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ONE YEAR AFTER: THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN GREAT BRITAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WTC TRAGEDY¹

On September 11, 2001 in front of the incredulous eyes of the world, the twin towers of New York collapsed burying thousands of innocent people below the rubble as well as the sense of civilized life in a great city. That day, the unimaginable became reality.

Peter Skinner (2002) *WTC: The Giants that Defied the Sky*.

More than a year has elapsed and the civilised world has not forgotten the sudden death of thousands of people caused by the kamikaze attack on the **World Trade Center** – one of the monuments of American civilisation and economy. As the attack was planned and executed by the extreme circles of Muslim fundamentalists it might be interesting to set this terrorist act in the broader context. In particular, I would like to concentrate on the position of Islam in Europe and especially the Muslim community in Great Britain. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to tackle the issue of the relation of Islam to other religious denominations in the United Kingdom. Finally, I will point to certain prospects for the future of Islam in Great Britain, which – it should be mentioned and remembered – is commonly regarded as one of the most tolerant countries in the world.

As to Islam in Europe, according to the recent statistics the number of practising Muslims living in the territory of Europe is about 15 million, 2 million of which live in Great Britain. It is interesting to note that the greatest number of

¹ I would like to take this opportunity and express my wholehearted gratitude to **Dr Annabelle Mooney** of the *University of Cardiff*, who made a number of valuable constructive comments pertaining to this text.

Muslims live in France (5 million) and Germany (3.2 million).² As historians point out the story of Islam in Europe is a story of immigration. In short, during the Continent's reconstruction after the Second World War, Britain and France turned to their former colonies in South Asia and North Africa to supply their labour shortages, while Germany opened its doors to **guest workers** from Turkey. Attracted by the quickly developing economy of the re-born Germany, most of these guests never went home again, and their children were born and grew up as Europeans. Today, the Muslim communities in these three countries are the biggest in Europe.

Of course, the followers of Islam in Europe face the challenge of reconciling their faith with the realities of contemporary European life. Especially after the events of September 11 this issue has been given new urgency. In particular, it seems that European Muslims must now redefine Islam in the context of their identities as believers who were born and brought up in Europe. As the result of this one can speak about the rise and growth of what may be referred to as **Euro-Islam**, based on the Koran, yet bearing innovations that must be ultimately marked as **Western**, such as the values of broadly-understood tolerance, democracy and civil liberties.

When we narrow our perspective to the United Kingdom we see that Britain in the 21st century is both a multicultural and a multi-faith society in which everyone has the right to religious freedom. Each religious organisation may conduct their rites and ceremonies, promote their beliefs within the limits of the existing legal system, own property and run schools. As for the Muslim society, it has existed in the United Kingdom ever since Muslim seamen and traders from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent settled around the major ports in the early 19th century. There was also further settlement of those who were released from military service in the British army after the First World War, and another wave consisting of workers who were seeking employment in the British mills and factories in the 1950s and 1960s because of a shortage of labour following the Second World War. More recently, Muslims from Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovo have sought refuge in the United Kingdom.

As *Britain 2001* – the official yearbook of the United Kingdom – informs us, there are over 1000 mosques and numerous Muslim centres throughout the United Kingdom.³ Not only are mosques places of worship but also they offer instructions in the Muslim style of life and provide facilities for education and welfare. For example, the first mosque in the United Kingdom was established in Woking, Surrey in 1890, and until the year 1997 two Muslim primary schools have been approved in Birmingham and London.⁴ Interestingly enough, there are

² The statistics here is quoted after Le Quesne (2001:47).

³ See *Britain 2001* (2000:242).

⁴ See *Britain 2001* (2000:236).

as many Muslims, per head of population, as native whites in Britain's universities. Taking mosques into account, they now range from converted buildings in many British towns to the **Central Mosque** located in Regent's Park in London, and its associated **Islamic Cultural Centre** which is one of the most important Muslim institutions in the western world. It is worth stressing that the Central Mosque has the largest congregation of every minority ethnic community in the United Kingdom, and during the festivals it may number thousands of believers.

Moreover, in 1997 the Muslim community in Great Britain founded the **Muslim Council of Britain**, which constitutes a representative body of established national and regional Muslim organisations. The main aim of the Council is to promote co-operation with other faiths as well as consensus and unity on Muslim affairs in the United Kingdom. Among other representative bodies one should also mention the **Union of Muslim Organisation** which has been set up to co-ordinate social, cultural, economic and functional aspects of Muslim life in the United Kingdom. However, despite the fact that the Muslim community seems to grow in power, for the moment their political representation is relatively small. Notice that with the Muslim population of about 2 million Britain has only two Muslim MPs in its Parliament.

The Church of England together with other churches in Great Britain seeks to build up good relations with people of other faith traditions and to co-operate with them where possible in every service to society. Among others, the Church of England is a member of the **Churches' Commission for Inter Faith Relations**, as well as the so-called **Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom**,⁵ the latter of which works to build good relations between the major faiths in Britain, such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, etc. The advisers working on the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom provide specialist advice and encouragement for church leaders of different faiths. Among other activities, they organise help for the homeless, issue urban regeneration schemes, exchange seasonal greetings, combat misinformation and prejudice about other faiths and organise meetings to share experiences in trust, friendship and prayer. It is believed here that the British example is the one that should be followed by other multi-cultural and multi-faith countries, especially in the context of the process of crystallising of multi-national, multi-cultural and multi-religious body called **European Union**.

