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Introduction

Although in majority of countries in the world there is a formal separation between Church and State (Great Britain is one of the minority cases), religious bodies remain important political players. On the whole, religions are very tightly interwoven with political establishments and their policies. The dominant religions in the given states are usually highly politicised, in the sense of having significant impact not only on the public debates, but also on the policies of these states. Their politization, however, is often taken for granted and unnoticed. This is not the case with the political mobilisation of the minority religions. Their efforts to actively shape public debates are very quickly noticed and frequently deemed "dangerous" for the social order. This is, for instance, the situation of the public mobilisation of Islam in Europe. In this article I shall shed some light on the relationship between politics and Islam in Great Britain.

One of the biggest changes in recent years within Islam in Great Britain, as well as, in larger Western Europe (around 14 million people – Pędziwiatr 2005: 46–48) is that, it has ceased to be only the religion of immigrants and to a large extent it is now religion of European born citizens. The largest communities within the 1,6 million strong Muslim population in Britain consists now of majority of people who were born in the country[1]. The generational change marks not so much the difference in the legal citizenship status of Muslims, in the situation when most of the British Muslims coming from the former British colonies were given all political rights instantly, as in identity and social citizenship. While the first generation of immigrants were often lacking cultural resources to choose between different courses of action and to play active role

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    [1] This figure is from the 2001 Census. Some authors have argued that accounting for growth and the fact that the question was a voluntary one, the actual figure in 2005 is closer to 1.8 million.

in the public life of wider society, and hence could be considered as partial denizens, their offspring in most cases is quite well equipped with the cultural tools. They understands how the political and administrative process of their countries function, and are eager to make use of this knowledge and their civic rights. As research into the Muslim communities in Europe has showed citizenship is often central to their self-understandings and assertions of who they are. Many members of the second and third generation of Muslims get involved in the new types of Muslim organisations which are a product of political and social priorities of both Muslim communities and the wider society. These new organisations are weakening their reference to the regions of origin or other foreign agencies, just as they are becoming more "ecumenical" in their attitudes to cooperation with Islamic religio-political movements different from their own (Dassetto and Nielsen 2003: 534). One of such organisations is the Muslim Council of Britain (hereafter MCB) that strives to represent interests of all British Muslims *vis-à-vis* the government. The article based on the fieldwork material[2] analyses the efforts of the MCB to create Muslim public sphere and to influence the policies of the State.

Public Sphere or Public Spheres?

Before I begin to analyse the dynamics of Muslim public sphere in Britain it is worth shedding some light on the concept of public sphere. One of the contemporary buzz words, the public sphere has re-emerged as a key concept only in the past decade. However, its roots one may trace already in the scholarship of Immanuel Kant. In his essay on Enlightenment, the notion of "public" is represented by the words of a writer appearing before readers independent of authoritative intermediaries such as preachers, judges, and rulers. "Public" thoughts and ideas presented in this manner are thus judged on their own merits. Implicit in this notion is the idea of a public space separate from both the formal structures of religious and political authority and the space of households and kin (Chartier 1991: 23). It is also the notion which is closely associated with the work of leading contemporary theorist of public space, Jurgen Habermas, who has described the origins, development and degeneration of the "public sphere" in the West (Habermas 1989).

In his study of eighteenth century European society, Habermas emphasized that public arenas like coffee houses, literary clubs, journals, and "moral weeklies" helped to create an open and egalitarian culture of participation. He has

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[2] In the course of the research, the author has carried out 10 in-depth interviews with members of the MCB and 6 interviews with members of the organizations not-affiliated with the MCB. Apart from that the author participated in several seminars, conferences and meetings organised by the MCB and its affiliates.

also suggested that this development provided vital precedents for the next century's struggles for democratic representation. According to the German social philosopher, the public space is created in and out of civil society. It is not absorbed into the state, but addresses the state and the sorts of public issues on which state policy might bear. It is based on: notion of public good as distinct from private interest; social institutions (such as private property) that empower individuals to participate independently in the public sphere because their livelihoods and access to it are not dependent on political power or patronage; and forms of private life (notably families) that prepare individuals to act as autonomous, rational-critical subjects in the public sphere (Calhoun 2000: 533).

