wide truth about threats to European culture and ways of life:

‘Islam is slowly but surely taking a grip on the European culture, warns the German journalist and university lecturer Udo Ulfkotte. Traditional values, customs and judicial standards are gradually customised to meet Muslim requirements. As Ulfkotte explained at a meeting of Christian Democrats in Wetzlar, March 8, more and more institutions are making allowances for Muslims. Many banks, he said, are abandoning the so-called piggy banks, because they are afraid of losing Muslim customers. Muslims regard the pig as an unclean animal. German butchers who sell pork are targeted by Muslim extremists, according to Ulfkotte. Muslims occasionally spit on sausages on sale at open-air markets. In some European cities Muslim taxi drivers refuse to transport dogs, even blind persons with guide dogs.’<sup>25</sup>

But the last word here on this story goes to the satirical blog Anorak. Anorak cited the quotation in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph*, repeated in the *Daily Express*, from the secretary of the Lancashire Council of Mosques:

‘[T]he *Express* sets about finding a Muslim to elicit a response from. And with Omar Bakri out of the country and Osama bin Laden missing or dead, it makes do with Salim Mulla, secretary for the Lancashire Council of Mosques. “This is a sensitive issue,” says Salim, “and I think the banks are simply being courteous to their customers.”... Surely Salim can do better than that. He’s not trying. Where’s the polemic? Where’s the outrage? Where’s the rant about Jews running all the banks and how the pig is part of a universal conspiracy to make money

unclean and so unfit for poor Muslims to touch? Oh, how we need barking Bakri back in this country. Any more of this and we'll start thinking Muslims are just like the rest of us. Even if they do keep their money in wallets and purses.'

In addition to eliciting a comment from the Lancashire Council of Mosques, the *Express* turned to the Dean of Blackburn, as shown in Box 3.2. 'The next thing,' he said, 'we will be banning Christmas trees and cribs'. The comment proved remarkably prescient, as discussed below.

### 'Council chiefs ban Christmas'

The story was a front page splash with a huge headline: CHRISTMAS IS BANNED: IT OFFENDS MUSLIMS. The start of the story is shown in Box 3.3.

#### Box 3.3 CHRISTMAS IS BANNED: IT OFFENDS MUSLIMS

##### Council is 'ashamed' to be Christian

*Daily Express*, 2 November 2005

BRITAIN'S proud heritage suffered a devastating blow yesterday after council chiefs banned Christmas. Critics immediately accused a politically correct local authority of being ashamed to be Christian.

The council ordered Christmas lights in its town centres to be called "winter" or even "celebrity" lights to avoid upsetting other faiths. The astonishing diktat is one of a string of decisions by town hall bureaucrats which have undermined many age-old traditions. Their obsession has already seen crucifixes removed for being too Christian, Bibles taken out of some hospitals and even teachers told they can no longer "fail" children.

Last night there was widespread condemnation of the ruling with residents, MPs and leaders from all faiths joining forces to condemn the outrageous move. Steve Jenkins, spokesman for the Church of England, said the move by Lambeth in south London left him "speechless". "I thought we were over all this stuff. I thought people had stopped this,"



he said. "The way for everybody to recognise everybody in their community is to recognise each other's festivals in the way we saw recently with the Diwali celebrations. We would not call Diwali lights celebrity lights would we? Christmas is Christmas, Diwali is Diwali and Ramadan is Ramadan."

The Muslim Council of Britain agreed, saying the decision beggared belief. Lambeth, which has earned a reputation as one of the worst-run councils, is home to the official residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The council, which includes Brixton and Clapham, has now replaced the word "Christmas" in its advertising material for the various switch-ons of lights over the festive season. In three districts it will now be the "winter lights" while, in a fourth area, locals will be invited to enjoy the "celebrity lights".

The council's latest attack on the symbols of the festival celebrating the birth of Christ provoked widespread outrage. Culture secretary and local MP Tessa Jowell branded the order "ridiculous", adding: "It is a completely misguided way to recognise and respect Lambeth's diversity. Children right across my constituency get excited about Christmas and what it means."

#### *How the story was developed and discussed*

There was nothing in the news item to substantiate the headline that Christmas offends Muslims, or even that anyone has ever thought that it offends Muslims. Nevertheless the story was recycled in other papers and on the BBC. 'A decision to call Christmas lights "Winter Lights" in south London', said the BBC, 'has been condemned as showing a "total lack of respect" for Christians. Advertisements for the switch-on of the lights in multi-cultural Lambeth have renamed them, apparently for fear of offending other faiths.' (BBC Online, 2 November 2005). It was repeated also by *Voice of Freedom*, which combined it with a story on the same theme from a town in Suffolk: 'A council is to stop paying for Christmas lights because they are not politically correct. Waveney District Council in Suffolk says the festive illuminations do not fit in with its core values of equality and diversity. The decision followed just days after Lambeth Council in south London re-branded their Christmas lights as "Winter Lights" so as not to upset the borough's ethnic minorities.'

#### *What actually happened*

The story was first printed in a local paper on 1 November 2005, the day before the coverage in the *Express*. The heading was 'Do they know it's Christmas any more?' Such stories often get into the national press through a local stringer or politician.

In a statement for this report a spokesperson for Lambeth council explained:

‘The important point in all this is that it was never council policy to rename the Christmas lights switch-on events, or to change the name to winter lights. The naming decisions were made at a local level and this inconsistency in naming should have been picked up before council literature went to print, but it wasn’t spotted until it was too late.

‘What started out as a joke in the *South London Press* (a cartoon with the headline “Christmas is cancelled”), turned into a full-blown media assault with the *Daily Express* carrying the headline “Christmas is banned: It offends Muslims” on its front page, turning it into a religious statement. It should be noted that the *Daily Express* did not once contact Lambeth council press office to find out the truth of the matter before printing their cover story.

‘From that point on the story about Lambeth pandering to certain communities at the expense of British/Christian culture and tradition was picked up by the rest of the nation’s media and blown out of all proportion. Our response to the story was that it was absurd. Christmas was going on as usual, the Christmas tree was up in the town hall, the usual Christmas carols were being sung, the lights were up. The different names really were born out of inconsistency, they were never the official council policy, yet it escalated into this huge story.’

The council issued a press release on the same day as the *Express* coverage cited in Box 3.3. ‘The suggestion Christmas has been banned is absolutely ridiculous,’ it said. ‘The usual Christmas tree will be up in the town hall, the usual Christmas carols will be sung and we’re looking forward to the Christmas lights.’ Not a single national newspaper used it. Nor did the BBC.

Subsequently, the council issued details about the six ceremonies for switching on Christmas lights that had been arranged. ‘Town centres in Lambeth are all a-glow,’ it said, ‘as they prepare to flick the switch for our biggest and best ever Christmas lights. The borough’s high streets have benefited from a £200,000 boost from the Lambeth Opportunities Fund this year, which has been spent on extending and improving Christmas light decorations.’ All six shopping centres had Christmas trees and all the ceremonies including carol singing. The lights in north Lambeth were switched on by the Archbishop of Canterbury. But none of this was reported in the national press.

The national press did, however, report that Father Christmas had been banned by Havant Borough Council in Hampshire. ‘Yes, it’s hard to

believe, but now Santa Claus AND Christmas lights have been banned,' said the *Express* on 16 November, referring to the fact that the charity organising Santa's grotto had moved the venue. *The Daily Mail*, on the same day, under the heading 'Is this the most miserable town in Britain?', said that 'the decision to drop Christmas lights was greeted with amazement in a borough where 99.1 per cent of residents are white'. The implication was that 'white' and 'Christian' are synonyms.

### Now Christ is banned

Again, this was a front-page splash. But for this story neither the headline nor the text referred explicitly to Muslims. However, the context included the two stories described above and the headline, NOW CHRIST IS BANNED, was a clear follow-up to the splash about Christmas that had appeared only two days earlier in the same paper. Most readers would have interpreted it as being about not offending or upsetting Muslims even though the reference was not explicit. An extract is shown in Box 3.4.

#### Box 3.4 **NOW CHRIST IS BANNED: BC (Before Christ) is out... it has to be BP (Before Present)**

An extract from the *Daily Express*, 4 November 2005

Museum bosses are trying to erase Jesus Christ from the pages of history. In the latest ludicrous attempt to tear down traditions, curators have banned the phrase BC – Before Christ – and insist on using BP – Before Present – to avoid offending other faiths. The astonishing decision caused national outrage last night.

Church of England spokesman Steve Jenkins said: 'I always thought BP was where you go to fill up with petrol. I just can't understand the point of introducing other initials and I'm sure no one else can. It's unnecessary and incredibly silly.' Historian Dr David Starkey dubbed it 'infantile'. He added: 'I am not a Christian, indeed I am anti-Christian, but BC is an essential feature of our history and to dispense with it in such a frivolous way is very foolish.'

The term BC is used for dates leading up to the birth of Christ to help place the timing of eras throughout history and is internationally accepted. But officials at the Cheddar Caves museum in Cheddar Gorge, Somerset – one of Britain's most popular tourist attractions – say that is not politically correct and have changed all exhibit dates to BP. Catholic academic Dwight Longenecker said the museum's decision was a desperate attempt to please everyone. 'BP is confusing because it sounds

like “before today”, which makes no sense at all in terms of timescale,’ he said. ‘It sounds like a totally unnecessary thing to have done.’

Massoud Shadjareh, chairman of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, said people of all faiths were now ‘getting really annoyed’ with the political correctness sweeping the country. ‘The reality is there is nothing wrong with calling something what it is,’ he said. ‘Muslims and other faiths have no problem in celebrating Christmas or using the term BC, especially when there are many more major concerns that society is not addressing such as Islamophobia. This level of sensitivity is silly and stupid.’

The outcry over the attempt to write Jesus out of history comes soon after council bosses and the taxman were accused of banning Christmas. Earlier this week Lambeth Council climbed down in the face of condemnation after renaming its festive decorations ‘winter lights’ and restored the word Christmas. And it emerged yesterday that Inland Revenue bosses have stopped staff from taking part in a Christmas charity collection in case it offends other religions.

#### *How the story was developed and commented on*

‘Stop PC brigade before it destroys all we hold dear,’ said a leader column in the *Express* on 4 November 2005. It continued:

‘Fanatics of political correctness seem to be in overdrive this week... Few people give a thought to the meaning of BC and if they do it is extremely unlikely to cause offence to non-Christians. Yet someone in the Cheddar Caves exhibition in Somerset has found time to worry about such a thing and to order a change to the exhibition charts. Surely he has better things to do. Yet, like so many others, he is eroding the very foundations of British culture by trying to appease everyone when absolutely no one has taken offence. This political correctness must be brought under control.

‘Instead of trying to second-guess what every ethnic minority might feel, we need to be proud of British culture and traditions. Or else we will wake up to find that everything we hold dear has been toned down to bland uniformity or destroyed altogether.’

#### *What actually happened*

The director of the Cheddar Caves and Gorge Museum issued a statement on 5 November correcting many of the ‘facts’ in the news story. He began, in response to the opening word of the headline (‘Now Christ is banned’) and the claim in the leader that the term BP had been introduced only within the last few days, by clarifying that the exhibition in question had opened on 23 March 2005, some seven months earlier.

Even if it was remotely true that the museum had ‘banned Christ’ this certainly was not something that had only just happened.

He said further he would like to apologise to everyone who has been upset by this newspaper report and acknowledged that, ‘from the telephone calls and numerous emails that I have received, there are a large number of individuals who have been deeply upset by the assertion, and understandably so, were the assertion well-founded.’ However, he continued, ‘my use of BP does not signify a denial of Christ, a denial of my own Christian upbringing, the denial of our collective Western European cultural heritage which dates back to the Greeks and Romans, or even some lapse into vapid and irritating “political correctness”.’

The Cheddar Museum, he stressed, is a museum of prehistory or ‘before history’, not a museum of history or even of ancient history. Its subject matter pre-dates ancient civilisations by hundreds of thousands of years, tracing the origins of humankind back six million years. Historical events, he pointed out, can be precisely located, using recorded corroborative evidence. He gave the examples of the Battle of Waterloo, fought on 18 June 1815 and the battle that took place in 1282 BC between the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II and the Hittites.

Such certainties do not apply, the museum director pointed out, to events that took place in prehistory, which is defined as the time before historical records began. He mentioned that radiocarbon dating can date organic material back 40,000 years, but only to an accuracy of plus or minus 500 years, and discussed technical matters relating to uranium series dating. He mentioned also, to give a further sense of the context in which his museum uses the abbreviation BP, that the oldest anatomically modern humans, whose remains were found in Ethiopia in 1967, were originally believed to have lived 130,000 years ago; this was subsequently re-dated as 160,000 years ago and then again in 2005 to 195,000 years ago – plus or minus 5,000 years. He explained further that the shorthand abbreviation BP has been used in academic texts since 1950. This was the benchmark year in which calibration curves for carbon-14 dating were established. Finally, he stressed that the concept of BP is clearly explained in a panel at the start of the Cheddar Museum exhibition.

The manager of the museum added for this report:

‘A couple of freelance journalists came to see us about the Cheddar Man and the Cannibals Museum. Journalists come to see us all the time and we thought that was all right. Whether they came with a secret agenda is another issue. The discussion was about the museum



and one of the points was that we used the BP dating system, which is what scientists tend to use. I mentioned in passing in the course of the discussion that some people find the use of AD and BC offensive but said that was not the reason we did it.

‘What happened next took us completely by surprise. We only realised what had happened when a local radio network rang and asked if we had seen the front page of the *Daily Express*. I was taken aback. It was a deliberate piece of sensationalism. Various other papers picked it up, although most of the local papers took our point of view. We received a lot of very rabid hate mail and some death threats. I was very displeased by the death threats. The story ran for about two weeks in various papers and on the internet. One religious fundamentalist used it as a reason why creationism should be taught. The idea that it was all PC is laughable. We were talking about the world’s first museum of cannibalism – nothing about that is PC!’

The manager added that the museum had not complained, explaining ‘it would have been a waste of time. They would have seen that as a success. It was the sort of thing they like to print and they were given that opportunity. Sensational news stories allow people to believe what they want to believe.’

A few days later, on 9 November 2005, the Archbishop of Canterbury was reported in the *Daily Mail* to have expressed concern, in answer to a question about the dropping of traditional Christian festive symbols from public life. ‘Archbishop,’ said the headline, ‘attacks PC brigade ban on Christian symbols’. In connection with the headline the *Mail* asked its readers if they had ‘had enough of the PC Brigade’. Extracts from their responses are printed below and show the kinds of fear, assumption and desire that discourse of so-called political correctness both reflects and stirs up. References to Islam were mixed in with criticisms of immigration policy, demands that immigrants should assimilate to a particular notion of British culture, anxieties about national identity and a sense of threat from the political left. Underlying specific references there is a pervasive sense of malaise and uncertainty:

- ‘The PC brigade are the ones who are making life in the UK difficult – they are deciding you cannot do this or that for fear of upsetting others. Why on earth has this country allowed itself to be dictated to?... Time the PC brigade realised people have choices: come and stay in this country and accept the way of life or don’t come! Simple! Our country should be one where people want to live here but not at the cost of changing it to suit them, take us the way we are or don’t come!’

- 'Political correctness is the new cancer. It erodes rather than builds; divides rather than unites.'
- '... for all their pronouncements the PC brigade remains nameless and faceless.'
- 'I thought we lived in a Christian country? If I lived in a Muslim country would they rename Ramadan for fear of offending me? I'm sure most of this renaming of CHRISTMAS is caused by geeky left wing twits who have nothing better to do.'
- 'I am heartily sick of the PC brigade and all the claptrap they spout. I want my country to stay British and Christian and for all to see this. I want to see Union Jack flags, Christmas decorations, Easter eggs and hear English spoken as I walk down the street.'
- 'It's about time these political correctness twits were put in their place. This is a Christian Country, not a Communist State. Though it would appear at times that it is being run as such through the back door, by loony left Town Councils. Christians should take note of this fact the next time their local elections come round.'
- 'Can somebody please enlighten me as to where (and when) the pc brigade came from? I like many others are thoroughly sick of the way they are changing everything we have grown up with in this country and it is time they were held to account.'
- 'If you think this looks bad, imagine how bad it looks to someone who has fought for our freedoms in Britain. Did I see my friends perish just so that Tony's Cronies could give away our sovereignty to the PC brigade?'
- 'This really is madness on a vast scale. I'm starting to think that what with the (failed) push to detain anyone who looks like a terrorist for 90 days, and all this erasing of Christian symbolism, Blair and his party really are trying to turn Britain into a 21st Century version of Stalin's Russia.'

**‘Sheer crassness of modern British bureaucracy’**

This story broke in the national press on Friday 7 April 2006. Similar words and details appeared in several different papers – it is probable that there was a common source in one of the news agencies, perhaps based on text filed by a local reporter who had been in Salford Magistrates Court the previous day. Most of the text that appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* is shown in Box 3.5.

**Box 3.5 CPS ‘IS CRAZY’ TO TAKE PLAYTIME INSULTS TO COURT**

Extract from a news item in *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 2006

A JUDGE lambasted the police and Crown Prosecution Service yesterday for taking a 10-year-old boy to court over a playground spat.

District Judge Jonathan Finestein said the decision to prosecute the youngster – accused of calling a fellow pupil a “Paki” and a “nigger” – was “political correctness gone mad”.

He attacked the police for not “bothering” to prosecute more serious crime such as car theft but readily picking on a “silly” incident.

He added that he used to be called fat at school and said that in the old days the headmaster would have given the children “a good clouting” and sent them on their way.

Judge Finestein spoke out when the boy, from Irlam, Greater Manchester, appeared at Salford youth court accused of racially abusing a fellow pupil.

He called an 11-year-old boy “Paki”, allegedly referred to him as “bin Laden” and chanted: “He’s on the run, pull the trigger and shoot the nigger”. He is said to have made the comments in the school playground between July 1 last year and Jan 30 this year.

The 10-year-old denied the racially aggravated public order offence and said he was now friends with the boy.

The Muslim dimension of the affair was indicated by the terms ‘Bin Laden’ and ‘Paki’ in the abuse and the judge’s comments on this. It was indicated also in the *Daily Mail* (8 April 2006) by the use of a quotation from the chairman of the MCB’s education committee, who had said: ‘We need to be sensible in relation to 10-year-old children. The issue of racism is, of course, very serious but we should educate them, not take them to court.’ The *Mail* commented that ‘to its credit, the Muslim Council of Britain sees

this affair for what it is and says the case should never have come to court.' It contrasted this with 'the bovine, brainwashed, politically-correct mindset of the liberal establishment'. 'The only good news in this sorry story,' said Minette Marrin in the *Sunday Times*, 'is that the Muslim Council of Britain has taken a wise and adult line, sensitive though Muslims are to racism. It has supported the judge in his comments.'

There was substantial comment on the story in op-ed pieces and leader columns. 'Common sense at last,' said the *Express* (7 April) and commended Judge Jonathan Finestein for 'slamming' police and crown lawyers. 'Law enforcement,' it continued, 'has been turned upside down in this country. Hardened criminals are allowed to roam free to commit crime, while children who should have been given a sharp talking to are prosecuted.' Editorial comment in the *Daily Mail* was along the same lines:

'It happens all the time. Schoolchildren squabble. There may be tears. They call each other utterly unacceptable names. Their teacher calls them over and tells them not to be so offensive and learn to respect each other.

'So children learn to become responsible adults. Not this time. Now a playground quarrel engages the full majesty of the law, with a police investigation, a file prepared for the Crown Prosecution Service, an appearance in court... This is political correctness gone mad. How sad that a country once known for its common sense should come to such a sorry pass.'

For Carol Sarler in the *Sunday Mirror* (9 April 2006) the culprits include 'lentil-eating liberals who... refuse to believe anyone is intrinsically evil.' In the *Express* (12 April), Ann Widdecombe said 'the country is well nigh paralysed by political correctness, fear of giving offence and the compensation culture.'

### *What actually happened*

An article by Andrew Chapman and Louisa Pritchard in the *Mail on Sunday* (9 April) explained what had actually happened. In a nutshell, the episode under consideration had not been a playground spat, tiff or squabble, but had involved persistent bullying and physical attacks over several months. It had not been a single child doing the bullying, but three. The police and the CPS had not taken the case to court on a whim, but had used restorative justice approaches to try to persuade the three alleged perpetrators to accept reprimands or warnings; they had been successful with two of them but not with the third, which was why the third had had to come to court.

The *Mail on Sunday* article was substantial and was based on an interview with the mother of the boy who had been at the receiving end of the bullying. 'I was disgusted,' she said, 'by the judge's remarks that seemed to belittle my son's ordeal even further. The judge is wrong. He may have been fat at school and he may have been called names. But my son can never change the colour of his skin and that's the difference here. I just wish the judge had seen the tears streaming down my son's face when he finally broke down and told me all about what had happened to him. How dare the judge match being called fat in the same vein as the racist abuse my son has had to suffer? I was angered by his comments. This has not just been a one-off name-calling session, this has amounted to several months of systematic taunting and bullying which has left my child withdrawn and miserable. Some of the names he has been called would make your hair curl.'

Recalling the first signs of bullying about nine months earlier she said:

'My son complained to his teacher about the things they were saying to him. All parties were brought in to school – parents and kids – to discuss the problem individually. There were class talks with the children en masse about how wrong it is to say racist things, but the taunting just went on and on. It got to the stage where the school was left with no option but to bring in the police. There was nothing else for it, as nothing was getting any better. My son even had an incident book to write down the things they were saying to him, that's how bad it was. Racist taunts and songs, sometimes even in the classroom. He was in a terrible state – withdrawn, sulky and upset. It was very cruel and humiliating. He'd never encountered anything like this before. The school was magnificent throughout and tried to deal with what was happening through normal disciplinary channels.'

The *Mail on Sunday* article also quoted from a statement by the CPS:

'We originally decided the case did not need to be brought before the courts, and an official reprimand by the police was offered to the three boys. In one case a reprimand was accepted and given, in another a final warning was given because he had already had a reprimand for another matter but the third boy, although he admitted some of the offence, would not accept the reprimand after his parents took legal advice.'

