

«Our Islamic Fifth Column»
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Our Islamic Fifth Column

Farrukh Dhondy

My first name gives rise to confusion. It's a common Muslim name, so people I meet, or who read my byline, assume that I am of the faith.

Most recently, in response to a column I write for an Indian paper, in which I confessed to having met a few terrorists in my time and attempted to analyze their limited grasp of the world, I received a lot of hate mail. Some of the e-mailers clearly thought I was a Muslim apostate and reminded me that the penalty for that sin was death. One, who signed himself Zahir Pathan, was more strident. He graphically said I was a Muslim *sin cojones*, as Hemingway would have put it, because I failed to face up to what had to be done. He went on to say, presumably as part of what needed doing, that preparations were under way for the bombing and destruction of Bombay. His tone was swaggering, his e-mail rage directed against one who had, he thought, reneged on Islam.

I haven't. I was born a Zoroastrian, in India, a descendant of refugees from the Muslim conquest of Iran by Arab armies in the seventh century. The India of my childhood was full of superstition, of faith in myriad manifestations of the unseen, but even then one knew that Islam and its followers were distinctive. From the Shia mosque in Poona, where I grew up, there emerged every Moharrum night, the end of Ramzaan, a procession of chanting Muslims in black shirts, cutting themselves with chains and little daggers strung together, in frenzied and bloody penance through the night - a demonstration of a belief beyond the threshold of pain. They believed that theirs was the only creed, that their book was dictated by God, that Hindus were idolators and the worshipers of trees and monkeys, that Zoroastrians were fire-worshipping infidels, and that Christians were an ancient military enemy. Their faith seemed to me even at the time to exclude what it had not invented.

In the searching years of adolescence, when we all tried to come to terms with the great ideas of democracy, liberalism, the possibilities of life embodied in literature, only the pious Muslims among us seemed impervious to taking part in the passionate arguments. They seemed to have an inbuilt view of the world and of history, formed and sanctioned by the Quran. Even then I wondered: if they would not assimilate the world, how would the world assimilate them?

I arrived in Britain at 20, just when the Muslim migration there, principally from India and Pakistan, was under way. The immigrants were leaving circumstances of grinding poverty and little hope to better themselves materially. They took it for granted that they would be afforded the right to work and live within the cultural and religious freedom that Britain's liberal civilization guaranteed.

During my years in England, I acquainted myself with various groups from the subcontinent who were part of this migration. Most were from peasant backgrounds. The Bangladeshis came to London's East End and found work in the garment industry. The Mirpuris, who came from the part of Kashmir that Pakistan occupied, went to work in the old cotton and woolen mills of Yorkshire,

Lancashire, and the Midlands. They cohered around the mosque, the central symbol of discipline in their lives, and around the small shops that sold the spices, the lentils, the halal meat that made these towns feel like home. The first generation that arrived imagined making some money quickly and, some time in the future, returning home. That future never arrived. Their children and grandchildren have now grown up as Lancastrians and Yorkshiremen - Muslim Lancastrians and Yorkshiremen.

These antiquated mills went out of business in the 1980s. The population - white, brown, and black - had no jobs. The general depression of the mill-and-mosque towns reflected itself in run-down, restless schools, without ambition or excellence. The activists and ambulance chasers of the Left demanded more multiculturalism in these schools - which gave cover to the ex-peasant community's demands for the Islamization of the schools' ethos and curriculum. They demanded - successfully, in some cases - that girls and boys be taught separately, that girl pupils cover their heads and limbs, that the schools serve halal meat, that Arabic and the Quran be taught, that British history classes depict Britain primarily as an exploitative, demonic nation. Principals who resisted these demands were branded racists.

In 1989 came the most significant divide in the multicultural history of Britain: the Rushdie affair, which uncovered a multicultural fifth column, whose literary criticism entailed book burning and death threats. The British Muslim community echoed the call of the Ayatollah Khomeini to hunt down and kill the writer. There were denunciations of Rushdie in every mosque by mullahs and crowds who had only handled a copy of the book to burn it. Not one Mullah - not one - raised a voice in support of the principle of freedom of creativity; no mullah ventured the opinion that the fatwa was wrong or against Islamic teaching. Though the supposedly liberal Muslim commentators whom the British press retains were not in favor of the death sentence, none would extend himself to a defense of the book. In Bradford, an ugly book-burning rally was led by one Kalim Siddiqui, who was forced to admit to an investigating press that he and his operation were financed by the government of Iran. He subsequently set up a "Muslim Parliament of Britain," which professed to dispense laws and promulgate rules for the Muslims of Britain.