This influential concept has met with a great deal of criticism from many angles and although there is no room here to elaborate on it at length, it is worth presenting the main arguments of the critics, since they can enable us to better understand the functioning of the Muslim public sphere in Britain and the involvement of Muslims in the national public sphere. First of all, one cannot notice that within the framework of Habermas's concept there is no place for the minority group's public space at all. This is so not only because Habermas in his classical concept did not pay much attention to religions' role in creating the public sphere of bourgeois (Calhoun 1992), but more so because he did not envisage that there might be plural public spheres. According to Calhoum the idea of a single, uniquely authoritative public sphere as presented by Habermas needs to be questioned and the manner of relations among multiple, intersecting, and heterogeneous publics needs to be considered, simply because it is one of the illusions of liberal discourse to believe that in a democratic society there is a single uniquely authoritative discourse about public affairs. The idea of a single public sphere should also be rejected because it is build on the false nationalist presumption that membership in a common society is prior to democratic deliberations and implicit believe that politics revolves around a single and unitary state (2000: 534).

The important voice in the criticism of the modern conceptions of the public sphere was raised also in the feminist literature and notably by Nancy Fraser. In a situation of existence of substantial inequalities, Fraser denies that it is desirable to have public debate confined to a single, overarching public sphere. She believes it is far better to think of multiple public spheres in which members of different social groups or those with specialist interests discuss issues with one another and then compete to get their views on the political agenda. She also points out that members of minority groups have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. The "subaltern counterpublics" as Fraser calls them, are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter discourses (Fraser 1995: 291). It seems that with the development of internet these "subaltern counterpublics"

and the people and organisations active in them have gained more space for expression of alternative discourses.

Public Sphere, Religion, Identity and Common Good

A different line of criticism has developed to question the central premises of Habermasian theory (as well as many other democratisation models) concerning the place of religion in the public sphere. The assumption that for a society to democratize, religion must retreat from the public stage to the privacy of personal belief[3] has been challenged, for example, by Jose Casanova who argues the religion always was and still is part of public sphere. He points out three situations when religion enters the public sphere of civil society to raise normative issues, participating in ongoing processes of normative contestation (Casanova 1994). The three situations when we can observe "de-privatisation of religion", are when religion enters public sphere: a) in defence of traditional life-worlds against state and market penetration (i.e. mobilisation against abortion or against banning the ritual killing of animals); b) in defence of traditional moral norms against the absolutist claims of states and markets to function according to their own intrinsic functionalist norms; and c) in defence of the principle of "common good" against individualist modern liberal theories that would reduce the common good to the aggregated sum of individualist rational choices.

Yet other critiques of Habermas challenge his presumption that identities of social actors active in the public sphere will be formed in private (and/or in other public contexts) prior to entry into the political public sphere. They point out the lack of adequately thematic role of identity-forming, and culture-forming of public activity in the Frankfurt theorist concept of public sphere. The authors such as, for example, Craig Calhoun argue that it is absolutely necessary to abandon the notion that identity as formed once and for all in advance of participation in the public sphere, in order to recognise that in varying degree all public discourses are occasions for identity formation (2002: 536). Others in the same gist point out that experience is not something exclusively prior to and only addressed by the rational-critical discourse of the public sphere; it is constituted in part through public discourse and at the same time continually orients people differently in public life (Negt and Kluge 1993). They also point out that it is possible to distinguish public spheres in which identity-formation figures more prominently, and those in which rational-critical discourse is more prominent. As my research into the Muslim public sphere in Britain has shown

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[3] It is worth noting that Habermas in his recent writings has revised his opinions in this matter and now envisages much more space for religion in the public sphere. See for example Habermas 2005.

it is undoubtedly an example of the former, rather than the later public sphere. Furthermore within this sphere it is especially the Muslim youth and Islamist[4] organisations which pay a great deal of attention to the process of identity formation of the generation of Muslims born in the non-Muslim country.

