CHAPTER

15

TRANSITIONAL RELIGIOSITY EXPERIENCES: CONTEXTUAL DISJUNCTURE AND ISLAMIC POLITICAL RADICALISM

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On 7 July 2005, four young indigenous British Muslims, three of Pakistani provenance and the fourth a Jamaican convert to Islam, became Britain's first domestic suicide bombers. A fortnight later, eliciting an unsettling sense of déjà-vu, a second abortive wave of attacks on the London transport network followed, the culprits this time being British asylum seekers hailing from the troubled horn of Africa.

These 'martyrdom operations' (as they are alluded to in the idiom of Islamist-Jihadist discourse), until now, only experienced vicariously through theatres of conflict such as Iraq and Israel, shocked us all, leaving many of us reeling at the prospect of this new threat posed by a small (but as of yet unknown) proportion of Britain's 1.6 million-strong Muslim community. The events of July 2005 were exceptional only in the sense that this was the first time British Muslims had perpetrated terrorist acts of this magnitude on home soil; however, they were not entirely without precedent. British Muslims have been drawn to radical Islamism in the past and have included, *inter alia*, Richard Reid, the 'shoe bomber' of December 2001; the five members of the 'Tipton Taliban' captured by coalition forces in Afghanistan in January 2002; Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, responsible for conveying US journalist Daniel Pearl to his death in Pakistan in February 2002; the group of Britons granted asylum from North African who were responsible for a failed chemical attack on the London Underground in November 2002; Asif Mohammed Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif, who conducted suicide bomb attacks in Tel Aviv in May 2003; and eight British Pakistanis from Luton, who were found to be in possession of a large quantity of explosive material in March 2004. According to a leaked confidential report commissioned by the government, 'the number of British Muslims actively engaged in terrorist activity, whether at home or abroad or supporting such activity, is extremely small and estimated at less than 1%' (FCO and Home

Office 2004), although, bearing in mind the clandestine nature of the source, it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of any such claims.

Despite numerous indicators portending a rise in extremist tendencies amongst Muslim youth (FCO and Home Office 2004), the government has been caught unaware, responding instead in a largely ad hoc manner by introducing draconian new legislative measures intended to curb extremism amongst its Muslim populace, and by questioning the renowned British paradigm of multi-culturalism itself, as an obstacle to effective integration of the minorities within its midst (Phillips 2005).[1] Moreover, the state has also placed the onus for 'rooting out extremism' principally on the Muslim community itself, through such measures as the creation of a predominantly Muslim taskforce composed of community representatives (Home Office 2005), pejoratively referred to as the 'house Muslims' by Yvonne Ridley at a recent conference.[2] Concomitantly, both the media and the wider social discourse have been rife with self-appointed punditry and a plethora of commentators pontificating on British radical Islam's putative causal factors and remedies.

Providing answers and solutions to this seemingly intractable problem is naturally beyond the remit of this chapter; however, a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the paths and motivations to extremism amongst British Muslims (and by extension their Western European counterparts)[3] is impera-tive if these pressing issues are to be addressed in a coherent and comprehen-sive manner. Consequently, this is where my contribution to the debate lies.

The role of religion

A cursory reading of the biographies of many of the individuals implicated in these terrorist acts points to one glaring, inescapable commonality: their polit-ical radicalisation, culminating in terrorism, is somehow inextricably linked to, or perhaps even contingent upon, the complex phenomenon of sudden or increasing religiosity. This in no way infers that an intensification in religious praxis or sentiment somehow results in a predilection for extremism and vio-lence, as can be evinced by the ubiquity of peaceful, moderate Islamic voices in Britain and the wider Islamic world, the overwhelmingly vast majority of whom do not subscribe to the aberrant worldview espoused by Islamist-Jihadism (for a slew of recent surveys of Muslim public opinion see Fair and Shepherd 2006; Pew Research Center 2005; FOSIS 2005; YouGov 2005; Guardian/ICM 2005). Rather, the crux of the problem appears to lie with the misappropriation of reli-gious labels for violent ends, which in itself is neither new nor confined to the Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, these are rendered moot points, for whatever the theological justification behind such actions (or perhaps a lack thereof), it remains an indelible sociological fact that these individuals considered them-selves to be Muslim, and indeed Islam provided (at least in their minds) the raison d'être for their acts of terrorism and even self-immolation.

In order to further explore the compelling role played by religion in such cases, I will draw upon my own extensive research on religious conversion and patterns of shifting religiosity amongst British Muslims. The growth of religiosity, along with its concomitants, can perhaps be better understood within the broad interpretational framework of *Transitional Religiosity Experiences* (TRE), which encompass five key motifs, namely *adoption*, *intensification*, *transition*, *attenuation* and *defection*. In light of our current ambit, we will focus principally upon those motifs that signal a heightened state of religiosity, namely: 1) *intensification* – transitions from a state of nominal or moderate to strong(er) adherence, commitment or affiliation within the same religious tradition, for example, those individuals who undergo *born again* experiences, or simply become more 'practising', as the process is referred to in the contemporary British Muslim idiom; and 2) *adoption* or *transition* – a move from no tradition or one tradition to another, for example, conversion to Islam, or conversion within Islam (*denominational switching*, a move from one branch, sect or school to another). The change undergone may be sudden, entailing the contentious phenomenon of 'snapping' or sudden personality change, identified by Conway and Siegelman's (1978) seminal study, but has a far greater propensity to be gradual, becoming manifest over prolonged periods of time (Buckser and Glazier 2003). These experiences are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and individuals may undergo multiple TREs throughout their lives, as is illustrated by the example of Asif Mohammed Hanif, who was for many years a committed member of the renowned LightStudy group, a congenial Sufi Muslim organisation based at Hounslow mosque, that rejects violence and extremism. However, during numerous trips to Syria, ostensibly to learn Arabic, his views are thought to have been altered drastically, to such an extent that he then travelled to Tel Aviv in May 2004 to undertake a 'martyrdom operation'. The now defunct radical Muslim organisation Al-Muhajiroun posthumously claimed Hanif as one of its members (Bright and Alam 2003; Dodd et al. 2003). Similarly, Sajid Badat, a devout Muslim training to be an Islamic scholar at the College of Islamic Knowledge and Guidance in Blackburn, one of the Dar al-ulum seminaries that trains indigenous British imams, departed for Pakistan in 2003 prior to graduating. He is alleged to have then travelled to Afghanistan, where he received Jihadist training at the infamous Khalden camp. Upon his return to Britain, he was arrested under terrorism charges and found to be in possession of an explosive device identical to that used by Richard Reid in 2001. He later admitted to conspiring to blow up an aircraft in mid-flight (Johnson et al., 2003; Leppard and Fielding 2003; Naughton 2005). Both cases reveal an initial, fairly gradual *intensification* experience during adolescence or early adulthood, which was then followed some years later by a secondary, quite sudden *transition* experience that resulted in or led to radicalisation. This tentative pattern may in fact explicate the ubiquitous lag phase witnessed

