



**Abdul-Rehman Malik**

## Take me to your leader

*Post-secular society and the Islam industry*

The emergence of "Muslim-ness" as an important marker of identity has created a new cadre of "professional Muslims" aware that kudos is to be gained in speaking on the "Muslim problem". But the "take me to your leader" approach, practiced by governments and replicated by the media, cuts out the majority of Muslims, writes Abdul-Rehman Malik. Muslim communities are looking for leadership and vision, not representation, he argues. If the emerging "Islam industry" cannot offer that, then it is not rising to the challenges of the moment.



Long gone are the halcyon days when emboldened intellectuals declared the "end of history" and the decisive destruction of wars over ideology. They seem like the good old days — too bad they were so short-lived. Islam has crashed the party, sideswiped the cake, and stolen the champagne. The same thinkers now spend their time

asking, "What went wrong?"

Many had myopically linked the rise of Islamist movements to Cold War power politics. Movements for democratic change or national self-determination were classed differently. Today it is more often the Islamist or neo-Islamist political organizations that are leading these struggles. A resurgent — although decidedly heterogeneous — Islam is now a global presence and not, as some might have it, a diaspora. Islam and Muslims, although linked in greater number to certain geographic regions by migration and language, see themselves as present and at home in any part of the world. They see their faith as mobile, relevant, and bold. For many second- and third-generation Muslims, citizens of their respective European countries, there is no "back home" to speak of.

Let's be frank: the European experiment is on the rocks and an increasingly frustrated liberal (and conservative) intelligentsia is pointing the blame at "resurgent Islam". The growing concern over the presence of a visible, loud, and increasingly politicized Muslim minority is as much a reflection of Europe's own pathologies as it is about genuine concerns over integration, security, and economics. The dispute is not only about the political and economic union's own power and legitimacy, but also about the notion of a common set of European values. There maybe an ethos of human rights at the heart of EU legislation, but the idea that Europe is a secular super-state where religion, at best, has only a seat at the table is far from clear. Pronouncements by (then) Cardinal Ratzinger and Valery Giscard D'Estaing on the Christian character of Europe ought to have seemed anachronistic to the secular minded. That Turkey be refused consideration to join Europe on the basis that it is a

"Christian Club" should have been met with cries of "shame" from ardent "Europeanists" — it was not.

The reason is simple: Europe's Muslim minorities are unwilling to divest themselves of their religious identities. For many, religious identity — in a post—"war on terror" period — is wrapped up with social and political identity. For Europe's Muslims, religion is categorically a key element of who they are and influences the way they choose to behave as social, political, and even economic actors (evidenced, for instance, by the growth of Islamic finance and banking options). A dynamic, self-identifying Muslim presence, a robust religious minority within the West (and a growing force outside it), has re-shaped our view of religion in the public sphere. While Christianity is in decline — churches are rarely full and in many countries are being sold off to make up for a shortfall in the coffers — and Judaism remains a numerically marginal religious minority, Europe's Muslims have almost single-handedly brought religion back into public discourse. The contemporary European experience of Islam defies Harvey Cox's notion, which many still cling to, of the "secular city" and the juggernaut process of "secularization" as an inevitable social-political force. Pope Benedict's now infamous Regensburg address was clearly an attempt to make space for Catholicism in the debate over religion by taking a swipe at what he clearly sees as his main contender. We are living, I would argue, in post-secular societies: religion refuses to stay in the box.

This is not a conversation between equals, however. From the *banlieues* of Paris to the mill towns of Yorkshire, the debate over "multiculturalism", "integration", "cohesion", and "diversity" is not a polite, dispassionate matter — it's about the lived reality of millions of people who have been segregated from the economic and political mainstream, radicalized by the fallout of one too many foreign policy blunders. The *banlieue* rioting of 2005 by Muslim youths had less to do with religion and more to do with having a say in the present and the future. The blah-blah and navel gazing of columnists and politicians means little to those who at the very least perceive that their voices are little heard.