Finally the last line of criticism of Habermasian theory of public sphere which I believe is pertinent to the analysis of the Muslim associational sector in Britain concerns one of its fundamental notions, namely that of public/common good. While in the modern conceptions of the public sphere, to which we can classify also the Habermasian one, it was believed that people should discuss what was in the public interest and what was good for everyone, some postmodernist scholars argue otherwise. Already quoted, Nancy Fraser, for example rejects the idea that people should not push their private interests in the public sphere. She argues, giving as an example the feminist campaign against sexual harassment, that what starts out as being a private interest can come to be accepted as an issue of public concern. Furthermore she argues that the personal and the private can be political, and that we should not presume in advance that certain things should be off limits for public debate. The divide between the public and the private is an artificial division of modern societies and it should not be allowed to shape public debates (Fraser 1995). Having situated the theme of the article within a larger theoretical context, it is time to move to the case under discussion, the Muslim Council of Britain which is one of the most important players within the Muslim non-governmental sector in Great Britain.

The Muslim Council of Britain as a Timely Initiative

The organisation that has been striving to speak on behalf on all Muslims in the country since *1997* is an example of *mélange* of the top-down and bottom-up initiative. The MCB is to a large extent a result of an effort carried out almost from the time of the Rushdie affair, when many Muslims who lobbied the government to ban the 'Satanic Verses' felt that their voice was being ignored and that "they needed to organize otherwise nobody was going to listen to them" (interview with MR).

Like many other minority umbrella organisations in the country, the MCB is patterned on the Board of Deputies of British Jews founded in 1760 by Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews www.bod.org.uk). Its affairs are conducted according to a written constitution and it is made up of a General Assembly, Cen-

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[4] I use the adjective Islamist in value-free manner. By Islamists I mean the social actors who place Muslim identity at the centre of their activities and use the language of Islamic metaphors to think through their political destinies. By 'Islamist organisations' I mean those which hold that Islam is not only a religion, but also a system that should govern the politicial, economic and social imperatives of the state.

tral Working Committee, Specialist Committees and Board of Counsellors. The true engines which drive the multi-faceted work of the organisation are its Committees. There are officially about 400 institutions affiliated to the MCB including mosques, education and charitable institutions, women and youth organisations and professional bodies. However, if one does not count the regional and local branches of certain organisations then the number of affiliates of the MCB goes down to about 250[5]. While the composition of the membership is ethnically and theologically mixed some critics point out that it has not been mixed enough. It has been accused of being comprised of "primarily Pakistani and Indian males" with little representation of groups such as women, youth and Shia Muslims (Q News June 2000). These are however not the only groups that the MCB fails to represent according to my non-MCB affiliated respondents. The Secretary-General of the recently established British Muslim Forum (hereafter BMF), grouping 250 mosques, points out for example that the MCB does not represent "the mainstream Muslims" by whom he means people of the Brelwi tradition. Although there are some Brelwi organizations affiliated with the MCB, these organizations are there, according to Gul Mohammad, just so as the MCB could say that there are some. "There is no real representation (of the Brelwis-K.Pędziwiatr) but just a token few" – he maintains (interview with GM). Other actors of the British Muslim civil society point at the MCB's strong ideological links with Muslim reformism, and with the Jama'at-i Islami movement in particular. According to the co-founder of An Nisa Society "the MCB is rooted in external political context and it tries to re-create that in the British context"(interview with HK).

With more women in its Central Working Committee every two years (the duration of tenure) and growing number of affiliates from various ethnic communities, the MCB has been clearly trying to address some of these criticisms. On the other hand, it has no illusions that becoming a truly representative body is an easy goal to achieve. Some of the most active members believe that it is achievable – "there is just a lot of organisational coherence and sustainability needed to achieve this objective" (interview with JS) – while others suggest that striving for greater representativity reminds the quest for the Holy Grail (Hussain 2003: 248).