In the first week of the fatwa against Rushdie and his book, I appeared on a television panel. Among the Muslim panelists, all of whom favored condemning the book, were two zealots: the same Kalim Siddiqui; and Yusuf Islam, the Muslim convert pop singer of Greek Cypriot origin formerly known as Cat Stevens. The moderator asked if, in my role as a commissioning editor of Channel 4 UK, I would contemplate turning *The Satanic Verses* into a film. I said that I would judge the cinematic merits of the script, and that no other consideration would rule it out. Kalim Siddiqui and Yusuf Islam snarled, warning that the sentence of death on Rushdie would extend to all those who forwarded his book in any way.

We had all come from London to Manchester to record the "discussion." The producer had a word with me when it was over: would I feel more comfortable if he changed my hotel, away from the threateners and their entourage?

Before the fatwa and the Muslim solidarity it generated, the race industry that arrogates to itself the leadership of immigrant opinion had assumed that, with a few concessions, and with some exotic and welcome additions to British cuisine, the new immigrant communities would be assimilated into British life with hiccups but not convulsions. The fatwa affair - when the entire Islamic community united behind the condemnation - should have put an end to the idea. This was one bridge that Muslim immigrants were not willing to cross.

In fact, after the Rushdie affair, Muslim spokesmen and their supporters demanded that the law of blasphemy, which still existed in Britain, be extended to apply to Islam. The Muslim clerics would then determine what was blasphemous. Thankfully, nothing came of it. The book burners and novelist killers, recognizing only one book as the fount of truth, cannot countenance a literary tradition, established through centuries of struggle against censorship and obscurantism, that allows the sacred to be prodded critically, even to be profaned. The liberal, democratic freedom to think and speak that the West enjoys has been won in part through this prodding and provocation. That freedom allows people to vilify a writer, to demonstrate their antagonism to his fiction, even to burn a few books. But it does not bestow the freedom to call for the execution of anyone.

The affair of the *Verses* demonstrated that successive generations of Muslim immigrants to Britain, despite their broad Midland accents and their (admittedly rather curtailed) education in the Western intellectual tradition, identified themselves primarily as Muslims. They declared their allegiance not to the traditions that allowed them to settle, to worship, to have the Prince of Wales visit their mosques and proclaim himself their protector, but rather to a religious philosophy that emanates from a different place and different age.

It was in the early eighties that this identity with a freshly militant universal Islam emerged as a politically distinct force in Britain. While the earlier generation of Muslim immigrants had gone their way without bothering to adopt Western dress, their children grew up wearing Air Jordan sneakers, baggy trousers, and Hilfiger tops, in imitation of American blacks. The great cliché of their generation, enshrined in endless articles and now in facile novels, is that they were caught between two cultures. Some of these second- and third-generation Muslim Britons resolved this tension by adopting the politics, philosophy, and culture of fundamentalist Islam. On college campuses, some students began to dress in what they imagined was a fashion decreed by an Islamic identity. They reformed their lives, their speech, their friendships. They assumed a mission and characterized the evolution of civil liberties - the gains of feminism for instance - as immorality. Their puritan disgust for the West's popular culture and sexual license, their support for laws that decree the stoning to death of adulteresses and the beheading of apostates, became the profession of an allegiance alienated from the Britain that allows them the freedom to assume and argue these positions.

All these new zealots were brought up in a traditional Muslim way by parents whose religious views were generally orthodox but not extremist. But in the 1980s, a new Muslim leadership of mullahs inspired and paid for by various Islamic powers around the world was entering the country and setting up bases in Britain, thanks to an immigration-law loophole that allows religious personnel open-ended permission to stay. Iranian money, Saudi money from worldwide foundations for the promotion of Islam, was establishing mosques and setting up madrasas, schools that purvey primitive religious instruction and teach the Quran by rote. Adolescents attracted to this new radical preaching, young people whose childhood religious observances had already set them apart from their British contemporaries, came under the domination of a stricter observance with the allure of an ideology. The new mullahs were offering a single-minded, luminously simple explanation of the cosmos and promising membership in an organization that would dominate the world. "We carry Islam as a political belief, a complete system," says Omar Bakri Muhammad, a poisonous cleric who runs a London Muslim organization. "We don't carry Islam as a religion. It's an ideology."