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between a rise in religiosity and the manifestation of radical Islamist inclinations. To put it another way, increasing religiosity per se, particularly through *intensification* experiences, is unlikely to result in radicalisation and often requires some further catalyst, such as an abrupt *transition* experience. It is important to reiterate in this respect that TREs are not prima facie evidence of terrorist proclivities, and experiences of increasing religiosity should not *ipso facto* imply a causal link between faith and attitudes. On the contrary, religious fundamentalism or 'strong religion' may even serve as an effective obstacle to radicalisation, as it can stave off feelings of loss and dereliction (Almond et al. 2003). In some cases, it may even be disingenuous to associate religion with radicalisation, for, if that were the case, how do we reconcile Hussain Osman's statement that 'religion had nothing to do with it. We were shown videos of the Iraq war and told we must do something big' (Campbell and Hooper 2005). This proviso is crucial at this stage, for the discussion that ensues is naturally primed towards the experiences of those individuals espousing radical Islamism.

The immediate consequences of TREs can be highly significant to the issue of potential radicalisation, and relate principally to the two primary ways in which individuals choose to (re)construct their life narratives following the experience. The first paradigm does not engage in any level of polarisation between the pre- and post-TRE phases of life; such cases maintain *contextual continuity*. Indeed, individuals adopting this viewpoint often fail to differentiate between life phases, choosing instead to view both as belonging to a continuum in which events transpire without fundamentally fracturing the overall life story. Although this first paradigm typically accounts for the vast majority of TREs in general, it is curiously absent from the experiences of radical Islamists and so of little relevance to our present study. Conversely, the second paradigm employs the TRE as a pivotal point in the narrative, in order to construct a harsh dichotomy between the two life-phases, a process I refer to as *contextual bifurcation*. The past life and all that it entailed is now diametrically opposed to the present life. Indeed, the more severe the distinction between the two phases, the more likely the individual will be to consider the change wrought to be genuine and meaningful. Often the individual's recollection of pre-TRE life is marked by confusion and crisis, which is then seemingly resolved through acceptance of a totalitarian vision of Islam, a system of unflinching moral absolutes. Indeed, anything that fails to conform to this perceived moral clarity (including other Islamic viewpoints) is to be shunned and condemned, and this perspective is facilitated by an almost Manichean separation of reality into *good* and *evil*, represented by the Islamic concepts of *halal* and *haram* respectively. This view is also typically characterised by the severing (or at least weakening) of familial and social networks, though the disavowal of parents, siblings, wives and children, which also signifies a 'break' with the past. The sudden *contextual*

disjuncture is epitomised by the experience of Hasib Hussain, as described by a classmate:

> He liked playing cricket and hockey, then one day he came into school and had under-gone a complete transformation, almost overnight . . . He started wearing a topi hat from the mosque, grew a beard and wore robes. Before that he was always in jeans. (Mail on Sunday 2005)

Antecedents of TREs

In addition to social, psychological, emotional, cultural and numerous other factors, the motivation for and experience of shifting religiosity can often be shaped by substantive religious or spiritual desires, yearnings and experiences that cannot simply be summarily dismissed, as is often the wont of many reduc-tionistic strains of literature on religious transformation within the social sci-ences (Rambo 2003). Rather, this particular dimension must be retained if we are to avoid divesting the individual's experience of any real religious specificity, or else we will fail to address the appeal of any one particular worldview over another.[4] However, we must also concede that TREs do not occur in complete vacua, and are also a product of ambient social, cultural and political milieux, which therefore also need to be accorded credence as factors that are integral to this process. Consequently, a holistic understanding of the antecedents of TREs is central to the study.

There are numerous extraneous factors that can lead to a predisposition for TREs. Diverse socio-economic factors are most often cited and typically include high levels of unemployment, poor job prospects, low educational attainment, a disproportionately high prison population and poor housing facilities, com-pounded by the presence of endemic and often institutionalised racism and Islamophobia (Office for National Statistics 2005; Trades Union Congress 2005; Peach 2004; Strategy Unit 2003; Department for Education and Skills 2003; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2003).

Hasib Hussain left school in July 2003 with no formal qualifications. Unemployed, with virtually no career prospects and resentful towards an envir-onment that was unable to nurture his passion for football, he wiled away his youth smoking marijuana with friends and having the occasional altercation with neighbouring white youths (Jenkins 2005). Germaine Lindsay displayed a much higher aptitude for schooling, although circumstances appear to have placed him in a similar predicament. His application to Greenhead College, a nationally acclaimed school in Huddersfield to which he was assured admission as a result of his exceptionally high grades, was lost in the mail. He was required to re-submit his application, by which time the school was oversubscribed and he subsequently spent the entire year casting about for something else to do (Stockman and Slack 2005).

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An ambience of deprivation is perhaps most evident in the biographies of the group responsible for the abortive attack on 21 July, which, being comprised entirely of former child asylum seekers, was located at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. Their experiences are epitomised by the case of Yassin Hassan Omar, who sought refuge in Britain from his native war-torn Somalia in 1992, aged eleven. Although he arrived with his elder sister and her husband, he was soon placed in foster care and spent the remainder of a peripatetic childhood in various foster homes. Prior to his participation in the London attacks, he was struggling to subsist on a combination of state subsidies and part-time employment (Tumelty 2005).

