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Methodist church backs religious hatred bill

Ekklesia (13.12.2004)/HRWF Int. (14.12.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - In the face of opposition from a number of conservative Christian groups, the Methodist Church has publicly backed Government proposals to outlaw actions which incite religious hatred.

The measures, contained in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill currently before Parliament, would make it a criminal offence to incite hatred against any individual or group because of their religious beliefs.

The bill is however being actively opposed by conservative Christians.

An unusual alliance including Blackadder star Rowan Atkinson, as well as comedians, writers, religious groups and representatives of the National Secular Society, met at the House of Commons last week, to highlight their campaign against elements of bill.

Conservative groups including the Barnabas Fund, the Evangelical Alliance, and the Lawyers Christian Fellowship, have signalled their opposition on the grounds it might prevent them from evangelising.

The Bishop of Manchester has however already pledged the backing of the bench of bishops in the House of Lords to the Government's proposals.

Methodist Parliamentary and Political Secretary Rachel Lampard says that the conservative views are based on a misconception of what the Bill proposes.

"The legislation is about inciting hatred," says Rachel, "not about satire, jokes or evangelisation. It is about preventing extremist political groups using loopholes in the existing law to promote hatred of certain religions. The test of hatred will be very high, and the Attorney General will have to approve each prosecution. If our jokes or methods of evangelisation could ever incite violence or hatred, they would be at variance with all that Christianity stands for."

The Bill is supported by a variety of faith communities.

Dr Elizabeth Harris, Secretary for Inter Faith Relations, said; "the Methodist Church is committed to an open discussion of beliefs and ensuring that people of all faiths are protected from hatred. Other faiths tell us that they want this legislation. We have to respect this.

"This legislation is not about debating truth claims nor about whether all religions are the same. But it is about all individuals and communities having the right to live and work without the fear of violence arising from religious hatred. The legislation will apply to everyone, so Christians will be protected as well."

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Religious populations

Christianity is main religion in Britain

Focus on Religion paints a picture of the different faith groups in the UK today. It looks separately at Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Information comparing and contrasting the characteristics of the main faith groups, their lifestyles and experiences is presented. It draws on information from the 2001 Census – the first time Great Britain included a question on religion – and other sources.

The 2001 Census identified 8.6 million people in Great Britain who said they had no religion. Christianity is the main religion, with 41 million people. Muslims were the largest non-Christian religious group – 1.6 million – and their profile shows a young, tightly clustered, but often disadvantaged, community.

Population of Great Britain: by religion, April 2001

	Total population		Non-Christian
	(Numbers)	(Percentages)	religious population (Percentages)
Christian	41,014,811	71.8	
Muslim	1,588,890	2.8	51.9
Hindu	558,342	1.0	18.3
Sikh	336,179	0.6	11.0
Jewish	267,373	0.5	8.7
Buddhist	149,157	0.3	4.9
Any other religion	159,167	0.3	5.2
All non-Christian religious population	3,059,108	5.4	100.0
No religion	8,596,488	15.1	
Religion not stated	4,433,520	7.8	
All population	57,103,927	100.0	

Christianity is the main religion in Great Britain. There were 41 million Christians in 2001, making up almost three quarters of the population (72 per cent). This group included the Church of England, Church of Scotland, Church in Wales, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations.

People with no religion formed the second largest group, comprising 15 per cent of the population.

About one in 20 (5 per cent) of the population belonged to a non-Christian religious denomination.

Muslims were the largest religious group after Christians. There were 1.6 million Muslims living in Britain in 2001. This group comprised 3 per cent of the total population and over half (52 per cent) of the non-Christian religious population.

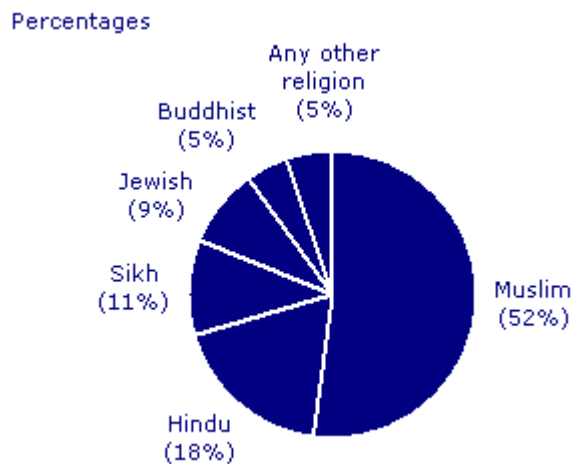
Hindus were the second largest non-Christian religious group. There were over half a million Hindus (558,000), comprising 1 per cent of the total population and 18 per cent of the non-Christian religious population.

There were just over a third of a million Sikhs (336,000), making up 0.6 per cent of the total population and 11 per cent of the non-Christian religious population.

There were just over a quarter of a million Jewish people (267,000), constituting 0.5 per cent of the total population and 9 per cent of the non-Christian religious group.

Buddhists numbered 149,000 people in 2001, comprising 0.3 per cent of the population of Great Britain.

The religion question was the only voluntary question in the 2001 Census and 8 per cent of people chose not to state their religion.



The distribution of non-Christian religions, April 2001, GB

Other religions in England and Wales

Rather than select one of the specified religions offered on the 2001 Census form, many people chose to write in their own religion. Some of these religions were reassigned to one of the main religions offered, predominantly within the Christian group.