It needs to be also stressed that the MCB as an umbrella organisation is not a monolith. Some of the most important cleavages that one may observe within it are formed along political, generational, and theological lines. The differences between conservative and progressive; the 1st and 2nd generation activists, as well as between the Deobandis, Salafis, Brelwis and others, all come into

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[5] For example the Islamic Society of Britain is counted 16 times The list of the MCB affiliates available on www.mcb.org.uk.

play not only during the moments when the organisation decides to respond to major international events such as for example the military interventions in Afghanistan or in Iraq, but also when addressing national issues which include inter alia religious extremism, anti-Semitism or homophobia[6] within the Muslim population.

The organisation strives to deal with problems faced by Muslims in the country and influence policies and outcomes through principled and effective participation, in conformity with Islamic norms and standards. Among its aims are inter alia: "to promote cooperation, consensus and unity on Muslim affairs in the UK and to work for the eradication of disadvantages and forms of discrimination faced by Muslims and to foster better community relations and work for the good of society as a whole" (MCB Constitution on www.mcb.org.uk).

Closer investigation of the aims of the MCB shows significant resemblance with those of the first British Muslim "representative" organisation established in the country after the Second World War - still functioning - the Union of Muslim Organisations of UK & Ireland (hereafter UMO). The important question which one needs to rise is why the MCB has been more successful in pursuing these goals than the UMO established in 1970 and led by Syed Aziz Pasha? One of the main reasons for that lies in the timing of the foundation of the new Muslim "representative body". One of the major problems of the UMO was that it was essentially premature (Nielsen 1992: 47). The organisation failed to recognise that most of the decisions and policies affecting Muslims had been taken until recently at local rather not national political level. However, the lobbying of the government by the UMO, which one may perceive as preview of the current work of the MCB, was not entirely fruitless. Many of the issues such as for example, Islamic mortgage, founding of Muslim schools, religious question in the census, that the MCB has been occupied with now, were initiated already by the UMO. The Union as a member of various inter-faith groups has also pioneered the cooperation with other faith communities[7]. The fact that its Secretary-General from the time of inception until now has not changed tells a lot about the style of leadership in this organisation and explains some of the reasons why several prominent members of the UMO (notably the current Secretary-General of the MCB) came to the conclusion that the structures of the organisation were impossible to work within and decided to set up a new institutional body. The new organisation, according to Syed Aziz Pasha was supposed to be only a service organisation which would not compete with the UMO,

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[6] The organisation's stand on homosexuality is one of the most recent sources of internal tensions. Some evidence of these tensions could be found even in the press. See "Muslims are accused of gay U-turn" The Observer, 23 April, 2006.

[7] Union of Muslim Organisations of UK & Ireland (UMO), *1970–1995: A Record of Achievement*, 25 Years Silver Jubilee Magazine 1995: 6.

as a "representative body" (interview with SAP). However from the moment of birth of the MCB it was clear that amongst the services which the new organisation wanted to offer was also to represent Muslims *vis-à-vis* the government.

Yet another reason why the MCB has been more successful in establishing itself at the stage of the Muslim organisations, and in pursuing its goals and rapidly gaining the status of "first among equals" among various Muslim organisations in the country was its exceptionally good relationship with the government. While the leaders of the MCB talk about "constructive engagement in dealing with the government", the leaders of the UMO and BMF call the MCB "a government backed body" (interview with SAP and with GM) and both sides have a point. On the one hand, in support of the thesis of Syed Aziz Pasha and of Gul Mohammed one may point out that only six months after its launch, MCB attended a meeting with Home Secretary Jack Straw[8], and by the end of its first year, had established regular contact with Straw and FCO ministers[9]. This good relationship with the government continued to develop so that in its 2002 Annual Report the MCB claimed to conduct regular meetings with "government ministers and other politicians and 'movers and shakers'" as well as senior civil servants[10]. Anas Osama Altikriti from the Muslim Association of Britain makes an important point when he notices that "It would be very difficult to achieve the position that the MCB holds at the moment without the governmental back up" (interview with AOA).