Farrar (2005), intimately familiar with Muslim youth in Leeds (the nexus for the 7 July attacks) through his many years of work as a sociologist and community activist, contends that the attacks can be viewed as an extreme variant of violent urban protest,[5] being deeply rooted in years of cumulative deprivation, marginalisation and grievances against the British state. The joint report produced by the FCO and Home Office (2004) referred to earlier corroborates this finding by suggesting that the poor and jobless are considered to be particularly susceptible to exploitation and recruitment by extremists.

Although Mohammad Sidique Khan and many of his cohort possessed impeccable records, and in many cases were upright members of their respective communities, criminal activity does appear to be associated with a significant proportion of Islamists prior to their radicalisation. Richard Reid was raised in a largely dysfunctional home; his parents separated when he was four and his father remained incarcerated for much of Reid's youth. He rarely attended school and instead drifted into the world of petty street crime, which resulted in numerous convictions, leading to several spells in prison, the youngest at the age of fourteen (Alleyne 2002). Similarly, Mukhtar Said Ibrahim, a cannabis-smoking bully at school, abandoned his parental home at age sixteen and became involved in youth gangs. In 1996, he was jailed for five years for violent street muggings and moved around a series of young offenders institutions, including the notorious Feltham YOI (Gardham and Johnston 2005). Hasib Hussain and Shahzad Tanweer both had more minor altercations with authorities in 2004; Hussain was arrested for shoplifting and Tanweer for disorderly conduct, however both received only cautions (Naughton 2005; BBC News 2005). Drawing the field internationally, Mohammed Bouyeri, known to have an unruly temper, served seven months in prison on a violence-related crime (Leiken 2005), as did Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head of the Iraqi insurgency and often referred to as bin Laden's Iraqi lieutenant. Devastated by the death of his father, the 17-year-old adolescent dropped out of school and descended into a life of drinking, drug abuse and violence on the streets of Zarqa, which finally led to a prison sentence for drug possession and sexual assault (Gambill 2004). With the exception of Hussain and Tanweer, all of the above are thought to have developed strong Islamist views whilst in prison, which could suggest that the

espousal of violent Islamo-Jihadism may in fact constitute a form of recidivism that supplants more conventional modes of criminality.

Although we have demonstrated, to some extent, the pervasive and very real socio-economic deprivations that may underlie the sentiments held by many radical Islamists, conversely, we are presented with the striking incongruity that a significant proportion of these individuals were not particularly deprived or marginalised. Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, Sajid Badat and Omar Khan Sharif all attended private schools, Mohammad Sidique Khan was a university graduate, and both Omar Khan Sharif and Shahzad Tanweer attended university but failed to complete their studies. However, by focusing on individual circumstances and achievements, we not only do a great disservice to the genuinely impoverished communities from which they hailed, and which held a profound resonance for them, we also fail to apprehend the communal nature of radical-Islamist discourse. Khan, in his posthumously released 'martyrdom' testament, repeatedly invokes a communal identity in which he identifies the subjugation of 'my people' and 'my Muslim brothers and sisters' as being principle amongst his grievances. However, even prior to this, in 2002, by some strange irony Khan gave an interview to the *Times Educational Supplement* in relation to his job as a learning mentor, in which he expressed utter disdain at the lack of regenerative funds needed to help raise his native Beeston from its endemic squalor (Jenkins 2005).

As Farrar (2005) contends, the one unifying thread amongst all these narratives is not necessarily poverty, but the complete divorce between all of these men and conventional political processes. Young Muslims can often experience a two-fold disaffection, in which they experience exclusion from both mainstream politics and society, and from minority community politics (as alluded to later). Political impotence, such as that witnessed in the wake of unprecedented anti-war marches and demonstrations that nevertheless failed to avert the course of the Iraq war, can lead to disillusionment with democratic principles and processes.[6] Potentially, this may result in a retreat to Islamism as advocated by groups such as *Hizb-ut-Tahrir*, who decry the notion of democracy and positively revelled in the failure of conventional political activism in preventing the Iraq war.[7] Hussain Osman explained to Italian interrogaters that he was motivated to participate in the attacks after viewing videos of war-torn Iraq. He further claimed that the bombs were never meant to detonate or inflict death, but only to draw attention to the Iraq war, which he'd failed to achieve through conventional processes: 'I am against war . . . I've marched in peace rallies and nobody listened to me. I never thought of killing people' (CNN 2005). Political disenfranchisement was also alluded to in Mohammed Bouyeri's open letter pinned to the body of his victim, Theo van Gogh: 'There shall be no mercy for the unjust, only the sword that is raised at them. No discussion, no demonstrations, no parades, no petitions; merely death shall separate the Truth from the Lie.'[8]

Identity construction

One particularly significant antecedent of TREs appears to be the presence of unresolved issues vis-à-vis identity construction. Of course, this search for identity and belonging is an intrinsic part of adolescence and early adulthood, and occurs universally, quite irrespective of religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nationality or any other such identity marker. However, as the case studies of many radical Islamists will attest, this process appears to take on an urgency and prominence in these individuals that belies its ubiquitous, and often mundane, nature. For radical Islamists, the most salient elements of this contested identity construction may be considered to equate to the abstractions of *majority* culture (mainstream or host society), *minority* culture (ethnic or parental), and religion. Admittedly, this facile demarcation is in many ways specious, for none of these elements are diametrically opposed to one another, and there is considerable interaction and overlap between their spheres of influence. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that they may simply reinforce the validity of a 'Tebbit test' or its trite post-7/7 equivalent, 'Are you British or Muslim?', iterated ad nauseam in the media recently, they do offer a convenient means of approaching the subject.