In due course, before the case came back to court, the third accused did accept a warning and the case was dropped. The Chief Crown Prosecutor for Greater Manchester, John Holt: 'Mr Finestein made remarks about the decision to prosecute which were highly critical of the CPS. He was not

aware of the full history of the matter, in particular the prior disposal of the allegations against the other two boys. He has accepted that he may well have been less forthright in his comments if he had been aware. In my review I have taken into account the fact the other two boys, who had a greater involvement, have accepted a reprimand and a final warning over their behaviour. As the third boy has now been given the warning about his conduct, we feel that this matter is now closed.' Greater Manchester Police said that the Chief Constable Michael Todd had received a letter from Mr Finestein expressing 'regret' about his criticisms of the police in court. (BBC Online, Wednesday, 26 April 2006)

### Concluding comments: can someone please enlighten me?

‘Can somebody please enlighten me as to where (and when) the pc brigade came from?’ asked an *Express* reader, quoted earlier in this chapter. ‘I like many others are thoroughly sick of the way they are changing everything we have grown up with in this country and it is time they were held to account.’ A brief reply is sketched out in the following paragraphs. However, the reply is about how the term ‘PC Brigade’ is used pejoratively to give voice to certain anxieties, not about an objective reality. It is unlikely to satisfy readers of the *Express*.

The widespread use of the term in its current pejorative sense dates back to the beginnings of the 1990s in the United States. On 24 December 1990 a *Newsweek* cover warned readers to ‘Watch What You Say’ and splashed the words ‘Thought Police’ across the middle of the cover in large block letters. The following May, in a speech at the University of Michigan, President Bush claimed that political correctness ‘replaces old prejudices with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, certain expressions off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits. What began as a cause for civility has soured into a cause of conflict and even censorship... In their own Orwellian way, crusades that demand correct behaviour crush diversity in the name of diversity.’<sup>26</sup>

Bush’s speech gave the nascent anti-PC campaign a substantial boost, and in the ensuing years the notion of PC enabled conservatives to unify into a single conspiracy issues such as multiculturalism, affirmative action and speech codes, and gender and sexual politics. The phrase quickly crossed the Atlantic and the anti-PC campaign became an extension of the sustained attack that had taken place on the alleged antics of ‘loony left’ London councils in the second half of the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> Focus group research for the Conservative Party reported in 1995:

‘Immigration, an issue which we raised successfully in 1992 and again in the 1994 Euro-elections campaign, played particularly well in the tabloids and has more potential to hurt. Then there is the “loony left” and political correctness. Voters can’t define it, but they don’t like it and Labour councils are the arch exponents.’<sup>28</sup>

‘They can’t define it, but they don’t like it.’ The reason why it cannot be defined, arguably, is that it does not objectively exist. On Christmas Eve 2006 an editorial in the *Observer* commented:

‘Many of the alleged signs of “political correctness” – the banning by town halls of Christmas trees or the imposition of atheistic “Wintervals” – are the stuff of unsubstantiated myth. “Political

correctness” is an imaginary movement, with no headquarters, no members, no spokesmen.<sup>29</sup>

But, continued the editorial, ‘it exists in people’s minds because of real fears’. Such real fears include:

‘that society is changing at disconcerting speed; that the political establishment is out of touch; that today’s prosperity is fragile and could be blown away by tomorrow’s global economic winds; that Britons are a target for murderous fanatics who would kill them because of their faith or lack of it.’

Real fears do need, of course, to be recognised and dealt with. There is fuller discussion of this in later chapters, particularly Chapter 7.



## 4 Being a journalist, being a Muslim – voices from the newsroom<sup>30</sup>

### Introduction

Text, talk and imagery in the media arrive each day in people's hands, and on their TV and computer screens, after lengthy and elaborate processes of selection. 'Every day people die or are born,' notes the commentator Atif Imtiaz, 'goods are bought and stolen, people make speeches and write books.' But, he continues, 'all of these events are filtered by those who decide on the extent of newsworthiness, such that some of these events are more important than others – that is, they become more available within the public conscience.'<sup>31</sup>

The first filter as events move towards the public conscience, Imtiaz recalls, is 'the minute-by-minute news wire of Reuters or Associated Press, which is itself dependent upon a variety of factors: the close proximity of their correspondent or associate to the event, its relevance to the current narrative canon, and the competition of other events that may be viewed as more important. All of these factors at the stage of the first filter decide what ultimately becomes news.'

Next, 'the journey from this point to the *News at Ten* or the tabloid front page is similarly dependent on... decisions and processes at different levels of editorial hierarchy, and their relationships with proprietors and government officials.' Even after publication, whether on the *News at Ten* or the tabloid front page, processes of selection continue, as viewers and readers attend to specific aspects of a story, often seeking confirmation of the understandings they already have rather than things that would challenge them to re-think.

What role, in these multifaceted processes of selection, is played by relatively junior staff in what Imtiaz calls 'the editorial hierarchy'? Does it make a difference if, at all levels of the hierarchy, there are journalists who happen to be Muslims? If so, in what ways? Do Muslim journalists experience distinctive stresses, difficulties and dilemmas? These are the questions explored in this chapter.

The chapter is based on in-depth interviews with six journalists. The interviews did not constitute formal academic research, but they were conducted by people who were journalists themselves and whose backgrounds and experience enabled them to establish a ready rapport with those whom they were questioning. Almost certainly they elicited franker and more detailed responses than would have been forthcoming in conventional academic research. All six journalists were of Muslim heritage and work or have worked on mainstream papers. Quotations from the

interviews provide a vivid and essential complement to the other chapters in this report. Amongst other things they show the importance and value of employing people of Muslim heritage as journalists. At the same time they show the ethical, professional and personal dilemmas and stresses that Muslim journalists experience, and in which they need support.

Though they were happy to share their thoughts and experiences, and in some cases were clearly relieved to do so, most of the six felt too fearful of the possible repercussions to allow themselves to be identified. None of their names, therefore, are given. Nor are there any other personal details here that might enable them to be identified. They were all asked the same series of questions, as shown in Box 4.1.

All six had worked at mainstream national newspapers and all but one still worked within the mainstream media at the time of the interview. Between them, they had also worked at mainstream local and regional newspapers, on wire services and in television. They ranged in age from their early twenties to their mid-forties and were both male and female. Their stories described the complications, concerns and the occasional advantages that accrue from being a Muslim journalist trying to progress in one's career, and at the same time trying to retain personal integrity in the newsrooms of national newspapers.

#### **Box 4.1 The experiences of Muslim journalists: an interview schedule**

Did you believe the news media's portrayal of Muslims and Islam was fair before you entered journalism?

Was part of your motivation in becoming a journalist to address that?

Do you believe you are treated differently from other reporters who are not Muslim and/or from an ethnic minority?

Have you ever been asked to do something you felt uncomfortable with because of your background or faith?

Have you ever refused to do something on that basis? What was the reaction?

Have you ever felt a conflict between your profession and your faith? Do you feel you have ever compromised your beliefs to get a story?

Have you ever been unable to sell a story to the newsdesk or your commissioning editors on Muslim issues or Islam that you felt was important?

Do you feel adequately supported and understood by your newsdesk/ commissioning editors and your colleagues? If you ever feel isolated within your organisation, are there colleagues you can talk to about this?

Have your views and beliefs been influenced by the process of being a journalist?

Have your views about whether the news media is fair to Muslims or Islam changed as a result of working within the mainstream press?

Did things change for you at work after 11 September and/or 7 July? If so, how?

Do you believe there is an expectation that you will somehow represent 'the Muslim community' and its views?

Do you feel you can or have made as much of a difference to the coverage of Muslim and other issues as you might have hoped?

What are your plans for your future career? Do you intend to stay within the mainstream media?

Do you ever feel angry or offended by stories you read within your own newspaper or others about Muslims or Islam?

Do you believe mainstream British newspapers are institutionally Islamophobic?

The first two questions in the interviews, as shown in Box 4.1, were about expectations and motivations before people became journalists in the first place. Much of what they said about motivation would have been said also by young non-Muslim journalists. They wanted to write, to tell stories, to meet people, to have a varied and interesting career.

'I became a newspaper journalist because I'm really nosey, I like talking to people and I like telling stories. I have a thing about the underdog and people who don't have much of a voice in the media but I don't think that is much to do with being Muslim.' (Reporter B)

'I went into journalism because I like words, I like writing. The idea that you go in to change things or to address things is putting the cart

before the horse. That's not the reason you go into it. I write from the heart. I am as interested in music as much as I am in religion. I went in to it because I thought it was an interesting career.' (Reporter F)

'My motivation was a slightly naïve wish to try and save the world. These were instincts I could see in people who weren't Muslim, so they weren't intrinsically Muslim, although they clearly were shaped by my parents' background. There are things that you are aware of as somebody with multiple cultural heritage which enable you to be quite empathetic to lots of different situations in an argument.' (Reporter D)

Although their motivations to become journalists were not, for the most part, connected to their sense of themselves as Muslims, they were already aware, when they embarked on their careers, that there was a mismatch between their own personal experience on the one hand and what they encountered in the media on the other. Several had been brought up with a suspicion of newspapers and a belief that they were biased against Muslims and Islam. There was reference to coverage of international issues such as the Bosnian War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and closer to home to *The Satanic Verses* affair at the end of the 1980s.

'I was brought up to be suspicious of the British media. Perhaps this is culturally what Asians and Muslim children of immigrants are brought up with. I remember my dad saying the press was biased and that it was all against us. There was a real sense of injustice in how things like Palestine and Bosnia were reported and how many of the victims were not shown. Even when they were, they would be mentioned in passing at the end in a way that dehumanised them. I gradually switched off the news because I found the portrayal so depressing. So culturally there was suspicion. I expected the news to be biased against Muslims.' (Reporter A)

'I was first aware of the perception of Muslims after the Salman Rushdie affair. It was during my first years at secondary school and some of the things that were reported were really bad. It made Muslims out to be total barbarians who because they didn't have an understanding of literature were one step away from being wild animals. The media didn't realise that religion is not something that Muslims do once a week. It's a way of life and they take it really seriously, more seriously than anything. And if you insult their religion you've had it. The rot set in from that because it was the first time that British Muslims had been in the public eye and it was for entirely the wrong reasons.' (Reporter B)

'When I was growing up I was very aware that the picture painted of Muslims... was nothing that I really recognised in my own upbringing.

At school and at college I did notice that my peers were very aware of a media image of what Muslims were and what they did. But my experience didn't really accord with that picture. I don't know why that is. It may be because being Muslim was one element of my cultural make-up but there were lots of other things too. Seeing the Rushdie thing happen, I remember not necessarily feeling comfortable with what people who looked like you were arguing but nonetheless also being annoyed at how it seemed that it was acceptable to generalise about the group of two million people that you belonged to.'  
(Reporter D)

### **Unease and mixed loyalties**

All the journalists interviewed had experienced a sense of unease about how to balance their personal integrity, and at times their religious or cultural beliefs, with the demands of being a journalist. On the one hand, they experienced as positive the possibility of bringing in stories that would be otherwise absent from the news pages – a useful strategy for a young reporter trying to make their mark. On the other, they often felt a sense of being used and pushed into the cul-de-sac of writing about minority issues. Coping strategies, ranging from acceptance to refusal, were fraught with difficulties, as outlined in the stories and recollections described below. The journalists knew that they were expected, like anyone in their profession, to use any wiles they could in order to get the story, including their ethnic or religious identity. They did not on the whole object to this, but all had been asked to do things they felt uncomfortable with. At least two had been asked, as a professional assignment, to infiltrate al-Qaeda. Quite apart from the difficulties and dangers of attempting this, there was a sense of responsibility not to reinforce stereotypes when it came to reporting on the community with which they were identified. They had learnt to draw their own lines – some through painful lessons, others by setting their own limits when they were starting out. (See, for example, the story in Box 4.2.)

For some, formative experiences in their careers came in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. For others, equivalent experiences came after the London bombs of July 2005. In all cases a significant crunch came when they forcefully realised that they could not escape the expectations and perceptions of their colleagues. 'When I started my journalism course,' one recalled, 'I lived in a state of denial about my race and my religion. I felt I was growing up having to apologise for being an Asian because Asians were greedy and smelly people who came over here and took people's jobs. Religion was something I rarely spoke about. I didn't drink but I didn't have the confidence to speak up about it. The way I learnt to cope was to make every effort to make people forget my difference. I thought

that because no one referred to my colour at all before I became a journalist that it wasn't an issue. As a result I went into journalism thinking I am going to be treated just like everyone else.' The reality was different:

'At my first local paper, I started making friends amongst Asians and suddenly realised there was a whole thing here I had turned away from. My first job was in a city which has a large Pakistani community and is very racially divided. I was suddenly being asked to write about forced marriages (which were then called arranged marriages) or great curry restaurants or festivals when they'd print a photo of an exotic woman in an ornate sari – real stereotypes of Asian women. They'd send me out to talk to the community. I would turn up and wouldn't know how to speak Urdu or how to relate to people. The newsdesk didn't discuss this with me. They just looked at me and made the assumption that I was Asian so I could access this very private community.' (Reporter A)

Reporter A recalled that the paper served an area where there was much outright racism amongst white people and reflected:

'It was the first time I had encountered real, real racism. There I was confirming quite a lot of the stereotypes for this racist audience. I quickly realised I didn't like doing these stories. I was in shock that they were asking me to do such clichéd stuff.' (Reporter A)

Another similarly reflected on September 2001 and July 2005:

'After September 11 loads more people started asking me about being Muslim. I was saying "I'm not a spokesperson for the faith, I can't tell you why these people did this." But they would ask "Would you do it?" and "Do you know any terrorists?"... After July 7 it was so much worse because they were British. It was all right before because they were foreigners. But now it was one of ours. One of us had decided to shit on their own doorstep. And you had all these programmes being made about why these men had turned to extremism. It was like the Salman Rushdie row all over again.' (Reporter B)

Conflicting loyalties at a personal level were mixed with growing awareness of external commercial pressures on newspapers and of the internal organisational culture in newsrooms. Reporter D, for example, recalled twice being asked to do 'undercover stuff, like infiltrating a radical mosque'. One could argue, the recollection continued, 'that it was a classic channelling of a minority reporter into the cul-de-sac of reporting about ethnicity – but I don't think it was. I can see why it is

reasonable for me rather than Bob Jones to go undercover at Finsbury Park. So yeah, I didn't mind so much.' The fact was, Reporter D continued, that there was in the office a very one-dimensional view of Muslims in Britain and around the world:

'The idea was that they were all part of the same tree and it could all be explained through a set of common behavioural characteristics in a way that would be absolutely shocking if it was said about any other ethnic group. Even though Muslims are the most racially diverse group around – both politically diverse and theologically diverse – it seemed to be okay to make these astonishing sweeping generalisations that were pretty insulting.'

'I felt it was more a case of ignorance than of spite,' said Reporter D, who then commented on the sources of ignorance and the pressure from readers and society more generally to create and promote bogey figures:

'The crucial fact is that the leader writers, decision-makers, columnists didn't have any Muslim friends. So you lacked fundamentally the empathy to be able to say, well we can't just group an entire two million people as all the same. The idea that there was this Islamic monolith that was about to take over, and all thought the same and had this rabid anti-intellectual inability to reason, seemed quite prevalent even in the very highest decision-making parts of the media... The biggest problem for me came in realising that being scared shitless by this big group of people that are out to get you is actually quite a good story. People have an interest, and always have had, in having bogeymen. That's more or less what is happening.'

Similar points about the public's interest in bogey figures were made by Reporter B: 'I was rung up by friends on other newspapers and I was asked if I knew anyone that would comment on the bombings. And I said, how do you mean "comment"? I knew exactly what they were after – they wanted someone that would praise them, and they thought that I'd have a good idea of where you could go to get that kind of quote.' The recollection continued:

'There is a certain pressure on a paper to shock and to frighten and to scare. And there's a tiny constituency of Muslims in Britain that are quite happy to acquiesce with that. So you have the bizarre situation where you have journalists desperate for a terrifying story talking to nutcases who represent nobody but themselves and everyone else kind of left in-between thinking what on earth's going on... I can see that it makes good copy and I can see that if you have no connection with

the community concerned that you wouldn't really care as to the effect of that... The media is not an impartial observer. It's playing a role and it's creating a market for frightening news. And there are certain comic, scary and villainous British Muslims who want it as well.' (Reporter B)

Other anecdotes and recollections are described below. In Box 4.2 (One day I just snapped) there is a description of a heated argument with a news editor. In Box 4.3 (Ludicrous projects) there is an account of an assignment in Leeds shortly after the 7 July bombs. In Box 4.4 (The next day I was appalled) a reporter recalls visiting a Muslim home and the subsequent shock when the resulting coverage was changed and distorted.

#### **Box 4.2 One day I just snapped**

It was at a national newspaper. After September 11, I think I became quite a valuable commodity to them. My identity provided me with a role. There was a part of them thinking I would look really good for them. We don't have an Asian, we don't have a Muslim. For years I just went ahead and did those stories. I wrote them with insight but I was writing for a white, non-Muslim community.

It was more than a year before things started to change. I realised that my voice was a very small but powerful tool. I could go to Regents Park mosque and they were saying stuff that was really thoughtful and I could actually write a big piece on it and people would read it. That was really positive. I realised it was a powerful thing and saw I should write about them honestly.

But the negative thing is our paper became fixated on the Asian community. They wanted to give them more inclusion in the paper but the way they found to do that was by looking at arranged marriages vs forced marriages, rapes, suicides, domestic abuse. They were absolutely obsessed. For a while I thought, this is interesting. But then I noticed it was happening every week. I would get phone calls and be sent on every Muslim story. Some of it was really challenging and interesting, but at the same time I was still being given regular stories about forced marriage. Then one day I just snapped and blew up. The news editor went really red and embarrassed and didn't want to discuss it. Because it was about race I think he was very worried about being seen as racist. So overnight I stopped getting any of those stories and suddenly I was stripped of that access.

I had no opportunity to discuss it. I tried to broach the subject with the news editor but he was so embarrassed it seemed impossible to talk about openly. By that stage I wasn't being given anything because what they had made me do for the past year was just Asian and Muslim stuff.



I ended up regretting ever saying anything because it had a snowball effect. He obviously thought it was wrong and racist for me to be given any Asian stories. It felt like a punishment for speaking up.

(Reporter A)

### **Pros and cons of being a Muslim journalist**

In all the interviews there was discussion of whether journalists who are of Muslim heritage have distinctive professional advantages, or whether on the contrary their background is a kind of burden or penalty. This has already been touched on in several of the quotations above. Further comments and memories include the following:

‘I want to be seen as a reporter first and foremost. I don’t want to be seen as an ethnic minority reporter... I don’t want them to think of me as Asian or Muslim. I just want them to think of me as a reporter.’

(Reporter B)

‘I find there are differences in how I’ve been treated compared to reporters who are not Muslim or from an ethnic minority. One positive is that people are interested to know what I think because they want to tap into that knowledge. Not just on Muslim issues, but also because I’m South Asian... But it can be negative in the way people think you are only hired for one reason. I never thought that at all when I worked at a local paper. But when I went to the nationals it was different... There was a raid in the local area and the paper weren’t going to send anyone. Then they sent me and it went really well. I got some reasonably decent stuff. Then they called me to go and do other stories like that and I got a slight sense that I was being used for a single purpose.’ (Reporter E)

On balance, Reporter E felt the dangers of being used and exploited were outweighed by the opportunity to challenge and remove negative stereotypes:

‘I have been thrown into writing about Muslim issues rather than having a massive interest in them. But I’d rather do it than let anyone else do it because I am more aware of the issues. Otherwise you get stuck with stereotypes.’ (Reporter E)

‘There needs to be an understanding that there is no homogenous Muslim community in Britain. First you need to look at Shi’a’s and Sunnis, then you need to look at where they came from. Then within Pakistan there are people from different areas. You can’t just lump them all together. You need someone to understand that there is

segregation within the Muslim community. You will get Pakistani Muslims living in one part and Bengali Muslims in another and they will never meet.’ (Reporter B)

Several others similarly felt that they had been successful in challenging the worst kinds of stereotype, both in their writing and in their interactions with colleagues. ‘I don’t think I’ve changed the news agenda,’ said Reporter A, ‘but I think I’ve added to things by not doing stories in a stereotypical way and in that way I might have slightly changed people’s perspective on Asians and the Muslim community. At the same time I’m not sure if I left that the influence would continue.’

There was a danger, though, of being pigeon-holed and typecast. ‘I am a professional journalist,’ said Reporter C, ‘not a professional Paki.’ The ambivalence of this reporter was expressed more fully as follows:

‘I have broadly steered clear of so-called Muslim stories. In some ways I am interested because some of the subjects are such lunatics. I was given a watching brief on some of these extremist groups, which was quite interesting for a while. But then it started veering towards the hocus-pocus and it became annoying. The thing is I don’t want to be pigeon-holed... I am a professional journalist, not a professional Paki. I suppose it’s primarily because I’ve been brought up in quite a Western and secular way and I felt uncomfortable because I had to seem enthusiastic about projects I was being asked to do simply because of my name. Newsdesks wanted me to have some insight into the ethnic communities but in the end that petered out because I wasn’t interested.’ (Reporter C)

Other comments on this theme included:

‘People ask my opinion on anything that happens to do with Muslims. If it’s a Muslim academic or a certain newsy personality, they’ll say, do you know this guy? Is this a story? They’ll see something on the wires or in a newspaper and ask me whether it’s crucial to cover or total bollocks... I think I have made some difference, especially with certain features I’ve written. Some people are scared of going into a mosque or approaching people with beards. I used to have no interest in ethnic affairs but as you get older you notice things a lot more. Now it would be hard not to get involved in reporting these things.’ (Reporter E)

‘One of the things that happens is if you are a Muslim you are offered more opportunities to write about things where the prime reason you are being asked is because you are a Muslim. It’s not that I’ve been asked to do something I’m uncomfortable with... Some people who have that experience want to do it because they feel passionate about

it. With me I feel I have to keep a sense of perspective. For every one article I write about Islam or Muslim issues I have to write at least one or two more that are not about that. I don't want it to look like here you are banging on about being Muslim again.' (Reporter F)

Reporter F added the crucially important point that Muslim-ness was not by any means the totality of their personality and identity:

'I don't think that being a Muslim is the most important thing and the only thing about me. It can be a gilded cage to get into that kind of writing. I am not only interested in that. It genuinely is not the only thing that defines me. I only think about it professionally. I don't think about it socially. I sit around thinking about Philip Roth or Superman films or any number of other things rather than that.' (Reporter F)

#### **Box 4.3 Ludicrous projects**

After the London bombings, there was more pressure for stories about terrorism which you were expected to get using your supposed ethnic identity. I did really well out of July 7. I went up to Leeds. I wouldn't say I enjoyed it exactly but it was one of the most exciting times of my journalistic career. I came back and my colleagues said I did well and I felt a great sense of professional pride.

Leeds was absolutely insane. People there had the look of people who'd been invaded by a medieval army. We were interrogating people, saying 'Who is Mr Big?', and they were like 'I don't know mate, I'm just on my way to the mosque'. It was pretty mad.

Because I had done a reasonable job... I got sent off on all these wild goose chases without any proper sense of thinking things through. I got a bit pissed off. I'd had quite a good run doing mainstream stories, then July 7 happened and I didn't get any of the other stuff any more. I just got sent on these ludicrous projects.

