

Between Nation and Umma: Muslim Loyalty in a Globalizing World

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It has become commonplace to suspect the loyalties of British Muslims, and all the more so after the London bombs last year. British Muslims are constantly asked to deny their alleged sympathies for terrorism. Their feelings of Islamic solidarity are thought to equal at best indifference or at worst hostility to patriotism. Although there has been a more concerted intellectual and cultural engagement with British Muslims in the last few years, it is unsurprising that, on balance, being under the spotlight of scrutiny has created a polarised reaction. Opinion polls indicate that more Muslims than ever before have considered migrating,¹ and that their feelings about their sense of Britishness appear to be quite divided.² This intense examination has provoked a sharp discussion among British Muslims about identity and belonging. Generally, however, public debate has been slow to pick up on the insight that has become almost clichéd in the social sciences, namely, that collective public identities work to either fuse or divide the multiple and contextualized identities that we all carry around with us as part of the complex business of being human.³

It is therefore not so surprising that British Muslims seem to face the stark choice of being either “British” or “Muslim”, or, more subtly, being a “British Muslim” in an culturally-approved way. In its bluntest and most unanswerable form, the question being asked today is whether the *umma* or the nation comes first. It is predictable, then, that the insistence upon an overriding attachment to the *umma* and its suffering has become central to the sense of self-identity of British Muslims who feel excluded from and marginalized in wider society. This finds expression as a reductive notion of *umma* solidarity, provoked and shaped by the news cycle in the mass media. This collective identity, hardly rooted in transcendent values, appears as an epiphenomenon of systems of human representation. In such an agonistic maelstrom, arguments about integration, and developing a sense of national identity, are thought either to be self-interested or disloyal to the universalising bond of faith.

Part of the reason for these perceptions is the legacy of a way of thinking still shaped by the struggle against imperial European nationalisms and the stultifying authoritarianism of secular nationalist governments, particularly in the Arab world.⁴ For British Muslims as for minorities elsewhere, the traditional rationale has been a contractarian one, which rationalises compliance to the laws of the

¹ 63 per cent of respondents in a Guardian/ICM poll, 26th July 2005.

² In a Telegraph/YouGov poll (23rd July 2005) British Muslims described their feelings for their country as “very loyal” (46 per cent), “fairly loyal” (33 per cent) and “little or no loyalty at all” (18 per cent).

³ E.g., P. Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas Among Manchester Muslims* (Oxford: James Curray, 2002), Chapter 2.

⁴ A. El-Affendi, “On the State, Democracy and Pluralism” in S. Taji-Farouki and B. M. Nafi (eds.), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 172-194.

land in return for the provision of basic freedoms.⁵ European Muslim intellectuals have already embarked upon the re-expression of this traditional legal vision into the calculus of Islamic citizenship in a liberal democracy,⁶ mirrored by a shift among Islamist movements in Britain towards civic participation and engagement from the 1980s onwards.⁷

But this tradition of principled and cautious engagement within legal and moral norms was undermined (if never supplanted) in Britain by the global rise of Wahhabism. For the most part, its doctrine of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* (glossed as “loving or hating for the sake of God”) was understood primarily in theological terms as the rejection of unbelief (*kufur*) and as loyalty to correct belief (*'aqida*). It was manifested as a sectarian polemic against the “deviant” Sunni majority, as isolation from a non-believing wider society, and as loyalty to the “rightly-guided” Muslims. In the 1990s, *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* gained a harder political edge with the spread of the idea of global jihad, developed by the “Afghan” Arabs in the 1980s, directly inspired by the anarchist movements of 1970s Egypt like al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra and the Jihad Group. In its political form, *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* was linked to the concept of *tawhid al-hakimiyya* (the unity of governance), relating to the judgement that a Muslim leader who does not rule by the entirety of the *Shari'a* was an infidel who should be overthrown, by violent means if necessary. Its most infamous method was attacking “the far enemy” (the West and its allies outside of Muslim countries) in order to create the conditions in which Muslim governments could be overthrown.⁸ In Britain, the linkage between credal purity and questions of political loyalty was also strengthened by the rising influence of Hizb ut-Tahrir, who emphasised the need to work for the reestablishment of the caliphate as the responsibility of every Muslim, a duty arising out of faith itself, over “unjustified” and disloyal nationalist modalities of engagement.

