

# The Veil

## DEMONIZING BRITISH MUSLIMS

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In Northern Ireland, murals, painted pavements, flags and a thousand other 'visible statements of separation and of difference' have made better relations between Nationalists and Unionists more difficult. Instead of focusing on these *symptoms* of the underlying problems, the Government set the goal of 'parity of esteem' between different traditions. The growth of fundamentalism and defiant difference in British Muslim communities is a symptom of a lack of esteem, a symptom of racism and Islamophobia, and a symptom of the despair, powerlessness and anger caused by Iraq.

### FUNDAMENTALISM AND FEMINISM

What is confusing is that the *niqab* is also a sign of 'separation and difference' between some Muslim women and most other British Muslim women. Within Muslim communities there is a struggle by some women and some men against right-wing fundamentalism and patriarchy, a struggle which is undermined by the spread of veiling of all kinds.

However, Maleiha Malik urges non-Muslim feminists to 'reconsider the disproportionate weight they are giving to complex symbols such as the veil... By attacking the veil—as in the colonial past—**they may strengthen many Muslim women's commitment to it** and make it **more difficult** for Muslims to have a much needed debate on women and Islam.' (*Guardian*, 19 Oct. <[tinyurl.com/y6mc8f](http://tinyurl.com/y6mc8f)>)

Non-Muslims who support women's rights in Muslim communities must consider carefully how they can make a positive contribution. **It will not be made by lining up with Straw, Blair and Brown, the architects of the invasion of Iraq, as they bully Muslim women and lecture them on how to behave acceptably.**

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### THE GROWING FEAR OF MUSLIMS

According to the polling agency YouGov, the proportion of people in Britain who feel threatened by Islam—not by violent fundamentalist versions of Islam, but by Islam itself—has risen from 32 per cent of the population in 2001, to a majority (53 per cent). In 2001, 'a majority of two to one thought that Islam posed no threat, or only a negligible one, to democracy. Now, by a similar ratio, people think it is a serious threat.' (*Daily Telegraph*, 25 Aug. 2006 <<http://tinyurl.com/yg5w82>>)

The *Telegraph* also compared polls just after the 7/7 attacks with Aug. 2006. The number of people believing that 'a large proportion of British Muslims feel no sense of loyalty to this country and are prepared to condone or even carry out acts of terrorism' had nearly doubled from 10 per cent to 18 per cent. The number believing that 'practically all British Muslims are peaceful, law-abiding citizens who deplore terrorist acts as much as anyone else' had fallen from 23 to 16 per cent.

In fact, a poll for the *Sunday Telegraph* <[tinyurl.com/zwf7o](http://tinyurl.com/zwf7o)> and an online poll by the anti-racist '1990 Trust' <[tinyurl.com/yf9qxd](http://tinyurl.com/yf9qxd)> both show that less than 2 per cent of British Muslims supported the 7/7 attacks.

### TREATING MUSLIMS AS FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT

When individual Christians or Jews take disturbing actions in line with minority interpretations of their faith, these are treated as exceptions to the rule. When individual Muslims take disturbing actions in line with minority interpretations of their faith, these are treated as examples of the unacceptable norm among Muslims, the true frightening face of Islam.

When Christian protesters tried to stop the BBC



broadcasting 'Jerry Springer–The Opera', were they represented as the mainstream of Christianity? When the Exeter University Christian Union's habit of excluding non-evangelical students from its meetings led to it being temporarily suspended, was this seen as revealing the illiberalism of Christianity? (*Telegraph*, 18 Oct., p. 11; Ekklesia <[tinyurl.com/y2pmnn](http://tinyurl.com/y2pmnn)>)

## MAINSTREAM MUSLIM ATTITUDES

The ICM/*Sunday Telegraph* poll referred to earlier showed that only 7 per cent of British Muslims thought: 'Western society is decadent and immoral and Muslims should seek to bring it to an end, if necessary by violent means'. **80 per cent** thought: 'Western society may not be perfect but Muslims should live within it and not seek to bring it to an end'.

While 97 per cent of British Muslims thought publishing the Danish cartoons of Muhammad was wrong (and 77 per cent were 'very' personally offended), only 14 per cent thought it right for Muslims to attack Danish embassies as a result. **82 per cent** thought this was unacceptable. **The same 82 per cent** also thought it was wrong for Muslim demonstrators to carry placards calling for the killing of those who insult Islam.

49 per cent of British Muslims said they felt 'very loyal' to Britain; 42 per cent said they felt 'quite loyal'. That's a total of **91 per cent** feeling loyalty. Only 5 per cent said 'not very loyal' and only 2 per cent 'not loyal at all'. (ICM poll, Feb. 2006 <[tinyurl.com/zwf7o](http://tinyurl.com/zwf7o)>)

## GROWING FEAR AMONG MUSLIMS

Jonathan Freedland wrote that the recent torrent of anti-Muslim reports and statements has created 'a kind of drumbeat of hysteria in which both politicians and media have turned again and again on a single, small minority, first prodding them, then pounding them as if they represented the single biggest problem in national life... I try to imagine how I would feel if this rainstorm of headlines substituted the word "Jew" for "Muslim": Jews creating apartheid, Jews whose strange customs and costume should be banned. I wouldn't just feel frightened. I would be looking for my passport.' (*Guardian*, 18 Oct. <[tinyurl.com/y7ccvy](http://tinyurl.com/y7ccvy)>)

## THE VEIL: BULLYING MUSLIM WOMEN

It is in this context that we turn to Jack Straw's intervention. He stated in the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* (5 Oct. <[tinyurl.com/lxqzu](http://tinyurl.com/lxqzu)>) that he asked Muslim women visiting his surgery to remove their face veils while speaking to him. Timothy Garton Ash points out that Straw may have asked politely, but he was in a position of power, the women had come to him for help, so 'the distinction between a request and a command is somewhat blurred.' (*Guardian*, 12 Oct. <[tinyurl.com/yxb3hx](http://tinyurl.com/yxb3hx)>) In short, Straw bullied these women to break a religious observance.

## STRAW DEEPENS SEPARATION AND DIFFERENCE

Straw also wrote that the *niqab* was 'a visible statement of separation and of difference', which made 'better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult'. Both statements are true. That doesn't mean Straw was right to make them. He knew what would follow. Attacks on veiled women in the street, growing hostility to Muslims veiled or unveiled, a deepening chasm between non-Muslims and increasingly alienated Muslims.

Many communities in Britain choose to make 'a visible statement of separation and of difference' between themselves and the rest of society. No politician, however, is telling yarmulke-wearing Orthodox Jews or headscarf-wearing Hutterian Brethren or sari-wearing Hindus to change their form of dress because it hinders 'community cohesion'.

## SIGNS OF DIFFERENCE

Neither the headscarf nor the face veil are explicitly commanded in the *Qur'an* (Koran). (BBC, <[tinyurl.com/y6pzfv](http://tinyurl.com/y6pzfv)>) Nevertheless, they are regarded in many societies as Muslim traditions. Madeleine Bunting writes: 'There are two distinct patterns of *niqab*-wearing in this country. One group wears the *niqab* by cultural tradition. Often they are relatively recent migrants, from Somalia or Yemen for example, and for the record it is not a "symbol of oppression" but a symbol of status. The second group comprises the small but slightly increasing number of younger women who wear it as a sign of their intense piety.' (*Guardian*, <[tinyurl.com/eh3r2](http://tinyurl.com/eh3r2)>)