(Reporter C)

**Box 4.4 The next day I was appalled**

After one of the terrorist attacks I was sent to door-knock a suspected extremist. The office knew it was a long shot but I was quite determined and I knew my Muslim background could get me in. I knocked on the door and said Assalamu Aleikum and told them I was a Muslim. After a few minutes they let me in.

I was a journalist just beginning. I would have done the story very differently now but I didn't know what the paper was looking for then. I just took what he was saying at face value. What I wrote was exactly what he had told me without any slant on it. It was neutral. It was probably not written in the most sophisticated way but I was really pleased with what I'd done. The next day I looked at the paper and I was appalled. It had been rewritten in a way that made him seem really slippery. It was really cynically done. I was really disappointed and scared about what he might think. But I didn't have the confidence to say I was really upset about it. It was a real wake-up call for me. I felt I had gone in there and used my Muslim background for my own glory. I felt very guilty because I was complicit in stitching him up.

That incident has left me questioning everything. It left me questioning my position as a Muslim and as a journalist. Sometimes I am comfortable with using my faith as a means of getting in. Sometimes I say I am a Muslim so therefore I understand. But I won't push it to get a story any more. There are now many more Muslim journalists and I think the Muslim community is far more canny about it. Muslim journalists still work for papers that are very hard on Muslim communities. People are learning not to open up just because a journalist is a Muslim.

I did use my ethnic identity after the July bombings. I got a lot of stuff from Muslim people who spoke to me in Urdu in a very unguarded way. I do use my Asian-ness, the way I look, my name. But I have changed the way I do things. Sometimes now on the way to a story I'll draw my own lines. I have had to really fight with the newsdesk about the reality on the street so now I will challenge them. I have compromised myself in the past and now I think I never would because it had such a big impact on me. I am forever finding myself anxious about being responsible to the people I've spoken to and not resorting to stereotypes. There are times when I censor a tiny amount because someone in their anger will say something like 'I'm really glad the bombings happened'. To some extent I feel I need to protect them.

(Reporter A)

### Relationships and organisational culture

In all the interviews there was consideration of everyday professional relationships, including relationships with senior staff, and of the general climate of opinion and outlook in newspaper offices. Comments included:

‘I don’t make a big song and dance about being Muslim. I talk about it quite freely with some of my colleagues and my friends but it’s not something I bring up in the workplace. I leave it at the door. There are times when I feel angry but I feel I don’t want to make it an issue at work. You should never become the story. I like to think I’ve never put myself up as a Muslim reporter. It’s not my job to explain or defend my religion.’ (Reporter B)

‘I was given some good advice once by a colleague which was “Go through the hoops and you’ll be all right”. Most people have been pretty good and pretty decent to me. However, some people didn’t have a clue, particularly those on the back bench [a team of senior journalists overseeing the production of the newspaper, responsible for assigning particular stories to particular slots on particular pages] and now in very senior positions in journalism. I never felt isolated in a big way.’ (Reporter C)

‘One news editor wanted me to go undercover in the firm of someone in the public eye and find out if they were employing illegal immigrants. They didn’t have anything on the guy, they just wanted to catch him out. I didn’t like it. If there was a tip-off it might be different but it really was like finding a needle in a haystack. You don’t need a journalist, you need an actor. You can always find something bad about someone if you really want to. But there was no indication that he had done anything wrong and you really are out to get someone. It’s very tabloid to campaign against an individual. It’s very personal but morally I didn’t think it was right.’ (Reporter E)

‘I was very lucky in that I got ahead quite quickly. If I didn’t like a story I’d tell them, I’d say it’s rubbish and I was listened to. I think some people would be surprised how much they would be listened to if they went and had the conversation at the right time. If they chose their moment. I’ve never done any story that I am ethically unhappy about. I wouldn’t do it. There are stories even now that other journalists do where I work and I’ve said very clearly that I think they’re rubbish stories and I wouldn’t do them.’ (Reporter D)

In most cases the interviewees had been the only journalists from Muslim backgrounds working at their newspaper. In many cases, they were also one of only a handful of non-white journalists at their place of work. Asked whether they had ever felt isolated, their responses appeared to

vary according to their level of seniority and professional confidence. Those who believed they had the support of their news editors and could talk to their colleagues felt they could balance their background with their job. Those who did not felt frustratingly powerless to resist an organisational culture that expected them to somehow represent 'their' community.

'I know the editors I deal with and I feel I am adequately understood. As for isolation, you can be isolated in a room full of brown faces. I have been with Asians and felt I have nothing in common with them. To be perfectly honest, I can be around a whole load of Muslims and feel I have nothing in common with them. The feeling of being the only ethnic minority person is very difficult but it's been a while since I felt that because I think it's a lot about a certain level of confidence based on my profile and my work. If I don't feel happy with something I don't do it.' (Reporter F)

'I now have a great news editor who I feel I can talk to if I need to. With the previous newsdesk I felt very isolated. I felt people didn't know what to make of me because I was Muslim and Asian and not posh. I felt like a fish out of water. I felt I had to fit in as much as possible for them to accept me. I felt very isolated. There were no other Asians. If I object to doing anything I could say so now. Before, I didn't have the support of the newsdesk, I couldn't talk to them at all. They were suspicious and afraid of that difference. It's amazing to think I work for the same people because it's changed so much. I feel more supported and feel I can bring up stuff I want to bring up about race. I have written comment pieces that have given me a voice. I have had a really abusive reaction but also some really positive letters. It's in my hands. If I want to do stuff about that, I can.' (Reporter A)

### **Views of media coverage**

Since entering newspapers, all six journalists had developed a pragmatic understanding that commercial considerations often come before social responsibility in the newspaper industry. But all except one believed newspapers should acknowledge their role in shaping the views of their readers. Although they hesitated to use the word Islamophobic, they felt that the tendency of newspapers to portray Muslims as either a problem or a danger was unhelpful. Their solutions? A move away from lazy journalism and its reliance on stereotypes and scaremongering; better informed reporting on the issues facing areas outside London; more balanced foreign coverage; and, especially, greater diversity in employment. It would also be helpful, several of those interviewed pointed out, if opinion leaders within Muslim communities had a better understanding of how the media operate, and if they were to see more clearly that there is a wider range of views within and between

newspapers than they tend to realise, and more good will amongst individual journalists.

Reporter E acknowledged that 'there is some pretty shady reporting', adding: 'I don't know what the point of a lot of it is. Some papers only seem to do knocking stories. Some of them border on being libellous. They are stirring up the issue for no reason and it makes it difficult for other reporters because now certain people won't talk to the press at all because they think they are going to be stitched up.' There was comment then on the pressures that newspapers experience from readers and the general climate of opinion and it was pointed out that there had been much responsible journalism at the time of the bombs in London in summer 2005:

'If a story's there and it's the biggest story in town they have to cover it. If it's what your readership asks for, you will respond. If you are a news editor getting letters saying you need to be stronger on this stuff, you will... Some of the reporting after the London bombs was very good. It was reported very well and very sensitively. Generally, in the immediate aftermath, newspapers were responsible. They realised they couldn't inflame the situation too much because it was a powderkeg. People were scared that something could happen because nobody knew how people were going to react.' (Reporter E)

Other comments on how stories are selected and treated, and on pressures in this regard to conform to readers' expectations, included the following:

'I remember wanting to do a story about a Muslim organisation and the way it was being demonised. I tried to do a hard sell on my newsdesk but they said "Do 400 words and we'll see where we can put it" In the end it made a 300-word story. I felt very disappointed. I felt it was important to put it in. But it wasn't sexy enough because it was not about extremism. The focus at that time was all on allocating blame and getting to the bottom of where extremism was happening. Everyone was being tarred with the same brush.' (Reporter A)

'I can see the frustration of normal people who think "Why am I tarred by association?" We didn't badger on about David Koresh and the Waco cult being Christians or about Timothy McVeigh being Christian. But equally I don't like endless stories about Muslims being victims. It's a really difficult area. No one demands that Christians all have to answer for all other Christians. But what you get in the Muslim community is that people feel a sense of collective guilt about what happens. If any Muslim commits a crime or acts badly or the odd one becomes a terrorist everyone feels guilty. They are only identified as

Muslims when it's a bad news story it seems. It's pretty rare in other circumstances.' (Reporter D)

'What I do feel frustrated about is there is still a tendency to only report about Muslims as a problem. It seems to be always a question of "What are we going to do about Muslims?" What are we going to do about terror? About fundamentalism? This new wave of young people who are rediscovering their religion? What I would like would be to have Muslims represented in a way where their Muslim-ness wasn't the reason that they were being reported on.' (Reporter F)

'Now I work at a newspaper I can see how unfair some media organisations are. But I also see there are some papers that are endeavouring to do something different and be more questioning. That response of "all you media are bad" has gone. Now when I hear Muslims say that I think "You are really not helping yourself." The Muslim community sometimes hasn't distinguished between liberal papers and the media as a whole. It just means it won't get its voice in the paper. I don't want to get so chippy that I shoot myself and the Muslim community in the foot.' (Reporter A)

If coverage is to improve there is also a role for opinion-leaders in Muslim communities:

'I think the press has been pretty fair to Muslims. They don't really need to stitch people up, they do a good enough job of that themselves. My view is Muslims have got to address issues themselves, things like anti-semitism and homophobia that seem to be unchallengeable within Muslim communities. As far as I'm concerned newspapers just report them as they are.' (Reporter C)

At the same time, though, newspapers could and should be far more responsible in their portrayal of opinion-leaders and give a louder voice to majority moderate opinion:

'The London bombings said it all really. Carried out by four Yorkshire British Muslims that killed six or seven Muslims in the process. What kind of questions does that raise? For a start, just how relevant is the label "Muslim"? The point is that the extremists and those who carry out criminal actions are a subset of the Muslim world yet there seems to be an applicability of what they do across the entire religion that fits the agenda of fundamentalists on all sides. 1.995 million British Muslims are utterly irrelevant to this whole terror story. But you wouldn't get that impression from the papers. It's clumsy journalism. I take issue with many things done by British Muslims. If the media



was doing its job it would help Britain's two million Muslims to be able to develop a kind of reasoned, questioning attitude within itself. And you are beginning to see that a bit. But instead it's far easier and a more potent story to paint a picture of this kind of green peril on your doorsteps. The real danger of that is that one fears it might become a self-fulfilling prophecy.' (Reporter D)

Recurring scare stories about 'the green peril on your doorstep', it was agreed, were amongst the biggest problems to be addressed.

'There does seem to be a kind of narrative which many newspapers are playing off: that a rampant Muslim lobby are controlling the leaders of a politically correct establishment to force Christian Britain to hand over everything that's sacred to Britain, which is just rubbish.' (Reporter D)

### **Employment issues**

Despite a range of personal difficulties, as outlined and illustrated above, all the interviewees were certain that improved coverage of Muslim issues in the media would be immensely helped if there were more good journalists of Muslim background employed in the media:

'Papers don't live in a bubble. They represent government policies, popular prejudices, popular opinions. Editors and journalists are just part of society. Ideally they should be representative socially but because it's such a white, middle-class industry those views will predominate. And that view is that Muslims are scary and a problem so that's what gets projected in the media. I still feel so amazed at how white it is. I would love it if there was another Asian reporter in the newsroom. There are times when I just want to leave and do something where I am not this minority and not this token Asian.

'But there is a problem with representation in terms of employment. I think it's an absolute obscenity how few Asians and Muslims there are working full-time within the British press. How papers can claim to report on modern Britain and have so few is mind-boggling. It's just basic good journalism to have a more representative workforce.' (Reporter A)

'I was surprised by the reaction of papers to the bombings, surprised people didn't realise what was going to happen in places where second generation people were growing up. You could see it a mile off – the social fracture. It's up to the journalists to be more aware about the country we live in. There are very middle class people in the media – public school educated, red brick universities. They are completely

unaware of normal life. They talk about “Muslims” but they’re not willing to engage with them.’ (Reporter F)

‘I still think you need more people who actually are from that background who are able to report on it. There is a generational problem. Quite a lot of reporters are people in their forties and fifties. The world in Britain has changed since their formative experiences. There are also class issues. There are too many people who are Cambridge educated and from private schools, who may be Muslim in name but wouldn’t recognise a working class Muslim if they had them in their face. There is too much nepotism and old ways of doing things. Middle class-ness seems to overpower Muslim-ness. There has been a death of working class voices. If journalism is about finding out the view from the ground then class is as important as race or religion.’ (Reporter E)

In addition to issues of social class in the organisational culture of an office, there are issues of religious faith:

‘Newspapers want to sell copies of newspapers and what they are interested in is interesting stories. Commercial considerations are more important to them than idealism. They want to hear why Britain is the way it is. There are journalistic imperatives going on. What newspapers have a problem with is people who have an absolute faith. Papers are run by people who are secular so they find people who have an absolute faith fascinating and horrifying in equal measure.’ (Reporter F)

More young people of Muslim backgrounds should be advised and encouraged, it was said, to think seriously about taking up journalism as a career. Such thinking should start at school, not college:

‘You’ve got to get journalists to go into schools because the super bright kids can’t find their way into newspapers. We need to be saying, “Have you thought about this as a career?” It’s got such a bad reputation in Pakistani communities. Parents think it’s a waste of time and energy, it’s got bad prospects and it’s badly paid, and it’s not putting anything back into your community. I wanted to be a journalist when I was 14 and my mum said no. It was white, middle class kids at school and university who did the student newspapers. I never felt posh enough or connected enough. My parents didn’t buy newspapers. If you get kids when they are young and say, “This is a career option and you can make a difference”... It’s something that can be done by regional newsrooms.’ (Reporter B)

Having been appointed, journalists of all backgrounds throughout Britain – particularly those outside London – need to extend their knowledge of Muslim communities:

‘Journalists need to understand communities outside London and how different they are. Every city will be different, with different practices and ways of life. It’s about people being good journalists and not being lazy. There is an element of truth in every stereotype but that doesn’t mean you have to accept it. Getting out there and talking to people and mosques and schools and making friends with your local councillor would be a good start.’ (Reporter B)

The essential thing, to stress again the point made above, is that journalists should be good at their jobs. ‘I think,’ one of the interviewees said, ‘papers need to employ people who are good journalists and if they happen to be a Muslim then great.’

### Conclusions

This chapter has shown through vivid conversation some of the challenges faced by journalists from Muslim backgrounds working within mainstream newspapers. The challenges are recalled also in Box 4.5, which consists of repeated short quotations from the interviews.

#### **Box 4.5 I’m a professional journalist, not a professional Paki – voices from the newsroom**

Papers need to employ people who are good journalists and if they happen to be a Muslim then great.

I haven’t got a magic hotline to Osama or Bakri Mohammed. People think I must know people and I’m hiding it. Of the Muslims I know, 99 per cent of them are my relatives.

I felt people didn’t know what to make of me because I was Muslim and Asian and not posh. I felt like a fish out of water.

You can be isolated in a room full of brown faces... To be perfectly honest, I can be around a whole load of Muslims and feel I have nothing in common with them.

The only conflict I have is feeling a sense of responsibility to not merely confirm the worst stereotypes people have over Muslims.

I wouldn't now pitch a story about Ramadan and lots of lovely Muslims. Because there's no story there. It's not Islamophobic to say that.

The thing is I don't want to be pigeon-holed... I'm a professional journalist not a professional Paki.

I feel I have to keep a sense of perspective... I don't want it to look like here you are banging on about being Muslim again.

I feel slightly conscious when I am sitting in a mosque because of work... Suddenly I am in there being really pious with everyone else and I feel like a bit of a charlatan.

The media is not an impartial observer. It's playing a role and it's creating a market for frightening news. And there are certain comic, scary and villainous British Muslims who want this as well.

This was just shit-stirring in the hope of finding something and I didn't want that on my conscience... All that would happen in return is I would get a byline. Big deal.

I knocked on the door and said Assalamu Aleikum and told them I was a Muslim. After a few minutes they let me in... The next day I looked at the paper and I was appalled... It was really cynically done.

After September 11, I think I became quite a valuable commodity to them. My identity provided me with a role.

I don't make a big song and dance about being Muslim. I talk about it quite freely with some of my colleagues and my friends but it's not something I bring up in the workplace. I leave it at the door.

I've become much more politicised. I thought my race and identity were something I could put in a box away from my role as a journalist. I have become much prouder of my religion and race.

Although most of those interviewed had entered the profession with consideration of their Muslim-ness only dimly in the background, their job has yanked their ethnic and religious identity firmly into the foreground and forced them to consider how it affects the work they do. Some have coped by accepting responsibility for changing the way their paper reports on Muslim issues. Others have responded more obliquely, by trying to change opinions within their workplace but deliberately avoiding covering such stories themselves.

The willingness of the six journalists quoted in this chapter to speak so personally about their feelings and experiences shows how hard they have had to think about what their background means for their job; about what it means to be a 'Muslim journalist' in an era when coverage of Muslim issues is often skewed by ignorance and prejudice. Their hopes for the future are clear: that newspapers accept their responsibility for forming public opinion in this area and attempt to address some of their failings; and, more personally, that journalists from similar backgrounds entering newspapers in years to come might be freed from the tokenism and pigeon-holing they have struggled against. As one of them put it, 'There's no reason why a Muslim journalist shouldn't be writing about music, or sport, or anything else.'

In the light of the discussions and quotations in this chapter it is clear that if media coverage of Islam and Muslims is to be improved, there are practical advantages in employing journalists who are themselves of Muslim backgrounds for the reasons below.

- When writing about issues concerning Islam or Muslims they are more likely to do so with sensitivity, fairness, and an awareness of complexity.
- When interacting with members of the public who are Muslims they are more likely to establish a rapport and to win people's trust and confidence.
- They are able to advise and challenge colleagues, including senior editors, about ways certain stories should and should not be covered.
- They can have an impact on the organisational culture of the paper, making it more open-minded and self-critical.

It is important, however, that senior managers in news organisations should:

- understand that there is a wide range of opinion, outlook and practice amongst journalists of Muslim backgrounds, as amongst people of Muslim backgrounds more generally. Not all practise the religion, for example, and no single individual should be treated as a representative or ambassador

- recognise that journalists of Muslim backgrounds are keen to be treated essentially as journalists who happen to be Muslims rather than Muslims who happen to be journalists
- resist pressures to limit people's career prospects by pigeon-holing and typecasting them into a narrow range of work.

## 5 'Full and fair debate' – who speaks for British Muslims?<sup>32</sup>

### Introduction

'Extremism,' wrote the TV journalist John Ware in August 2005, about six weeks after the London bombs, 'feeds off a conviction that Islam is a superior faith and culture which Christians and Jews in the West are conspiring to undermine. My journey through Muslim communities since the London bombings suggests their leaders have not acknowledged the extent to which these views are held in Britain. Muslim leaders have condemned utterly the bombings. And yet this murderous rage grew from within their communities. Some Muslims believe that the time for a full and frank debate about where Islam is going here is long overdue.'<sup>33</sup>

Ware was defending a BBC *Panorama* programme which he had made and which had been broadcast two days earlier.<sup>34</sup> Much of the programme was an attack on the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) and Ware returned to this theme in a brief article in December 2006. He noted that the Prime Minister and Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, 'have decided that the MCB leadership is in denial about the causes and the extent of extremism, just as I on *Panorama*... concluded some 15 months ago.' Ware remarked in addition that 'while preaching moderation, the MCB is also good at keeping young Muslims angry.'<sup>35</sup>

This chapter describes the pre-publicity for Ware's programme and the programme itself; quotes from the MCB's criticisms of the programme and from the BBC's replies; and comments on issues arising from the programme's content and style. It agrees with Ware and others that 'a full and frank debate' about issues of extremism, moderation and representation is required, but argues that the programme itself was neither frank nor full. First, however, it gives some background information about the MCB and recalls the kinds of problem that all representative organisations necessarily face.

### The Muslim Council of Britain

The MCB was inaugurated in autumn 1997 by 250 Muslim organisations from all parts of Britain, making it a collective of collectives. Since then its affiliates have grown to more than 400. Its formal aims include 'to promote co-operation, consensus and unity on Muslim affairs in the UK', 'to work for a more enlightened appreciation of Islam and Muslims in the wider society', 'to establish a position for the Muslim community within British society that is fair and based on due rights', and 'to work for the eradication of disadvantages and forms of discrimination faced by Muslims'. Over the years it has published a range of reports and guidance documents, including *The Quest for Sanity*, compiled in the wake of

11 September 2001, and advice to employers on implementing anti-discrimination legislation.<sup>36</sup>

The MCB is not defined by the ideologies of any one of its member bodies. Given the diversity of religious perspectives and political persuasions in British Muslim communities, the MCB therefore needs to perform – in relation to several different issues simultaneously – a delicate balancing act, while remaining committed to central Islamic values. It has been successful in establishing itself as the principal channel through which Muslim perceptions have been presented to the Government and to the media. It is increasingly not the only channel, however.<sup>37</sup>

The MCB seeks to engage with all mainstream political parties and until recently has enjoyed a close association with the current Government. In the wake of 9/11, it played a key role in the Government's attempts to make a clear distinction between Islam and terrorism. This aimed to defuse anti-Muslim sentiment at home by stressing that the 'war on terror' was not a war on Islam, and had the effect of isolating the more radical elements within the Muslim population. In the days following 9/11, MCB representatives met Jack Straw, David Blunkett and Tessa Jowell, and the government was believed to have restrained the press, resulting in, inter alia, a centre spread in the *Sun* on 13 September headed ISLAM IS NOT AN EVIL RELIGION.<sup>38</sup> However, once the bombing of Afghanistan began in November, many Muslims increasingly questioned the idea that the 'war on terror' was not a war on Islam, and the MCB declared its public opposition to the action, much to the Prime Minister's disappointment. However, it did stick to the line that the Afghan war was not part of a more general war against Muslims and Islam. According to the only professional poll of Muslim opinion conducted (by ICM) during the war, 80 per cent of Muslims opposed the bombing, and 57 per cent did not accept the claim that the war on terror was not a war against Islam. Inevitably, as Jonathan Birt subsequently put it, the MCB was involved in a complex struggle 'to retain its credibility with British Muslim opinion while attempting to keep channels of communication open with the government.'<sup>39</sup>

Disappointed with the MCB, the Government looked for support for the war from Muslim MPs, members of the Lords and local councillors, but with little success. This coincided with a series of official reports into disturbances involving Asian Muslims in northern towns during the summer of 2001. By the end of the year, the MCB and by extension all other Muslim leaders, were effectively accused of having exacerbated religious separatism and of inadvertently laying the grounds for a further



youthful radicalisation that they neither condoned nor could control. Jonathan Birt commented:

‘In the short term at least, the MCB has remained “the only show in town” in the eyes of the government, whether for the symbolic purposes attendant on the “politics of recognition” or as a means to gauge Muslim reaction to impending policy, in particular to attune foreign policy rhetoric to Muslim sensibilities both at home and abroad. Having groomed and promoted a unified Muslim lobby for nearly a decade, the British government depicted it as part of the problem when it proved insufficiently compliant.’