In England and Wales, 151,000 people belonged to religious groups which did not fall into any of the main religions. The largest of these were Spiritualists (32,000) and Pagans (31,000), followed by Jain (15,000), Wicca (7,000), Rastafarian (5,000), Bahà'i (5,000) and Zoroastrian (4,000).

Sources:

Census, April 2001, Office for National Statistics Census, April 2001, General Register Office for Scotland

Notes:

The chart of non-Christian religions excludes Christians, people who had no religion and those who did not state their religion.

No religion includes people who ticked 'None' at the religion question plus those who wrote in Jedi Knight, Agnostic, Atheist and Heathen and those who ticked 'Other' but did not write in any religion.

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Spiritual Britain worships over 170 different faiths

by Jonathan Petre

The Telegraph (13.12.2004)/HRWF (14.12.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Britons follow more than 170 different faiths or belief systems, according to newly-published official figures which suggest that spirituality is thriving.

The huge range of belief, much of it exotic or New Age, has been revealed by the raw statistics collated during the 2001 census, the first national count of religious affiliation.

The headline findings released last year showed that the overwhelming majority in England and Wales – 71.1 per cent – still regards itself as Christian, with Muslims making up the second largest religious group.

A number of students, encouraged by a tongue-in-cheek internet campaign, also registered themselves as Jedi Knights, after the fictional characters in the Star Wars films.

But the complete figures, which have now been published on the Office of National Statistics's website, show that spiritualism and paganism is thriving, and that beliefs range from vodun (voodoo) to the Native American Church, whose worship is based around the peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus.

The South-East emerged as the capital of fringe faiths and sects, with London and the South-West not far behind.

The census found that spiritualism, the belief that the dead can be contacted through mediums, was the eighth largest faith group, with 32,404 people claiming allegiance. The first spiritualist church was established in England at Keighley in Yorkshire in 1853.

Just behind them were the pagans, with 30,569 supporters, although their numbers rise to nearly 40,000 if wiccans (witches) and druids are included.

Suzanne Evans, a writer on paganism, said the figures confirmed that it is one of the fastest growing religions in the country.

She said it was environmentally friendly, treated God as both male and female and regarded sexuality as something to be celebrated.

Despite its often extensive coverage in the media, Satanism could only muster 1,525 practitioners, with the occult adding a further 99.

The list contains dozens of subsets of Christianity, from the mainstream denominations to less well known groups, such as the Brethren, the Independent Methodists and the Christadelphians, a Bible-based church dating from the mid-1800s with 2,368 members.

Also strongly represented are the Jehovah's Witnesses with 70,651 adherents, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), with 12,722.

Baha'i, which emerged from Islam in the 19th century, has a following of 4,645 and there are 15,132 Jains, the ancient Indian faith.

Many of the faiths reflect the multi-cultural society that Britain has become.

The census found that Rastafarians number at least 4,692, the Greek Orthodox has 24,176 followers, the Zoroastrians have 3,738, and even the Amish, best known from the film Witness, starring Harrison Ford, claimed 24 adherents.

Grace Davie, the professor of sociology at Exeter University, said the most significant feature of the census remained its findings about Christianity. "Whatever you mean by it, the residual attachment to Christianity is huge, and much larger than people had thought," she said.

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Muslims 'facing most faith bias'

BBC News (18.11.2004)/HRWF (23.11.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Muslims in the UK are more likely to face discrimination based on religion rather than race, a study says.

The report, by the Open Society Institute (OSI), says Islamophobia is adding to the problems of the UK's most disadvantaged faith group.

Muslims youths are at increasing risk of social exclusion, the report's authors say.

They are calling for government policies based on religion rather than ethnicity to tackle Muslims' needs.

The report - launched as part of Islam Awareness Week which begins on Monday - is a follow-up to a study conducted by the OSI in 2002.

Researchers say information then available on UK Muslims was "limited" and new data has now revealed the extent and nature of the deprivation faced by Muslim communities - the UK's second largest faith group.

We've got a new generation of people who feel very much part of Britain and they're not going to just be silent when faced with this kind of thing

Sher Khan of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) said the OSI report reinforced earlier findings about the plight of the UK's Muslims.

"This report adds to the body of evidence that's been generated that Muslims feel very much disenfranchised and disconnected," Mr Khan said.

Since 2002 increasing Islamophobia had added to the long-established problems of the group in areas such as education, employment and housing, researchers found.

Under siege

Eighty percent of UK Muslims had reported being victims of Islamophobia since September 11 and more than a third complain of being singled out by authorities while using UK airports.

Young Muslim women were the most likely to report discrimination in the aftermath of September 11 and believed this was related to their decision to wear traditional dress.

"In the post-September 11 environment, religion is more important than ethnicity in indicating which groups are more likely to experience racism and discrimination," the report concluded.

Also on the rise was dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system, particularly with the perceived unfairness of police stop-and-searches and highly publicised anti-terrorist arrests, the study found.

Between 2001-2003 the number of Asians stopped-and-searched under the Terrorism Act 2000 increased by 302% compared to 118% for white people and 230% for black people.

"The gap between the number of stop-and-searches and that of actual arrests, charges and convictions - is leading to a perception among British Muslims of being unfairly policed, and is fuelling a strong disaffection and a sense of being "under siege," researchers said.