The importance ascribed to the various elements of this identity construction varies according to the principal actors involved and so it is important to recognise these intrinsic differences if we are to avoid spurious generalisations. Radical Islamists within European contexts may be broadly assigned to three primary groupings: 1) converts to Islam; 2) first-generation migrants (often asylum seekers or students); and 3) second- or subsequent-generation progeny of early immigrants.[9]

Minority culture

For converts, the notion of an ethnic or *minority* culture may appear paradoxical, and although some converts may view parental culture in highly parochial terms that render it discernible from a more general notion of mainstream culture, the vast majority will perceive an inevitable conflation between *majority* and *minority* cultures, rendering the latter term somewhat redundant. Conversely, *minority* culture has a far greater bearing upon identity constructions in the experiences of first-generation migrants, for whom it occupies the position of *majority* culture prior to their migration. Their sentiments vis-à-vis *minority* culture are largely contingent upon the degree and duration of embedment within the said culture prior to displacement, and the underlying reasons for that displacement – that is, whether or not the dislocation was voluntary. Subsequent to their displacement, their experiences often mirror those of the final grouping.

Second- and subsequent-generation members of migrant communities are much more ambivalent towards the notion of a *minority* culture. Those who

choose to affirm its validity can do so in one of two main ways. They may construe their ethnic culture as a symbol of political mobilisation and belonging (Song 2003), as in the example of Mohammad Sidique Khan, who established a youth centre gym in 2000, with a local government grant, under the rubric of the Kashmiri Welfare Association, aimed at keeping British Kashmiri youth off the streets through weightlifting and other youth activities. He was also instrumental in the opening of a second youth centre gym in 2004, the Hamara ('ours' in Urdu) Youth Access Point, to cater once again to 'ailing' Kashmiri youth (Tumelty 2005; Jenkins 2005). Others, however, retain identifications with parental culture through the atavistic expression of ethnic cultural components such as language, cuisine, dress or music. However, even in cases where individuals attempt a nostalgic reconciliation with their 'roots', it typically entails the adoption of a distinctively diasporic expression of that culture (such as 'Asian' hip-hop or bhangra music), which may not necessarily be deemed 'authentic', nor grant cultural legitimacy. Despite the fact that Shahzad Tanweer spent two months in his family's village home in rural Faisalabad, ostensibly to learn more about his roots, he rarely ventured outdoors as he did not feel particularly welcomed by the locals who viewed him principally as a Briton (BBC News 2005). Similarly, the British Pakistani Muslims who travelled to Pakistan in 2002 in order to join the Jihadist group Jaish-e-Muhammad, intending to help towards the 'repatriation' of their Kashmiri homeland, could only respond in English during their trial, evincing a complete loss of mother-tongue language faculties (Ahmad 2002).

However, the predominant paradigm for radical Islamists by far appears to be the staunch repudiation of one's *minority* culture, and this can occur for a variety of reasons. Individuals may deem the community and culture associated with parents to have exerted a serious stultifying effect on their aspirations and prospects for the future. Consequently, a sense of powerlessness and a lack of self-determinism may ensue, which the individual perceives to be the result of excessively moralising influences, overbearing familial control, and conservative social and sexual mores. These, combined with inflated parental expectations and an unattainable study or work ethic, are seen as seeking to stifle creativity, experimentation and freedom of choice. Individuals may attempt to rebel against this imposition of cultural constraints in tentative ways; for example, Omar Khan Sharif rebelled against parental cultural mores (but curiously not Islamic mores) by marrying a girl of Middle Eastern origin who spoke little English (Dodd et al. 2003; Britten et al. 2003), while Mohammad Sidique Khan invoked parental opprobrium by marrying an ethnically Indian Muslim (Herbert 2005).

The problem may be compounded further by the presence of tribal or clan-based power structures, epitomised by the South Asian *biraderi* and commensurable systems in other cultures, which can have the ostensive effect of divesting youth of any real tangible control over their own lives. The socio-political impotence that may be imposed by the *biraderi* was poignantly illustrated by the

Labour 'postal voting' fraud in Birmingham in the 2003 elections (Kennedy 2005; Akhtar 2003).[10] A slew of reports following the 'race riots' of 2001 in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, primarily involving young British Muslim men of South Asian descent, all drew attention to precisely this sort of cumulative marginalisation of youth voices by decision makers and community leaders (Cantle 2001; Clarke 2002; Ouseley 2002; Ritchie 2001; Denham 2002). More recently, the Home Office Report (2005, p. 15) '*Preventing Extremism Together' Working Groups*, precipitated by the events of July 2005, also arrived at a similar conclusion:

> Many young Muslims feel that they do not have a voice or a legitimate outlet for protest, political expression, or dissent. Leadership roles are traditionally held by the elders, and the young people can feel frustrated at their inability to actively engage in decision making structures.

Consequently, the repudiation of one's ethnic culture and its appurtenances can in itself symbolise a form of self-empowerment.

The loss of *minority* culture may also correlate to a profound sense of alienation from one's family and is often precipitated by a breakdown in communication, particularly with parents, who are therefore unlikely to be made privy to issues of utmost importance in their children's lives. Hasib Hussain's distraught mother, unaware of her son's heinous actions, reported him missing to the Police Casualty Bureau on the evening of 7 July (Burke et al. 2005). Similarly, Mukhtar Said Ibrahim, one of the failed bombers on 21 July, was only identified after his bewildered family recognised their estranged son from CCTV images distributed throughout the media (CNN 2005; Gardham and Johnston 2005). Indeed, in the numerous cases presented before us, none of the families appear to have been cognisant of the paths upon which their children were embarked, and for many, the disavowal of their children's actions were preceded initially by vociferous doubts over their culpability, evincing a state of profound shock and denial.

One of the charges routinely levelled at *minority* culture by radical Islamists is that the traditions and customs associated with it seek to adulterate their pristine vision of Islam. This is hardly surprising, considering that prior to their TREs, most individuals possess only a rudimentary grasp of their parental faith, which rarely extends to religious praxis of any sort. Consequently, when they do begin to tentatively explore their religious heritage, the discovery of 'extraneous' material interjected into the Islamic canon can appear as something of a revelation, providing them with an authentic vehicle through which they can to forge an alternative Islamic identity to that bequeathed by parents (Lewis 1994; Roy 2004). The growing attraction of an austere Wahhabism or Salafism amongst diasporic Muslim youth, that condemns many ethnic customs and norms as *bid'ah* (reprehensive religious innovation),

is testament this fact. Mohammad Atta, one the 9/11 hijackers, stated in his will that after death he did not want to be memorialised every forty days or every year as per Egyptian tradition, as this was not an authentic Islamic custom (*Der Spiegel* 2002).