During the 1990s, a vocal jihadi minority in Britain, all of whom were at some point theologically Salafi in outlook, like Omar Bakri Mohammed, Abu Hamza, Abdullah al-Faisal and Abu Qatada, were able to set the terms of intra-Salafi debate, even if the majority of British Salafis held to a non-political view of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'*.⁹ After 9/11, however, British Salafism as a whole moved sharply away from *al-wala' wa'l-bara'*, in both its theological and political forms, towards engagement, a process led by the largest Salafi grouping, Jam'iyat Ihya' Minhaj al-Sunna. Similarly, the pragmatism of young British Muslims has forced Hizb ut-Tahrir, particularly in the last four years, to re-engage with grassroots community issues. Additionally, the Party had begun, even before 7/7 and the subsequent

⁵ For a recent restatement of this see Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, “Muslims Living in Non-Muslim Lands” (1999), available at http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/shariah/muslims_in_non_muslim_land.htm and elsewhere.

⁶ Most notably T. Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ A perceptive overview is provided by S. McLoughlin, “The State, ‘new’ Muslim leaderships and Islam as a ‘resource’ for public engagement in Britain” in J. Cesari and S. McLoughlin (eds.) *European Muslims and the Secular State* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 55-69.

⁸ The majority of contemporary jihadis have preferred, unlike al-Qaeda, to operate within national confines see Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why the Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁹ J. Birt, “Wahhabism in the United Kingdom: Manifestations and Reactions” in Madawi al-Rasheed (ed.) *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2005), 168-184.

threat of proscription under anti-terrorism legislation, to work co-operatively with other community organisations, dropping their confrontational style of the early 1990s.

It is the nature of this relationship between theology and our sense of national loyalty and belonging that this essay seeks to explore, as the legacy of the radical 1990s fades away. It aims to ask how, beyond contract and duty, can a sense of national belonging find a rationale within our tradition? This is an admittedly difficult task when coping with cultural disdain, social exclusion and anti-terrorism measures. And it will not be enough to envision “multicultural citizenship”, based on commonalities as well as differences and on a genuine cultural interchange of mutual enrichment, without an under-girding sense of “plural Britishness” to provide duty with its motive force.¹⁰

It is helpful to reflect on these issues by returning to an earlier debate in India during the 1930s about nationalism and Islam, as Muslim intellectuals struggled to decide what kind of nation, alongside the related question of what kind of state, should emerge once independence from the British was achieved. Iqbal (1877-1938), the poet-philosopher, insisted in his mature thinking that the basis of a nation (*qaum*) could only be credal (*mazhab*), two notions conjoined together in the terms, *umma* and *millat*, which Iqbal equated with religious nation or society. After a first-hand experience of European nationalism during his doctoral studies, Iqbal was convinced that it could not avoid racism and imperialism as a consequence of turning a natural love of country (*vataniyat*, or patriotism) into a political ideology (nationalism or *qaumiyat*). Interestingly Iqbal’s sense of Indian patriotism was linked in his poetry to a love of India’s landscape and not political allegiance to an imagined history defining a discrete territory as demanded by nationalism. The basis of solidarity would be found instead in religious law, although Iqbal did not conceive of this in the traditional scholastic sense or in the ideological form later advocated by Mawdudi.¹¹ Iqbal, in a letter to Nehru in 1936, encapsulates perfectly well the Muslim distrust of nationalism expressed in various ways down the decades of the twentieth century:

Nationalism in the sense of love of one’s country and even readiness to die for its honour is a part of a Muslim’s faith: it comes into conflict with Islam only when it begins to play the role of a political concept and claims to be the principal of human solidarity demanding that Islam should recede to the background of a mere private opinion and cease to be a living factor in the national life.¹²

¹⁰ T. Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005). This is also not to ignore the crucial point made that loyalty and belonging only become possible in an environment of acceptance and inclusion see M. S. Seddon, D. Hussain and N. Malik (eds.) *British Muslims: Loyalty and Belonging* (Markfield: Islamic Foundation, 2003) and their other collection, *British Muslims between Assimilation and Segregation: Historical, Legal and Social Realities* (Markfield: Islamic Foundation, 2004).