Mobilised

But the authors noted that while reports of Islamophobia were rising, Muslims were now more likely to respond than in 2002.

They said there had been several instances in the recent past in which Muslims had mobilised to complain about particular articles or programmes in the media.

Sher Khan of the MCB believes said he believed that was because many young Muslims are more prepared to speak out than their parent's generation.

"We've got a new generation of people who feel very much part of Britain and they're not going to just be silent when faced with this kind of thing," he said.

However, while Islamophobia had led some Muslims to mobilise it also led to some feeling more estranged from society, Mr Khan added.

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Britain must 'combat Islamophobia'

by Roshan Muhammed Salih

Aljazeera (18.11.2004)/HRWF (23.11.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The UK government must combat Islamophobia and pursue a more Muslim-friendly foreign policy if British Muslims are to fully integrate into society, a new report says.

Released on Thursday by the London-based Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), the report states that most British Muslims suffer from negative media coverage, lack of legal protection from discrimination, and a lack of respect by government and society at large.

The study, which is based on the feedback of more than 1000 British Muslims, also challenges the widely held assumption that the loyalty of British Muslims to the state is open to question.

Over the past few years certain sections of the British media and some British politicians have blamed Muslims for their alleged lack of affiliation to the UK, and charged them with ingratitude to the government and wider society.

However, the IHRC survey found that most British Muslims see no contradiction between Islam and good citizenship, and argue they are loyal to the state because of their religion.

Fear of racism

The authors of the report believe the government needs to recognise these two sources of affiliation and implement "comprehensive social and political policies" to encourage them to function complementarily.

And they say the government must address its anti-Muslim foreign policies and the climate of fear and racism, as well as encourage Muslims to participate in the political process.

Arzu Merali, an IHRC spokeswoman, said: "Hitherto we have seen a lopsided debate where prevailing prejudices about Islam and Muslims have dictated the terms of Muslim participation in society.

"In recent years this has been characterised by increasing pressure on Muslim beliefs and practices. This study has thrown many of these perceptions of Muslims away.

"Based on the responses of Muslims themselves, it finds that religion is one of the main factors that have influenced a high level of loyalty among the UK's Muslims despite clear feelings of discrimination and hatred being levelled against them.

"The government needs to seriously look at Muslims' expectations of them if they are to foster a truly inclusive, safe and just society."

Earlier this year, another major report on British Muslims found that persistent and untackled Islamophobia could lead to "time-bombs" of backlash and bitterness.

The Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia said the aftermath of the September 11 attacks has made life more difficult for Muslims in the UK.

It criticised public bodies for failing to address "institutional Islamophobia" and warned that exclusion from public life perpetuated a feeling among some Muslims, particularly the young, that they do not belong in the country.

On the other hand, the British government insists that it strives for an equal, inclusive society where every citizen is treated with respect and where there is opportunity for all.

Equal society

It argues that Britain is becoming a more equal society and the UK now has the most comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation in Europe.

Increasing prosperity also benefits Muslims, the government argues, as many British Muslims come from lower-income groups.

In addition, 10 Downing Street insists that its foreign policies, such as its support for the Iraq war and the Israeli government, are not anti-Muslim but are rather based on the principle of justice and the national interest.

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The devil and the deep blue sea

Consequences of de-Christianization

Zenit (13.11.2004)/HRWF (15.11.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Britain's Royal Navy stirred the waves last month when, for the first time, it gave official recognition to the practice of Satanism. According to an Oct. 24 report in the Telegraph, Chris Cranmer, a naval technician serving on the frigate Cumberland, is now allowed to perform Satanic rituals on board ship. He would also be able to have a funeral carried out by the Church of Satan if he were to be killed in action.

Cranmer is now petitioning the Ministry of Defense so that Satanism can be a registered religion in the armed forces. According to the Telegraph, the Church of Satan was founded in San Francisco in 1966 by Anton Szandor LaVey, author of "The Satanic Bible."

The article quoted a Royal Navy spokesman as saying that Cranmer's unconventional beliefs would not cause problems on board ship. "We are an equal-opportunities employer and we don't stop anybody from having their own religious values," he said.

In an Oct. 26 commentary in the Scotsman newspaper, Bruce Anderson said that naval authorities gave the go-ahead to Cranmer because they feared a lengthy legal action that could have ended up before the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg, costing millions of pounds. The government, he said, is at fault for "nervously allowing a rights-based legal culture to intrude upon the armed forces."

Sophie Masson, in a commentary published Oct. 27 in the Sydney Morning Herald, considered the religious implications. The Church of Satan, she noted, says that "we are our own gods." Moreover, they hold that all traditional sins are virtues, that altruism is a myth and that the Christian virtues are just hypocrisy.

"The most frightening thing is that our society has seemingly become so disconnected from meaning that it no longer takes seriously the very building blocks of its culture," she added. "To worship the principle of evil itself is to invite it into your life and the lives of those around you, sometimes in unpredictable and horrifying ways."

Decline in faith

The navy's recognition of Satanism is just one in a series of news items detailing the decline in Christianity in Britain. On Aug. 18 the newspaper Independent published details of a report by the UK Home Office showing that while most white Britons still call themselves Christian, in practice religion plays little part in their lives.