There were those who resented the MCB’s closeness to Government and what they regarded as its stranglehold on patronage. Some may have been motivated by jealousy, but others had significant ideological differences with the MCB, some finding it too ‘political’, others not radical enough. It has also been claimed that many Muslims in Britain belong to the Sufi tradition, whilst MCB members come largely from outside that tradition. In addition to theological differences, there is substantial diversity amongst Muslims in Britain in terms of national and ethnic origins, and therefore amongst MCB affiliates. As Ceri Peach points out (Peach 2005: 25):

‘Although South Asian groups represent Islam in Britain, there is a danger in essentialising Islam and arguing that South Asian characteristics are fully representative of Islam itself... Islam is pan-ethnic and there are Muslims in Britain of... many other groups of origin whose characteristics and socio-economic profiles are very different from those of the South Asian groups... What is true of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations as a whole is not necessarily true of individuals drawn from those populations. On the other hand, it needs to be borne in mind that the 2001 census showed that 68 per cent of the Muslim population was of South Asian origin, and that Pakistanis alone accounted for 43 per cent of the Muslim population, making up the largest individual group.’<sup>40</sup>

In relation to the stance taken by the *Panorama* programme, there are therefore three salient features of the MCB to be borne in mind. First, the Muslim population of Britain is not homogenous. Second, the MCB does not and cannot control the activities of its affiliates. Third, the MCB has its critics and rivals within the Muslim population of Britain. Such criticisms and rivalries exist also, of course, in all large communities. They are not unique to British Islam.

### Setting the agenda and pre-publicity

On 14 July 2005, John Ware was interviewed on the Radio 4 *Today* programme about the forthcoming 'A Question of Leadership' programme, which the presenter Carolyn Quinn introduced thus:

'All but a tiny fringe of Muslim organisations in the UK have condemned the London suicide bombings. But are those organisations condemning in London what they are failing to condemn abroad? *Panorama* reporter John Ware is examining the role of the country's main Muslim organisation, the Muslim Council of Britain.'

Ware explained that Sir Iqbal Sacranie, then Secretary General of the MCB, had condemned the London bombings, and had said that the loss of both Israeli and Palestinian lives in a suicide bombing in Israel by two British citizens could not be condoned. However, he continued, Sacranie had nevertheless attended a memorial service at the Central Mosque in London after Sheikh Yassin had been assassinated by the Israeli Government and had described him as 'the renowned Islamic scholar'. Ware, however, described him as 'the chief ideologist of an organisation [Hamas] which seeks the destruction of Israel' and which 'has conducted a fair number of the 160 or so suicide bombings since the second intifada'. The interview also turned to Dr Azzam Tamimi, a senior member of the Muslim Association of Britain, which is affiliated to the MCB. Ware pointed out that, although Tamimi had condemned the London bombings, he had also said that, if given the chance in Israel, 'I would sacrifice myself. It's the straight way to pleasing my God.'

Quinn then asked Inayat Bunglawala of the MCB for his thoughts on 'the rather serious charges John Ware is making, alleging the Muslim Council of Britain never expressly condemns all suicide bombings'. He replied:

'Well let me make clear then, once and for all, we condemn the killing of all innocent people, wherever they are. Human lives everywhere are of equal value, whether they are British, American, Iraqi or Palestinian. Jewish lives are not worth more than Palestinian lives... But can I just make it clear here, it's quite misleading to compare the situation here in the UK with that in Israel... The Qur'an says you cannot take innocent life. But, again, to explain is not to justify. When we try and explain why the Palestinians are being driven to what they are doing, it is not to justify it. It's trying to explain why they are doing what they are doing. Even our own parliamentarians have tried to do the same.'

Questioned about Sheikh Yassin, Bunglawala repeated the point that he was indeed a renowned Islamic scholar, and added that he was

assassinated by Israel in defiance of international law. Pressed by Quinn about Tamimi, he responded that, 'If he makes that comment he should answer for that.'

In the period between this Today programme and the broadcast of the *Panorama* episode 'A Question of Leadership', there was considerable press interest in the issues that the episode was to raise, with most articles presenting the programme's findings in broadly supportive terms. In short, the programme had generated substantial controversy even before it was broadcast. Box 5.1 shows how the programme was presented on the BBC News website:<sup>41</sup>

### **Box 5.1 Who speaks for British Muslims? – pre-publicity for a TV documentary**

In this Sunday's *Panorama* Special, John Ware examines questions raised by senior members of the Muslim community themselves: questions about the direction and role of the Muslim Council of Britain and the influences on the leadership of the organisation and its affiliates.

After 7/7 the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police said the Muslim community in Britain is 'fairly close to denial about the extent of extremism in its midst'.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is generally regarded as the community's main representative body. After meeting the Prime Minister at Downing Street, the Secretary General, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, promised that 'the community is determined to deal with this issue head on'.

Several prominent Muslims explain to *Panorama* why they believe the MCB is unlikely to meet this challenge at the moment. Indeed one of the founding members of the MCB tells us that 'It is my personal belief... that they are in a state of denial'.

*Panorama* examines the extent of Islamist ideology which some of the affiliates which make up the MCB have brought to Britain from Pakistan and the Middle East over the past 40 years.

We show that beyond Iraq, even within some of the mainstream, there exists sectarianism, anti-Semitism, and a powerful conviction that Christians and Jews are conspiring to undermine Islam. Some MCB affiliates also promote the belief that Islam is a superior ideology to secular Britain.

In a wide-ranging interview with Sir Iqbal the discussion ranged from his views on the efforts to deal with extremism in some young British Muslims, to the Regent's Park mosque declaration on suicide bombings, to the rhetoric of some MCB affiliates, the relationship between religion and politics, as well as dealing with direct questions about suicide attacks and Sir Iqbal's views on the targeting of civilians around the world, including in Israel.

***Panorama, 'A Question of Leadership', 21 August 2005***

The programme had two main points of focus: one was concerned with the leadership role played by the MCB and the other with the approach that Islam takes to the use of violence in general and specifically to Muslims who use violence in the name of Islam. According to John Ware in the letter to the *Guardian* quoted at the start of this chapter, the purpose of the programme was to 'highlight how the MCB is either in denial of, or tolerates, racism and sectarianism in some of its affiliates'. Central to the programme's arguments was what it referred to as 'Islamism', defined as 'the fusion of politics and faith', an ideology that, it claimed, 'burst into the British arena' with the *Satanic Verses* affair. The MCB was firmly identified with this fusion. However, it was claimed, most British Muslims are Sufis: this means that 'they do not politicise their faith; theirs is personal and spiritual'. This led on to a double charge against the MCB: first, it does not effectively represent the views of the majority Muslim population; and second, it is 'playing politics in a secular country'.

The case for the MCB being 'in denial' and politicising their faith was presented by Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui of the Muslim Institute; Mehboob Kantharia, a founding member of the MCB; Professor Neal Robinson of the University of Louvain, Belgium; Dr Taj Hargey, Chairman of the Muslim Council, Oxford; Sheikh Musa Admani, Imam at London Metropolitan University; and Nicholas Mehdi Lock, teacher at Nottingham Islamia School. Alternative views were put by Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari, then Deputy Secretary General of the MCB and Chairman of the East London Mosque; Sir Iqbal Sacranie, at that time Secretary General of the MCB; Professor Kurshid Ahmad, Chairman and Rector of the Islamic Foundation and Vice President of Jamaat-i-Islami; and Dr Azzam Tamimi, director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought.

### Complaints and responses

The MCB criticised the programme for being presented in a ‘sensationalist style’ that was ‘completely irresponsible... John Ware clearly entered the debate with a preconceived idea of how Muslims should behave, and then sought out individuals, who have very little grassroots support, to try and support his conclusions’. They criticised the programme as ‘maliciously motivated’ and called upon the BBC to apologise to the MCB and all British Muslims for a ‘shoddy and Islamophobic piece of work that will contribute to furthering distrust and divisions in our society’.

The BBC responded:

‘The questions in the programme about the MCB’s leadership came from members of the Muslim community, and from very many Muslims who did not appear in the final film but who were spoken to during the course of our research... The programme’s purpose was to reflect, inform and generate debate in the Muslim community and the wider population, about the nature and direction of the leadership of British Muslims. In the light of the London bombings this is a debate which many Muslims, to whom we spoke, believe is long overdue. They raised important questions about all the issues to which we drew attention. As this debate goes forward I very much hope that you will desist from unwarranted and wildly inaccurate attacks on the honesty of our journalism and the good faith of the *Panorama* team.’<sup>42</sup>

On 23 August, the BBC website carried a piece on the controversy, which, among other things, acknowledged that audience reaction to the show had been mixed. More than 640 people had contacted the BBC to complain that the programme portrayed Muslims and the Islamic faith in a negative light. However, nearly 100 people had been in touch to say the programme was excellent and NewsWatch had received emails praising the show.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, the programme raised a number of extremely complex issues and it continued for some time to be the subject of considerable comment and controversy. The comments and controversies revolved around the following topics: selective quotation; Shabina Begum and ‘fundamentalism’; Britain as a secular country; ‘Islamism’; the personal and the political; guilt by association; interview style; and visual style. These are discussed in turn below.

### Selective quotation

One of the criticisms made of the programme was that it engaged in selective and out-of-context quotation. For example, in a section of the programme devoted to the Islamic Foundation, it was stated that its book

sales 'promote the ideology' of Sayid Mawdudi, who was described as 'the ideologue and founder of the Jamaa'at Islami [sic]', a party that 'wants Pakistan to become an Islamic state governed by sharia holy law'. Ware went on to state: 'In Mawdudi's ideal Islamic state, private and public life would be inseparable. In this respect it would bear "a kind of resemblance to the fascist and communist states"'. The quotation appeared both on the soundtrack and also on the screen.

In its letter to the BBC, the MCB complained that the programme had quoted Mawdudi's words out of context and cited how the words appeared in *Islamic Law and Constitution*:

'Considered from this aspect the Islamic State bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states. But you will find later on that, despite its all-inclusiveness, it is something vastly and basically different from the totalitarian and authoritarian states. Individual liberty is not suppressed under it nor is there any trace of dictatorship in it. It presents the middle course and embodies the best that the human society has ever evolved.'

The BBC's response was to quote a yet fuller version of the disputed passage:

'A state of this sort cannot evidently restrict the scope of its activities. Its approach is universal and all-embracing. Its sphere of activity is coextensive with the whole of human life. It seeks to mould every aspect of life and activity in consonance with its moral norms and programmes of social reform. In such a state, no one can regard any field of his affairs as personal and private. Considered from this perspective the Islamic State bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states. But you will find later on that, despite its all inclusiveness it is something vastly and basically different from the totalitarian and authoritarian states. Individual liberty is not suppressed under it nor is there any trace of dictatorship in it. It presents the middle course and embodies the best that the human society has ever evolved. The excellent balance and moderation that characterise the Islamic system of government and the precise distinctions made in it between right and wrong elicit from all men of honesty and intelligence the admiration and the admission that such a balanced system could not have been framed by anyone but the Omniscient and All-Wise God.'

According to the BBC:

'Given that Mawdudi writes that the Islamic state "seeks to mould every aspect of life and activity in consonance with its moral norms

and programmes of social reform”, the applicability of the reference to “a kind of resemblance to Fascist and Communist states” is clear. The commentary in the film limited the application of this Mawdudi quote to precisely the same limits as he did in writing the above paragraph, namely: in respect of making private and public life inseparable’.

In reality, Islam is all-embracing in the way that it touches personal relationships, intimate feelings and the inner life of the spirit; and because of the central belief in God as omniscient and omnipotent, it is more holistic than either fascism or communism. The BBC’s response demonstrated that Mawdudi’s words had been quoted accurately, but only in a limited and strictly literal sense. However, the words ‘fascism’ and ‘communism’ carry negative connotations for most people in Britain. The effect of using a very brief quotation was, therefore, to highlight references to these two political systems and to exaggerate the parallels with Islam, thereby transferring to Islam the negativity that fascism and communism connote.

It is not acceptable to claim, as the BBC seemed to imply, that the programme ignored the passage about a Muslim state being ‘something vastly and basically different from the totalitarian and authoritarian states. Individual liberty is not suppressed under it nor is there any trace of dictatorship in it’ because ‘the claim was one that the production team and I considered as flying in the face of known facts about Mawdudi’s own values’. If this were the case, the passage should have been quoted in full and challenged; instead, the programme team simply formed their own judgement on the matter and denied viewers the opportunity to do likewise.

### **Shabina Begum and ‘fundamentalism’**

In 2002 Shabina Begum told her school, Denbigh High in Luton, that she wished to wear a *jilbab* (an ankle-length gown) rather than the *shalwar kameez* (trousers and tunic) worn by the school’s other Muslim pupils. The school said that she could not attend lessons except in an approved uniform, so she worked at home and then went to another school where the *jilbab* was allowed, whilst taking her case for reinstatement through the courts. Eventually she lost.

According to Ware: ‘The Muslim Council of Britain has recently helped politicise the issue [of the *jilbab*] in state schools’. However, from the programme itself it was completely impossible to deduce how the MCB had allegedly helped to ‘politicise’ either the *jilbab* issue in general or the Begum case in particular. Nor did there appear to be evidence for this view from other sources. Indeed, all that the BBC News website showed was that, at the time of the case, Sir Iqbal Sacranie stated: ‘Those that

choose to wear the *jilbab* and consider it to be part of their faith requirement for modest attire should be respected.<sup>44</sup>

The BBC's reply to the MCB's letter of complaint offered something of a hostage to fortune by quoting from the transcripts of the court case:

'On 30 September Mr Shahid Akmal, Chairman of the Comparative Religion Centre in Harrow wrote to Mr Moore [assistant headteacher of Denbigh High], enclosing advice from the Muslim Council of Britain setting out the dress code for women in Islam. This included: (i) there is no recommended style, (ii) modesty needs to be observed at all times, (iii) trousers with long tops/shirts for school wear are absolutely fine, (iv) a Muslim school girl's uniform does not have to be flowing or of such length that there will be a risk of tripping over and causing an accident. Mr Akmal wrote: "In summary, the dress code prescribed by your school for Muslim females as per your 'School Uniform Requirements' leaflet is in accordance with the tenets of Islam."

From this, the BBC concluded, perfectly correctly: 'It seems that the MCB has considered the uniform requirements at Denbigh High School to be sufficient to meet the requirements of modesty mentioned in the Qur'an.' While the issue was undoubtedly highly politicised, there was no basis for the accusation that the MCB was 'playing politics' with the *jilbab* issue, either in general or in the specific case of Shabina Begum.

Further, according to Ware: 'Ms Begum appeared to be following a fundamentalist agenda' and was 'advised by the women's section of the radical Hizb ut-Tahreer group, which the government is planning to ban'. It is worth pointing out that the Government has failed to ban Hizb ut-Tahreer, who have denied that they advised Begum, stating in the *Guardian*, 4 March 2005, that 'we were not involved in her case in any way, but we were there for her in terms of explaining Islamic values as we are for the Muslim community in general.' Nor was the sense in which Begum is a 'fundamentalist' explained in any way in the programme. A clip of Begum showed her merely stating that she acted 'out of my faith and belief in Islam' whilst, outside the context of the programme, in an interview in the *Guardian*, 3 March 2005, she said that: 'Today's decision is a victory for all Muslims who wish to preserve their identity and values despite prejudice and bigotry.'

In her view, the school's decision had been 'a consequence of an atmosphere that has been created in western societies post-9/11, an atmosphere in which Islam has been made a target for vilification in the name of the "war on terror"'. She also told the *Guardian*: 'I hope in years



to come policy-makers will take note of a growing number of young Muslims who, like me, have turned back to our faith after years of being taught that we needed to be liberated from it. Our belief in our faith is the one thing that makes sense of a world gone mad, a world where Muslim women, from Uzbekistan to Turkey, are feeling the brunt of policies guided by western governments.’ While this was an example of politicisation, it was in no sense engendered either by the policies or actions of the MCB, or by speeches by any of its representatives.

Finally, the MCB also pointed out in its letter of complaint that:

‘Many other schools do allow the wearing of the *jilbab* by Muslim schoolgirls without it causing any problems whatsoever, yet Ware, once again, did not mention this. This omission would have left the unsuspecting viewer to believe that it was Shabina who was behaving intransigently, instead of Denbigh High School, which made the headlines precisely because it refused to allow Shabina Begum to exercise her rights.’

### *Secularism*

Ware made the point on three separate occasions that the UK is a secular country and, on the third occasion, in an interview with Sir Iqbal Sacranie, repeatedly accused the MCB of ‘playing politics with religion in a secular country’. Maintaining a hard and fast distinction between the secular and the non-secular was central to the programme’s strategy. In response to the MCB’s complaint on this topic, the BBC replied:

‘I think you are missing the broad point that was being made. The programme examined whether the MCB was failing to acknowledge the extent to which British society separates religion and politics, and operates with an accepted and fundamental recognition of the distinction between sacred and secular. The production team considered that Britain’s modern political culture is a secular one – it does not elevate religious beliefs to the level of a party or group manifesto, nor does it accept that religious demands have the status of political imperatives. This political culture sits within a broadly secular culture in 21st century Britain.’

This is true to a certain extent but the distinction between religion and politics is not as clear-cut as the programme implied, for the connections between religion and politics are highly complex. For example, the Queen is head of both the state and the established Church, Christian clergy sit in the House of Lords, and the country is governed by Christian values in a broad sense. Further, there are many people – across the religious spectrum in multifaith Britain – whose religious and political beliefs are

seamless. Muslims are no exception to this. The distinction lies in the fact of the highly publicised political events and issues – specifically concerning the Middle East – which Muslim political activity addresses. The opposition on which the programme turned between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ tended to create a dichotomy between the ‘modern’, ‘rational’ West and the ‘backward’, ‘theocratic’ East. In other words, it created divisiveness rather than reflected it.

### ‘Islamism’

Central to the programme’s arguments was ‘Islamism’, which Ware defined as ‘the fusion of politics and faith’ and which he argued is a distinguishing feature of the MCB and some of its affiliates. The programme did not discuss the origins and multiple uses of the term. A brief digression is relevant here, however. The term corresponds in part to the Arabic word *Islamiyyun*, which was developed in Algeria in the 1970s and translated into French as *Islamisme*, originally coined some 200 years earlier to refer to the whole religion of Islam. In the 70s and 80s it described people seeking to apply Muslim perspectives to political issues, and drew upon the beliefs, narratives, symbols and language of Islam to inspire, shape and mobilise political activity. It did not, in the first instance, inherently refer to a specific part of the political spectrum or to a particular kind of practical strategy. People who used the terms *Islamiyyun* and *Islamisme* as self-definitions saw them as differentiating themselves *both* from Muslims who did not engage in politics *and* from political movements in nominally Muslim countries which were broadly secular in their motivations and frames of reference. The term passed from French into English in the mid 1980s.<sup>45</sup>

It then quickly acquired negative associations. Since about 1995 it has been used in English almost exclusively to signal disagreement and disapproval. It is now often no more than a shorthand codeword for referring to any aspect of Islam of which the speaker disapproves. Since it sounds like the name of the whole religion (similar semantically to Buddhism, Judaism and Sikhism) the distinction between Islam and Islamism is frequently forgotten. Many journalists now use the terms ‘Islamic’ and ‘Islamist’ interchangeably. This does not foster clarity and is deeply insulting and disturbing for most Muslims.

In so far as the term is still used neutrally, rather than to signal disapproval, it can refer to a wide range of political movements, campaigns, leaders and theorists. One academic definition of an Islamist, for example, is of someone who ‘believes that Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim World and who seeks to implement this idea in some

fashion'.<sup>46</sup> In this sense of the word, Islamist movements include a) political parties that operate within the rule of law and constitutional framework of a nation-state, b) groups concerned to defend Islamic faith and morality against secularism and to spread Islamic values, wisdom and teachings, and c) those who engage in armed struggle. The latter have a range of policies and goals and operate in a range of different national and regional contexts, as also in a global context. Since the term is both pejorative and imprecise, it has lost whatever benefits it may once have had to describe an approach to politics.

One unfortunate consequence, amongst others, is that consideration of the relationship between the personal and the political is rendered more difficult. An editorial by Abid Uallah Jan on 27 February 2006 on the Al-Jazeera website asked: 'If Islam is a way of life, how can we say that those who want to live by its principles in legal, social, political, economic, and political spheres of life are not Muslims, but Islamists and believe in Islamism, not Islam?' When the French academic François Burgat published his book *L'Islamisme au Maghreb* in 1988, Abassi Madani, the leader of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front, told him: 'In your book, you must first of all change the title! Why "Islamism"? It is Islam that is at work in Algeria, nothing but Islam. We are Muslims!'<sup>47</sup>

### **The personal and the political**

On a related point, Ware claimed that most British Muslims are Sufis, which in his view meant that 'they do not politicise their faith; theirs is personal and spiritual'. Taken in the context of the programme as a whole, this effectively set up an opposition between 'non-political' Sufis on the one hand and the 'political' Islamists at the MCB on the other. However, as the MCB pointed out in its letter of complaint, by no means can all Sufis be considered non-political:

'Muslims who follow the "Sufi way" as well as others are both in the same Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA) coalition party as the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan. This is the same Jamaat-i-Islami that Ware attempts to portray as extremists. The primary anti-colonial jihadist movements of the 19th century were all Sufi-inspired. For example, Imam Shamil in Daghestan belonged to the famous Naqshbandi order, Umar al-Mukhtar in Libya to the Sanusi order, Amir Abdul Qadir in Algeria to the Qadiri order and so on.'

A similar point was made by Abdullah al-Kateb in a piece published in *Open Democracy*, 13 September 2005, under the title 'Who labels who? A reply to Ehsan Masood'. Here he argued that:

‘Those who do follow a Sufi *tariqa* (path) are not necessarily apolitical. Some medieval Sufis, such as Abu-Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), wrote tracts on the political issues of their day. The late Syrian *sheikh* and modern Sufi, Abdul Fattah Abu-Ghuddah, was one of the main leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Others, such as Imam Shamil (1797-1871), led a long war of resistance against the Russian occupation of the Caucasus.’

In its response the BBC stated that: ‘Nothing in our report precludes the idea that followers of Sufi teachings, or indeed any other Muslims motivated by the values of their faith, might be strongly involved in political processes either today or in the colonial past’. This set up an extremely fine, and some might say extremely tenuous, distinction between Muslims who ‘politicise their faith’ and Muslims who are ‘strongly involved in political processes’.