Recent tragic events of September 11 and the response in the legal sphere have added new dimensions to consideration of definitions of religions. While these issues were relevant previously, the determined action of Western governments in particular has thrown them suddenly into relief. And so, the British government issued a consultation paper on reforming United Kingdom

⁵*About the Church of England.* www.interfaith.org.uk

terrorism legislation.⁶ Though a response to the situation in Northern Ireland, it has been extended to have an international remit.⁷ Following this, the **Terrorism Act 2000** was passed adopting, among other things, a new definition of terrorism and, thus, a new attitude to terrorist acts.⁸

One cannot help feeling that unlike Christian religion, the faith of British Muslims seems to be getting stronger, which appears to be paradoxical especially in the face of the events of September 11th, 2001. First of all, British Muslims turn out to be consolidating more and more; they are not only praying more but also attending mosques more frequently and observing the strict rules of Ramadan. Secondly, as noted by Le Quesne (2001:47), the increased devotion is particularly visible among university students and women who today are wearing the **hijab** more often than was the case 10 years ago. Also, it may be no coincidence that Muslim leaders in the United Kingdom have not condemned the terrorist attacks on America. **Margaret Thatcher**, the former Prime Minister pointed out this fact when she said that:

*The people who brought down these towers were Muslims and Muslims must stand up and say that is not the way of Islam. They must say it is disgraceful. I have not heard enough condemnation from Muslim priests.*⁹

Muslims and other minority groups have recently welcomed a new governmental proposal to establish anti-discrimination law. The aim of this law would be to prevent and punish religiously motivated discrimination, hatred and crime. In October 2001 Tony Blair's government wanted to stop bigots from exploiting the current global crisis connected with the terrorist attacks on **World Trade Center** to stir up hatred. He said *Fair comment is not at risk, only the incitement to hate*.¹⁰ This may have been the official response to the increased

⁶ See Edge (1999:194).

⁷ See Edge (1999:194).

⁸ Most notably, the **Terrorism Act** includes a new definition of terrorism.

(1) In this Act **terrorism** means the use or threat of action where:

(a) the action falls within subsection (2),

(b) the use or threat is designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and

(c) the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.

(2) Action falls within this subsection if it:

(a) involves serious violence against a person,

(b) involves serious damage to property,

(c) endangers a person's life, other than that of the person committing the action,

(d) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public, or

(e) is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system.

(3) The use or threat of action falling within subsection (2), which involves the use of firearms or explosives, is terrorism whether or not subsection (1)(b) is satisfied.

⁹ *How Muslim leaders responded to September 11*. www.theguardian.com.uk

¹⁰ *Britain Takes On Religious Hatred*. www.theguardian.com.uk

harassment and violence, which Muslims have suffered in many countries including Great Britain. However, while many British civil liberties groups would support new anti-discrimination laws – and most would back the incitement to racial hatred ban – they are nervous about the government getting involved in debates over religion.

Another development that seems to be taking place among Muslims in the United Kingdom pertains to the nature of marriage. In Britain increasing number of young women are resisting arranged marriages because they want to choose their husbands. Additionally, under Islamic law, a man is permitted to have up to four wives, which creates a great problem for British law because it rises the question of whether minorities have the right to follow their own customs or should conform to established traditions. In general, in spite of the general tolerance, which is the axis of British democracy, there is a fair amount of intolerance towards Muslims. In France, there have been cases of schoolgirls being expelled from French schools for wearing the hijab, while in Britain Muslims are twice as likely to be unemployed as other citizens. Muslims in Great Britain, apart from facing unemployment, seek equality in the political representation in local and national governments. Thus, as reported by the **British Council of Britain**¹¹ the most important task of South Asians is to fight against racial discrimination and religious prejudices.

King (2001:39) maintains that British people in the years to come will go about their lives as normal regardless of the looming terrorism and the possible repercussions it may have in Great Britain since doggedness, patience and certain stoicism remain the basic British virtues. According to the same author, there will not be any significant change in Britain's attitude towards their Muslim neighbours. While Americans see Islam as foreign and alien, Britons regard it as domestic, as the British Empire used to be a great Islamic power with tens of millions of Muslims who were British subjects in Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Nigeria, the Sudan, India, etc. The Muslim population in the United Kingdom is very much varied. For example, East London Muslims as well as the ones from Northern former cotton towns such as Bradford and Oldham, for the time being remain poor, but some of them are millionaires. Although racial tension must, and I assume will, flare up from time to time, yet most Britons, in their casual manner, will continue to regard their Muslim neighbours as unproblematic. Many polls, including those taken after September 11th, show most Britons think Muslims have fitted well into British society and few imagine that British Muslims are terrorist sympathisers. This happens to be the case because Islam is perceived as a peaceful religion. One may predict that the war against terrorism will continue at an accelerated tempo, but in Britain it will certainly not be a holy civil war.

¹¹ *The Muslim Council of Britain*. www.mcb.org.uk/phd.html

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