The survey, based on 15,500 interviews, showed 74% called themselves Christian. But among those who professed their Christianity, when asked what they considered important to their identity, religion was cited by only 17% of white Christians, after other factors such as family, work, age, education, gender, income and social class. By contrast, among black people, 70% of whom say they are Christian, religion was third on the list, and Asians placed it second, behind family.

The survey also showed a weak Christianity among youth. Just 18% of Christians aged 16 to 24 considered their religion as important. Religion was more important for young people in other groups: 74% of Muslims; 63% of Sikhs; and 62% of Hindus.

Then, on Nov. 4, the Times published details of another study pointing to a severe decline in traditional religion, and a rise of mysticism. The study, carried out by two specialists in religion from Lancaster University, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, looked at Kendal, a town of 28,000 in Cumbria.

In their book containing the results of the study, "The Spiritual Revolution," the academics observed that only 7.9% of the town's population now attends church, down from 11% two decades ago.

The practice of what the authors term "holistic activity," while still limited, is fast-growing. Currently, 1.6% of the population of the town and environs engage in some kind of holistic activity. During the 1990s, the growth of this number was rapid, and if current trends continue, within 30 years the holistic activities will be the dominant form of religious worship.

Some of the comments cited by the study revealed dissatisfaction with being "preached at" and a preference for describing their religious needs in psychological language. But the Times article also cited the Reverend Brian Maiden, of Parr Street Evangelical Church in Kendal, who declared that he believes that the liberalism of Christianity has turned people off it. "The people of Britain have been inoculated with a dead, mild form of Christianity, which has given them resistance to the real thing," he said. "It has been diluted with human philosophy. People want to be told what to do and how to do it."

The occult gains force

Britain is not alone in the trend toward the occult and alternative spiritualities. In the United States, for instance, Halloween continues to grow in popularity, the Los Angeles Times reported Oct. 11.

Although many celebrate Halloween on a merely superficial level, the article noted that sales of Halloween goods this year are projected to grow faster, at 5.4%, than those of Christmas, 4.5%. According to the Los Angeles Times the National Retail Federation estimates that Americans will have spent more than \$3 billion this season on Halloween products.

On a more serious level, news of Druidic influence in the Episcopalian Church has drawn attention. According to the Washington Times of Nov. 1, a Druidic "women's eucharist" and a "divorce rite," posted on the Episcopal Church's official Web site, outraged a number of Episcopalians. The rites were removed from the Web site after church headquarters began receiving complaints.

Shortly afterward, the Philadelphia Inquirer, on Nov. 5, reported that two Episcopal priests, a married couple, the Reverend Glyn Ruppe-Melnyk and the Reverend William Melnyk, had resigned from the leadership of a local Druid society. They may face disciplinary action from the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. During almost four years,

while they led parishes in Malvern and Downington, the couple were also spiritual guides to local Druids, according to the Inquirer.

Another sign of the growing influence of non-Christian groups is the spread of Wicca. The term can cover a multitude of practices, but it is part of a neo-paganism involving the worship of diverse gods and sometimes the practice of witchcraft. According to an article by Christine Wicker titled "Teen Pagans," posted on the Web site of Belief Net, Wicca is increasingly popular among adolescents.

Its spread is fostered by the contemporary interest in the occult, as well as the ease with which information about these groups can be disseminated via the Internet. Attempts to put a number on followers of Wicca have not met with much success, according to data posted on the Web site of the multi-faith Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. Estimates of their numbers in the United States range from a low 2,000 to a high of 5 million.

Death of morality

Leaving aside what the decline of Christianity means from a religious viewpoint, attention on the social consequences was the focus of a book published earlier this year, "The Strange Death of Moral Britain," by Christie Davies.

His book charts what he terms the decline of "respectable Britain" -- the increase in crime, drug use, illegitimacy, abortion, homosexuality, etc. -- and links it to the declining influence of Christian morality. Over the last few decades, notably since the 1950s, moral values once instilled by such institutions as Sunday schools have been replaced by a secularized attitude of minimizing harm, regardless of moral considerations.

Recognizing one person's right to practice Satanism may be dismissed as a trivial incident. But it can also be seen as symptomatic of a society that is rapidly becoming de-Christianized, a process that brings with it many unpleasant surprises.

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Radical UK Cleric 'Urged Killing of Non-Believers'

by Kate Holton

Reuters (19.10.2004)/HRWF (19.10.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Radical Muslim cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri was charged by British police Tuesday with 16 offences including encouraging the murder of non-believers, meaning a U.S. attempt to extradite him has been put on hold.

Abu Hamza, who lost an eye and both hands in Afghanistan fighting Soviet forces, is wanted by the United States over 11 alleged offences and a five-day extradition hearing had been due to start Tuesday.

The British case, however, takes precedence and tight UK legal restrictions mean details of the U.S. charges could not be given.

The cleric, a former nightclub security guard who has preached in support of Osama bin Laden and the Sept. 11 attacks, faces 10 charges of using public meetings to incite his followers to kill non-Muslims.

Four of the charges say he urged the killing of Jews.

He is also accused of using threatening, abusive or insulting behavior with intent to stir up racial hatred, one charge of possessing threatening, abusive or insulting sound recordings and one charge of possessing a "terrorist" document.

Abu Hamza was already in a top security British jail after being arrested in May on a U.S. extradition warrant.

But in August, Britain launched a probe to see whether it could mount its own case against him.