But perhaps the most damning indictment of *minority* culture for many radical Islamists is that it holds little or no relevance in the diaspora. There is no 'myth of return', no solace to be found in a nostalgic struggle for the home-land (or if there is, it is at least re-framed in supranational terms that renders its parochiality anachronistic), and ethnic languages become defunct through neglect whilst English assumes the role of lingua franca. Moreover, ambient cul-tural racism[11]serves to negate any intrinsic worth thought to reside in ethnic traditions and customs, whilst concomitantly those very same traditions and customs are exposed as subverting authentic Islam. By virtue of this two-pronged attack, *minority* culture can effectively become obsolete.

Majority culture

One of the more striking aspects of radical Islamism in the West is the degree to which its proponents are often ensconced within the majority culture prior to their radicalisation. Indeed, most biographies are rife with details alluding to an espousal of secular, Western lifestyles that are wholly appropriated from the 'host' culture. Mohammad Sidique Khan was raised in Beeston, in what was, at the time, a predominantly white area. Attempting to shrug off his Pakistani-Muslim identity, he adopted the anglicised name 'Sid' and maintained a largely white social circle during his youth, displaying a general indifference to religion and ethnic or parental culture. A close friend, Rob Cardiss, remembered Khan as being 'very English', an observation iterated by another member from his childhood clique, Ian Barrett: 'If it wasn't for the colour of his skin, he would have been English . . . I just thought of him as a Beeston lad – and that's what he was – a Beeston lad, born and bred' (Suleaman 2005). Khan's emphatic espousal of a Western identity continued beyond his formative years. At one point, he became completely enamoured with the US, and dreamt of migrating there and becoming an American – an image strikingly at odds with his later vehement denunciation of Western foreign policy, spearheaded by the US (Khan 2005). Similarly, Asif Mohammed Hanif was regarded as being very 'Westernised' by those around him. A close family friend and neighbour remarked, 'I was surprised. I didn't understand why he had changed, because his whole family were all westernised. The sisters all wore tights and skirts' (Dodd et al. 2003). Not only does the espousal of *majority* identities appear to be the norm, it often includes elements that are anathema to individuals' own *minority* cultural expectations and norms. Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh had a history of drinking and flings with older girls (Akhtar 2005a), whereas Omar Khan Sharif was expelled from his school for severe disciplinary problems

(Britten et al. 2003). Hasib Hussain 'went a bit wild' with drinking and swearing shortly after leaving school (Cobain 2005), and was not alone in flouting his parental mores; his sister Alia had sparked a family scandal earlier by eloping with her Sikh lover (*Mail on Sunday* 2005).

Enculturation of this sort is perhaps to be expected of converts and second- or subsequent-generation British Muslims who, by virtue of being raised in a pervasively British environment, imbibe many of its values and cultural norms. However, even the more recent arrivals appear to have displayed a remarkably rapid embedment in *majority* culture. Hussain Osman, one of the 21 July bombers, was renowned for his popularity with girls, and a former Italian girlfriend who nicknamed him 'Bambi' remembers him fondly:

> We called him that because of his big dark eyes, like those of a fawn, and his long, thick eyelashes . . . we went to a disco every Saturday afternoon. He was obsessed with America. It was his dream. The music. Hip-hop – He dressed rapper-style. Trousers with a dropped crutch and a basketball vest. He drank alcohol – beer. He danced really well. Everyone knew he was a Muslim and a believer, but he never talked about it to me, nor did he have any problems going out with those of us who were not Muslims. It was just that he didn't eat pork. (Hooper 2005)

Her account reveals a portrait not dissimilar to that of other young men prior to their radicalisation; one comfortably immersed in popular, mainstream youth culture, lax in religious praxis but also, critically, one who clearly retains some vestige of his *minority* cultural and religious identity.

At best, such examples illustrate that an individual is particularly adept at traversing cultural spheres, however, at other times and points in the individual's life (such as those induced by crisis, or changes in circumstances or commitment), it may also point to a cultural schizophrenia of sorts that cannot reasonably be sustained for any prolonged period of time. Identity is not a static construction and as self-categorisation theory contends (Oakes et al. 1994; Turner et al. 1987), the self may be defined at different levels of abstraction depending upon differing circumstances; at times, it may be in terms of individual uniqueness, whilst at others, in terms of specific group membership. The salience of a communal identity may, for example, arise during periods of perceived group crisis, evoked by events such as the Iraq war, the Palestinian Intifada or the global 'War on Terror'. It is in these instances that individuals become more prone to reassessing what religious identity means to them, either as reconstruction in part of the lost *minority* identity or as a response to pressing questions and challenges from a pervasively non-Muslim environment. Moreover, this new interest in religion may also stem from a gradual disillusionment with *majority* culture, particularly in light of its perceived hedonism, rampant capitalism and the general imposition of conflicting core value-systems from the 'host' society, which may render the individual unwilling or unable to perpetuate assimilation into the predominant paradigm.

This leaves the individual in something of a quandary: a distinct lack of iden-
tification with both *minority* and *majority* cultures, as a result of being unable
or unwilling to fulfil either group's normative expectations, gives rise to a *dual
cultural alterity*. In the absence of an appealing cultural paradigm from either
group, the individual simply resorts to a cultural entrenchment that assumes a
religious hue by default (due to a lack of viable alternatives), thus transforming
religion from religion per se into an anchor of identity. Consequently, religion
not only provides an emphatic rejoinder to Western identity, but is also inter-
preted *de novo*, without the perceived cultural accretions of the Islam associated
with their parental or ethnic identity, thereby constructing a legitimate identity
outside both *minority* and *majority* cultures. Roy (2004) argues that globalised
radical Islam is particularly attractive to diasporic Muslims precisely because it
legitimises their sense of deculturation and uprootedness by refusing to identify
Islam with the pristine cultures of their parents, pointing to a strong correlation
between deculturation and religious re-formulation.