It does not help that politicians take to calling them scum, or that rightwing parties are polling 15 per cent and more in many jurisdictions on the back of very public anti-Muslim campaigns. During a particularly trying week last Autumn, London's *Evening Standard* carried front-page headlines that reported on rioting at the site of a proposed mosque in Windsor; the Metropolitan Police's granting of a request from a Muslim officer to be removed from guard duty at the Israeli embassy; the alleged refusal by a London Muslim taxi driver to transport a blind passenger and his guide dog; and the brouhaha over Jack Straw's disapproving comments about veils. If you didn't know Britain, you'd think that there was no greater threat to social order and no bigger news story than the supposed antics of Muslims.

Much of the tabloid journalism about Islam and Muslims is sadly not confined to the tabloids. Stories are often reported without context, interviews and investigations are sometimes cursory, and reporting can get lazy as journalists rely on easy-to-get quotes from go-to representatives. The media problematizes — any journalist knows that. While an increasing number of journalists are becoming more nuanced in their reporting on Muslim communities, many more are not. It's the nature of news reporting in a 24-hour, high-pressure, corporate culture that demands that the appetite for stories and controversy (the desire always to be breaking news) be fed.

Imagine the hundreds of hours needed to be filled on dozens of 24/7 news channels across the world. Blaming media rhetoric can only go so far — the problems are systemic as much as about poor editorial judgement and Islamophobia (which is certainly real, demonstrable, and measurable).

Enter the Islam industry — and a new cadre of "professional believers". From a British experience, diversity has been conventionally viewed in racial, ethnic, and linguistic terms. The Race Relations Act of 1976 emerged from an acute social need to identify and protect in legislation the rights of minority and racial ethnic groups; this would tackle disadvantage and create a mechanism whereby racism and discrimination could be taken on, and difference recognised. While the Race Relations Act did not stop racial discrimination or disadvantage, it created institutional advocates for social and political change. The emergence of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) as the main mechanism through which communities were to engage with policy makers and government looked fine on paper, but the notion that one organization or institution could serve both the role of advocate and representative was simply untenable. What emerged in the years following 1976 was a fascinating emergence of "new" identities — although in fact they had been there all along, it was just that nobody seemed to see them (perhaps they were too disruptive for the narrow communalist system that underscored ad hoc British multiculturalism).

Thus the idea of "black", which had initially included all visible minorities, was broken down into "black" and "Asian". With the immigration of "Asian" Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs of Gujarati heritage from Uganda in the wake of Idi Amin's expulsion, and the presence of diverse ethnic and linguistic communities, the categories were constantly revised. Religion was left out of the equation. While the race industry developed a growing concern with self-preservation and institutionalization — its own leadership, representative organizations, funding mechanisms, spokespersons — the voices of increasingly loud religious minorities, particularly Muslims, were ignored. Religion was too messy and legislation did not provide for the official consideration of religious minorities. Jews and Sikhs, although having discrete confessional affiliation, were in time accepted into the race-based framework because of their faiths' close tie to an ethnic or linguistic identity (Punjabi, in the case of Sikhs). As so-called Asian groups were largely biased towards Indian-Hindu communities, Muslims — from the sub-continent, the Arab World, and beyond — were left out in the cold. The law did not protect them from discrimination, if that discrimination took place on the basis of religion. A white, British Muslim woman, for instance, who was attacked because someone was enraged by her headscarf, had no recourse to anti-discrimination legislation because she was white. Her case would be treated as a regular assault, when in fact it was an act of violence motivated by hatred for her religion.

Identities, of course, are not fixed; we wear many identity masks concurrently — race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, region, tribe, and faith all exist simultaneously. While identity is not essential, it is a profoundly democratic act to self-identify and to choose which aspects of one's identity to represent in the public sphere. The Race Industry sought to control that impulse and undermine expressions that were a threat to their own legitimacy.