Appearing at London's top-security Belmarsh Magistrates Court Tuesday, Egyptian-born Abu Hamza, who appeared flanked by four police officers and without his steel hook on his right arm, nodded when asked to confirm his name.

He was remanded in custody until a hearing at London's Old Bailey court on October 26.

The charges against Abu Hamza in Britain have set the stage for one of the country's highest-profile cases since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

He was stripped of his British citizenship last year and he was banned from speaking at his Finsbury Park mosque in north London although he continued to preach in the road outside until his arrest.

Last year, Jamaican-born Muslim cleric Sheikh Abdullah el-Faisal, a former supporter of bin Laden, was jailed for seven years in Britain for urging his followers to kill non-believers in what he called a holy war.

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Britain arrests radical cleric Al-Masri

by Beth Gardiner

AP (27.08. 2004)/ HRWF (01.09.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Police arrested a radical Muslim cleric Thursday on suspicion of preparing or instigating "acts of terrorism," a move that could delay U.S. attempts to extradite the suspect for allegedly trying to establish a terrorist training camp in Oregon and on other charges.

The arrest of Abu Hamza al-Masri, who already was being held in a British prison on the U.S. warrant, suggests British authorities plan to pursue charges against al-Masri under British law.

Al-Masri was taken to a central London police station for questioning by anti-terrorism officers, police said. If British authorities formally charge al-Masri, the case has to be resolved before any extradition proceedings, according to officials.

British law bars extradition to countries that might execute a suspect, and officials have made clear they would not send the Egyptian-born al-Masri to the United States unless it rules out the death penalty.

Al-Masri, whose mosque has been linked to several terrorist suspects — including Sept. 11 suspect Zacarias Moussaoui and "shoe bomber" Richard Reid — is also under U.S. scrutiny for possible links to an alleged senior al-Qaida operative recently arrested on charges he conducted surveillance of financial targets in the United States.

Dhiran Barot, 32, was arrested in England earlier this month and charged with possessing reconnaissance plans for the New York Stock Exchange, the International Monetary Fund in Washington, the Citigroup building in New York and the Prudential building in New Jersey.

Barot, also known as Abu Eisa al-Hindi or Abu Musa al-Hindi, also is accused of possessing notebooks containing information on explosives, poisons, chemicals and related matters "of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism."

A Metropolitan Police spokesman declined to comment on whether the department suspected a link between al-Masri and Barot, who was among more than a dozen terrorism suspects arrested recently in Britain following a string of arrests in Pakistan of alleged attack plotters.

The arrests and discovery of computer evidence of the surveillance, which purportedly happened in 2000 and 2001 at the behest of Osama bin Laden, prompted the U.S. Homeland Security agency to issue terror alerts for New York, New Jersey and Washington, D.C.

In Britain, police said Thursday they arrested al-Masri "on suspicion of being involved in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism."

Under anti-terrorism laws, prosecutors have two weeks to decide whether to file charges against al-Masri, 47, a flamboyant figure with one glass eye and hooks in place of the hands he says he lost fighting in Afghanistan. He's been held in Britain's high-security Belmarsh prison in London since his May 27 arrest on the U.S. request.

The Metropolitan Police gave no details about what they suspected al-Masri of doing, but Britain's Press Association news agency said the investigation centered on whether he provided support to terrorists in the form of recruitment, finances or logistics.

Investigators also are examining whether the fiery sermons he gave when he was imam of the Finsbury Park mosque in north London might have encouraged others to commit terrorist acts, the Press Association said.

The American indictment accuses al-Masri of trying to establish a terrorist training camp in Oregon, being involved in hostage-taking in Yemen and funding terrorism training in Afghanistan.

Al-Masri denies any involvement in violence and says he is only a spokesman for political causes. He is challenging the U.S. attempt to extradite him. No one answered a call Thursday evening to the office of his lawyer, Muddassar Arani.

Al-Masri's lawyers argue he will not receive a fair hearing in the United States because President Bush has prejudiced any trial by publicly calling him a terrorism supporter. They also say some American evidence against the preacher may have been obtained from tortured witnesses.

Al-Masri has called the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks a Jewish plot and the invasion of Iraq a war on Islam. Last year, the Charity Commission barred al-Masri from preaching at the Finsbury Park mosque, but for months he continued to give weekly sermons on the street outside.

When does religion become a hate crime?

by Al Webb

Washington Times (18.07.2004) / HRWF (21.07.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- The government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, with its eye on Islamist militants, has begun a nationwide campaign to make inciting religious hatred a crime punishable by imprisonment.

Home Secretary David Blunkett said the government's aim is to extend anti-discrimination laws to stop hatemongers from targeting people because of their religious faith and to "sideline" extremists who claim to speak for them.

The new law would be a "two-way street," Mr. Blunkett said. "It applies equally to far-right evangelical Christians as to extremists in the Islamic faith."

Mr. Blair's administration hopes to turn the proposals into law within a year and to model the necessary legislation along the lines of existing statutes outlawing incitement to racial hatred, which carries a maximum prison term of seven years.

In Britain, inciting racial hatred is defined as using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behavior "with intent or likelihood to stir up racial hatred."

The new proposals announced by Mr. Blunkett in a recent address to the Institute of Public Policy Research use the word "religious" in place of "racial."

But the government's campaign was seen in some quarters as an infringement on Britain's fundamental right to free speech.