Antecedents of radicalisation

As indicated earlier, TREs, including those that occur suddenly and entail *con-
textual disjuncture* of some form, do not imply, *ipso facto*, the presence of
radical Islamist proclivities. Some individuals may even be drawn to the austere,
puritanical forms of Salafism or Wahhabism (which provide the principle ide-
ological basis for global Jihadism) but nevertheless eschew violence of any form
themselves. Clearly something beyond a simple TRE must transpire if an indi-
vidual is to be drawn to radical Islamism. How, then, does one progress from
a TRE to Islamo-jihadist inclinations? A number of factors appear to be instru-
mental to this process.

A recent survey of Muslim students (FOSIS 2005) found that 83 per cent were
unhappy with British foreign policy, principally in Iraq, Israel/Palestine,
Afghanistan, and the alliance with the US – all areas in which Muslims are per-
ceived to be the victims of Western aggression and persecution. Clearly, within
such a widespread sea of discontent, the presence of a small minority who may
countenance the articulation of that discontent through violent means is emi-
nently plausible. For these putative latent radicals, any new perceived provoca-
tion, such as the occupation of Iraq or the lurid excesses witnessed at Guantanamo
Bay or in Abu Ghraib, may serve as a *casus belli* that sanctions the recourse to
jihadism. The International Institute of Strategic Studies (2004) in its *Strategic
Survey 2003/4* reported that the Iraq conflict had resulted in an acceleration of
recruitment, with up to 1,000 foreign Jihadists having infiltrated Iraq, highlight-
ing the role of political events in the incubation and catalysis of radicalism.

One of the potential consequences of socio-economic deprivation, political
disaffection, and the gradual lack of identification with *minority* and *majority*
cultures referred to earlier, is the manifestation of a state of anomie. This

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absence of values and standards, with concomitant feelings of alienation and purposelessness, are not necessarily alleviated by recourse to TREs. Instead, the individual turns to the espousal of radical Islamism, which serves as an emphatic rejoinder to the banality and humdrum inanity of daily life. In its stead, this new worldview provides, perhaps for the first time, a sense of being part of an elite that compensates for the shortcomings of one's own petty existence. Moreover, sacralised violence and ultimate martyrdom provide a conduit for these otherwise seemingly implacable feelings of dejection, with the individual spurred on by the vainglory of being included amongst the alumni of the 'Shaheeda' (martyrs).

Given the amorphous and egalitarian nature of Islamic ecclesiastical structures, and the fluidity of its jurisprudence, the conspicuous absence of a clearly delineated religious hierarchy can also pose a serious problem. As Hefner (2005, p. 6) contends, 'most Muslim societies are marked by deep disagreements over just who is qualified to speak as a religious authority and over just how seriously ordinary Muslims should take the pronouncements of individual scholars'. The pressing issue of locating religious authority becomes much more acute in the predominant Sunni tradition, and can leave laity with a vast array of differing (and sometimes conflicting) religious opinions and rulings (Ayoob 2005). Moreover, these rulings are all grounded to varying degrees within the traditional canons of Islam, and are traditionally held to be equally valid, at least in their methodology if not in their actual content, with believers often being encouraged to follow the ruling of a scholar they respect or trust. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the traditional *ulema* (religious scholars) are no longer considered to be the ultimate repositories for moral authority and guidance they once were. With the advent of globalisation and an age of virtual fatwas,[12] it can prove increasingly more difficult for the uninitiated (which most radical Islamists are, prior to their TREs) to discern the authentic and eminently trustworthy from those who are not. It is in this context that we should seek to understand Shahzad Tanweer's adulation of Osama bin Laden, whom he considered to be 'his personal hero' (McGrory and Hussain 2005; Foster and Malick 2005). It is easy to understand why a figure like Osama bin Laden, who strikes a compelling pose as the classic warrior-cleric, is considered eminently more trustworthy, more genuine, more rightly-guided than 'mainstream' scholars, perceived to be corrupted by complicity with and subservience to secular or despotic regimes. Indeed, his pariah status grants him autonomy from the political machinations, internecine conflicts and 'worldly' affairs within which mainstream scholars are seen to be embroiled, granting him a potent legitimacy not based on scholarly erudition. Consequently these types of charismatic *lumpen-ulama*, some of whom may not even be theologically qualified to give religious edicts (Taarnby 2004),[13] can quote selectively from the Qur'an and prophetic traditions, both ahistorically and *sans* context, to formulate novel interpretations that may violate mainstream

scholarly consensus (*ijma'*), for example, in the unlawful targeting of civilians.[14] This very same process, that equates dissidence (against the state, Western hegemony or secularism) with probity, also grants legitimacy to notorious fringe scholars in Britain such as Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad, Abu Hamza al-Masri and Abu Qatada, who have been instrumental in at least some of the radicalisations witnessed, including those of Richard Reid, Zacarias Moussaoui (the alleged twentieth hijacker on 9/11), Asif Mohammed Hanif, and numerous others, through links with the Finsbury Park Mosque (Leiken 2004; McGrory 2003; Shameen 2002). Curiously, in light of these revelations, the media has been awash with spurious claims of bullying harangues from pulpits and pathological hatred spewed out in mosques. This is, in fact, a fallacy with little or no basis in reality; aside from the cases of the infamous preachers already mentioned, and the notorious case of the Finsbury Park Mosque, control over which was temporarily usurped by the incendiary preacher Abu Hamza al-Masri and his coterie of radicals, no other British mosque has allowed itself to be used in the same way.