In this context, it is relevant to note that Abdullah al-Qateb in *Open Democracy* also contested the distinction between Sufi and non-Sufi Islam, even going so far as to claim that ‘there is no such thing as “Sufi Islam”’. Whilst agreeing that there are most certainly differences amongst various Muslim groups in Britain, he also pointed out that ‘most of these theological issues are decades (and sometimes centuries) old; they arose long before the modern phenomenon of terrorism’. In addition, he argued that one of the main problems with the *Panorama* programme was that it did not address these differences and issues in the context of scripture and theology, adding that:

‘Some differences relate to theology, others to law; some groups that differ with each other on one point may find common ground on another. The process of understanding sects and groups can be painstaking, and many journalists are unable or unwilling to undergo it.’

The question of the personal and the political in Islam was also taken up, though from a different perspective, by Abidullah Ansari in *Q-News*, November 2005. The magazine is a trenchant critic of the MCB and the article welcomed many of the programme’s revelations about some of the MCB’s affiliates. It was also extremely critical, however, of Ware’s simplistic distinction between the ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ in Islam:

‘The problem of Islamist control of key organisations was explained in terms of “political religion”, not of mistakes in interpreting shariah and *aqeedah*. Clearly, any attempt to depoliticise Islam is foolish, given the religion’s origins and its historic achievements. The presenter suggested that “it’s a battle of ideas – between those for whom Islam is personal

– and those who also wish to pursue Islam as a political ideology”. Here he spilled his secularist beans. Mainstream orthodox Islam is not, and never has been, apolitical. Leaders such as the former Bosnian president Izetbegovic saw their struggle against Christian oppression in Islamic terms. This is where the programme failed totally, since it presented the struggle between the Muslim community and the Islamists as a fight between apolitical and political religion, when no one on either side sees it like this. Properly understood it is a fight between orthodox Islam, full of mercy and wisdom, and the British extrusion of Middle Eastern and Pakistani Islamism, popular only among some middle-class technocrats with a weak Islamic education. The programme claimed to range the apolitical against the politicised; but what we really saw was scholars ranged against Islamists. Few in the British establishment seem to comprehend that British Islam should be represented by scholars, rather than by medics and accountants who have read Mawdudi.’

### **Guilt by association**

One of the programme’s central strategies was repeatedly to suggest guilt by association. Here, for example, is how John Ware introduced the Islamic Foundation: ‘I’m on my way to the organisation that mobilised the Rushdie protests. It too is an important affiliate of the MCB. It was once described as the most influential outpost of militant Islamist ideology in the West. It’s based in Leicester. The Islamic Foundation was set up in 1974 by leading figures in an Islamist opposition party from Pakistan. The Jamma’at Islami [sic] wants Pakistan to become an Islamic state governed by Sharia holy law.’ The key phrase here is ‘an important affiliate of the MCB’, which has the effect of implying (erroneously) that the MCB participates in the movement to create Islamic states governed by sharia.

Ware also informed viewers that when Sir Iqbal Sacranie went to Leeds in the wake of the London bombings, he prayed at the Grand Mosque there. Ware noted that this is where Abdullah Jamal, one of the bombers, spent a good deal of time, and added: ‘It too is an affiliate of the Muslim Council of Britain – and the only mosque in Leeds that follows a political version of Islam’. Again, the juxtaposition suggested a convergence of views about terrorism.

### Interview style

In marshalling six interviewees in support of its thesis and four who opposed it, the programme's allotment of screen time was fairly well balanced between the two sides. However, the manner in which the two sides were interviewed was entirely different. Ware adopted the stance of friendly interlocutor with the supporters of the programme's thesis, and that of prosecuting counsel with its opponents. Even his body language varied startlingly according to the person he was speaking to. He was shown sitting back and nodding at the supporters, but peering accusingly over his spectacles at the opponents, and burrowing in his files to produce the quotes which apparently revealed MCB affiliates to be extremists of one kind or another. At times, he resorted simply to badgering and browbeating. The spectacle was not only unedifying, it was also completely un-illuminating, as the examples below illustrate.

The criticism made of Dr Abdul Bari, the then Deputy General Secretary of the MCB and Chairman of the East London Mosque, was that he had invited Sheikh Abdur-Rahman Al-Sudais, an imam from Saudi Arabia, to the opening of a new Islamic Centre in the East End. There the Sheikh had spoken of the history of Islam being a testament to how different communities can live together in peace and harmony, yet in Saudi Arabia he had attacked 'aggressive Jews and oppressive Zionists', as well as Christians and Hindus. Ware was shown as visibly shocked that a public figure – and a religious leader, at that – had said one thing to one audience and something else to another. The guilt was transferred to Dr Bari by association.

The case against Dr Azzam Tamimi, 'a Palestinian who... has avowedly promoted Islam as a political ideology' was that 'he supports suicide bombings in Israel and the resistance in Iraq'. Suicide bombing in the context of the Middle East is an extremely complicated and controversial issue, but Ware was concerned simply with accusing Tamimi of breaking the law by allegedly 'glorifying terrorism' and of being an 'apologist for terrorism'. A transcript of their exchange appears in Box 5.2.

**Box 5.2 Glorifying terrorism? – extracts from a TV interview**

*John Ware:* Following the London bombings, to stop more young British Muslims being drawn into terrorism the government says it will prosecute anyone who glorifies terrorism – wherever it happens.

*Dr Azzam Tamimi:* I don't glorify killing anybody. I explain, I... my job is to explain. I explain why people resort to certain tactics in certain contexts.

*John Ware:* So when you said for example: 'For us Muslims, martyrdom is not the end of things but the beginning of the most wonderful of things.' That's more than explanation, that's glorification, isn't it? Glorification?

*Dr Azzam Tamimi:* Martyrdom is an Islamic concept. You cannot rule it out of Islam. If people abuse it, or use it in the wrong place, or kill innocent people and call it martyrdom, that's something else. But martyrdom is definitely an Islamic concept.

*John Ware:* 'The blood of martyrs provides nourishment and sustenance for those who continue this struggle.' That's more than explanation, isn't it, that's glorification, isn't it?

*Dr Azzam Tamimi:* Well if you... if you occupy other people's lands, people have to...

*John Ware:* No, I'm sorry, just answer the question. You said all you do is explain, you don't glorify it, and I'm saying that what you've said goes further than that. I think it does glorify.

*Dr Azzam Tamimi:* So what?

*John Ware:* Well, does it or doesn't it?

*Dr Azzam Tamimi:* It has to be attached to a context. What are we talking about? About the concept of martyrdom in general which means offering yourself for the sake of defending your homeland, for the sake of defending your community, then that has to be glorified, of course.

*John Ware:* You said that martyrdom in Israel is, quote, 'divine bliss'. That's glorifying, that is glorifying the tactics in another country irrespective of the rights and wrongs of the Israeli government, that is glorifying a terrorist tactic, the same tactic that was used in London. You, Mr Tamimi, are an apologist for terrorism, aren't you?

*Dr Azzam Tamimi:* If you want to consider me so, that's up to you.

Ware's method of conducting this interview meant that Tamimi was quite unable to present the context which would enable him to explain fully what he actually meant by 'martyrdom' and 'glorification'. This may well explain why Tamimi's attitude towards Ware became increasingly and visibly contemptuous and dismissive.

Martyrdom in an Islamic context is an extremely complex subject – and, in the case of suicide bombing, a highly controversial one. 'Martyrdom for a Muslim can be a choice – between accepting 'disgraceful death of a humbled people,' writes Humayan Ansari<sup>48</sup> and a 'desired death when confronted with the destruction of one's freedoms and rights'. For most Muslims – as the programme did make clear – suicide bombing is entirely haram (forbidden). It does need to be stressed that beliefs in salvation as a supreme act of selflessness and in the glorification of martyr-bombers are rare in the Muslim world – at least outside the Middle East – but there are signs that they are gathering momentum. Having raised the topic of martyrdom in the context of suicide bombing, the programme owed it to its audience to explore more fully how it is understood. Instead, the viewer was presented with a confrontation that threw no light on either topic.

The case made against Sir Iqbal Sacranie can be divided into four parts. The first charge was that an affiliate of the MCB, Ahl-e-Hadith is 'inspired by puritanical Saudi ideology', that its website makes negative comments about Jews and Christians, and that it propagates a 'them and us culture'. Sacranie replied: 'I don't subscribe to that. I'm not a member of Ahl-e-Hadith but it's a membership that we have, it's diversity that exists in the community, having different views on life'. Ware responds: 'Isn't it a form of diversity that you should disown?' Sacranie replied:

'Well, we must accept the reality on the ground that the diversity that we have with the Muslim Community in the UK, and as long as they subscribe to our constitution, which is very clear, which is on the website and it's totally transparent in terms of its activities of a work which is through the teachings of the Qur'an and upholding the principles of Islam; then what they do outside the Council, there is no control that we have on them.'

This, of course, was yet another example of guilt by association, but it also, like many of Ware's other charges, completely misunderstood the nature of the MCB, as Sacranie clearly pointed out again later in the programme:

'Our job is not to go and monitor what every single imam in this country is delivering at the Friday Khutbah. This is perhaps an over-estimation of what we as a community organisation can do. We have



representatives from across the country, organisations that take our view, it's such a diverse group of membership that we can only agree upon the common denominator, the lowest common denominator.'

As Madeleine Bunting put it in the *Guardian*, 22 August 2005:

'In that short exchange, Ware revealed his lack of comprehension of the Muslim community. Sacranie only has as much power as the MCB affiliate organisations allow him – the idea of him putting an imam right is ridiculous. The tiny, volunteer-run MCB doesn't have the power to police the views of its disparate membership. Sacranie and the MCB have a tightrope to walk. On the one hand, the government and non-Muslim Britain are piling on the pressure that they deliver a law-abiding, loyal ethnic minority. On the other, an increasingly restless younger generation of Muslims criticise the MCB as far too moderate, a sell-out establishment stooge cosying up to Tony Blair.'

The second charge was that, after the London bombings, Sacranie went to Leeds, where three of the bombers had lived. Ware noted that: 'At this impromptu press conference Sir Iqbal Sacranie focused on the conduct of the police' and a clip then showed Sacranie saying the following:

'Immediately when the raids were carried out, there's hardly any communication with the community leaders. We've had cases where the pressures on some of the family members while not directly involved with the people who had committed the crime, have been under immense pressure, and their personal material has been removed and been displayed in the national press.'

However, as there is evidence to suggest that inappropriate behaviour by the police inflames community relations when it occurs, it seems unreasonable for Ware implicitly to criticise Sacranie for speaking thus.

Third, as already noted, Ware accused Sacranie three times of 'playing politics with religion'. This came about because of Sacranie's refusal to distance himself from the notion that the 'war on terror' is a 'war on Islam', and Ware's refusal to accept the validity of such a point of view, even though this is exactly what an ever-increasing number of Muslims in Britain and across the world do indeed believe. This is not entirely without reason, given that the highly influential Samuel Huntington argues that after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, 'an intercivilisational war developed between Islam and the West', and is still continuing. His conclusion is that:

‘The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defence. It is the West, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world.’<sup>49</sup>

As in the Tamimi case, Ware’s insistence on pursuing a line of questioning whose terms the interviewee clearly refused – as he is perfectly entitled to do – resulted merely in a pointless confrontation that told the viewer almost nothing, as opposed to provoking an illuminating discussion of exactly why so many Muslims view the ‘war on terror’ as a war on Islam. The exchange is shown in detail in Box 5.3.

### **Box 5.3 War on terror, war on Islam – points from a discussion**

*Sir Iqbal Sacranie:* The war on terror has been a failure and this...

*John Ware:* That’s not my question, but is it a war on Islam... is it a war on Islam?

*Sir Iqbal Sacranie:* The war on terror has been a total failure, the way it’s been perceived, the way it’s been fought. When you try to occupy Afghanistan, when you see what is happening in Iraq, the people on other ground view this war on terror, this is their perception.

*John Ware:* Indeed. Is it not your responsibility, as the leader of the Muslim community in effect in Britain, whatever your views about the Iraq war to disabuse the Muslim population of Britain that whatever is going on in Iraq is not a war against Islam?

*Sir Iqbal Sacranie:* Now, in terms of the motives behind... nobody knows about, we don’t know about it...

*John Ware:* You are playing politics again aren’t you.

*Sir Iqbal Sacranie:* It is...

*John Ware:* You are playing politics with religion.

*Sir Iqbal Sacranie:* We are playing...

*John Ware:* You are playing politics with religion.

*Sir Iqbal Sacranie:* We are being factual, You don't want to accept the reality of what Islam is in its daily life.

It appeared that Ware's thesis, which determined his interview with Sacranie, was that British Muslims hold the views they do on the 'war on terror' because of the influence of radical 'Islamist' ideology emanating from certain mosques and Muslim organisations. There are, however, entirely different explanations that the programme simply refused to countenance.

The fourth charge against the MCB was that its sincerity in condemning suicide bombings in Israel and elsewhere in the Middle East is suspect because, firstly, Dr Azzam Tamimi of the MAB, an MCB affiliate, regards such bombings as martyrdoms. However, as noted above, the MCB is, and indeed could not possibly be, responsible for every utterance of every member of each of its affiliates. The second reason given by Ware was that Sacranie had attended a memorial service at the Central Mosque in London for Sheikh Yassin of Hamas after he had been assassinated. Here Sacranie hailed him as 'the renowned Islamic scholar' but Ware was concerned only with 'the theological justification which [he] gave to the murder of civilians' and the fact that 'he was the spiritual leader and the ideological leader of a terrorist movement'. Sacranie countered:

'In your terms, if it means fighting occupation, it is a terrorist movement. That is not a view that is being shared by many people. Those who fight oppression, those who fight occupation, cannot be termed as terrorist, they are freedom fighters, in the same way as Nelson Mandela fought against apartheid, in the same way as Gandhi and many others fought the British rule...Those who fought oppression are now the real leaders of the world.'

Ware, however, refused to acknowledge the thrust of Sacranie's first sentence, namely that he, like vast numbers of others, does not accept that Hamas is *simply* a terrorist movement. In other words, this was another example of the problem encountered above with the 'war on terror', and so, doggedly persisting with a line of questioning whose terms the interviewee refused, Ware led the interview into a predictable cul-de-sac, and viewers learned nothing about British Muslims' attitude to Hamas.

### **Visual and aural effects**

Two aspects of the programme's presentational style deserve comment. Firstly, in the scenes in which Ware was shown at his computer in order to

unearth quotes from websites of various MCB friends and affiliates, a mosque dominated the view from his office window. This *mise-en-scène* was presumably not accidental and, given both the content of the individual scenes in which it occurred and the context of the programme as a whole, tended to suggest Islam as a looming, and indeed threatening, presence in modern British society.

Second, on at least eighteen occasions the screen was given over to dark evocations of what was presumably meant to be the inside of a mosque. This device usually occurred when a new figure was introduced, their image prominent within the frame. A fragment of 'exotic'-sounding music accompanied the image. On numerous occasions, quotations were superimposed on this image (and also spoken rather portentously on the soundtrack). These quotations began as a kind of shimmering haze in the top left-hand corner of the screen and then, in a snaking movement, emerged into legibility, usually accompanied by a strange rushing sound, like an electronically enhanced breath of wind. Presumably all this was intended to give the proceedings a little more visual interest. Visual and aural devices are never neutral, however, and inevitably carry with them all sorts of connotations. This battery of effects reinforced clichés about the 'exotic East' and served further to enhance the 'Us' and 'Them' motif. It was a classic expression of what Edward Said defined as 'Orientalism': 'a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them")'.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

'A Question of Leadership' can be described as an example of thesis-driven journalism. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this kind of reportage but problems arise when it tips over into tendentiousness. The distinct impression left by this particular edition of *Panorama* was that the programme makers were grinding an axe and had set out to find facts to fit – as opposed to test – the thesis, and that nothing that they discovered was going to sway them from the view with which they began.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how the programme's approach to its subject can be squared with the BBC's own editorial guidelines on impartiality. Amongst other things, these require BBC programme makers 'to be fair and open minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts, as well as being objective and even handed in our approach to a subject'. They also state that: 'Our audiences should not be able to tell from BBC programmes or other BBC output the personal views of our journalists on matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy.' Ware's views on the subject matter of this particular

programme appeared abundantly clear. Indeed, even the relatively sympathetic Ehsan Masood in *Open Democracy* argued that Ware may have ‘allowed some of his assumptions to frame the film’, and that, in the battle currently being fought out within Britain’s Muslim population, ‘the reporter seems to be firing some of the ammunition collected and supplied by one side for use against the other’.

As the MCB is not exactly short of critics both within and outside the Muslim community, it would be no feat of investigative journalism to tap into this seam. Indeed, it is not outside the realms of probability that MCB critics were queuing at the door of *Panorama* once they knew that this programme was being planned. The MCB, like any other organisation, is not without its faults and problems but it is operating in a highly complex and delicate situation, and any programme about the MCB should adequately reflect that situation, as opposed to structuring itself around the crude and misleading binary oppositions that lay at the heart of ‘A Question of Leadership’. As Madeleine Bunting put it in the *Guardian*, 22 August, the impact of the film, and of the press coverage which preceded it

‘will be a powerful boost for the increasingly widespread view that there is no such thing as a moderate Muslim: underneath, “they” are all extremists who are racist, contemptuous of the west, and intent on a political agenda. A legitimate and much-needed debate among British Muslims about a distinctive expression of Islam in a non-Muslim country has been hijacked and poisonously distorted. Journalists need to be very careful: we are entering a new era of McCarthyism and, if we are not to be complicit, we need to be scrupulously responsible and conscientious in unravelling the complexity of Islam in its many spiritual and political interpretations in recent decades.’

In this respect, it is instructive to look at the selection of e-mails that the BBC received about the programme.<sup>51</sup> What these clearly show is that the vast majority of Muslim respondents were extremely upset by the programme, whereas for a worrying number of non-Muslims it provoked views such as ‘the MCB and MAB have said one thing on camera and another off’, ‘there is nothing more dangerous than having extremists who pretend to be moderates’, ‘his [Sacranie’s] refusal to answer questions directly spoke volumes of his true beliefs and allegiances’, and ‘I welcome any tightening of immigration/deportation if it is going to make my country safer’. In other words, it appears to have divided its audience along faith lines: in an increasingly divided society this was not an achievement of which to be proud. In this respect, the MCB seems indeed to have been proved absolutely right in its claim that the programme would ‘contribute to furthering distrust and divisions in our society’.



## 6 Histories, stories and Islamophobia – the content and form of narratives

### Introduction

‘The West’s war against terror,’ wrote the defence correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* in October 2001, ‘belongs within the much larger spectrum of a far older conflict between settled, creative, productive Westerners and predatory, destructive Orientals.’<sup>52</sup> On 11 September, he said, ‘the Oriental tradition... returned in an absolutely traditional form. Arabs, appearing suddenly out of empty space like their desert raider ancestors, assaulted the heartlands of Western power, in a terrifying surprise raid.’ His words were a vivid and dramatic summary of the way the Western media both reflected and shaped how the events of 9/11 were seen.

It is frequently the case, both for those who report events and for those who read about them in the press, hear about them on radio, or watch images about them on television, that something seems to erupt suddenly from empty space, or as if from a desert where normally nothing happens, nothing grows. Always metaphorically, and sometimes – as in September 2001 – literally, such events are surprise raids. The first priority for the human mind, when confronted with a surprise, is to place it within a narrative or larger spectrum, so that it is connected to more familiar experiences and begins to make sense, and so that any further such events can be better anticipated, and actions to deal with them are maximally effective. Text, talk and imagery are directed to these three ends: making sense, being better prepared, taking more effective action.

In relation to ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’ there is a range of competing and overlapping narratives. (Inverted commas signal that both terms are shorthand for immensely complex and variegated realities. Also, the realities are inter-related and merge with each other. Picturing the world as consisting largely of two large monolithic entities with little or nothing in common is profoundly unhelpful.) A narrative, it can be said, consists of a) a history and b) a collection of stories. In a different metaphor, there is a) a big picture and b) a set of vivid details.

In the light of the previous chapters, this chapter discusses seven different narratives about Islam in the West. Six of these are derived from a newspaper article by the historian and commentator Timothy Garton Ash. Next, the chapter focuses on one of these, the one that is dominant in most of the Western media most of the time. The components of the dominant narrative are then contrasted with the components of an alternative narrative. The chapter draws to an end with a discussion of Islamophobia, arguing that Islamophobia is seen not only in the content of the dominant narrative but also in the form in which it is frequently

expressed. In this connection the chapter distinguishes between closed and open ways of expressing opinions, and thinking, talking, writing and engaging.

### *Histories*

A history, obviously, is an account of how we got to where we are; it explains or seeks to explain patterns of cause and effect, and who or what is to blame. It provides a stock of metaphors, analogies and vivid imagery, as in the extract about 9/11 cited above, and a recurring concern is to establish – again, as in the example cited above – the distinctive features of ‘us’ and ‘them’, self and other, insider and outsider, allies and enemies, victims and aggressors, those who ‘really’ belong in our society or civilisation and those who do not.<sup>53</sup> Further, histories recall glories to be inspired by, humiliations to avenge, acts of heroism and martyrdom to emulate and grievances to redress. In addition, they provide explanations and justifications for current policies and actions. It is not rare, as is well known, for histories to be revisited and revised, to align them to new concerns, intentions and programmes in the present.

A history is not only about the past. It also shapes expectations of what is likely to happen next. In a familiar metaphor, it helps build a radar system on the look-out for anomalies and threats in the world out there. In a different metaphor again, it is a template which makes a pattern out of what would otherwise be, in a famous phrase, ‘buzzing, blooming confusion’. Prior to the July 2005 bombs in London, the Metropolitan Police officer in overall charge of anti-terrorist operations told the Security and Intelligence Committee that ‘we were working off a script which actually has been completely discounted by what we [now] know as reality.’<sup>54</sup>

### *Stories*

Stories, in the sense the word is being used here, are individual items in newspapers and on TV and radio. Examples include the four stories considered in Chapter 3 of this report. They are interesting in themselves but also help to keep histories and big pictures alive. Some – indeed most – come and go. They are here today, gone tomorrow. One-off. Some, though, run for two or three days, or for a bit longer, particularly if they move from one paper to another, and backwards and forwards between print media, TV and radio. Many stories in the media about Muslims are inaccurate and distorted, as shown in Chapter 3. They nevertheless take on the status of urban legends (for example, the legend that local councils ‘ban Christmas’, or that banks ban piggy banks) and enter cuttings files. They are then, in ensuing years, frequently given an airing by columnists and other commentators.<sup>55</sup>



But some stories, most certainly, are so momentous and so obviously true that they are incorporated overnight into history – 9/11, obviously, and (for all of us in the UK, at least) 7/7. But most are not as momentous as those. Most illustrate and recall history, in the manner of a vivid case study. In these ways they revivify and reinforce history, but they do not enter it, except in the minds and memories of the individuals most directly affected, or if there's something about the story that causes particular individuals to continually return to it in their minds' eyes.<sup>56</sup> 'I cannot forget,' writes a columnist, 'the story of the Brownie leader in Bradford who was stoned in the street by Asian youths who snarled "Christian bitch" at her.'<sup>57</sup>

Through its sense of history and its stock of vivid case studies, a narrative handles four questions, both implicitly and explicitly:

- What's the problem?
- What's the background?
- What's the solution?
- What do we want?