Rowan Atkinson, the comedic star of the "Mr. Bean" movie and television series, said he and others in his profession fear that they could be prosecuted for lampooning religious figures.

Monty Python's hit movie "Life of Brian" — about a fictitious neighbor of Jesus Christ who is mistaken for the Messiah — never could have been made had the proposed law against religious hatred been in force, he said.

The home secretary insisted that such a law would not curb the rights of anyone to express their views about others' religions.

"The issue is not whether you have an argument or discussion, or whether you are criticizing someone's religion," he said. "It's whether you incite hatred on the basis of it."

Even some among Britain 1.5 million-strong Muslim population, which has become the target of numerous hate crimes since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, fear the effect such a law could have on the Muslims and on the right of the community's more extreme elements to speak out.

"In the light of the well-recognized Islamophobic society that we have [in Britain] at the moment, this legislation could very well be used against Muslim communities," said Massoud Shadjareh, chairman of the Islamic Human Rights Commission.

Mr. Blunkett announced his campaign against religious hatred even as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a fiery Egyptian cleric who preaches support for suicide bombings and for the beating of "disobedient" wives, arrived in Britain.

"I am very clear that some of the noisiest and most high-profile political and religious extremists in this country have no mandate to speak for the communities they claim to represent and evoke a reaction which plays into the hands of racists," he said.

Mr. Blair's government tried — and failed — to get similar legislation against religious hatred enacted in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

The House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British Parliament, squelched that attempt. The new legislation might not fare any better.

Indian-born Meghnad Desai, a professor at the London School of Economics who sits in the upper chamber, predicted that the Blair government again will face "a very, very difficult time" in the Lords.

"We will get into a real muddle if we take religion as a basis for prosecution, rather than race," Mr. Desai said.

"Once you step into the religious cauldron, the depth is bottomless," he said. "There are Hindus and Buddhists and so on. ... How are we to define a religion? Are the Scientologists to enjoy protection, and what about Druids, and Satanists?"

Britain's main opposition Conservative Party sharply opposes the proposed legislation. Its home-affairs spokesman, David Davis, summed up its views about such a law: "It will impinge on civil liberties and only serve to make lawyers rich."

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Pressure grows to expel cleric

by Michael Settle

The Herald (08.07.2004) / HRWF (12.07.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Tony Blair was under pressure yesterday to deport a Muslim cleric accused of supporting child suicide bombers and anti-Semitism even as the government moved to make inciting religious hatred a criminal offence.

Yusuf al Qaradawi's week-long visit to the UK erupted in controversy yesterday with the Tory leader highlighting his alleged links to terrorism.

Michael Howard used prime minister's questions to ask why the government had failed to stop the cleric, the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, entering the country.

He challenged Tony Blair: "When I was home secretary, I used my powers to ban people whose presence here was not conducive to the public good. Why doesn't your home secretary do the same?"

The prime minister said David Blunkett had already indicated the situation was under strict review.

He told MPs: "We are totally opposed, as is everyone, to people coming to this country and using it as a platform for views in support of terrorism or extremism of any sort at all.

"We have to be sure, however, that if someone is excluded from this country that they are excluded in a way that is lawful."

The row broke out as Mr Blunkett unveiled legislation in England and Wales which could be deployed against Islamic fundamentalists, as well as other extremists, who preach against Christian society, or attacks in the opposite direction.

Mr Blunkett is to make inciting religious hatred a criminal offence. The new crime is likely to be closely modelled on the existing one of inciting racial hatred which carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment south of the border.

Mr Blunkett said that it would be a "two-way street", adding: "It applies equally to far-right evangelical Christians as to extremists in the Islamic faith."

He said the new offence will be introduced as soon as possible.

However, in an unrepentant interview broadcast last night Mr al Qaradawi, an Egyptian, did little to stem the growing controversy by repeating his support for suicide bombers.

In an interview on BBC Newsnight, filmed some weeks before his arrival in the UK, he said that such acts were justified under Islam as a form of holy war.

"This is not suicide, it is martyrdom in the name of God," the cleric said.

Asked whether these views extended to the situation in Iraq, he said: "If the Iraqis can confront the enemy, there's no need for these acts of martyrdom. If they don't have the means, acts of martyrdom are allowed."

On the killing of innocent women and children, he said: "Israeli women are not like women in our society because Israeli women are militarised. Secondly, I consider this type of martyrdom operation as an indication of the justice of Allah almighty.

"Allah is just through his infinite wisdom. He has given the weak what the strong do not possess and that is the ability to turn their bodies into bombs like the Palestinians do."

Mr Al Qaradawi is said to encourage women and children suicide bombers, to have sought the destruction of Israel and to believe that husbands should beat "disobedient" wives.

He also said the beheading of Nick Berg, the American hostage, by Islamic militants in Iraq had to be seen "in the right context". The cleric has been banned from entering the US since 1999.

His views provoked anger among MPs. David Winnick, the Labour member for Walsall North, said: "This country is contaminated by the presence of such a creature. He should be kicked out.

"It's remarkable how quickly the law can act and I hope we can act quickly with this person.

"I hope the message will go out loud and clear that we will not tolerate outright racists in Britain."

Mr al Qaradawi arrived in London on Monday to attend a number of events, including a conference next Monday when speakers will debate the right of Muslim girls to wear the hijab in British schools.