Instead, the primary inspiration for radicalism is to be found in the first instance on the Internet, in particular in the growing phenomenon of Jihadist websites and blogs. Virtual propagation of Jihadism is proceeding apace, with exponential growth in Jihadist websites, witnessing a proliferation from 14 to over 4,000 within the last five years alone (Atran 2005). In addition to the publication of 'official' statements from Jihadist leaders, the Internet not only provides the ideological treatises and theological 'evidences' underpinning the culture of *jihad*, but also the means through which to carry it out (Ulph 2005a). A plethora of technical and military manuals, such as the notorious *Mawsu'at al-I'dad* (Encyclopaedia of Preparation), cover topics as diverse as how to kidnap and murder hostages, weaponry manufacture and deployment, guerrilla warfare, training, tactics and bomb-making expertise. For example, the manufacture of acetone peroxide, the material allegedly used in both the 7 July and 21 July attacks, is given a comprehensive treatment in the online *Al-Aqsa Encyclopaedia*, available on a number of *jihadi* forums.[15] Just as significant are the numerous bulletin boards and forums for the global cadres of Jihad, which, aside from facilitating the discussion and dissemination of new material, also allow 'outreach' facilities through which the uninitiated may express discontent and discover a channel for its expression.[16] More recent developments have seen the advent of the Internet streaming of video news programmes such as the weekly *Sawt al-Khilafah* (Voice of the Caliphate), 'dedicated to the leaders of al-Qaeda, the Islamic armies in Chechnya, Kashmir and the Arabian Peninsula', and which consists of a fifteen-minute news round-up. The potency and legitimacy of this increasingly more sophisticated brand of Jihadist media is bolstered by the conspicuous absence of commensurate reports from the mainstream media on these conflict zones. In cases where they are afforded coverage, they usually lack the graphic portrayals of violence and its aftermath,

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simply reinforcing the perception that the Western media is, at best, presenting a censored, sanitised version of conflict that fails to countenance real Muslim suffering, or, at worst, is somehow complicit in the events themselves. Some Jihadist groups are now becoming alarmingly cognisant of the Internet's radicalising efficacy and appear to be explicitly focusing their energies upon virtual radicalisation and recruitment. The Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) recently wrote: 'this is the Internet that Allah has enlisted in the service of jihad and of the Mujahedeen, which has come to serve your interests – given that half the battle of the Mujahedeen is being waged on the pages of the Internet – the sole outlet for Mujahedeen media' (Ulph 2005b). A recent posting by the GIMF entitled the 'Pledge of Death in God's Path',[17] went further and requested a virtual pledge of allegiance (*bayah*) from site visitors, in the hope that they might be prepared to actively engage in jihad and 'allegiance to death . . . in the very near future . . . so that Osama bin Laden will have an army in Afghanistan, an army in Iraq, and a huge army on a waiting list on the Internet pages' (Ulph 2005b).

Other forums list the exploits and 'glorious' martyrdoms of those slain in the global arena of Jihad, with the prospect of drawing others to the same path. One such highly publicised recent list, detailing the names and accomplishments of 429 such fighters in Iraq, is suspected to have been largely falsified,[18] with its primary purpose serving as a propaganda tool for mobilisation and recruitment (Cordesman and Obaid 2005). The 2004 Madrid train bombings are prime examples of the consequences of virtual radicalisation. The Internet text *Iraqi Jihad: Hopes and Dangers*, which suggested that the strategic bombing of trains would compel Spain's withdrawal from the US-led coalition in Iraq, is thought to have been seminal to the actions of the perpetrators (Comisiones de investigación sobre 2004). Similarly, Hussain Osman stated to Italian investigators that the group regularly met up in a basement gym in Notting Hill, where they repeatedly watched videos of the conflict in Iraq and used the Internet to 'read-up' on jihad. Although he denied any direct links to al-Qaeda, he did admit to utilising their platforms on the Internet (Elliott et al. 2005).

One of the oft-overlooked aspects of radical Islamism is the degree to which humanistic aspirations underlie the changes in worldview associated with incipient radicalism. Empathy for fellow-Muslims inculcates many potential radical Islamists with a sense of duty and justice, which finds effective expression through the conduit of Jihadism. Hussain Osman told Italian investigators that during preparations for the attack the cell steeled its resolve by 'watching films on the war in Iraq . . . especially those where women and children were being killed and exterminated by British and American soldiers . . . of widows, mothers and daughters that cry' (Fusani 2005). Similarly, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh's radicalisation harked back to the conflict in Yugoslavia, ostensibly stemming from compassion towards Bosnian Muslims and the perceived apathy of Europeans towards their ethnic cleansing: 'it was the unjust armed

embargo perpetuated by the European members of the United Nations on Bosnia's Muslims while they were being slaughtered in the most horrific way by Serbian forces that made me realise that the pillars of Western civilisation are not for us Muslims' (Ansari 2005).

According to interrogators, would-be suicide bombers are always sincerely compassionate to those they see themselves as helping (Atran 2004) – a point corroborated by Durkheim's sociological taxonomy of suicide, through which 'martyrdom operations' are also considered to be altruistic in nature (Durkheim 1897; Stack 2004). Pape's (2005) comprehensive study of suicide terrorism reveals that suicide bombings are virtually always a liberation strategy in response to occupation that places the community over and above the self; that is why the occupied communities often call them martyrs and consider their actions to be altruistic.[19] The notion of community here is expanded beyond its traditional ambit to that of the *Ummah* (the global community of believers), which is central to Islamist discourse, and indeed the Islamo-jihadist movement's actions and rhetoric constantly, and rather shrewdly, invoke the spectre of a global community. This helps to explicate why a British jihadist of Pakistani or Jamaican provenance (who feels little or no identification with Britain, Pakistan or Jamaica, but complete allegiance to the *Ummah*) would undertake a martyrdom operation in Britain, ostensibly in response to occupation in Iraq or elsewhere.

It is easy to conflate all Jihadist acts and actions under the singular rubric of terrorism, but even amongst radical Islamists themselves there exist degrees of 'acceptability'.[20] Causes associated with national struggles for independence against repressive regimes, such as those of Chechnya, Kashmir and Palestine, enjoy widespread sympathy and consequently have far greater legitimacy than, for example, khilafah movements or the global jihadism of al-Qaeda. In the same way, conflict with military occupiers is not accorded the same inviolable taboo status as violence against civilian populations. It appears that many potential radicals, with romanticised and earnest but largely inchoate notions of defending the ummah and championing the cause of the oppressed, can have their (often laudable) empathies diverted (due to a lack of accessibility to the principle cause) or manipulated to deadly effect. They may not wish to participate in more 'controversial' operations, but by that point they have long crossed the Rubicon. Mohammad Atta reputedly wanted to travel to Chechnya to defend its Muslims against the brutal repression of the Russians, prior to his involvement in the 9/11 terrorist attacks (American Future Foundation 2003). Similarly, several members of the London 'ricin plot' in 2003 were found to have trained in the Pankisi Gorge camps, with the stated aim of undertaking Jihad in Chechnya (Bale et al. 2003; Norton-Taylor et al. 2003). Mohammed Bouyeri, who emerged from jail an Islamist, incensed over injustices in Palestine and strongly sympathetic to Hamas, nevertheless articulated this anger through the ritualistic killing of Theo van Gogh in his native Netherlands (Leiken 2005).