If you prostrate yourself to an all-powerful and unfathomable being five times a day, if you are constantly told that you live in the world of Satan, if those around you are ignorant of and

impervious to literature, art, historical debate, and all that nurtures the values of Western civilization, your mind becomes susceptible to fanaticism. Your mind rots.

Worse, it can become the instrument of others who send you out on suicidal missions. Three years ago, the Yemeni police caught eight young men with plans and equipment to bomb British targets in that country: the offices, homes, and churches of the British diplomatic and expatriate community. Six of these young Muslims, all of Pakistani origin, held British passports. Three were from the Midlands, two from the North, and one from London, the stepson of a Muslim preacher in the Finsbury Park mosque. The Yemeni courts tried and convicted them of conspiracy to commit terrorism.

Their cover stories were pathetic. They said they had gone to Yemen to learn Arabic: that's like going to Pakistan to learn English. The Foreign Office in London instructed the British diplomats in Yemen to extend their support to these citizens. One can imagine the conversation: "I say, old chap, you didn't really come here to blow me and my children up, did you? Ah well - we'd better see you safely back to old Blighty, hadn't we?"

I set out to write about these adventurers at the time. Their wives or partners - young white women wearing headscarves and ankle-length skirts, like the Albanian peasants who beg on the London Underground - appealed on TV for the British government to secure their release. The men in Yemen denied that their aim was terrorism and begged for their freedom, alleging that the Yemeni police had tortured and sexually assaulted them. They, their lawyers, and their families claimed the protection of the British state; and Britain, accepting an obligation to them as British subjects, made representations on their behalf to the Yemeni government. Where did these young men, British by birth and schooling, develop the hatred that would take them to Islamic guerrilla training camps in Yemen and then on a mission to kill British diplomats and their families?

Journalists traced the roots of their mission back to Finsbury Park in north London, to the mosque situated in a largely Turkish Cypriot area of the city and to a preacher called Abu Hamza, a one-eyed mullah with a claw, like Captain Hook's, for a right hand. I asked him where he had lost his hand. His reply was: "I didn't lose my hand; I gained it."

I persisted, and he claimed that he had been a mujahid in Afghanistan and lost his hand in the fighting, though it seemed to me that its amputation was consistent with the premature explosion of a bomb. He boasted to me that he had sent young men to training camps. He would not say what they trained for or where, but his general contention was that, as Muslims, they must fight for the conversion of the world to Islam. The young men in Yemen were part of the worldwide jihad. He would not say which one of the professed worldwide campaigns he was part of. He seemed proud that his own stepson was involved in the murdering foray into Yemen and said that, if they had gone to destabilize the Yemeni government, he would not condemn their enterprise. I pointed out that Yemen was a Muslim country and that these British men and their Algerian co-conspirators were being tried under Islamic law. His contention was that any court that did not support the attack on Western interests in the Middle East was insufficiently Islamic.

The Yemeni incident should have alerted Britain and its government to the rise of a phenomenon that couldn't be explained by any theories of race relations. It didn't. Liberal opinion, while not admitting that the Yemeni six were out to kill Britons, called again for an examination of the British racism that had alienated them.

Then, in the summer of 2001, riots broke out in several of the mill-and-mosque towns. A few hundred masked "Asian" (which in Britain means Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi) youths

took to the streets after dark and began torching shops, pubs, cars, and buses. They fought the riot police with staves and stones. Oldham, Bradford, and Burnley exploded in riots. The pundits and the Home Office officials in charge of race relations were bewildered. Their explanations were classic - clichéd and mistaken. They attributed these "Asian" riots to the "failure of years of race relations," to resentment of poverty and unemployment, and to rumors that neo-fascist anti-immigrant organizations like the British National Party were invading these towns.

The BNP had undoubtedly established a small presence among the white citizens of the mill-and-mosque towns, capitalizing on fears of the unemployed and unemployable "Asian" youths hanging around the streets. As for race relations, Britain has long been acting like Florence Nightingale: selfless, dedicated, bandaging every wound, but ignorant about the genesis and gestation of gangrene. What the newspapers failed to mention was that these weren't "Asian" youths - not Gujaratis, not Hindu Punjabis, not Sikhs. They were Muslims whose parents or grandparents came from Mirpur or Bangladesh. The difficulties Muslim culture places in the way of assimilation has produced a generation of disaffected youth, highly susceptible to the incitements of Islamic militants.