¹¹ F. Shaikh, “*Millat and Mazhab: Rethinking Iqbal’s Political Vision*” in M. Hasan and A. Roy (eds.), *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 366-388.

¹² *Ibid.*, 378.

Iqbal did at least have a point about the quasi-metaphysical claims of nationalism. While it has never made sense to talk of “my religion, right or wrong”, religion being the source of eternal goodness, as one might say of one’s nation, nonetheless the badness of nations is usually held to be only temporary. The goodness of nations lies more in intra-historical secular time, as opposed to the transcendence of religion: the obligation and duty towards future unborn nationals, the puritan rigour of nationalist movements, the association of pure patriotism with children, and the innocence of the national dead.¹³ In his later poetry, Iqbal expressed this view that the transcendent bond of faith could not find realisation in other more mundane expressions of solidarity; in his poetic vision he preferred the sky-bound eagle to the earthbound nightingale.¹⁴ The immanentist claims of the nation to goodness could never be accepted.

Others were less satisfied than Iqbal with such theoretical musings. Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani (1879-1958), the Rector of the famous seminary at Deoband and one of the leading figures in the struggle for independence, favoured a traditionalist pragmatism on the basis that “politics is not resolved through philosophy”,¹⁵ and he recognised that constitutionalism, pluralism and democracy were the political currency of his day. This did not mean, however, that his stance was not without scriptural writ. In his appeal to the Qur’an, Prophetic tradition and Arabic lexicography, Madani makes an authoritative and clear distinction between *millat* and *qaum*. *Millat* refers to religion (*din*) or religious law (*Shari`a*) or way of life, regardless of its truth or falsehood, whereas *qaum* refers to a group of men or a group of men and women, whether they are believers or not, provided that there is a point of commonality between them. This point of commonality may be linguistic, cultural, territorial or based on descent.¹⁶ Similarly *umma* in scriptural and classical Arabic retains a sense similar to that of *qaum*, and need not be strictly linked to Abrahamic monotheism, as Iqbal argued.¹⁷ And while the universal bond of Islamic solidarity remains paramount,¹⁸ at the same time, the Covenant of Medina describes the Muhajirun, the Ansar and the Jewish tribes of the Prophet’s City as one nation or community (*al-umma al-wahida*).¹⁹ Madani argues on this basis that:

The gist of my argument is that the Prophet brought together Muslims and Jews into one “nation” to fight against their enemies. [...] Moreover in the covenant the word *umma* (followers) was used instead of *qaum* (nation), and it said that Muslims and Jews should be considered as one nation as against those who are not included in the covenant. [...] If Muslims cannot form a nation with non-Muslims, if Islam does not permit it...then how was

¹³ B. R. Anderson, “The Goodness of Nations” in P. van der Veer and H. Lehmann (eds.) *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton: University Press, 1999), 197-203.

¹⁴ Shaikh, 378-380.

¹⁵ B. D. Metcalf, “Reinventing Islamic Politics in Interwar India: The Clergy Commitment to ‘Composite Nationalism’” in Hasan and Roy (eds.), 389-403, quotation at 399.

¹⁶ H. A. Madani, *Composite Nationalism and Islam [Muttahida Qaumiyat aur Islam]*, translated by A. H. Hussain and H. Imam (Delhi: Manohar, 2005 [1938]), 76-77, 79-80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85-90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90-96, 102-106.