The last of these is about notions of the good life, and the kind of society that nourishes the good life.

### **What's the problem?**

With regard to the first of the questions noted above ('What's the problem?') the historian and political commentator Timothy Garton Ash has suggested there are six principal narratives or perspectives – six big pictures – in competition with each other in relation to the West and Islam. They are not, he stresses, mutually exclusive. On the contrary, there are overlaps amongst them and in practice the narrative adopted by any one person at any one time is likely to be complemented and qualified by at least one of the others. It is logically impossible, however, for someone to operate adopting all six with equal assurance. Garton Ash's article was written in September 2005. Introducing the six narratives, he said:

'Four years after the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, which were perpetrated in the name of Allah, most people living in what we still loosely call the west would agree that we do have troubles with Islam. The vast majority of Muslims are not terrorists, but most of the terrorists who threaten us claim to be Muslims. Most countries with a Muslim majority show a resistance to what Europeans and Americans generally view as desirable modernity, including the essentials of liberal democracy. Why? What's the nub of the problem? Here are six different views often heard in the west, but

also, it's important to add, in Muslim countries... As you go down the list, you might like to put a mental tick against the view you most strongly agree with. It's logically possible to put smaller ticks against a couple of others, but not against them all.'

Briefly summarised, and with additional brief comments, the six narratives are set out in Box 6.1.

### **Box 6.1 What's the problem? – six views of the West and Islam**

#### **1 Religion**

The problem is religion in general, which is superstition, false consciousness and the abandonment of reason. The deplorable influence of religion is seen throughout the world, and in all cultural traditions – in Christianity and Judaism, for example, as well as in Islam.

#### **2 Islam**

The problem is a particular religion, Islam. Unlike western Christianity, it does not allow the separation of religion and politics. It systematically discriminates against women, metes out barbaric punishments for homosexuality and is militantly intolerant of all other worldviews. Essentially, it is stuck in the middle ages. It needs a reformation, based on integrating religion with science and rationality and re-interpreting traditional texts in the light of modernity.

#### **3 Islamism**

The problem is Islamism, namely a particular interpretation of Islam that has its intellectual roots in organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt after the First World War and subsequently developed by Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and Maulana Maududi in Pakistan. Alternative phrases or words instead of Islamism include political, militant or radical Islam, Islamist activism, Qutbism, Salafism, jihadism, extremism and fundamentalism.

#### **4 West Asia/Middle East**

The problem lies in the specific history of West Asia, particularly the history of Arab nations. Key events and factors of the last 100 years include the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire; the Balfour Declaration and in due course the creation of the state of Israel; processes of decolonisation and globalisation; tensions and conflicts within and between Arab countries and between Arab countries and Iran; the Sunni/Shi'a rift; and the emergence of oil-rich economies.

## 5 The West

The problem is 'the West'. From the Crusades to colonisation, and from moral and military support for Israel to the recent invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, western powers have oppressed Muslim countries and cultures, and have developed forms of anti-Muslim hostility and orientalism in order to justify their own behaviour. Western culture is not only aggressive and expansionist but also superficial and materialistic. This has provoked, understandably, much bitterness and anti-western hostility in return.

## 6 Alienation

The problem lies in the alienation of young people of Muslim heritage born and educated in European countries. They are marginalised and excluded by processes of religious and racist discrimination and in their search for personal significance and identity some turn to an ideology of nihilism and terrorism, intermixed with Islamism, as a rhetoric of self-justification.

*source* Adapted from an article by Timothy Garton Ash, *The Guardian*, 15 September 2005

Garton Ash's distinctions are a helpful start for considering the narratives about the West and Islam that are articulated in the Western media, sometimes explicitly but often simply taken for granted, part of common sense. He suggests that the second ('the problem is Islam') and the third ('the problem is Islamism') are dominant in the media as a whole, though with different nuances between and within different papers, programmes and channels. In saying this he recalls that sometimes what is said in so many words is not necessarily the same as what the speaker really thinks. Nor is it necessarily what they intended to say, or what is actually heard and understood by others. Of the third narrative, for example ('the problem is Islamism, not Islam') he says that this is the official view of George Bush and Tony Blair,<sup>58</sup> but continues:

'Well, they would say that, wouldn't they? They're not going to insult millions of Muslim voters and the foreign countries upon which the west relies for its imported oil. But do they really believe it? I have my doubts. Put them on a truth serum, and I bet they'd be closer to 2 ["the problem is Islam"].'

Garton Ash's scheme is valuable for introducing and illustrating the concept of narrative, but needs – as no doubt he would himself be the first to acknowledge – some further unpacking if it is to act as a framework for consideration of the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media day by day, week by week. Such unpacking is this chapter's subject matter and concern. But first, it is relevant to note a seventh view of the

problem, one that refers more to conflicts over material interests than to differences of culture.

### **Box 6.2 What's the problem? – a seventh view**

The problem is not in the first instance to do with differences of culture, religion, ideology or civilisation. Rather, it is to do with conflicts of interest, and with competition for power, influence, territory and resources, and therefore with competition for recognition. Within urban areas of western Europe the conflicts are around employment, housing, health and education.

The problem further is that such conflicts become 'religionised' or 'culturalised' by some or all of the principal actors, and in consequence people become increasingly intransigent. Each side celebrates and idealises its own traditions, and claims a divine seal of approval for them. At the same time each denigrates and demonises the traditions of the other.

These processes of religionising are reinforced by anxieties arising from globalisation, and the challenges it poses to cultural, religious and national certainties of earlier ages.

#### *The dominant narrative in the West*

The dominant narrative in the Western media and in Western consciousness is arguably a mix of Garton Ash's second and third big pictures – 'The problem is Islam' and 'The problem is Islamism'. It is often implied or simply assumed, or expressed in code, rather than stated in so many words. So to speak, it is the default position.

The metaphor of default position refers to taken for granted assumptions not only in the mindsets and groupthink of people who work in the media but also in those of readers, viewers and listeners. It implies that if the dominant narrative is not to hold sway, deliberate efforts need to be made to, as it were, alter the settings. That is to say, focused and conscious interventions are required to ensure that alternative narratives are heard as well or instead, and that the hearing is fair. Box 6.3 itemises the default position's principal components.

**Box 6.3 Muslims in Europe: components of the dominant narrative****1 Failure to integrate**

Muslims do not wish to integrate into European societies, but prefer to live in separate, self-segregated communities and neighbourhoods.

**2 Unreasonable demands**

Muslims make unreasonable demands on European societies, expecting the Judeo-Christian traditions of these societies to be modified, changed or jettisoned in order that they can avoid being offended or inconvenienced.

**3 Mixed loyalties**

Muslims in Europe owe their principal loyalty to the worldwide Ummah, not to the country where they live. They therefore cannot be depended on to support their country's foreign policies, or even its sports teams. They are an enemy within.

**4 Support for extremism**

The sense of alienation and lack of loyalty mentioned above combine to make Muslim communities in Europe a breeding ground for extremism.

**5 Obscurantism**

Islamic theology has never gone through the kinds of critical review and reformation that were the hallmarks of the Enlightenment in Europe.

**6 Incompatibility of values and interests**

Islam and the West are incompatible in terms of moral values and are locked in a zero-sum struggle for power and control.

**7 Lack of Muslim leadership**

Religious leaders such as imams, and secular leaders such as office-holders in Muslim organisations, are out of touch with the people they claim to guide and represent, particularly young people.

**8 Corroborating evidence from overseas**

The perceptions listed above are about Muslims within Europe. They gain additional persuasiveness and plausibility, however, from how Muslims outside Europe behave – their hatred of the West, abuse of human rights, use of barbaric punishments, intolerance of debate and disagreement, glorification of martyrdom, and anti-semitism.

## 9 Weak national government

The threats posed by Muslims, outlined above, are made even more serious by the failures of successive European governments, and by metropolitan intelligentsias. In the 1950s and 1960s governments did not foresee the dangers of permitting immigration on a large scale; more recently they have failed to police their borders and have irresponsibly promoted multiculturalism and political correctness.

Please note: There is a slightly fuller description of these views in Appendix A.

### *Alternative narratives*

Alternative narratives in the West about Islam deny all the components in the dominant narrative (Box 6.3), or else have a very different take on them. The principal components of alternative narratives are listed in Box 6.4.

## Box 6.4 Muslims in Europe: components of alternative narratives

### 1 Barriers to integration

The vast majority of Muslims in western Europe would like to be fully integrated – though not culturally assimilated – in the economic and political affairs of west European societies but are prevented from doing so by the factors summarised in points 2 to 5 below.

### 2 Material disadvantage

Most Muslims in western Europe are people who came, or are the children or grandchildren of people who came, to meet labour shortages. The jobs they were recruited to fill were poorly-paid, often dirty and in labour-intensive heavy industries. Material disadvantage continues, as do discrimination and racist violence.

### 3 Negativity in the media and the general climate of opinion

Media coverage of Muslims, particularly but not only in the press, is almost entirely negative and hostile – when, that is, there is any coverage at all.

### 4 Foreign policy

Much of European foreign policy works to the disadvantage of Muslims overseas.

### 5 Policing

Since 9/11, and even more so since terrorist attacks within Europe, many Muslims have had experiences, either directly themselves or indirectly through their friends, families and acquaintances, of heavy-handed and insensitive policing, often in the glare of media publicity.

## 6 Establishing a presence

Despite the substantial barriers to integration mentioned in points 2 to 5 above, Muslims have established a strong presence throughout western Europe – mainly through self-help, but also with support from sympathetic non-Muslims and finance from overseas.

## 7 Commonalities and interdependence

Western and Islamic cultures are not incompatible. They have much in common and there has been much borrowing and interchange between them over the centuries.

## 8. International contacts

European Muslims speak a range of non-European languages and are a resource of much economic and diplomatic value.

## 9 Self-criticism

Muslims accept that some of the criticisms made of them by others are legitimate – the criticisms are not necessarily instances of Islamophobia. Muslims are ready to debate these, both with others and internally amongst themselves. Appropriate self-criticism is difficult or impossible, however, within the wider context of hostility and suspicion listed in points 2 to 5 above.

Please note: There is a slightly fuller description of these views in Appendix A.

## Underlying assumptions

All the statements in Box 6.3 above can be found explicitly stated in articles, leader columns and readers' letters in the print media. Underlying them there are certain assumptions or beliefs that are by and large implied, not explicitly stated. Five of the most powerful are these:

- All Muslims are much the same.
- All Muslims are essentially different from all non-Muslims.
- Muslims are morally and culturally inferior to non-Muslims.
- Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims.
- There is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living and working co-operatively together, either in the world at large or within individual European societies.

To repeat, these are usually unspoken. But sometimes they are expressed entirely explicitly. A particularly vivid example came in an article published in summer 2004 under the pseudonym of 'Will Cummins' in the *Sunday Telegraph*. Cummins's principal claim was that all Muslims are the same and that all are different from non-Muslims. He chose, however, to

express these claims by saying that all Muslims are the same in the sense that all dogs are the same. This example inevitably implied, even though logically it did not inherently entail, the claim that Muslims are inferior to non-Muslims, a lower order of being. Not all people who broadly share the underlying assumptions listed above would approve of the offensive and extreme form of self-expression Cummins used:

‘All Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics. A dog is not the same animal as a cat just because both species are comprised of different breeds. An extreme Christian believes that the Garden of Eden really existed; an extreme Muslim flies planes into buildings – there’s a big difference.’<sup>59</sup>

Another strong statement that all Muslims are the same and all are different from non-Muslims is to be found in Samuel Huntington’s influential book *The Clash of Civilisations*. ‘The underlying problem for the West,’ he writes, ‘is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.’<sup>60</sup> A similar claim is made by the columnist Peter Hitchens: ‘Soon it will be illegal to say this, so I had better do it now. Islam, yes even “moderate” Islam, threatens our freedom and civilisation.’<sup>61</sup> Such statements assume there is a continuum or slippery slope between so-called moderates and so-called extremists.

The five assumptions underlying the dominant narrative sketched above can be contrasted with assumptions which underlie alternative narratives, as in the tabulation in Table 6.1.<sup>62</sup>

**Table 6.1 Contrasts between basic assumptions in different narratives**

Points of contrast	Dominant narratives	Alternative narratives
Uniformity/diversity	Muslims are all much the same.	There is great diversity amongst Muslims.
Difference/similarity	Muslims are significantly different from non-Muslims.	There are many commonalities between Muslims and non-Muslims.
Inferiority/equality	Muslims are morally inferior to non-Muslims.	There is both good and bad everywhere – both in Muslims and non-Muslims.
Threat/trust	Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims.	There are both real and perceived threats on both sides.
Conflict/co-operation	There is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living co-operatively together, either in the world at large or within individual European societies.	It is both possible and urgent that Muslims and non-Muslims should work together on solving or managing shared problems and on building mutual confidence.



### The form of narratives

The dominant and alternative narratives outlined above in Boxes 6.3 and 6.4 and Table 6.1 were described with regard to their content. But their form also needs attention – the way views are formulated, presented and argued. The journalist Peregrine Worsthorpe has said that Islam was ‘once a great civilisation worthy of being argued with’ but now ‘has degenerated into a primitive enemy fit only to be sensitively subjugated. But if they want a jihad, let them have it.’<sup>63</sup> He makes two distinctions in this claim, the one to do with content (between ‘great civilisation’ and ‘primitive enemy’) and the other with regard to forms of thinking and engaging (between ‘argued with’ and ‘subjugated’.) To see an individual, group or civilisation as ‘worthy of being argued with’ is necessarily to be open-minded towards them. The hallmarks of open-mindedness include:

- readiness to change one’s views, both of others and of oneself, in the light of new facts and evidence
- not deliberately distorting, or recklessly over-simplifying, incontestable facts
- not caricaturing the views of people with whom one disagrees
- not over-generalising
- not being abusive when arguing, for example not claiming that one’s opponents are evil, insane or sub-human
- not using double standards when comparing and contrasting others with oneself
- seeing difference and disagreement as a resource for understanding more about oneself and one’s own views, not as a threat
- seeking to understand other people’s views and standpoints in their own terms, and where they are coming from – the narratives and stories with which they interpret events
- not claiming greater certainty than is warranted
- seeking consensus or, at least, a *modus vivendi* which keeps channels of communication open and permits all to maintain dignity.<sup>64</sup>

### The nature of Islamophobia

The word Islamophobia was coined on an analogy with xenophobia and homophobia, but exactly when, where and by whom, and with what particular purposes, concerns and subject matter in mind, is not certain.<sup>65</sup> The French word *islamophobie* is recorded as having been in print in the 1920s, and again in the 1970s. In both these instances, however, the reference was to internal disputes and differences within Islam – specifically, it referred to rejection of aspects of the tradition by people born within the tradition. It is possible, though unlikely, that whoever first used the word in English was simply translating a French word that was already in existence, but applying it to different subject matter, namely

hostile attitudes and actions of non-Muslims towards Muslims. It is more likely that the English word was a new coining.

The first recorded use of the word in print in the UK appears to be in a book review by Tariq Modood in *The Independent* on 16 December 1991.<sup>66</sup> Modood used the term twice, but on neither occasion implied that it needed explanation or definition, or that it was his own coining. It did not appear in the book he was reviewing, *Sacrilege and Civility: Muslim perspectives on The Satanic Verses affair*, published by the Islamic Foundation.

In 2002 a House of Lords Select Committee was told that the word had first been coined by the late Dr Zaki Badawi, or else by Fuad Nahdi, founding director of *Q News*.<sup>67</sup> The date of the coining by either of these would have been the late 1980s. The context would probably have included the campaigns led by *MuslimWise*, the predecessor of *Q News*, and by the An-Nisa Society, a community organisation based in Brent in north-west London, to counter anti-Muslim hostility not only in society at large but also amongst people working in the field of race relations. The latter were perceived to be insensitive and indifferent to the distinctive forms of prejudice and discrimination suffered by Muslims.

The word has increasingly been used since about 2000 in the deliberations and publications of international organisations, including the United Nations and the European Union. The concept is now widely used in the media, though occasionally it still appears in inverted commas, to imply that the meaning is not clear, or – in the author's view – not as clear as others claim; or that there is in reality no such thing, Islamophobia being the figment of a paranoid or politically motivated imagination, created from a desire to have victim status.<sup>68</sup>

The disadvantages of the term, it must be acknowledged, are not insignificant. Medically, it implies a severe mental illness of a kind that affects only a tiny minority of people. Whatever else hostility towards Muslims may be, it is not merely a mental illness and it does not merely involve a small number of people. A second disadvantage, linked to this, is that to accuse someone of being insane or totally irrational is to be abusive and, not surprisingly, to make them defensive and defiant. Reflective dialogue with them is then all but impossible. Also, to label someone with whom one disagrees as irrational or insane is to absolve oneself of the responsibility of trying to understand them, and of seeking through argument to modify their views.

A further disadvantage is that the use of the word Islamophobia on its own implies that prejudice against Muslims is unrelated to other forms of prejudice, for example prejudice based around physical appearance and skin colour; prejudice against immigrants; prejudice against military, religious or economic rivals; and prejudices around class, power and status. Also, it implies there is no important difference between prejudice against Muslims within one's own country and prejudice against those who are in other countries. Yet another disadvantage is that use of the term may obscure the fact that the key phenomenon to be addressed, arguably, is anti-Muslim hostility, namely hostility to an ethno-religious identity, rather than hostility towards the tenets of a religion.<sup>69</sup>

Despite its disadvantages, the term Islamophobia is almost certainly now here to stay. It not infrequently happens in the history of language, incidentally, that words are coined that are less than ideal. The word anti-semitism, for example, is grammatically problematic since there is no such thing as semitism; and in any case not all Jewish people are so-called Semites, nor are all so-called Semitic people Jewish. However, the word has been around long enough now (about 150 years), for it to be generally accepted as unproblematic. The same kind of acceptance is fast being accorded to Islamophobia, despite the problems and disadvantages outlined above.

It is sometimes argued, in the light of the concerns mentioned above, that the term 'anti-Muslim racism' would be clearer.<sup>70</sup> An obvious objection is that Muslims are not a race and that therefore hostility towards them cannot be a form of racism. But, as is well known, the human species is a single race and distinctions between so-called races have no basis in science. From a scientific point of view it is as false to say that Africans, Asians or Chinese are races as to say that Muslims are. In legal parlance in the UK, the term *racial group* is defined as 'a group of people defined by their race, colour, nationality (including citizenship) or ethnic or national origin'. This is an extremely broad definition and clearly encompasses groups that are not normally thought of as races. If the term *religious* were to be added, or if the term *ethnic* were understood to encompass *ethno-religious*, then certainly Muslims would be defined in UK law as a racial group and the full force of race relations legislation would be brought to bear against hostility towards them.

Either way it would need to be understood that Muslim identity is not necessarily or universally to do with holding distinctive beliefs or engaging in specific activities – it can be primarily to do with a sense of belonging to a broad cultural tradition. Academic writers sometimes use the word Muslim in inverted commas, to signal that it means different things to

different people and does not necessarily imply religious observance. The French scholar Etienne Balibar has suggested that the term Muslimophobia is preferable to Islamophobia, since it more obviously refers to ethno-religious heritage than to certain theological beliefs and explicitly religious practices.<sup>71</sup> Tariq Modood points out in this connection that ‘the South Asia I am from is contoured by communal religious identities. It has nothing to do with belief. If you assert “I am an atheist”, people will still think it meaningful to ask, “Yes, but are you a Muslim, a Hindu?”’ A key distinction must be drawn, this is by way of saying, between ‘belief’ and ‘affiliation’. Islamophobia, like anti-semitism and like sectarianism and factionalism throughout the world, attacks certain people because of their affiliation, or assumed affiliation, not because of their beliefs.

When the UN organised the world conference on racism (WCAR) in August 2001 it used the word racism as a shorthand abbreviation for a much longer phrase: *racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance*. At the very least, Islamophobia is clearly a form of ‘related intolerance’. Confronting and eliminating it involves the same range of measures – legal, structural, educational, attitudinal – that are required for the removal of all other kinds of racism. The WCAR’s deliberations and eventual report had the potential to shift public understanding of the connections and similarities between Islamophobia and other forms of racism. But one of the many consequences of the events on 11 September 2001, just a week or so after the WCAR ended, was that this potential was never realised. On the contrary, hostility towards Muslims amongst non-Muslims was massively amplified.

#### *Towards a revised definition*

In the light of these considerations, it is appropriate to revisit the definition of Islamophobia proposed by the Runnymede commission in 1997. It was as follows:

‘A shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims.’

At the time, something along such lines, echoing the popular understanding of phobia (‘dread’), seemed sufficient as a starting point. The use of the word ‘shorthand’, however, signalled that it was not an end point or last word, not a tablet of stone. Despite its claim to be provisional, however, the definition was accepted by a wide range of other organisations and publications, and in due course on many websites. A revised and fuller definition would be along lines such as these:

‘Islamophobia is a shorthand term referring to feelings of fear or hostility towards all or most people of Muslim heritage, expressed not only through language but also through discrimination in employment and the provision of services, crimes of violence, exclusion from public life, and international relations.’

In relation to the media, the word is a useful shorthand term for referring to coverage that:

- portrays all or most Muslims as threats at the same time as ignoring or misrepresenting alternative narratives
- does so with bigoted and abusive ways of thinking, talking and engaging
- is likely to increase insecurity and vulnerability amongst Muslims
- is likely also to provoke anxiety, fear and panic amongst non-Muslims
- is unlikely therefore to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of discrimination against Muslims
- is unlikely to contribute to an informed debate about ways of maintaining and developing Britain as a multicultural, multifaith democracy.

How can Islamophobia in the media be reduced and, at best, removed? This is the subject matter of the next and final chapter.