Fiona Mactaggart, a Home Office minister, has withdrawn her support for the Muslim women's conference because the controversial cleric was the guest of honour.

Mr al Qaradawi might also address the Finsbury Park mosque, where the imprisoned cleric Abu Hamza used to preach.

The Muslim Association of Britain, who invited Mr al Qaradawi, insisted that the cleric was one of the Muslim world's most respected scholars and that a "vile attempt" was being made by Islamaphobes and right-wing zealots to widen the gap between Muslims and the West.

On the cleric's support for suicide bombing, a spokesman said: "It's not murder, it's self-defence.

"What do you expect the Palestinians to do?

"It's a cheap shot by the Zionist lobby."

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Muslim cleric to be monitored while in Britain

by Jeremy Lovell

Reuters (07.07.2004) / HRWF (12.07.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- A leading Muslim theologian who condemned the Sept. 11 attacks and the Bali bombing but condones some suicide bombings will have his speeches monitored while in Britain, Home Secretary David Blunkett said on Wednesday.

Blunkett, under mounting pressure to expel outspoken Egyptian-born cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, said his comments while on a speaking tour of Britain would be scrutinized for any indications of preaching race hate or intolerance.

"We will certainly monitor what he has got to say and what he has got to do," Blunkett told BBC radio on the same day he said he planned to legislate to stop attacks on the Muslim religion in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Newspapers and parliamentarians from all parties have urged the government to deport Qaradawi, who arrived in Britain on Monday. They accuse him of supporting terrorism.

Arguing his case on suicide bombings on BBC television, Qaradawi said on Wednesday the act was justified in certain circumstances.

"It is allowed to jeopardize your soul and cross the path of the enemy and be killed, if this act of jeopardy affects the enemy, even if it only generates fear in their hearts, shaking their morale, making them fear Muslims," he said. "If it does not affect the enemy then it is not allowed."

"Allah is just. Through his infinite wisdom he has given the weak what the strong do not possess, and that is the ability to turn their bodies into bombs, like the Palestinians do."

Prime Minister Tony Blair said the Qatar-based Qaradawi would not be allowed to overstep the line, but that any case to expel the man, who has been barred from the United States since 1999, would have to be watertight.

"We will keep it under very strict review. There are rules that have to be applied and those rules will be applied to this particular individual," he told parliament.

Qaradawi is revered in much of the Muslim world for his intellectual rigor and ability to adapt the fundamental tenets of Islam to the modern world.

A prominent poet, writer and public speaker, Qaradawi has a reputation for spurning extremists which is seen by some to be at odds with his known support for Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel and statements deemed to be homophobic.

After Sept. 11 he urged all Muslims worldwide to donate blood to help the victims and also condemned the 2002 Bali bombing as barbaric and immoral.

The Muslim Council of Britain, an umbrella organization representing some 400 different organizations, condemned media attacks on Qaradawi, describing him as "a voice of reason and understanding."

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New religious hate laws unveiled

BBC News (07.07.2004) / HRWF (12.07.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Inciting religious hatred is to be made a criminal offence under plans unveiled by Home Secretary David Blunkett.

The government failed to get laws introducing the offence passed by Parliament in the wake of the US terror attacks in 2001.

In a speech in London, Mr Blunkett revived the proposals.

He said he was returning to the plans as there was a need to stop people being abused or targeted just because they held a particular religious faith.

Islamophobia fear

"Extending anti-discrimination law is only worthwhile if we actually change the processes on the ground," he said in a keynote speech to left-leaning think tank the Institute of Public Policy Research.

Earlier he told BBC Radio 4's Today programme the legislation would not curb people's right to express their view of other people's religions.

"The issue is not whether you have an argument or discussion or whether you are criticising someone's religion. It's whether you incite hatred on the basis of it," he said.

There is already an offence of inciting racial hatred but this does not offer protection if someone is being targeted because of their religion.

The government is worried in particular about discrimination against Muslims.

The home secretary believes the law change would help tackle religious extremists who preach against other religions.

It is not yet clear exactly when the plans will go before Parliament.

It is thought likely the plans will be part of other legislation rather than forming a Bill on their own.

Tackling extremism, political and religious, was the central theme of Mr Blunkett's speech.

He is also expected to praise the enormous contribution made by Britain's ethnic minority communities.

He is keen to stress that the government does not want to create a single common culture but instead values Britain's diversity.

Battle predicted

But Labour peer Lord Desai believes there is no need for the proposed measures.

He told Today: "We will get into a real muddle if we take religion as a ground for prosecution, rather than ethnic stereotyping.

"When people insult Muslims they are not attacking the religion, they are attacking Muslims as a racial group. The protection required is already covered in law."

Lord Desai suggested Mr Blunkett would have a "very tough time" getting the proposed measures through the House of Lords.

Current race hate laws protect religious groups if they can also be identified as a distinct ethnic minority community - such as Jews or Sikhs.

The anti-terror laws introduced in late 2001 after the World Trade Center attacks do include laws which mean courts can take religion, like race, as an aggravating factor when dealing with crimes of violence or intimidation.

But in a last-minute compromise to ensure the main bulk of his anti-terror plans were passed by the House of Lords, Mr Blunkett dropped the proposed incitement to religious hatred offence.

Life of Brian

Both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats said at the time they would have backed fresh moves to introduce the law away from the pressures of emergency legislation.