¹⁹ A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1990 [1955]), 232.

it that the Prophet formed a composite *umma* with the Jews? [...] This proves that *muttahida qaum* (a nation united) irrespective of people being free to pursue their different religions is possible, and that they too can be considered [part of the] Muslim *umma*.²⁰

Madani's argument has a powerful resonance for current debates among British Muslims. It does much to provide the rationale for a sense of loyalty and belonging to a multicultural state in the difficult throes of expanding notions of plural Britishness, the frontier of which is currently measured against the Muslim community and the public role of Islam in Britain's secular liberal democracy. It is the crucial insight that the Qur'an defines *qaum* and even *umma* in non-religious terms, and recognises the fact of extra-religious bonds as the basis of political co-operation, which provides the grounds for engaged Islamic multicultural citizenship.

This argument is certainly not an abstruse consideration given that, in the recent past, the most widely projected—if neither the wisest nor most common—voices have stood firmly against the idea of loyalty to Britain, even against the sort of loyalty informed by the “critical citizenship” that defines the new generation of British Muslims. At a conference I attended on Islamophobia in 2005, a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir suggested to the largely non-Muslim audience that Muslims had no need “to feel British”. Although I challenged him on that point in the panel discussion, after the event, when he predictably described the argument for patriotism as dangerous, he did more perceptively add that the idea of nationalism was “old hat” in a globalising world.

This is an argument that deserves attention, for many have hailed the imminent passing away of the Westphalian order, or the idea of mutual recognition of the autonomy of sovereign states. Since around 1970 or so, the ideological and practical dominance of neoliberalism (the doctrine that “market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action”) has unleashed a deterritorializing logic of global capital that is undermining the territorializing logic of nation-states.²¹ Even if the largest economies in the world retain some ability to ameliorate the dispersal of global capital, and to order “deregulation” to their advantage, nonetheless, even in a prosperous Britain, the cultural and political after-effects are noticeable.

The proposal to underpin an expanded definition of multicultural liberalism that allows for greater cultural diversity with a more inclusive sense of national belonging faces a serious challenge from several large-scale processes resulting from the reordering of global markets. These include:

²⁰ Madani, 114.

²¹ D. Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

- (i) The advocacy of a form of cultural globalisation, pushed for by global elites, presented as a “virtuous deracination”,²² who champion open borders, and are less interested by nationalism and instead argue for new sorts of regional and global reordering, like the simultaneous expansion of the European Union alongside devolution in Scotland and Wales, which has led to a cultural revival of Englishness, the inclusiveness of which is still ambiguous.
- (ii) The commodification of cultural meaning communicated through the mass media, placing identities of consumption at the centre and weakening civic and nationalist discourses that are primarily mediated through local and national state institutions.
- (iii) The further regulation of private life and civil society by the modern state that, in muddying the classic public-private distinction of liberal society, provokes public contestation from deprivatised identity movements.
- (iv) The adverse impact of the “war on terrorism”, the core rhetorical code for US-led military expansion in the Muslim world, and of al-Qaeda-type terrorism upon Muslims everywhere, which has become particularly salient in Britain after 7/7 with an intensification of policing, surveillance and media scrutiny.

In the current political climate, the simple restatement of nationhood in a pristine form is devolved disproportionately upon British Muslims, the marginalized objects of suspicion and ridicule. How natural it then seems at this juncture to seek in globalisation the opportunity to soar, eagle-like with Iqbal, above the immanentist claims of the chauvinistic nation-state, to lay claim to a similar global, political reordering in an Islamic vein. And to argue likewise for the nation-state, albeit of the inclusive and multicultural variety, would constitute an unrealistic resort to nostalgia.