The emergence of "Muslim-ness" as an important marker of identity (particularly in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair, the Bosnian genocide, and 9/11) meant that new institutions, media, spokespersons, and leadership would

emerge, seeking to represent that. British Muslims, like their brethren globally, are diverse and aware of interpretive, cultural, linguistic, sectarian, and political difference. This, in turn, makes Muslim communities politicized and globalized in a profoundly different way than other Europeans. Their shared and remembered experience of colonial encounter, migration, and struggle means that they often defy the narrow confines of discrete national, ethno-linguistic identities. Most Muslims are citizens of the nations they live in, but accepting that citizenship is not the panacea to their problems, any more than their embrace of a particular civic identity explains their many successes.

Like "black" or "Asian" (largely outdated and objectively useless terms of identification), the label "Muslim", while indicating a shared belief system and theology, hides a robust spiritual pluralism and intra-Islamic diversity. This was an issue that particularly concerned *Q-News*; as early as 1992 we were challenging our communities to have an active debate about who we "Muslims" are. *Q-News'* founding editor and publisher Fuad Nahdi asked: "Beyond beards, scarves, and *halal* meat, is there more to being a British Muslim in the twenty-first century?" The inevitable emergence of umbrella groups advanced the myth of homogeneity that served self-styled community leaders well. With at least 56 nationalities and over 100 languages, Muslims in Britain are a truly global religious community at home in Britain. The same experience has replicated itself in varying degrees across Europe.

With questions of integration, cohesion, and multiculturalism now deeply connected to the "war on terror" and the prevailing concerns over security, governments have sought to find representatives to speak to. It is a communitarian approach the British Raj would have been proud of. The "take me to your leader" school of community relations cuts out the majority of Muslim voices, particularly those who have little institutional clout within their own communities — namely women, young people, and minority ethnic communities present within broader Muslim communities. People must have the freedom to represent themselves, to deny representation. The British government has been reluctant to extend that privilege to a minority group that is increasingly seen as the indigestible other, the so-called "enemy within". Control has taken precedence over democracy. It is at the heart of the general sense of lazy governance that sits alongside New Labour.

While Muslim communities need real civil society and spaces where a spectrum of views — from the most liberal to the most extreme — have an opportunity to be debated and legitimized (or delegitimized) through frank, unmediated discourse, umbrella groups and government have colluded to be gatekeepers of what is "acceptable" Muslim opinion.

In the aftermath of the 7/7 attacks in London, the government has been under acute media scrutiny to act on the issue of religious extremism. Previous Whitehall favourites have been quickly replaced (out with the Muslim Council of Britain, enter the Sufi Muslim Council), but the communitarian model remains more or less the same. Because of policy confusion and drift at the centre, along with the media obsession with Islam and its commensurate desire to hear "Muslim voices", the field has never been more open for "Islam entrepreneurs" to rush in and claim legitimacy and a stake. This is not always civil society per se, but a cadre of consultants, groups, think-tanks, journalists, commentators, activists, and policy wonks who are acutely aware that public and social policy priorities have shifted, and that there is plenty of kudos (and some money) to be had if solutions to the "Muslim problem" can be delivered, critiqued, or, in the case of rightwing pundits, mocked. I include in this group

individuals like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Salman Rushdie, and Tariq Ali, who have little connection with Islam as a faith, but because of their Muslim "heritage" and "experience" find reason to comment and have their comment legitimized.<sup>1</sup>