On the other hand, the support which the MCB has been receiving from the government in various forms does not mean that the organisation has become a governmental puppet. To achieve its goals it employs both the strategy of an "insider" trying to influence the politics behind the scenes (Redcliffe 2004) and of the "outsider", by taking stand in the public sphere and stimulating debates in the Muslim "subaltern counterpublic", to use the poetic of Nancy Fraser (1995: 291). The organisation has remained highly critical of policies of the government and especially of its foreign policy. Its image as a pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist strongly boosts its position among British Muslims.

The MCB argues its position not with reference to the *Sharia* or *Quran,* which would not appeal to the majority of non-Muslims readers, but usually with references to principles such as human rights, international law and the will of the international community. It disseminates its opinions mainly through the means of press releases, which are often published in major broadsheet newspapers. For example, in its first press release on an issue of international concern – condemnation of the US bombing of Afghanistan and Sudan in August 1998 in retaliation for the terrorist bombings of their embassies in Kenya

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[8] MCB, "MCB Delegation meets Home Secretary (17 June 1998)", www.mcb.org.uk/news170698.html.

[9] Valerie Grove, "Hollow laughs over US 'respect' for holy month," *The Times*, 19 December 1998.

[10] MCB, "Secretary-General's Introduction," www.mcb.org.uk/annual2002.htm.

and Tanzania – the MCB wrote "The American action is a clear violation of international law and takes us back to the days of gunboat diplomacy when might was right, and the law of the jungle prevailed"[11] and thus, it couched its criticism in the language of international law and diplomacy. Despite the MCB's criticism, the government has continued to look with favour on the organisation since it desperately needs, mainly from the point of effectiveness of communication, a single voice to refer to as an interlocutor in order to deal with Muslims' demands and needs (Hussain 2003: 245). It seems that instead of setting up from scratch a new body, as Belgium, France, Austria and Spain did, the British government prefers to tacitly support the existing organisation hoping that it will gain further credibility within the Muslim population.

Attaining and Using the Power

The organization which until recently had been employing only two people have managed to establish itself as the government's favourite Muslim umbrella organization also as a result of the enormous input of voluntary work of its members. In this sense the MCB can be viewed as an organisation which draws on a strong sense of social enterprise (interview JS). The financial value of the voluntary work of the MCB members and the volunteers' expenses amounted in 2004 to nearly 500 000 pounds and it was one and a half times higher than the actual turnover of the organisation of 350 000 pounds (MCB Annual Report 2004: 15). Without this voluntary effort the organisation would probably have never managed to gain such prominence in a relatively short time. Along with the prominence of the organisation many of its members have gained prestige and are being perceived as powerful. Its Secretary-General Iqbal Sacranie for his social activity was awarded first Order of the British Empire - OBE (www.obeservice.org.uk) and in 2005 the Knighthood. Already in 1999 he was voted by *The Observer* a one of the 300 most powerful people in Britain – a year, the paper noted, the Archbishop of Canterbury did not even make the list[12]. Certainly he was not put on this list as an accountant running the family business (trading in agro-chemicals)[13], but as a leader of the organisation that the government wants to see as a voice of the Muslim population of the country. In the light of the Foucault's "micro-physics of power" approach one could say that the main reason why the Islamists attain power and become "religious brokers" is because they posses the knowledge how western societies work and willingly and skilfully are taking advantage of this expertise by engaging in the public arena. On the other hand the ethno-religious

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[11] "American Airstrikes against Afghanistan and Sudan (21 August 1998)," www.mcb.org.uk/news210898.html.
[12] "1999 The Observer Power 300: From Souter to Grieve," *The Observer*, 24 October 1999.
[13] Interview with Iqbal Sacranie, The Guardian, June 17, 2002.

leaders who pay more attention to knowledge of *desh pardesh* (In Urdu "home far from home") than to British context and those who see Islam as part of the private sphere rather than the public one, are not interested and often not capable of competing with Islamists.