In responding to this, it is better to reiterate that it is political judgements that are at stake, to return to Madani’s point about the nature of politics, rather than credal or metaphysical nostrums. Thus any political adjudication might begin with the observation that globalisation represents a continuity with empire and nationalism in the organisation of power and capital on a larger and more intensive scale. Ordinary folk organised at a more local and smaller scale struggle to keep up, and part of this struggle has been to seek proper opportunity and equity within the nation-state. Cosmopolitans, whether of liberal or Muslim stripe, in their critique of nationalist chauvinism have missed “the extent to which nationalism not only expresses solidarity or belonging but provides a rhetoric for demanding growth and equality”.²³ Therefore the precautionary assessment is that the nation-state still represents the best vehicle for keeping up with capital and power. After all in any new attempt at global unification, it is the larger states of the world that would seek to set the rules. Furthermore, extreme liberal cosmopolitans in their critique of so-called backward tradition (Islam is the

²² C. Calhoun, “Is it time to be postnational?” in S. May, T. Modood and J. Squires (eds.), *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 231-256, quotation at 246.

²³ Calhoun, 238.

favoured target) miss the supreme importance of rootedness, manifested as a search for roots, in that very tradition and in communal social relations at a time of rapid change in which the vulnerable, the dispossessed and marginalized are at the mercy of the new rules. Without this rootedness, no voice of autonomy can be formed to stand against this large-scale integration, for the alternative is a final colonization of the non-Western imagination and mind.²⁴

For cosmopolitanism to be rooted, it must recognise the “moral status of those who are political strangers”²⁵ whose lives may encompass values and meanings very different from our own without recourse to granting them rights as cultureless instances of a universal humanity. Unlike either relativism or universalism, cosmopolitanism recognises that while there might be universal values that allow for the possibility of intercultural exchange, there is no single way of life that is universally valid. In other words, cosmopolitanism recognises the challenge of a continuous tension between two ideals: “universal concern” (e.g. against torture) and “respect for legitimate difference”.²⁶ But, as critics have pointed out, cosmopolitanism places a higher value upon peaceful coexistence than upon a universally applicable order of enforceable rights. It does nothing to find an ideological resolution for diametrically opposed premises. It is not a more sophisticated manifesto for “liberalism on safari”, but simply describes a *modus vivendi*.²⁷

The Qur’an itself recognises that diversity is part of the Divine intent, and that human beings are bound to live in political orders smaller than the entire species (11:118-119) and that the modalities of “knowing one another” as “diverse nations and tribes” is a criterion of “righteousness” (49:13). If the basis of the common national bond admits to arbitrariness (how many suffered for the idea that every nation must find resolution as a state), the state on a smaller scale encapsulates “the many circles narrower than the human horizon that are the appropriate spheres of moral concern”.²⁸ In other words, cosmopolitanism is a political arrangement for peaceful relations between competing truth-claims both within and between polities, even if in metaphysical terms, the Islamic commitment to pluralism is “non-reductive” and not relativist.²⁹ Yet it is still also the case that in our tradition, “wisdom is the lost property of the believer”,³⁰ to be sought wherever it is found, thus implying a moral commitment to a global conversation dedicated to mutual enrichment as well as peaceable relations.

Thus the argument returns to the point that the multicultural state invested in a form of rooted cosmopolitanism remains preferable to the deterritorializing and detraditionalizing logic of universalising and abstracted (Western) cultural

²⁴ Z. Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture* (London: Pluto, 1998), 13.

²⁵ K. A. Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 219.

²⁶ K. A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006).

²⁷ J. Gray, “Easier Said Than Done”, *The Nation*, 30th January 2006, available at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060130/gray>.

²⁸ Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 246.

²⁹ M. Legenhausen, “A Muslim’s Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism” in R. Boase (ed.) *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 51-73.

³⁰ Tirmidhi 2611, Ibn Majah 4159.

globalisation, which seems less likely to ensure “mutually assured [cultural] diversity” in the twenty-first century.³¹ The challenge therefore lies ahead for British Muslims to find, as did Madani in his day, a new Covenant of Medina for a composite nationalism, the united nation (*al-umma al-wahida*) of our times.

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³¹ Z. Sardar, *Beyond Difference: Cultural Relations in the Twenty First Century* (London: British Council, 2004).