The pundits didn't seem to notice that the stone-throwing impulse and the hanky masks were in imitation of TV pictures of Arab youths in their street battles with Israeli police. They failed to engage with the fact that among these rioting Muslims were members of semi-clandestine Islamic fundamentalist quasi-organizations, gathering under the aegis of a mosque or a college society. And though none surfaced publicly in the wake of these riots to claim responsibility, behind them there were preachers like Abu Hamza of Afghanistan and Finsbury Park.

I had a foreshadowing of this connection in conversations I had with some of these young Muslims in Oldham before the riots. They wore the fundamentalist uniform - the cap, the beard, the white tunic and trousers. They said that Western civilization deserved to be destroyed.

"So where are you going to start? In your own hometown?" I asked.
Their spokesman smiled. "Everywhere," he said.

The riots had no targets, symbolic or strategic. They didn't seem to protest against unemployment. The riots were swagger and mayhem, and the rioters in successive towns vied to outdo one another. The race-relations lobby's claim that this was an "Asian" protest against maltreatment and racism¹²;and the lobby needs racism to keep it in business¹²;is worse than unhelpful, for it obscures the real problem and the real danger: the antagonism among some British Muslims that condemns all of Western civilization as rotten and immoral.

After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Hamza was wheeled out again, together with the poisonous Omar Bakri Muhammad, who had been expelled from his native Syria and is funded by missionary money originating in Saudi Arabia. They both said that they supported the jihad, that the laws and sensibilities of men did not matter, and that only the law of the book and the will of God, as interpreted by them, of course, could govern the thinking of the Muslim. After all, "Muslim" means the one who submits.

Established Muslim organizations of Britain, the sort that talk to the Home Office and get invitations to Downing Street, expressed their regret at the atrocity. The Prince of Wales went to prayers at the East End mosque to demonstrate his solidarity with Britain's Muslims. Tony Blair, staunch supporter of President Bush's anti-terrorist initiatives, appeared on TV, flanked by leaders

of Muslim organizations. As a group, they condemned the attack and denounced Hamza and Bakri as "clowns".

Despite these denunciations, outside the mosques of Britain, young men of the jihadi persuasion mount soapboxes with hateful slogans supporting the atrocity, exhorting the arriving or departing worshipers to "join the war" against the wickedness of America and demanding nothing less than its total destruction.

Outside the Regent Street mosque, the largest in London and the one regarded as the central place of worship for all Muslim denominations, groups of these youth, who would not say when challenged whether they were followers of Hamza or of Bakri, distributed leaflets. The leaflets called for the worshipers to defend Islam against the imminent American war and called on the British government to dissociate itself from the American-led aggression against Islam. Uniformed London policemen stood by to ensure their freedom of speech.

And now, even as I write, a young Muslim from Burnley, Lancashire, has been taken prisoner by the Northern Alliance Afghans. He had come to Afghanistan to fight for the Taliban. The deputy prime minister of Britain, John Prescott, rallied to his defense, perhaps, like so many Labour politicians with Muslim constituents, looking for votes. Instead, he should send MI5 and MI6 to investigate where and how this young man was recruited and whether there are other terrorist cuckoos in this same nest.

The governments of Algeria, Egypt, and Yemen may not be able to root out the fundamentalists in their midst who resort to terror, but Western countries have no option. One can't shelter in one's home those who would kill you. Britain has given extended permission to stay to the likes of Hamza and Bakri. The very liberalism against which they preach has nursed this fifth column. It must be rooted out.

Muslim states, including Libya, have mouthed their support of the U.S. and its people in their hour of bereavement with an ironic brazenness. Some of them, apostles of Islamist terror themselves, do it to avert the judgment and vengeance of an aroused America; others because they have their own local terrorist problem, with which they would welcome assistance. From within the U.S., several voices of the Muslim community have expressed their sorrow, dismay, and outrage.

And yet even when liberal Muslims declare that what was done to the victims of New York, of the Pentagon, and of the four airliners was an atrocity contrary to the tenets and teachings of the Quran, that it was indeed a sinful transgression of Islam that will not lead to paradise but to hell, the majority of Muslims around the world don't believe them, because they have been convinced by the interpretation of the fundamentalist, whom liberal Muslims allowed to remain unchallenged for so long.

Ironically, this terrible act is destined to mark a day of judgment for world Islam. In its 1,400 years, Islam has inspired and incorporated the great mystical movement of the Sufis. It has also suppressed it. It has spawned in its time liberal jurisprudence, great art, scientific endeavor, and the simple idea that what is not forbidden by the Quran is allowed. And yet Islam has, in the twentieth century, funded by oil and inspired by the work of Mohammed Wahab, an eighteenth-century fundamentalist, led its followers back to the book.

