A sociological approach to Christian-Muslim relations: British Evangelicals, Muslims and the public sphere

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ABSTRACT

The increasingly politicized presence of Muslim communities in Britain today is raising issues not only for society in general but for other faith communities as well. Among these the Evangelical constituency, including the members of various Christian diasporas, is struggling to find a coherent response which is true to its Bible-based, activist roots.

This thesis discusses the relationship of religion to the theoretical notion of the public sphere. Specifically it hypothesizes an *Evangelical micro public sphere* as the framework for an empirical exploration of the responses of British Evangelicals to Muslims since the events of 11th September 2001. It describes the formation, composition and discourse of this sphere drawing on data gathered from books, articles, lectures and interviews with key participants. The data reveal a marked tension, indeed a polarization, amongst Evangelicals, with an increasingly sharp disagreement between 'confrontationalists' and 'conciliators'.

A detailed analysis of the interaction of this sphere with Muslims, the national media and church leaders follows, leading to a concluding discussion of the future trajectory of the British Evangelical movement. Whilst it is still too early to say whether Evangelicalism will be strengthened or weakened, its encounter with Islam is likely to be an increasingly significant factor in British public life for the foreseeable future.

DETAILED TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 7
Table of contents 9
Detailed table of contents 11
Table of figures 21
Notes and accompanying material 23
List of abbreviations 25
List of Arabic terms 27

Chapter 1 Introduction 29
1.1 Setting the scene 29
1.2 Origins of the project 31
1.3 Rationale for the thesis 32
1.3.a The Public Sphere 32
1.3.b British Evangelicals 33
1.3.c Muslims 34
1.3.d The post 9/11 world 35
1.4 Principal aims and objectives 36
1.5 A map of the thesis 36

Part I – The public sphere, religion and religious group strength: theoretical reflections

Chapter 2 The Public Sphere 41
2.1 The Public Sphere and Civil Society 41
2.2 Habermas and the rise of the bourgeois public sphere 44
2.3 Criticisms of Habermas' ideal type 45
2.4 The rise of the media, the fall of the bourgeois public sphere, and new models 47
2.4.a Fraser and subaltern counterpublics 49
2.4.b Eisenstadt, multiple identities and the non-western world 49
2.4.c Fraser – again – and the transnational public sphere 50
2.4.d Keane and the size of public spheres 50
2.4.e Hauser and the rhetorical reticulate public sphere 52
2.5 Defining a micro-public sphere 53
2.6 The formation of micro-public spheres 54
2.7 Conclusion 56

Chapter 3 Religion and the public sphere 57
3.1 The history of Christianity and the public sphere 57
3.1.a Christian protest: the early church 58
3.1.b Christian order: the rise of Christendom 59
3.1.c return to protest: the Protestant Reformation 60
3.2 The history of Islam and the public sphere 61
3.2.a Islamic order: from Mecca to Medina 61
3.2.b return to protest: the decline of Islam 63
3.3 Theoretical approaches to religion in the public sphere 64
3.3.a Rawls, Habermas and religion in the public sphere 65

3.3.b Critiques of Habermas 67
3.4 Some twenty-first century themes 67
3.4.a Multiculturalism 68
3.4.b Faith communities, social capital and cohesion 70
3.4.c The establishment of the church 71
3.5 Conclusion 74

Chapter 4 The public interaction of religious groups 75
4.1 Religious identity formation 76
4.1.a The social imaginary: a common narrative 76
4.1.b The sacred umbrella: a shared worldview 77
4.1.c The religious tribe: a secure boundary 79
4.2 Theories of religious group strength 80
4.2.a The secularization thesis 80
4.2.b Religious markets 81
4.2.c Cultural evolution 84
4.3 Modes of interaction 85
4.3.a Isolation 87
4.3.b Hostility and polemical debate 87
4.3.c Competition, evangelism and apologetics 88
4.3.d Partnership, tolerance and hospitality 89
4.4 Likely trajectories 91

Part II – Evangelicals and Muslims: the British Context

Chapter 5 Evangelicals in Britain 97
5.1 What is an Evangelical? 97
5.2 Variations within global Evangelicalism 98
5.3 A brief history of Evangelicalism in Britain 101
5.4 Evangelicalism in Britain in the twentyfirst century 105
5.5 The Evangelical public sphere 107
5.5.a Evangelical associations and networks 107
5.5.b Evangelical media 109
5.5.c Issues for debate in the Evangelical public sphere 109

Chapter 6 Muslims in Britain 111
6.1 The global context 111
6.2 The Muslim presence in Britain 113
6.2.a Statistics 113
6.2.b Muslim migration to Britain 116
6.2.c Muslim civil society 119
6.3 The development of a British Muslim public sphere 121
6.4 Issues of concern to the British Muslim public sphere 123
6.4.a Domestic and international affairs 123
6.4.b Media portrayals of Islam 124
6.4.c Islamophobia 125
6.4.d Identity 127

Chapter 7 The Evangelical-Muslim encounter 133
7.1 The Protestant encounter with Islam 133
7.1.a The reformation period 133
7.1.b The Protestant missionary movement 135
7.1.c The contemporary encounter 136
7.2 The modern Evangelical-Muslim encounter 138
7.2.a The American context 138
7.2.b The British context 141
7.3 The formation of an Evangelical public sphere concerned with Islam 146