One of the best examples of how the MCB is using its power to influence the public sphere and to strengthen its authority within British Muslim discursive arena is its campaign for introduction of the religion question into the census. Although the campaign started yet before the foundation of the MCB and the intellectual engine behind it was a group "Churches Working Together", Muslims took an active part in it from the very beginning[14]. As one of its active participants pointed out, it marked for many British Muslims their first comprehensive engagement with the variety of networks, power centres, institutions and processes that interact in the shaping of policy and participative democracy (Sherif 2002). Despite many twists and turns it ended with success on June 19, 2000 when the House of Commons passed amendment introducing new questions to the census by 194 to 10 votes[15]. This victory was not only a consequence of efforts of the many British Muslims, but also advocacy of the Churches and a changing social milieu which has become more open to role for faith in the public sphere. The result of the campaign was inclusion to the 2001 census a question on religious identification which the last time was asked in Census for England 150 years ago. The high response rate (92%) to what was the only voluntary question in the census form indicated its wide acceptability and confirmed the importance of religion as a basis of identity.

While for the leader of the UMO lobbying for introduction of the question "what is your religion?" into the census was "irrelevant thing" (Interview with SAP), all the interviewed members of the MCB spoke unanimously about it, as a "landmark event" and one of the greatest achievements of the MCB (interviews with IB, JS, SJ, MR and IM). For the members of the MCB, in contrast to Syad Aziz Pasha it was clear that a mere presence of the word "Muslim" in the nation-wide census was a significant development allowing the discussion about the nature of the British pluralist society to move beyond the race/ethnic paradigm that until recently has dominated thinking amongst social scientists and policy makers. As Jamil Sherif points out the 2001 Census was significant because it acknowledged that allegiance to moral and ethical values was in some contexts more important that characterizing people by what they looked like (Sherif 2002: 1). The members of the MCB were also aware of the fact

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[14] Before November 1997 the advocacy body for the Muslim community was UKACIA – the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs.

[15] More about the census campaign, Sherif Jamil (2002) The Religion Question in the Census – A Landmark Event' on www.mcb.org.uk.

that implementation of religious question into the Census meant that religions and religious groups have gained a new space in the public sphere.

The fact that now there is authoritative data on the size and regional distribution of British Muslims has meant not only the end of quarrels about the size of the Muslims population but also the beginning of their statistical visibility as the second, after Christians, religious group in the country. On the one hand this statistical visibility has given the MCB a valuable tool which the organization might use both when it lobbies the government or takes part in public debate and when it tries to strengthen its position within the Muslim population in the country. As Peter Skerry reminds us state-defined identity categories can have a profound impact on individuals' conception of themselves. Like birth certificates and migration documents, the census is a crucial instrument in producing and maintaining ethnic, racial and, now with the inclusion of the religious category, also religious identities. In this way the census which enables us to understand the boundaries of certain nation, its strengths, weaknesses and the relationship of its part, can contribute also to maintaining these boundaries (Skerry 2000: 11).

The MCB as an organisation that strives to provide "community representation" has been trying to translate the diverse socio-cultural reality of numerous Muslim communities in the country and the established by the census category of Muslim population into the category of singular Muslim community. In doing so it has been trying to deploy the idea of essence into the empty notion of community and in this way it has been striving to aggregate and mobilise people of often quite different subject positions in a common cause. The methods used by the MCB in its discursive effort to create British Muslim community include among others, the usage of the notion of Muslim community as it was a homogenous one and frequent referring to the size of the Muslim population as to the size of the Muslim community. The employment of this kind of discursive technique by the organisation has not remained unnoticed by members of other Muslim NGOs. The editor of the portal ummanews.com Faisal Bodi, for example, complained in the Guardian that "barely a news bulletin passes these days without reference to MCB's take on the latest developments, giving the impression, as did the Muslim Parliament during the Rushdie Affair, that it alone legitimately speaks for British Muslims" (Bodi 2001).