## 7 Responsible journalism – principles and action points

### Introduction

The previous chapters of this report have suggested that in most though not all of the UK print media, and for most though not all of the time:

- The dominant view is that there is no common ground between the West and Islam, and that conflict between them is accordingly inevitable.
- Muslims in Britain are seen as a threat to traditional British customs, values and ways of life.
- Alternative worldviews, understandings and opinions are not mentioned, or are not given a fair hearing.
- Facts are frequently distorted, exaggerated or oversimplified.
- The tone of language is frequently emotive, immoderate, alarmist and abusive.
- The coverage is likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims.
- The coverage is at the same time likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims, and in this way may weaken the Government's measures to reduce and prevent extremism.
- The coverage is unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims.
- The coverage is likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government's integration and community cohesion policies and programmes.
- The coverage is unlikely to contribute to informed discussion and debate amongst Muslims and non-Muslims about ways of working together to maintain and develop Britain as a multicultural, multifaith democracy.

This final chapter considers ways of improving the situation. The discussion is under six headings:

- Freedom of speech
- Dealing with anxiety
- Religious literacy
- Critical literacy
- Complaints and complaining
- Professional codes of practice.

### Freedom of speech

It is relevant to recall the Danish cartoons controversy – more accurately and tellingly the Danish caricatures controversy – in 2006.<sup>72</sup> No national

paper in the UK chose to reprint the caricatures. The reasons they gave for this decision reflected principles of responsible journalism that all UK media claim to be guided by and according to which they invite assessment, criticism and judgement. All agreed that freedom of speech is not absolute. In the words of a leader in the *Independent* (3 February 2006), 'there is no doubt that newspapers should have the right to print cartoons that some people find offensive... But there is an important distinction to be made between having a right and choosing to exercise it.' The same point was made by Gary Younge in the *Guardian* (4 February 2006): 'The right to freedom of speech equates to neither an obligation to offend nor a duty to be insensitive. There is no contradiction between supporting someone's right to do something and condemning them for doing it'. A leader in the *Daily Mail* (3 February 2006) said that 'while the *Mail* would fight to the death to defend those papers that printed the offending cartoons, it disagrees with the fact that they have done so'.

So under what circumstances, the question arises, is it appropriate for the media to exercise restraint, rather than to exercise their right of free speech? In relation to the Danish caricatures, UK newspapers in effect proposed three broad principles. First, there was a desire not to cause distress, insecurity and fear. The caricatures were hurtful to many people, particularly but not only to Muslims, and papers chose not to distress substantial numbers of their actual or potential readers. There was an element of commercial self-interest here, almost certainly, but the actual words used were to do with principles of respect, civility, courtesy and human concern. 'The cartoons are intended to insult Muslims,' said the *Sun*, 'and... [we] can see no justification for causing deliberate offence to our much-valued Muslim readers.'

'There is no merit in causing gratuitous offence,' said the *Independent*, 'as these cartoons undoubtedly do'. To present them [the caricatures] in front of the public for debate is not a value-neutral exercise,' said *The Times* (3 February). 'The offence destined to be caused to moderate Muslims should not be discounted.' 'We prefer,' said the *Telegraph*, 'not to cause gratuitous offence to some of our readers.' Freedom of speech, said the *Mail*, is 'a treasured characteristic of a civilised society. But great freedoms involve great responsibilities. And an obligation of free speech is that you do not gratuitously insult those with whom you disagree.'

Second, the principle of avoiding gratuitous offence was seen as particularly important with regard to people who are vulnerable to hate crimes on the streets and to discrimination and exclusion in employment and public life. People should have the right, said the *Independent*, 'to exist in a secular pluralist society without feeling as alienated, threatened



and routinely derided as many Muslims now do'. 'It would be senselessly provocative,' said the *Guardian* (3 February 2006), 'to reproduce a set of images, of no intrinsic value, which pander to the worst prejudices about Muslims.' In other European countries, incidentally, there was markedly less concern to avoid further distress to those who are already vulnerable and excluded. A group of French writers, for example, defended publication of the cartoons on the grounds that 'picking on the parish priest has long been a national sport'.<sup>73</sup> Anti-clericalism and anti-Muslim racism are extremely different from each other, not least with regard to the relative power and standing of those who are attacked.

In an article in the *Guardian*, the philosopher Onora O'Neill recalled that the concept of freedom of speech in newspapers derives in part from the work of J.S. Mill in the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> But in Mill's day, she continued, a free press was seen as the champion of the weak in the face of overweening governments, and as augmenting and giving voice to the powerless. It is less easy to justify the same freedom of expression being permitted to the immensely more powerful media organisations that dominate the modern world. She concluded:

'Once we take account of the power of the media, we are not likely to think that they should enjoy unconditional freedom of expression. We do not think that corporations should have unrestricted rights to invent their balance sheets, or governments to damage or destroy the reputations of individuals or institutions, or to deceive their electorates. Yet contemporary liberal readings of the right to free speech often assume that we can safely accord the same freedom of expression to the powerless and the powerful.'

Third, explicitly or implicitly, papers saw themselves as responsible for upholding standards of courtesy and respect, with a view to promoting thoughtful discussion in a diverse but inclusive society. 'Our restraint is in keeping with British values of tolerance and respect for the feelings of others,' said the *Telegraph*. 'The right to publish,' said the *Guardian*, 'does not imply any obligation to do so,' especially if putting that right to the test inevitably causes offence to many Muslims at a time when there is 'such a powerful need to craft a more inclusive public culture which can embrace them and their faith'. The limits to free expression, said Ziauddin Sardar in the *Independent on Sunday*, 'are to be found in the social consequences, the potential harm to others of an exercise of free speech.'<sup>75</sup> He continued:

'Tolerance is easy if there is nothing to offend. We become tolerant only when we defer to the sensitivities of those with whom we

profoundly disagree on matters we do not believe can or should be accepted. Forbearance is the currency of peaceful coexistence in heterodox society... Freedom of expression is not about doing whatever we want to do because we can do it. It is about creating an open marketplace for ideas and debate where all, including the marginalised, can take part as equals.'

The cartoons themselves, wrote Tariq Modood, developing this theme, were 'a trigger rather than the main issue'.<sup>76</sup> What was really at stake, he argued, was how to build and maintain an inclusive but diverse society. For Muslims, the underlying causes of anger surrounding the cartoons included 'a deep sense that they are not respected, that they and their most cherished feelings are "fair game". Inferior protective legislation, socio-economic marginality, cultural disdain, draconian security surveillance, the occupation of Palestine, the international "war on terror" all converge on this point. The cartoons cannot be compared to some of these situations, but they do distil the experience of inferiority and of being bossed around. A handful of humiliating images become a focal point for something much bigger than themselves.' Modood compared the responses of the UK press with those of papers elsewhere in Europe:

'Europe is having to choose which is more important, the right to ridicule Muslims or the integration of Muslims... While we [in the UK] could not be said to have made a decisive choice there is greater understanding in Britain about anti-Muslim racism and about the vilification-integration contradiction than in some other European countries. This is not to say that Muslim sensibilities must be treated as fixed. They too will rightly change and adapt to new contexts. The point is that this cannot be a one-way process. Civic integration and international interdependence – let alone anything as ambitious as a dialogue of civilisations – means that there has to be mutual learning and movement on both/all sides, not just the hurling of absolutes at each other. This is not just a matter of compromise but of multicultural inclusion.'

The non-publication of the cartoons in the UK, Modood concluded, is a sign of some progress. 'But we have only just begun on a long journey and the task of carrying our European Union partners with us makes it more uphill. The important thing is not to lose focus. If the goal is multicultural integration, then we must curb anti-Muslim racism and exercise restraint in the uses of freedom.'

The UK press has its faults, as earlier chapters in this report have shown. But at its best it understands that, as Modood put it, 'a handful of images can become a focal point for things much bigger than themselves'. It is

also arguably seen at its best at times of great crisis, for example immediately after the events in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, and in London on 7 July 2005. There are further notes on these below.

### 9/11 and 7/7

There was a clear possibility, on Tuesday 11 September 2001 and the ensuing days, that violent hatred of all Muslims in Britain would be whipped up. Phrases in email messages sent to the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) that week included: 'You don't belong here and you never will. Go back to fornicating with your camels in the desert, and leave us alone', 'Your religion is a joke', 'The US will soon kill many Muslim women and children. You are all subhuman freaks', 'I no longer have any respect for you. None at all. I am so sorry, but I just despise you and your cruel God. You are not people. Just get out of the UK', 'I have never considered myself to be a racist – but I am now... Your kind knows nothing but force... well you've sown the seed, now reap the whirlwind, you have woken us up to what you all stand for', 'What a vile evil race you load of Muslims are... Get out of my country now! England is for white civilised English people', 'Your satanic religion. We will kill you all... may Islam burn under US bombs.', 'The rest of the world will now join to smash the filthy disease infested Islam. You must be removed from Britain in body bags'.

There were literally hundreds of such messages. But the tone in the press was immensely more calm. The most striking example, arguably, was in the *Sun*. On Thursday 13 September there was a two-page editorial with the banner headline ISLAM IS NOT EVIL RELIGION. This, observed in due course by an academic specialist in ethics, 'was responsible journalism'.<sup>77</sup> The editorial declared:

'If the terrorists were Islamic fanatics [at that time it was suspected, but not yet known, that those responsible for the bombs had associations with Islam] then the world must not make the mistake of condemning all Muslims... The men who hijacked packed passenger planes and flew them into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon were evil. But the religion they practise is one of peace and discipline... The Muslims in Britain ARE British. They may have a different culture to most of us but they love this country and they respect democracy.'

In relation to 7 July 2005, a report from the European Monitoring Centre (EUMC) commented:

'The strong and united stand taken by the UK Government, police and community leaders, including leaders of the Muslim community, in

condemning both the bombings and any retaliation, has played a major part in preventing an anti-Muslim backlash. This joint action was decisive in countering a short-term and disturbing upsurge in anti-Muslim incidents in the immediate aftermath of the bombings. Such incidents have now dropped back to levels before the bomb attacks.<sup>78</sup>

The EUMC report noted further that the UK press ‘went to great lengths to report in a balanced and objective way, for instance by putting in focus Muslims as having been among the victims of the bombings’. In the immediate aftermath the press warned against a possible backlash and the hate crimes that followed in the wake of the attacks were given broad coverage. However, it noted too that ‘now that this initial coming together of different communities fades the problem of hostile coverage in parts of the media continues.’ The distorted and mischievous stories about banning Christmas and Christmas in order not to offend Muslims, described in Chapter 3, occurred within four months. The distorted coverage of the MCB and other such umbrella organisations, described in Chapter 5, occurred even sooner.

### **Dealing with anxiety**

‘In many influential circles in Europe,’ notes the political philosopher Bhikhu Parekh, ‘it is widely held that its over 15 million Muslims pose a serious and political threat.’ Several chapters in this report show how the threat is portrayed in the UK media. Parekh continues:

‘Sometimes this view is explicitly stated; more often it is implied or simply assumed. On other occasions it takes the form of an attack on multiculturalism for which Muslims are held responsible and which is a coded word for them. It cuts across political and ideological divides, and is shared alike, albeit in different degrees, by conservatives, fascists, liberals, socialists and communists.’

Parekh’s use of the concept of anxiety, rather than – for example – phobia, means that there can be measured reflection and deliberation around questions such as these:

- Is an anxiety rational and legitimate?
- Or is it based on insufficient or inaccurate information and misperception?
- Is anxiety correctly described by those who feel it?
- Or are the principal reasons for anxiety different from those which are advanced?
- If so, what are the real or additional reasons for an anxiety?

- Where misperception and wrong description exist, what factors influence this?

In the light of the answers to such questions there can be debate about sensible measures, as distinct from panicky, harmful or self-defeating measures, to remove or reduce anxiety.

Ethical responsibility for journalists lies in seeking to acknowledge and understand anxiety but in not pandering to it, and not inflaming it into panic. It is in competition with commercial responsibility, for consumers of the media enjoy a certain *frisson* of anxiety, rather as theatre-goers, cinema-goers, readers of fiction and poetry, and visitors to art galleries do. There are in consequence real ethical dilemmas in the reporting, selecting, editing and publishing of stories about relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims at the present time, whether in the UK or in the world more generally, and about the building and sustaining of a *modus vivendi*, a common life. In so far as the media get this wrong, they exacerbate the very conditions they seek to describe. An additional tension, as discussed above, arises from the fact that the ethical responsibility not to inflame co-exists with, and sometimes seems at odds with, the ethical responsibility to defend freedom of speech and expression.

### *Folk devils*

Do the media pander to fear in the general public and inflame it into panic? Or do they provide explanations and discussions which reduce fear, and which are likely to inform policies which will reduce or remove objective grounds for fear? It is relevant, in consideration of such questions, to recall the concept of moral panic.<sup>79</sup> To what extent and in what ways are Muslims the latest incarnations of folk devils in a lineage which since the 1950s has included also teddy boys, mods and rockers, punks, video nasties, recreational drug-taking, yardies, African-Caribbeans, welfare scroungers, dangerous dogs, teenage mothers, trendy teachers, asylum-seekers, Gypsies and travellers, and immigrants of many kinds?

Moral panics have some or all of the following features in common:

- the construction of folk devils seen as the embodiment of all that is negative, deviant and, in some cases, wholly evil
- criticism of officials in the civil service, local government and public services ('bureaucrats'), in churches and other voluntary sector organisations ('do-gooders' and 'bleeding hearts') and in academia ('ivory towers'), for not understanding the seriousness of threats by which society is apparently faced

- a linking together of apparently disparate threats, implying they have a single cause and all are symptoms of the same underlying malaise
- an increased sense of 'us' and 'them', with no similarities, commonalities or shared interests
- a strengthened sense of self-righteousness and moral indignation in the majority of the population
- exaggeration, distortion and sensationalism in the media – objective molehills are made into subjective mountains
- a pervasive sense of crisis and collective nightmare, 'one damn thing after another', and of social and cultural change out of control

and, as a consequence of all the above:

- appeals and greater support for more restrictive and punitive laws, and curtailments of civil liberties.

The Parekh report on the future of multi-ethnic Britain (2000) did not use the concept of moral panic. It did, however, maintain that all considerations of race, ethnicity and religious diversity nowadays should take place in the wider context of rapid social and cultural change, a process which many find disturbing, unsettling and threatening. It mentioned this in connection to seven interacting trends: globalisation; Britain's decline as a world power; the increasing importance of the European Union; devolution within the UK; the end of empire; the rapid advance of social and moral pluralism, linked to the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial and service economy; and postwar migration.<sup>80</sup> These were the underlying causes of malaise and unease, the report argued, not specific events, groups or communities. The latter are scapegoats and pretexts, not the underlying cause. Box 7.1 contains a slightly fuller summary of the seven fundamental causes of anxiety identified by the Parekh report.

### **Box 7.1 Seven sources of anxiety**

#### **Globalisation**

The growing interdependence of the world's major regions results from the rapid movement of global capital and investment, neoliberalism and deregulation of financial and other markets, the rise of multinational corporations, the spread of new information and communication technologies, the new cultural industries and global consumption patterns. One effect has been to weaken aspects of national sovereignty, the nation-state as an exclusive political focus, national economies, and the idea of nation as the guarantor of citizenship.

**The long-term decline in Britain's position as a world power**

Militarily, Britain is dependent on alliances for effective influence. She is no longer the centre of a worldwide empire and no longer leads in the technologies of the new global age. Overall, Britain has slipped to a position of a middle-ranking power. This has undermined her long-standing sense of the inevitability of British 'greatness'. There is widespread concern that Britain has lost its historical vocation, and the country is tempted to look back, nostalgically, to past glories.

**Britain in Europe**

This is part of an inevitable trend towards larger regional associations. However, the idea of an island people with an island destiny has been central to British national identity. Indeed, Britishness has been most effectively described negatively, in terms of what it is not – especially not 'European'. Euroscepticism is not so much a considered policy as gut nationalism, a last-ditch refusal to make any further concessions to foreignness.

**Devolution**

Many factors have conspired to stimulate pressure to devolve power from England to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The process is said to represent a loosening of ties, not a breaking of ancient bonds. However, as the new parliaments and assemblies flex their muscles, significant divergences between Westminster and how things are done elsewhere are developing. These inevitably weaken the centralised idea of a united kingdom. What symbolic glue can hold these increasingly autonomous entities together?

**The end of empire**

This is often described as the shedding of a burden whose time has passed. However, expunging the traces of an imperial mentality from the national culture, particularly those which involved seeing the white British as a superior race, is a much more difficult task. This mentality penetrated everyday life, popular culture and consciousness. It remains active in projected fantasies and fears about difference, and in racialised stereotypes of otherness.

**The rapid advance of social pluralism**

The shift from an industrial to a post-industrial and service economy has been accompanied by the breakdown in older class hierarchies, diminished respect for traditional sources of authority, shifting gender and sexual norms, erosion of the established cultural canon, more emphasis on individualism, hedonism and personalised ethics, greater sense of diverse religious and non-religious world views, and growing sense of moral relativism.

### Postwar migration

Migration is a worldwide phenomenon. It affects every metropolitan Western country, for all have needed influxes of labour from outside. It is also driven by globalisation, poverty, underdevelopment, natural disasters, famines and civil wars. Migration to Britain from the Caribbean, the South Asian subcontinent and Africa, and more recently Eastern Europe, has raised many questions about British identity and British institutions.

*source* Adapted and abridged from *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: the Parekh Report*, Profile Books 2000

### Religious literacy

There is an increasing need for people in public bodies, particularly those with leadership and senior management responsibilities, to be 'religiously literate'.<sup>81</sup> It is not unreasonable to expect the media to help develop this skill. A crude measure of the need is the number of stories in the media that mention the words Christian and Muslim. In the *Guardian*, the word Christian appeared 770 times in 1985; 1,221 times in 1995; and 2,341 times in 2005. The word Muslim appeared 408 times in 1985; 1,106 times in 1995; and 2,114 times in 2005.<sup>82</sup> A preliminary definition of religious literacy, for improvement and refinement, is offered as follows:

'skills in understanding and assessing religious statements and behaviour; discerning the difference between valuable and harmful aspects of religion and religions; appreciating religious architecture, art, literature and music without necessarily accepting all the beliefs that they express or assume; and making reasonable accommodation between people holding different religious and non-religious worldviews.'

The concept of religious literacy does not imply holding a set of distinctively religious beliefs, but to understanding the range of ways in which religion may affect a person's values and perspectives. It implies also that a religious tradition should be understood in its own terms, so far as is possible, not through templates and assumptions derived from another tradition. For example, it is religiously illiterate to suppose that imams in Islam have the same range of roles and responsibilities as clerics in Christianity. Also, it is illiterate to equate an attack on a bishop of the established church with an attack on a cleric in a marginalised community subject to racist violence. It was religiously illiterate, for example, for the group of French writers mentioned above, apropos the controversy about the Danish caricatures in early 2006, to defend them on the grounds that 'picking on the parish priest has long been a national sport.'<sup>83</sup>

Religious literacy also involves recognising that within every tradition there is a tension and conversation between pressures to maintain the



heritage and pressures to re-interpret it. It is religiously illiterate to suppose that all people with a strong commitment to a certain tradition have much the same orientation towards it. Further, religious literacy involves understanding the pressures in every tradition that lead to the emergence of 'fundamentalism' and 'extremism', and that may cause people to use religious discourse to justify, or try to justify, immoral acts.

When people 'religionise' a conflict by claiming a divine seal of approval for their own actions, their discourse has one or more of the following five functions: a) to justify actions and policies that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to justify; b) to motivate combatants to perform acts which they would otherwise be reluctant to perform; c) to provide solace and comfort for defeats, uncertainties, risks, dashed hopes and privations that would otherwise be intolerable; d) to mobilise tacit or active support amongst onlookers that would not otherwise be forthcoming; and e) to provide legitimacy for authority figures who would otherwise be distrusted or opposed. Claiming divine support for one's own side frequently involves demonising – more accurately, perhaps, satanising or devilising – one's opponents, and doing this with religious imagery and frames of reference.

In all religious traditions a distinction is made between 'true religion' and 'false religion'. Sometimes it seems easy to make the distinction, or minimally to recognise false religion when one sees it – planes flying into the Twin Towers, for example, or when true religion is equated cavalierly with 'us' and false religion with 'them'. But traditional teachings through the centuries have also stressed that telling the difference between true and false religion is seldom straightforward, for human capacities for self-deception, false security and unhealthy defences against anxiety seem limitless. 'We'd better acknowledge the sheer danger of religiousness,' wrote the Archbishop of Canterbury shortly after September 2001. 'It can be a tool to reinforce diseased perceptions of reality, a way of teaching ourselves not to see the particular human agony in front of us; or worse, of teaching ourselves not to see ourselves, our violence, our actual guilt as opposed to our abstract "religious" sinfulness. Our religious talking, seeing, knowing, needs a kind of cleansing.'<sup>84</sup>

Religious literacy is required in responsible journalism on issues relating to the subject matter of this report, the search for common ground between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is required also amongst certain individuals and groups in Muslim communities. A report published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2007 identified a range of factors which affect whether or not young British Muslims

become attracted to extremism and fundamentalism.<sup>85</sup> One of the factors was introduced as follows:

‘A lack of religious literacy and education appears to be a common feature among those that are drawn to extremist groups. The most vulnerable are those who are religious novices exploring their faith for the first time as they are not in a position to objectively evaluate whether ...[a] radical group represents an accurate understanding of Islam.’

The development of religious literacy in young Muslims is a task for Muslim organisations, including mosques, and is to do with leadership and scholarship. The Government can facilitate the task and the media arguably have a role in supporting it. The principal responsibility of the media, however, is to avoid putting obstacles in its way. The DCLG report indicated that other factors affecting whether someone becomes attracted to extremism include experiences of discrimination and blocked social mobility, and ‘the public devaluation and disparagement of Muslims and Islam’, which leads to feelings that they do not belong and are not wanted. In this connection, the media most certainly have a part to play, for it is they who give a platform for the public devaluation and disparagement. Journalists are unlikely to change their ways in this respect unless they too develop religious literacy.

### **Critical literacy**

‘Pupils need to be able to interpret reports,’ argues a consultation paper issued by the Department for Education and Skills, ‘and develop skills to interrogate and make judgements about how their meaning is constructed and conveyed. While different localities may have different contexts, the media, especially the press and TV, are universally available and afford all pupils opportunities to explore diversity and its representations. Critical literacy is crucial.’<sup>86</sup> It continues:

‘If you are white,... living in a white area, how do you relate what you see on the television to your idea of being British and the nature of British society? If you are black, how do you interpret programmes on AIDs and famine in Africa, or inner city issues in America? If you are Muslim, how do you cope with the barrage of media images about terrorism or the veil? Schools must play their part in recapturing the middle ground for groups who are misrepresented.’

Critical literacy in schools will involve interrogating news reports with questions such as those shown in Box 7.2.

## Box 7.2 Critical literacy

### 1 Generalisations

Are Muslims seen as basically all the same, or are they represented as being engaged in reflective disagreement and dialogue with each other, with a range of different views?