Apart from the Muslims of Arabia, all Muslims are converts to Islam. As V. S. Naipaul eloquently argues in his books and essays of travel and discovery (see "Our Universal Civilization,"

Summer 1991), they date their history from the birth of the prophet. They adopt the history of Islam, the movements and conquests of the desert tribes, as their history, despite being themselves the descendants of the world's most ancient civilizations. Five years ago, Iranian fanatics, the descendants of Muslim converts from Zoroastrianism, set out to destroy the ruins of the ancient Zoroastrian city of Persepolis. This year, the Taliban of Afghanistan destroyed the world's inheritance of the Bumiyan Buddhas that happened to be on the land that they have usurped. Persepolis ultimately escaped demolition only because members of the Islamic regime saw a commercial opportunity in opening the site to tourism, making some money while preserving their contempt for the site's historical and cultural significance.

The creed that leads these vandals to disown and destroy anything that is deemed "un-Islamic" leads them to a mission to challenge and convert the world, through terror if necessary. They don't for a moment consider that the world doesn't want a religion that suppresses women, adopts a medieval creed of crime and punishment, forces people to prayer at the behest of the police, forbids the writing of novels, the making of films, and the playing of music, and destroys the minds of its young and leads them to fanatical acts of suicidal terror in which they murder upward of 6,000 innocents.

This barbaric interpretation of Islam has inevitably come into moral and now mortal conflict with the West and its dominant state power. As the cowboy movies say, this earth ain't big enough for the both of them. And this fight to the oblitative finish ultimately cannot be a matter of killing people and toppling regimes. It has to involve a revolution within Islamic thinking itself.

What Islam needs is a reformation, and if this very concept is forbidden in the unchangeable word of the Quran, there is enough Islamic history to support a reforming and radical interpretation of the law of living with others. There have been movements in Islamic history that are by no means inimical to peace, tolerance, and even to democratic and liberal principles.

But where is the will today to affirm such a history, to promulgate such a theology, and to found an authoritative reformation of the modern Islamic mission?

The U.S. has in the last three decades countenanced the immigration of millions of Muslims from the Indian subcontinent, from the Middle East, and North Africa. Some of them died in the World Trade Center, where they had a mosque on the seventh floor. The Muslims of America now live in what, with all its imperfections, is a free, advanced, democratic society. Many of them are professionals - doctors, dentists, engineers, software and hardware experts, scientists, pilots, even members of the armed forces. Their right to the pursuit of happiness will ensure their right to embrace Islam. They must now see that an interpretation of the Quran that belittles all preceding human history and that refuses to be modified by the discoveries of the Enlightenment, of scientific advance and social liberty, cannot coexist with the rest of the modern world.

The vast number of Muslims in Britain and the U.S. who are educated in Western disciplines and culture, who live by the demands of Western ways of work, are riven by a conflict between the prescriptions of Islam and the freedom to think, speak, and associate, and to be protected by democracy and Western jurisprudence. These Western Muslims will have to resolve their dilemma by seeding the reformation in Islam.

Western Muslims must now discover in their own history and theology that nothing forbids the rise of a single or collective Martin Luther who will defy the medievalist mullahs (a self-

appointed rather than an anointed clergy) and will pin new theses, renouncing world conquest, on the doors of every mosque.

The development of Islam, though constantly hijacked by fundamentalist sects like the Wahabis, has always had a strong, non-proselytizing, mystical Sufi current, to which 80 percent of the world's Muslims have some connection. And Islam has always had in its theological armory the sanctioned concept and tradition of *ijtihad*, which means coming to conclusions about prescription, behavior, and morality through argument and the application of reason rather than through dogma. It is in a sense parallel to the reliance of the Christian Reformation on the supremacy of conscience. True, passages in the Quran urge believers to "kill those who join other gods with God wherever ye shall find them" and to wage war on neighboring infidels. But a hundred suras of the Quran also enjoin the faithful to tolerance: one specifically says that killing one innocent person is akin to the murder of the whole world. An Islamic Reformation would delegitimize literal interpretations of Quranic passages stoking intolerance and emphasize those that resemble the Golden Rule.

As for the officials of America and Britain, they need to redirect the effort and money that they have poured into race relations and multiculturalism into a clear, reasoned, energetic defense of the values of freedom and democracy.. Their future depends on it.

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