In the case of the MCB the crucial role in building its authority within the country Muslim population and wider society plays the internet. The organisation not only uses it to communicate with the affiliates but also maintains and regularly updates a comprehensive and easily navigable website that includes both information on current affairs and historical material about what the MCB has done to further various causes of concern to British Muslims. This presentation seeks to convey to Muslim and non-Muslim citizens the MCB's leading role

as the community representative. Gary Bunt has rightly pointed out that its website "presents an impression of 'unity' within the British Muslim community" with MCB at the helm, emphasising the number and diversity of MCB affiliate organisations (Bunt 1999: 354). As one may read in the MCB 2004 Annual Report the financial value of the content management of the website and related to it technical services, provided free of charge by the company of one of the MCB members, excess 25 000 pounds per annum (MCB Annual Report 2004: 15).

In its efforts to meet of one of its central goals, which is "fostering of better community relations and working for the good of society as a whole", the MCB tries to activate Muslim communities and encourage their members to use their civic rights. For example it encouraged the active participation of British Muslims in the elections of 1997 and 2001, calling on Muslims to vote strategically to elect MPs that were responsive to Muslim concerns[16]. The organisation issued "manifestos" prior to both elections, outlining the "Muslim position" on various issues[17]. More recently the MCB has sent a letter to all of the country's mosques, Islamic associations and institutions urging them to encourage their communities to take the fullest part in the upcoming local and European elections[18]. In the letter which has gained high publicity, as it was published among others on the BBC website[19], the MCB emphasized that Muslims' participation was very important in order not to let in the racist and Far Right parties simply by default which could happen if people did not vote and there was a low turnout.

In order to foster better community relations and promote community cohesion the organisation in the wake of the Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004 has also taken the unprecedented step of writing to every mosque, urging people to help in the fight against terror. In the letter which was quoted directly, for example, in the *khutbah* delivered on April 2nd 2004 at the East London Mosque[20] and mentioned in many other mosques across the country, the MCB asked Muslims "to observe the utmost vigilance against any mischievous or criminal elements from infiltrating the community and provoking any unlawful activity" and "to liaise with the local Police and give them the fullest cooper-

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[16] A special election supplement written by MCB was included in *TMN*, 30 March 2001. It included an article entitled "Why vote?"; a "Muslim VoteCard" to be sent to parliamentary candidates asking them to declare their position on five issues of concern to Muslims, and a chart listing constituencies with outcomes that could potentially be affected by the voting of its Muslim electorate.

[17] The 1997 political manifesto was issued by UKACIA, the driving force behind the formation of MCB; see UKACIA, "Elections 1997 and British Muslims – for a fair and caring society" (1997). This document was published in both *TMN*, 28 February 1997 and *Q-News*, March 1997. Also MCB, "Electing to Listen: promoting policies for British Muslims" (2000).

[18] The letter is available on http://www.mcb.org.uk/Jun04_letter_mosques.pdf.

[19] See, MCB letter to Muslim communities on BBC http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3772017.stm.

[20] The transcription of the *khutbah* one may find on http://www.mcb.org.uk/khutbah.pdf.

ation in dealing with any criminal activity including terrorist threat[21]". It has legitimised both requests with verses from the Qur'an[22]. While the letter has met with many positive responses there were also some people who felt that it linked their religion with terrorism and were expressing their dissatisfaction with the action in their e-mail to the MCB[23].

Both initiatives of the MCB to write letters to Mosques and Muslim organisations across the country show that after more than 8 years of continuous work aimed at building authority within the Muslim population and wider society, it feels strong enough to take more pro-active and sometimes even controversial decisions in order to achieve its goals. Before the attacks on London Transport Network on July 7th 2005 the position of the MCB as 'a voice of British Muslims' was so strong that could not be challenged by any other organisation. After the attacks the situation has radically changed as the government is trying to extend the array of the consulted Muslim leaders and organisations. The MCB accused of being "too soft" on dealing with extremism within the Muslim community seems to have lost its privileged position in the corridors of power. However taking into account its significant advances in this matter I think it would not take it long yet to regain its position prior to 7/7.