### 2 A plague on them all?

In so far as Muslims are seen as having disagreements with each other, for example between Shi'a and Sunni or between Sufi and Islamist, is the assumption that all are wrong, all as bad as each other? Or is there a much more nuanced and sensitive account of differences amongst Muslims, similar to the differences, deliberations and disagreements amongst non-Muslims?

### 3 Two kinds of Muslim?

Are Muslims divided into two broad categories, 'good Muslims' (hard-working, decent, law-abiding and 'moderate') and 'bad Muslims' (mixing religion with politics, inclined to extremism and terrorism, making unreasonable demands)? Or is the multi-faceted complexity of Islam, both in the present and the past, recognised and attended to?

### 4 Like or unlike?

Are Muslims seen as totally 'other', separate from the so-called West, or as both similar and interdependent, sharing a common humanity, a common set of aspirations and values, a common history and a common space? Are there stories in the media about 'ordinary' Muslims, people 'just like ourselves'?

### 5 Partners or enemies?

Are Muslims seen as an aggressive enemy to be feared, opposed and defeated, or as co-operative partners with whom to work on shared problems, locally, nationally and internationally?

### 6 Really religious?

Are Muslims seen as hypocritical in their religious beliefs and practices, using religion to justify things that cannot be justified, or simply to give themselves a sense of identity, or are they seen as sincere and genuine?

### 7 Identity as well as belief?

Are Muslims represented as all holding certain theological beliefs, essentially, or is it recognised that being a Muslim is for some people more to do with ethno-religious identity, or affiliation to a broad tradition and heritage, than with holding specific beliefs?

**8 Abusive language?**

Is immoderate language used, for example language that compares Muslims to animals, or that claims they are insane, or evil, or similar to people with severe medical conditions such as cancer and gangrene? Or are disagreement and criticism expressed with civility?

**9 Recognition of power differences?**

Is no account made of the fact that Muslims have far less access to the media than do non-Muslims, and are therefore at a competitive disadvantage on an uneven playing field? Or is unequal freedom of expression recognised?

**10 Attention to Muslim insights and arguments?**

Are Muslim criticisms of the so-called West rejected out of hand or are they considered and debated?

**11 Double standards?**

Are double standards applied in descriptions and criticisms of Islam and the so-called West, or are criticisms even-handed?

**12 Who gets to speak?**

Are Muslim voices sought out and quoted and is there a range of such voices? Are they given a fair hearing, or are they ridiculed or sidelined? And is it shown that many non-Muslims seek and express solidarity with Muslims on many issues?

**13 Common sense?**

Are anti-Muslim comments, stereotypes and discourse seen as natural and 'common sense', or as problematic and to be challenged?

**Complaints and complaining**

Up to a point, news organisations are susceptible to pressure and to complaints. All interested individuals and organisations should consider advice such as the following:

- Demand correction of factual errors. If complaining about the use of words, be prepared to suggest alternative terminology.
- If a paper has a readers' editor or ombudsman, then polite, factual, restrained letters and/or emails should be addressed to them. If not, then write direct to editors. Either way use the very tactics which papers use to get their message across – drip-drip-drip. Editors need to be told as often as possible where their papers are going wrong.

- The task is to ‘censure not censor’: don’t try to censor opinions, but engage in debate, for example through letters to the editor or directly to the writers concerned. Some editors and writers will respond positively, though with others it’s an apparent waste of time, particularly in the short term. However, there are examples of persistency paying off. It was as a result of constant pressure, for example, that the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) guidelines mentioned below were formulated.
- If you don’t get satisfaction write to the PCC, making sure that your letter addresses the specific points and criteria in the PCC’s code of practice. You may not get satisfaction in the short term but persevere, for editors and writers do not like being reported to the PCC and constant complaints may cause them to moderate their practice.
- Send copies of your complaint to friends and contacts. Instead or as well, post them on a website. In this way you help to build up a climate of opinion and help persuade others to complain as well.
- Bear in mind that effective complaining requires organisation, both to monitor what is published and to ensure that complaints are formulated in the best possible way.
- If you don’t get satisfaction from an editor or the PCC, consider approaching your MP or the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) The latter is keeping watch on the workings of press self-regulation, and providing the department with material may have future benefits.
- Editors can also be responsive to pressure from their own journalists. Forging alliances with individual reporters and writers may prove helpful, as might forming links with the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) at both national and local level. The NUJ’s executive membership and headquarters staff are very sympathetic to the plight of minorities ill-treated by newspapers. For example, the decision of the NUJ chapel at the *Daily Express* to complain to the PCC shows vividly there are journalists deeply unhappy at being required to write prejudicial articles.

The task of making complaints about distorted media coverage of Muslims should not be left to Muslims. Also – for example – church organisations should routinely make complaints, as should all organisations concerned with antiracism and race relations.

### **Codes of professional practice**

There is a common assumption in the media that newspapers, TV and radio are simply passive reflectors of the society on which they report, as opposed to active players in its culture and politics: ‘The media have an unwritten rule not to divulge their power,’ comments John Lloyd. ‘They

make and re-make the versions of the world with which we live – and yet when the news media represent the world, they largely excuse themselves from it'.<sup>87</sup> Or, as another observer puts it, journalists 'rarely write about themselves or their own political responsibilities, and they almost never write about the organisations and interests of the organisations they themselves write for'.<sup>88</sup>

In so far as the media do not acknowledge their own power, they refuse also to acknowledge the responsibility and accountability that go with power – whilst at the same time constantly insisting on their right, and indeed their duty, to scrutinise and hold to account all other power holders. Consequently, as Will Hutton put it in an article entitled 'Facts are free, opinion is sacred' in the *Observer*, 17 August 2003: 'Britain's least accountable and self-critical institutions have become the media'.

One way to promote accountability is through codes of practice.<sup>89</sup> In the period 2003-05 there were three significant reports on media treatment of asylum and refugee issues. These were respectively by a team at the University of Cardiff for Article 19,<sup>90</sup> Roy Greenslade for the Institute for Public Policy Research,<sup>91</sup> and the Information Centre on Asylum and Refugees for the GLA.<sup>92</sup> In addition, and partly in response to the reports, the PCC issued guidelines on this subject. Between them these reports made several recommendations that are also relevant, with appropriate modifications and additions, in relation to media treatment of British Muslims. Several examples are stated in Box 7.3.<sup>93</sup>

### **Box 7.3 Principles for a professional code of ethics**

Relentless repetition of negative stereotypes of Muslims is likely, particularly when couched in abusive and emotive language, to generate hostility towards Muslims amongst non-Muslims; in consequence, Muslims understandably feel vulnerable to hate crimes and to unlawful discrimination and there may, indeed, be more hate crimes and acts of discrimination than otherwise. Further, the drip-drip-drip consequence of such repetition is likely to lead to estrangement and alienation, and a disinclination to engage in mainstream politics and civic life.

The media have a duty to promote informed debate about the nature of multiculturalism. Distorted and inaccurate stories, such as those described in Chapter 3 of this report, do not contribute to such debate.

The media should pay more attention to obtaining and publishing a range of opinion amongst Muslims. By the same token, they should provide and publish the views and viewpoints of people who are not themselves

Muslims but have positive perceptions of Muslims based on first-hand and substantial experience of dialogue and shared projects.

There is a need in all media organisations for more Muslims to be employed, particularly in senior gatekeeper and supervisory functions. At the same time there must be attention to the experiences and perceptions of people of Muslim heritage who are already employed in the media, as described in Chapter 4 of this report.

Reporters, editors and sub-editors need convenient access to sources of reliable factual information. The British Council's *British Muslims Media Guide* should be widely distributed and available throughout media organisations and consideration should be given to requesting the British Council to re-create its contents as an interactive website, routinely updated.

The media should find opportunities to present Muslims as individuals whose stories are worth telling, rather than merely examples of a generic problem.

The PCC has issued valuable though non-binding guidance on the use of inaccurate terminology in reporting on asylum seekers and refugees, and the BBC has issued such guidance in relation to coverage of terrorism. Consideration should be given to providing guidelines on reporting of issues affecting Muslims, for example with regard to words such as fundamentalist, radical, jihad, Islamist, extremist and moderate. The publisher could be the PCC itself, or else the NUJ, or else individual papers within the context of their existing style guides. Central government could valuably give a lead by clarifying the vocabulary that it will itself use in official documents and statements.<sup>94</sup>

TV and radio are required by Act of Parliament to ensure their news coverage is balanced and fair. However, this requirement relates only to the way a specific story or topic is covered, not to how it is selected in the first place. Many stories selected for TV and radio are generated by items in the print media. The latter frequently and perhaps increasingly set the agenda for broadcasters, whose news items are in too many cases little more than follow-ups to newspaper stories, not wholly original. It is usual for broadcasters to interview people who take opposing views on a given subject, thus providing a greater measure of balance than in a popular paper. But the person putting a positive view of Muslims is all too frequently on the back foot, so to speak, having to react and respond to a negative agenda that has already been set, rather than being able to determine the topics and terms of debate themselves; and it is rare for broadcasters to question the factual accuracy of stories in the press.

In any case, the device of having two speakers, each putting their own point of view quite robustly, but not necessarily even listening to the other, let alone engaging with them, is not a recipe or a model for the kind of informed dialogue that is in fact required. That said, the public service media set standards of impartiality that the print media should consider emulating, particularly with regard to sensitive matters such as relationships in a multicultural society. However, broadcasters do not always observe the high standards that they set themselves, as demonstrated in Chapter 5 of this report. The approach of the BBC to impartiality is set out in Box 7.4.<sup>95</sup>

#### **Box 7.4 Public service journalism – the BBC’s commitments**

We seek to provide a properly balanced service consisting of a wide range of subject matter and views broadcast over an appropriate time scale across all our output. We take particular care when dealing with political or industrial controversy or major matters relating to current public policy.

We strive to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range and conflict of views so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under represented.

We exercise our editorial freedom to produce content about any subject, at any point on the spectrum of debate as long as there are good editorial reasons for doing so.

We can explore or report on a specific aspect of an issue or provide an opportunity for a single view to be expressed, but in doing so we do not misrepresent opposing views. They may also require a right of reply.

We must ensure we avoid bias or an imbalance of views on controversial subjects.

The approach to, and tone of, BBC stories must always reflect our editorial values. Presenters, reporters and correspondents are the public face and voice of the BBC, they can have a significant impact on the perceptions of our impartiality.

Our journalists and presenters, including those in news and current affairs, may provide professional judgments but may not express personal opinions on matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy. Our audiences should not be able to tell from BBC programmes or other BBC output the personal views of our journalists and presenters on such matters.



We offer artists, writers and entertainers scope for individual expression in drama, arts and entertainment and we seek to reflect a wide range of talent and perspective.

We will sometimes need to report on or interview people whose views may cause serious offence to many in our audiences. We must be convinced, after appropriate referral, that a clear public interest outweighs the possible offence.

We must rigorously test contributors expressing contentious views during an interview whilst giving them a fair chance to set out their full response to our questions.

We should not automatically assume that academics and journalists from other organisations are impartial and make it clear to our audience when contributors are associated with a particular viewpoint.

A report for the BBC in summer 2007 acknowledged that impartiality is a complex subject. It used a vivid metaphor to evoke what is involved:

‘Imagine twelve bottles on the alchemist’s shelf, with the following labels: Accuracy, Balance, Context, Distance, Evenhandedness, Fairness, Objectivity, Openmindedness, Rigour, Self-Awareness, Transparency and Truth. None of these on its own could legitimately be re-labelled Impartiality. But all the bottles are essential elements in the Impartiality compound, and it is the task of the alchemist, the programme-maker, to mix them in a complex cocktail.’<sup>96</sup>

Also in the print media these are the key components of responsible journalism, the key ingredients in each complex cocktail.

### Concluding note

In March 2007 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, declared that 'we urgently need a new approach to tackling the violent extremism that seeks to undermine our society and that this approach must be based as much on winning hearts and minds as on security measures'.<sup>97</sup> She said further that there 'must put a new emphasis on local solutions' and that 'our aim must be not just to stop people committing violence but also to challenge the ideologies that drive them'. She acknowledged that successive governments, including the one of which she was herself a member, 'have not always got this balance right'. Governments have put too much faith in action, she added, 'not enough in debate'. The purpose of the debate, she continued, would be to challenge, isolate and neutralise 'ideologies of hatred' amongst 'a tiny minority' of Muslims. She drew an analogy with the far right extremism – 'the British public rejects their ugly message'.

The stress on debate as well as action was and is welcome. The mainstream media – not just the Muslim media – will have a major role to play in it. The debate in the mainstream media will be disingenuous, however, if it assumes that hostility and suspicion towards Islam and Muslims are to be found only amongst a small minority of non-Muslims, the so-called far right. There needs also to be substantial debate about the prejudices and anxieties – sometimes amounting to panic – amongst non-Muslims. This will have to include consideration of how the mainstream media are by no means always responsible in the ways in which they treat the basic question underlying this report – 'common ground or certain conflict?'

If they are to contribute constructively to the debate, the mainstream media must put their own house in order. They need to be supported, encouraged and empowered in this by their readers, viewers and users.

### Principal recommendations

In the light of the discussions in this chapter, and in the report more generally:

- 1 News organisations should review their coverage of issues and events involving Muslims and Islam, and should consider drawing up codes of professional conduct and style guides about use of terminology. Such codes of professional conduct should be based on their own best practice.
- 2 News organisations should take measures, perhaps within the framework of positive action in equalities legislation, to recruit more journalists of Muslim heritage and to draw, when appropriate, on their experience and knowledge.
- 3 News organisations should consider also, however, how best to give Muslim staff appropriate professional support and to prevent them being pigeon-holed as specialists in minority issues rather than concerned with the full spectrum of an organisation's output.
- 4 Organisations, projects and programmes concerned with race relations should see and treat anti-Muslim hostility as a form of racism, and as serious as other forms of racism.
- 5 The new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) should focus explicitly on, amongst other concerns, combating anti-Muslim hostility and prejudice, both in society at large and in the media in particular.
- 6 The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) should give a higher profile to combating anti-Muslim hostility in the media and the general climate of opinion.
- 7 Both Muslim and non-Muslim organisations should complain more frequently and persistently about distorted coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media.
- 8 Consideration should again be given to amending the Press Complaints Commission's terms of reference in order that it can consider distorted and inaccurate coverage of groups and communities as well as of individuals.
- 9 Organisations and institutions concerned with education should give consideration to how they can develop a) critical media literacy and b) religious literacy in the programmes, courses and curricula that they provide.



## Appendix A: Dominant and alternative narratives

*Appendix A consists of slightly expanded versions of Boxes 6.3 and 6.4*

### **Muslims in Europe: components of the dominant narrative (Box 6.3)**

#### **1 Failure to integrate**

Muslims do not wish to integrate into European societies, but prefer to live in separate, self-segregated communities and neighbourhoods. Failure to integrate leads to failure in the educational system and failure to obtain economic well-being. There is in consequence much bitterness and a deep sense of alienation, a victim mentality, and a false, self-deceiving perception that mainstream society is unjust and Islamophobic. These feelings and perceptions then lead to additional failure in education and employment, and the vicious spiral continues.

#### **2 Unreasonable demands**

Muslims make unreasonable demands on European societies, expecting the Judeo-Christian traditions of these societies to be modified, changed or jettisoned so they won't be offended or inconvenienced. Amongst other matters, the demands are about dress codes in public places (particularly the *burqa*, which seems to symbolise antagonism to the state and to established customs of openness), the building of mosques in towns and cities, the use of community languages in public, the establishment of faith schools and after-school religious classes.

#### **3 Mixed loyalties**

Muslims in Europe owe their principal loyalty to the worldwide *Ummah*, not to the country where they live. They therefore cannot be depended on to support their country's foreign policies, or even its sports teams. In relation to international situations, for example in Iraq, Israel/Palestine and Afghanistan, they are a fifth column or enemy within

#### **4 Support for extremism**

The sense of alienation and lack of loyalty mentioned above combine to make Muslim communities in Europe a breeding ground for extremism. It's true that only a small minority of them actually engage in acts of violence but there is a general climate of tacit support and sympathy for extreme measures, whether these are committed within Europe or elsewhere. In well-known metaphors, 'ordinary' Muslims constitute the pond in which extremists swim, and the hinterland from which they emerge. All Muslims are on a single continuum at one end of which there is readiness to engage in terrorism.

### **5 Obscurantism**

Islamic theology has never gone through the kinds of critical review and reformation that were the hallmarks of the Enlightenment in Europe. Scriptures are not subjected to textual criticism; doctrines and moral teachings are not seen in historical context; multiple interpretations of a text are not acceptable; received tradition is paramount.

### **6 Incompatibility of values and interests**

Islam and the West are incompatible in terms of moral values and are locked in a zero-sum struggle for power and control. At the global level there is a clash of civilisations and at local levels Muslims and non-Muslims cannot live and work harmoniously and constructively together, other than in relatively superficial ways. Muslims subvert local democracy: in Britain's northern cities, for example, through manipulating *biraderi* kinship networks. They are misogynist and homophobic, use repressive educational methods in their mosques and madrasahs, and are opposed to all things Western.

### **7 Lack of Muslim leadership**

Religious leaders such as imams, and secular leaders such as office-holders in Muslim organisations, are out of touch with the people they are supposed to guide and represent, particularly young people. They are insufficiently vocal and proactive in condemning extremism and in encouraging integration into mainstream society. Some even glorify extremism and terrorism. All or most are in denial about the presence and growth of extremism in their communities and do not see that theirs is the principal responsibility for removing it. The few who might be inclined to speak out on these issues are in fact frightened to do so, because of the opposition they would encounter from most other Muslims.

### **8 Corroborating evidence from overseas**

The perceptions listed above are about Muslims *within* Europe. They gain additional persuasiveness and plausibility, however, from how Muslims *outside* Europe behave – their hatred of the West, abuse of human rights, use of barbaric punishments, intolerance of debate and disagreement, glorification of martyrdom, antisemitism, plans to create a world-wide caliphate, obscurantist religion, and support for terrorism and insurgency. These features of Muslim societies and cultures combine with beliefs that they are culturally and morally superior to the West, which they see as corrupt, shallow, and in need of being converted to, and reshaped in accordance with, Islam.

## **9 Weak national government**

The threats posed by Muslims, outlined above, are made even more serious by the failures of successive European governments, and by metropolitan intelligentsias, particularly in London. In the 1950s and 1960s governments did not foresee the dangers of permitting immigration from cultures so different from their own. More recently, governments have consistently failed to police and protect their borders effectively and do not appreciate the severe dangers posed by Islam in general and Islamism in particular. They have also failed to insist on full assimilation and integration, while promoting multiculturalism, political correctness, cultural relativism and the nanny state. Some of these failures have been exacerbated by the human rights legislation which governments have introduced against the interests of Europe's majority populations. The overall effect has been to appease Muslims rather than to oppose and control them.

## **Muslims in Europe: components of alternative narratives (Box 6.4)**

### **1 Barriers to integration**

The vast majority of Muslims in western Europe would like to be fully integrated – though not culturally assimilated – in the economic and political affairs of west European societies. They are prevented from integrating, however, by a wide range of factors, as summarised in points 2 to 5 below.

### **2 Material disadvantage**

Most Muslims in western Europe are people who came to meet labour shortages, or their children or grandchildren. The jobs they were recruited to fill were often poorly-paid, dirty and in labour-intensive industries. Material disadvantage has been compounded by the collapse of many of the industries for which they were originally recruited and by extensive hostility – including racist attacks on the streets and direct and indirect discrimination in employment and the provision of services. Multiple hardships and handicaps continue, as do violence and discrimination, despite new legislation against them.

### **3 Negativity in the media and the general climate of opinion**

Media coverage of Muslims, particularly but not only in the press, is almost entirely negative and hostile – when, that is, there is any coverage at all. Specifically, the media present a sense that: all or most Muslims are the same; they are different from non-Muslims; they are culturally inferior; they are a threat to the European societies where they are settled; and they do not and will not ever truly belong. The media frequently or typically make these claims with language that is abusive and offensive. They seldom give a Muslims a voice and a fair hearing, and

seldom permit alternative views of Muslims and their situation in Europe to be presented.

#### **4 Foreign policy**

Much of UK foreign policy works to the disadvantage of Muslims overseas. Examples include the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, support for the government of Israel in its dealings with Palestinians and Lebanon, insufficient criticism of the US creation of Guantanamo Bay, and exploitation of natural resources, particularly oil, in Muslim countries.

#### **5 Policing**

Since 9/11, and even more so since 7/7, many Muslims encountered, experience, either personally or indirectly through friends and family, heavy-handed and insensitive policing, often in public places or the media glare. Many Muslims acknowledge that action against extremism needs to be taken, but it need not be at the expense of casually humiliating and alienating large numbers of people, particularly young people.

#### **6 Establishing a presence**

Despite the substantial barriers to integration mentioned in points 2 to 5 above, Muslims have established a strong presence throughout western Europe. Mainly through self-help, but also with support from sympathetic non-Muslims and finance from overseas, there is a flourishing Muslim civil society, built around mosques, cultural centres and local welfare projects, and involving the creation of a range of representative bodies at national, regional and local levels. There are increasing numbers of Muslim professionals in business, medicine, politics and government.

#### **7 Commonalities and interdependence**

Western and Islamic values are not incompatible. For example, the objectives (*maqasid*) and essential interests (*masaleh daruriyah*) of the Shariah (Islamic Law) – namely, the development of individuals, social justice and communities through the protection of life, intellect, religion, family and wealth – are little different from the deeper values and principles that underpin European human rights law, as captured in the European Convention of Human Rights. Islam originated from the same part of the world from which both Christianity and Judaism originated. There is nothing intrinsic to Islam, whether in belief, values or practice, that is not already there either in Christianity or Judaism. Also, the three traditions have developed interdependently with each other, not separately, with much mutual borrowing and enrichment.



### **8 International contacts**

British Muslims speak many languages, have strong connections with other parts of the world and are familiar with a range of different cultures. If this resource is harnessed properly, it could assist greatly in taking British brands to new markets and sustaining Britain's economic edge in the face of rising economic competition from different parts of the world. By the same token, British Muslims could have a crucial role to play in international diplomacy. Developments in Europe in Islamic theology and ethics have the potential to affect and enrich other religious traditions (and also, incidentally, Islamic theology and jurisprudence worldwide) and to contribute to the common good.

### **9 Self-criticism**

Muslims accept that some of the criticisms made of them by others are legitimate – the criticisms are not necessarily instances of Islamophobia. They are ready to debate these, both with others and internally amongst themselves. Appropriate self-criticism is difficult or impossible, however, within the wider context of hostility and suspicion listed in points 2 to 5 above.



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## Endnotes

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- 36 Full information can be found at [www.mcb.org.uk](http://www.mcb.org.uk).
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