Chapter 8 The research project 149
8.1 The best laid plans: an overview of the research strategy 149
8.2 Who's who? Establishing the samples 151
8.2.a The national elite 151
8.2.b The churches 154
8.3 What's what? Collecting the data 156
8.3.a Texts in the public domain 156
8.3.b Interviews 158
8.4 Which "bucket"? Analysing the data 162
8.5 Who am I? The reflexive question 163

Part III – British Evangelical responses to Islam: the data

Chapter 9 Evangelical Conceptualization of Islam 169
9.1 What is Islam? 169
9.1.a Is there an essence of "true Islam"? 169
9.1.b Should we focus on Islam or Muslims? 171
9.1.c Who are the "true" Muslims? 172
9.2 What is the source of Islam? 174
9.2.a God? 174
9.2.b Humans? 175
9.2.c The Qur'an? 176
9.2.d Satan? 177
9.3 How is Islam to be understood from the perspective of Christian theology? 178
9.3.a What theological resources do Evangelicals draw on? 179
9.3.b Is there continuity between Christianity and Islam? 180
9.3.c How are Islamic denials of Christian doctrine to be understood? 181
9.3.d Who is Allah? 182
9.3.e Is there salvation in Islam? 185
9.3.f Israel and the End Times? 186
9.4 What is Islamic ideology? 187
9.4.a Is Islamic ideology compatible with western forms of thinking? 188
9.4.b Is Islam inherently violent? 189
9.4.c Are there other causes of Islamic violence? 194
9.4.d What is Islam's global agenda? 198

Chapter 10 The socio-political implications of Islam 201
10.1 Evangelicals and the state 201
10.2 Evangelicals and multiculturalism 203
10.2.a The failures of multiculturalism 204
10.2.b Negative outcomes of multiculturalism 207
10.3 The "Islamization" of Britain 212
10.3.a Muslim community life 212
10.3.b Education 215
10.3.c The media 216
10.3.d Islamic finance 218
10.3.e Shari'a, human rights and British law 218
10.3.f British converts to Islam 222
10.4 Evangelicals, Islamic conspiracy and the future 223
10.4.a How do Evangelicals perceive Muslim intentions? 223
10.4.b Can Muslims be trusted? 225
10.4.c How do Evangelicals see Islam developing in Britain in the future? 228
10.4.d What do Evangelicals believe should be done? 230
10.4.e Are Evangelicals at war? 237

Chapter 11 Evangelical relationships in the public sphere 239
11.1 The relationship of the Evangelical public sphere to Muslims 239
11.1.a The Evangelical mission to Muslims 239
11.1.b Evangelical friendship with Muslims 248
11.1.c Evangelical cooperation with Muslims 251
11.1.d Evangelicals, Muslims and reciprocity 252
11.2 Evangelicals and the British public sphere 254
11.2.a Lobbying and campaigning 254
11.2.b Political engagement 256
11.2.c Right wing links? 257
11.2.d The media 259
11.3 The relationship of the Evangelical public sphere with the Evangelical churches 260
11.3.a The various roles of the participants 261
11.3.b The equipping of the churches 262
11.3.c Attitudes of Evangelical church leaders in London towards Islam 266
11.4 Internal relationships within the Evangelical public sphere 276
11.4.a Media articles 278
11.4.b A Common Word 279
11.4.c An Evangelical "spat" 281
11.5 Conclusion 282

Part IV – British Evangelicals and Muslims: an analysis

Chapter 12 The Evangelical Public Sphere 283
12.1 The Evangelical micro-public sphere 283
12.1.a Evident existence 284
12.1.b Transnational influence 286
12.1.c Influence in the Evangelical churches 287
12.1.d Lack of influence within the wider public sphere 288

12.1.e Micro-public spheres and the sociology of religion 289
12.2 Responses to Islam within the Evangelical public sphere 290
12.2.a Mapping the responses by themes 292
12.2.b Factors affecting Evangelical responses 293
12.2.c Types of responses 294
12.2.d Comparisons with other typologies 298
12.3 Community relations: Evangelicals, Muslims and government 300
12.3.a Unending competition 300
12.3.b But are Evangelicals Islamophobic? 302
12.3.c Social capital: bonding, bridging and linking 303
12.4 Possible futures 304
12.4.a Rejection and retrenchment 304
12.4.b Accommodation and capitulation 306
12.4.c The middle ground and engaged orthodoxy 307
12.4.d Likely trajectories 308

Chapter 13 Conclusion 311
13.1 Looking back: the contribution of this thesis 311
13.2 Looking forward: future research 313
13.3 Looking out: to whom it may concern 314
13.4 Looking in: a personal reflection 317

Appendices

Appendix A: Key participants in the EPS (fold out copy in rear pocket) 319
Appendix B: London Evangelical churches (fold out copy in rear pocket) 325
Appendix C: Annotated bibliography of Evangelical Books and Booklets 2001-2010 331
Appendix D: Introductory letters 351
D.1 – National participants 351
D.2 – Church leaders 353
Appendix E: Consent forms 355
E.1 – National participants 355
E.2 – Church leaders 356
Appendix F: Interview schedules 357
F.1 – National participant interview schedule 357
F.2 – Church leader interview schedule 359
Appendix G: Codes for analysis 363

Bibliography 365