Like the Race Industry, the new Islam industry has within its ranks a growing class of "professional Muslims" (the author of this piece would be accused by some of being one), on call and available to put forward a Muslim (and sometimes Islamic) perspective. They are either eager, or in genuinely high demand, to be part of the growing policy networks that are now cropping up to talk about the Muslim presence in Europe. Many of these "expert voices" are indeed capable, experienced, and add value to the current debates. In the UK, leading think-tanks such as Demos, Policy Exchange, and the Fabian Society have dedicated resources and published major reports on Muslim communities that have been the source of much public debate and comment. In the US and Europe, millions are being committed to an endless carousel of conferences, "high-level" meetings, and roundtables sponsored by foundations prefixed with Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford, and Brookings. Not to be outdone, the (in)famous Saudi Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal is strategically endowing centres for the academic study of Islam and Muslims in the US.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings, *Q-News* entered into partnership with other Muslim organizations to promote legitimate theological perspectives that opposed and challenged the religious justifications for violence popular among a small minority. This project was supported by over 20 partner organizations throughout the UK and received financial support from the British government. While the partners maintained their editorial independence and participating speakers were free to speak their mind about British foreign policy or the approach of government to Muslim communities, the project had to work hard to maintain legitimacy within Muslim communities suspicious of government.

The presence of so many players is not the necessarily the issue. The more voices the merrier. Many of those engaged in this work are sincere and care deeply about Muslim communities and the role of Islam in the modern world. But here's the problem. We have learned little from the successes and, more importantly, from the failures of the Race Industry. Institutionalized and supported by legislation, institutions like the CRE (although soon to be replaced) became interest groups committed to their own preservation.

The emergence of Islam and Muslim experts and policy entrepreneurs does not necessarily mean that the government and the media are more connected to the so-called Muslim street — to the aspirations, feelings, and concerns of Muslim communities. The plethora of savvy voices does not mean that Muslim communities have a leadership they trust. The closer this nascent Islam industry appears to government, the more they are held suspect by "ordinary Muslims". Proposals to tinker with Islam itself, as made by the Rand Corporation and others, have made the Muslim street even more nervous.

Clearly, replicating the race experience is not in the interest of Muslim communities. It is not in the interest of Britain or Europe as a whole either. Government would serve the interests of social cohesion and the multicultural, multi-faith reality by truly understanding the way in which communities operate on the ground. It is time that the tremendous voluntary and community sector resources of the communities they seek to engage with are mapped and identified, rather than relying on sometimes cut-throat policy entrepreneurs.

Muslim communities themselves are looking for more leadership, vision, and innovative ideas rather than representation. They want to see mechanisms through which they can participate in their societies and their faith community. They want to challenge the power asymmetries they experience and have the right to dissent, represent, and lead on their own terms like all other citizens. If the emerging Islam industry cannot offer that, then it is simply not rising to the critical challenges of the moment.

At the heart of the debate over professionalizing religion and the emergence of the Islam industry is the nature of religious identity; this is primarily a discussion for people of faith. Religion is ultimately not about political identity, it is about living a life of divine awareness and acting in accordance with high moral values and ethical standards. After all, the Prophet Muhammad said that he came to do nothing "except perfect good character". Religion impacts the way a believer behaves in the world, how she chooses act. The Islam industry largely ignores religion and theology, seeing Muslims as merely another ethnic minority target group. To try to understand Europe's Muslims without reference to faith and religious discourse is a mistake that disregards the very basis of religious identity. It is critical that Muslim in Europe, while self-identifying and organizing themselves along faith lines, do not allow themselves to be made into just another cookie-cutter interest group. In this post-secular context, religion matters (just as it always has for so many Europeans) — we need not be ashamed of that.



*This article is based on a contribution to the panel discussion "Mirror writing. Reflections of cultural reality", which took place at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in London, 27–30 October 2006.*

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- <sup>1</sup> See Fareena Alam's review of Hirsi Ali in the *New Statesman*: [www.newstatesman.com/200607240051](http://www.newstatesman.com/200607240051) ; and Laila Lalami's excellent response to both Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji in *The Nation*: [www.thenation.com/doc/20060619/lalami](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060619/lalami)).
- <sup>2</sup> The Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown and The Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Islamic Studies Program at Harvard — both of which received US\$ 20 million.

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