In the case of the 21 July cell, the absence of a conduit for their anger over the Iraq conflict precipitated the abortive attack that instead sought to punish Londoners by proxy.

In other scenarios, there may be a gradual progression to increasingly more 'hardline' radicalism that transcends the individual's initial largely humanistic aspirations. The small number of Britons who struck out to join the Iraqi insurgency (Leiken and Brooke 2005), which is viewed as a legitimate movement against Western occupation, will inevitably return to their host societies, as did earlier British Jihadists who travelled to the theatres of conflict in Chechnya, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Bosnia before them (Taarnby 2004). These survivors, brutalised by the ravages of war and possibly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, may prove incapable of slipping back into mainstream society, and consequently may more easily resort to more extreme or taboo modes of violence.

The paths and motivations to Islamic political radicalism amongst British Muslims are many and varied, with no simple cause-and-effect calculus appearing to be tenable. Rather, socio-economic deprivation and political disaffection, potently combined with the *dual cultural alterity* experienced by diasporic Muslims, can lead to an entrenchment that takes on a religious hue by default. In light of this deculturation, identification and loyalty is transferred from the *majority* and *minority* cultures to the *Ummah* exclusively. In times of group crisis (such as that imposed by perceived Western aggression), humanistic aspirations and a state of anomie may compel the individual to undertake altruistic violence in the hope of liberating his community (*Ummah*), and himself, through his own sacrifice. Perhaps, ultimately, what impels the radical Islamist towards sacralised violence is not entirely removed from Horace's dictum, effectively employed to spur on generations of soldiers to the glories of war and martyrdom: '*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*' – it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.

Notes

1. See Modood (2005b) for an emphatic rejoinder to the facile linkage between the events of July 2005 and the UK's policy on multiculturalism.
2. The Global Peace and Unity Event, 4 December 2005, Excel, London.
3. We must of course remain cognisant of inherent differences; there is a world of difference between the experience of South Asian Muslims living within a British or Dutch multiculturalist paradigm, and the experience of North African Muslim youth chafing under a rigid *Laicite* in French *banileus*.
4. This is particularly pertinent when we look at the experiences of converts to Islam who are, in principle, at liberty to choose from the entire gamut of religious options.
5. Such as the 'race riots' of 2001 in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, or the more recent disturbances involving French youth in Paris and Lyon.

6. Conversely, the potent efficacy of the Madrid bombings in precipitating the with-drawal of Spanish troops from Iraq serves to legitimise alternate means.

7. *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* ran an intensive campaign in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, employing the slogan 'Don't Stop the War – Except through Islamic Politics': www.khilafah.com/home/category.php?DocumentID=6108&TagID=28. Accessed 27 February 2006.

8. For a transcript of the letter, see www.faithfreedom.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t= 5270. Accessed 27 February 2006.

9. The ethnicity of second- and third-generation European Muslims varies across Europe and broadly follows patterns set by colonial legacy: Muslims in the UK are principally from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, whereas French Muslims tend to be of North African descent.

10. Nevertheless, we must be wary of overstating the influence of cultural institutions such as the *biraderi* in diasporic communities. Shahid Malik was elected Labour MP for Dewsbury in 2005 despite being denied the specific endorsement of any local mosque. Similarly other successful community leaders such as Lord Nazir Ahmed of Rotherham have fared extremely well despite falling foul of *biraderi* pol-itics in the past (Akhtar 2003). Although we must also temper this point by acknowledging the fact that both were immersed in ambient *biraderi* politics and thus not totally aloof from the system.

11. Modood (2005a) contends that the familiar 'biological racism' has been displaced by a newer 'cultural racism', which focuses on language, religion, family structures, dress and cuisine – traits that define what it means to be Asian.

12. A number of Islamic websites offer online *fatwa* databases and the provision of *fatwa* Q&A sessions. See, for example, www.islam-qa.com and www.islamon line.net/English/index.shtml. Accessed 27 February 2006. See also Bunt, G. (2003) *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments*, London: Pluto Press.

13. By all accounts, Osama bin Laden has had no formal religious training.

14. For a discussion of some of the arguments put forward by radicals in order to justify the killing of civilians, see Wiktorowicz (2005).

15. See, for example: http//elaqsa.2islam.com/Explo/11.html. Accessed 27 February 2006.

16. For examples, see: www.azzam.com, www.tajdeed.org.uk and www.al-farouq. com. Accessed 27 February 2006.

17. Posted on the 'al-Hesbah' Jihadi forum: http://www.alhesbah.org. Accessed 27 February 2006.

18. The list is available from the 'al-Saha' forum: http://alsaha.fares.net/sahat/.ee6b2ff. Accessed 27 February 2006.

19. The large number of US troops stationed in the Arabian Gulf, particularly in the *hijaz*, was seen as occupation by al-Qaeda and their supporters, and indeed their removal constituted the earliest articulated demand by Osama bin Laden. See 'The Ladinese Epistle: Declaration of War (I)', *MSANEWS*, 12 October 1996. See also

Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places: http://azzam.com/html/articlesdeclaration.htm. Accessed 27 February 2006.

20. See, for example, Haykel, B. (2005) 'Among jihadis, a rift over suicide attacks', *The New York Times*, 12 October. More recently, the London bombings were condemned by both Hamas and Hezbollah, who have been known to employ the tactic of suicide bombing as part of their strategy against Israeli occupation (*The Daily Star* 2005).

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