Conclusion

The article has shed light on the case of politization of Islam in Europe. Moreover it has demonstrated the usefulness of the concept of public sphere in the analysis of the Muslim organisational activism in Britain. In order to be analytically useful though, the notion of public sphere needs to be understood not as singular but as multiple public spheres.

At the age of politics of identity, creating subaltern counterpublics allows the groups which would otherwise have limited opportunities to attain power, to promote their own goals and eventually influence the policies of the state. The article identifies several specific factors which have enabled the MCB to influence the politics of the state. Some of them are: good relations with the government, knowledge of "how western societies work", simultaneous usage of the strategy of an "insider" and "outsider", employment of the internet and appropriate languages while addressing the state and the Muslim communities. One of the general factors that have paved the way for the MCB to the corridors

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[21] The letter is available on http://www.mcb.org.uk/Imamletter-31March04.pdf.

[22] The first one with *ayah* 10 from *surah fatir* (chapter The Angels) *"And those who criminally plot evil deeds, a severe punishment awaits them; and all their plotting is bound to come to nought."* (35:10) and the second one with *ayah* 2 from *surah al-maeda* (The Table) *"Help one another to virtue and God-consciousness and do not help one other to sin and transgression."* (5:2) Qur'an on-line available on http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/.

[23] Opinions available on MCB website, http://www.mcb.org.uk/tragedy163.php.

of power is undoubtedly the wider politicisation of Islam not only in Europe, but in the West. Since the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon in 2001, and the explosions of trains in Spain in 2004, Islam and Muslim populations have been very high on the agendas of Western governments. It seems that this situation has favoured the Muslim organisations that strive for more space for Islam within the public sphere, rather than those that believe that religion should remain part of the private sphere. Clearly, the impact of the wider politicization of Islam on the Muslim organisational activism is one of the fields that require yet further research.

Abstrakt

Większość brytyjskich organizacji muzułmańskich założonych przez pierwsze pokolenie imigrantów działa głównie w obrębie „kolonii etnicznych" i rzadko bierze udział w debatach publicznych. Organizacje, w skład których wchodzi coraz większa liczba przedstawicieli drugiego pokolenia, kreatywnie i dynamicznie angażują się w tego typu debaty. Jedną z nich jest Muzułmańska Rada Wielkiej Brytanii (MCB), która dąży do tego by reprezentować interesy wszystkich brytyjskich muzułmanów w kontaktach z rządem. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje próby stworzenia przez MCB muzułmańskiej sfery publicznej i wywarcia wpływu na politykę państwa. Proponuje myślenie o sferze publicznej nie w liczbie pojedynczej, lecz w liczbie mnogiej, jak o rozmaitych sferach publicznych, w obrębie których członkowie różnych grup społecznych i specjaliści rozmawiają ze sobą, a następnie konkurują między sobą żeby ich opinie znalazły odzwierciedlenie w polityce państwa. W ten sposób rzuca światło na zróżnicowanie oraz konflikty wewnątrz populacji muzułmańskiej w kraju.

Słowa kluczowe: sfera publiczna – polityzacja islamu w Europie – muzułmańskie organizacje w Wielkiej Brytanii – polityzacja islamu w Europie – muzułmańskie organizacje w Wielkiej Brytanii

Abstract

While the majority of British Muslim organisations established by the first generation of immigrants tend to work within the "ethnic colonies" and rarely take part in public debates, the organisations made up by an increasing number of the second generation critically and creatively engage in them. One of such organisations is the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) that strives to represent interests of all British Muslims vis-ŕ-vis the government. The article analyses the efforts of the MCB to create Muslim public sphere and to influence the policies of the State. It proposes to think about the public sphere not as singular but as multiple public spheres in which members of different social groups or those with specialist interests discuss issues with one another and then compete to get their views on the political agenda. Thus, it sheds light on the diversity of the Muslim population in the country and the conflicts within it.

Keywords: public sphere – politicizing Islam in Europe – Muslim organisations in Britain

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