Comedians such as Rowan Atkinson raised fears the law change could have outlawed jokes about religion.

The Blackadder star suggested Monty Python's Life of Brian would not have been made if the law had been in force.

At the time, Mr Blunkett said much of the criticism of the plans had been "nonsense", adding that jokes would not fall foul of the proposed measures.

Last month, the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia think tank warned that persistent and untackled Islamophobia in the UK could lead to "time-bombs" of backlash and bitterness.

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Muslim pupil loses legal battle to wear jilbab

by Sam Jones

The Guardian (16.06.2004) / HRWF (21.06.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.org> -- A 15-year-old Muslim girl yesterday lost her high court battle for the right to wear strict Islamic dress to school.

Shabina Begum has not attended Denbigh high school in Luton since September 2002 when she was sent home for turning up in a jilbab - the full-length gown worn by many Muslim women that covers all of the body except the face and hands.

Shabina's claim that she had been "constructively excluded" from her school was dismissed by Mr Justice Bennett. He said the school's refusal to let her wear the jilbab did not breach her right to education and freedom of religion as laid down in the European convention on human rights.

The school, a 1,000-pupil comprehensive where almost 80% of pupils are Muslim, said it had a flexible uniform policy to ensure that the religious and cultural sensitivities of its students were respected. Girls have the option of wearing trousers, skirts, or a shalwar kameez (trousers and a tunic).

Simon Birks, appearing for the school, said Shabina had never been excluded but had stayed away. He said Denbigh did not let pupils wear the jilbab because it could create the impression that those who wore one might be regarded as "better Muslims" than those who wore the shalwar kameez, and because pupils wearing the jilbab ran the risk of "tripping and slipping".

Turning down the application for a judicial review, Mr Justice Bennett said: "It seems to me unrealistic and artificial to say that the claimant's right to education has been denied in the particular circumstances of this case."

He said Shabina had been happy to wear the school uniform for two years but had abruptly changed her mind, putting the school in a difficult position: it wanted her to come back but she felt unable to do so because of her religious beliefs.

After the hearing, Iqbal Javed, a solicitor speaking on behalf of the school and local education authority, said: "Denbigh high school's uniform was agreed by the governing body after wide consultation and pupil involvement. Its appropriateness for Muslim students was recently reiterated by the local council of mosques. Naturally we are pleased the court has upheld our policy."

But Yvonne Spencer, Shabina's solicitor advocate, said her client was "devastated" and that there was now no possibility of her returning to Denbigh: "The family has expressed their view that the decision does not help to integrate Muslims into our society."

"The point remains that Shabina has been out of education for two years. Shabina is a hard-working, exemplary pupil and it's important to the family that she finds a new school place as soon as possible."

Tahir Alam, chairman of the education committee of the Muslim Council of Britain, said his organisation was "very surprised and concerned" by the judgment.

"The Muslim community in this country is very diverse and different ways of dressing are open to interpretation. In this case, [Shabina] felt she had a right to wear the jilbab. That sort of thing should be accommodated at school."

Mr Alam said potential safety problems, such as science experiments at school, could easily be coped with by tying back clothes.

"It's quite a concerning precedent. If a young British woman who happens to be Muslim wants to dress this way these days, she should be allowed to. It's ironic that in a country where women's rights are important she isn't allowed to dress how she wants."

Islamophobia pervades UK

by Dominic Casciani

BBC News (02.06.2004) / HRWF (09.06.2004) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Many Muslims say they feel they don't belong. Persistent and untackled Islamophobia in the UK could lead to 'time-bombs' of backlash and bitterness, according to a major report.

Findings by a national commission into Islam in Britain found the aftermath of the 11 September attacks has made life more difficult for Muslims.

It criticised public bodies for failing to address institutional Islamophobia.

But it said schools and hospitals had become much more sensitive to the religious needs of Muslims.

The report is the latest publication from the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, a think tank first set up by anti-racism organisation the Runnymede Trust.

Its first report in 1997 made 60 recommendations and warned that the government and communities themselves had to do more to improve the situation of Muslims in the UK.

It called for changes in the law to better protect Muslim communities and a major effort to bring its people into public life.

'Recommendations ignored'

Launching the new report, Dr Richard Stone, chair of the commission and formerly an adviser to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, warned key recommendations had been ignored.

"On 15 February 2003 there took place the biggest public demonstration ever in British history [the march against the war in Iraq]," said Dr Stone.

"But within weeks, the wonderful solidarity seen on 15 February seemed to be unravelling.

"There is now renewed talk of a clash of civilizations and mounting concern that the already fragile foothold gained by Muslim communities in Britain is threatened by ignorance and intolerance."

Since the 11 September attacks, communities had experienced greater hostility, including increased attacks against individuals and mosques, the report said.

It criticised established anti-racism organisations for failing to do enough to combat anti-Muslim prejudice.

Rioting predicted

Credit for any positive changes since 1997 had to go largely to Muslim organisations themselves which had become more organised, the report found.

Central government deserved some praise for moves on religious discrimination.

But it warned exclusion from public life perpetuated a feeling among some Muslims, particularly the young, that they did not belong in Britain.

This resentment and disaffection represented a time-bomb that needed to be dealt with now, it said.

Dr Abduljalil Sajid, an imam and adviser to the commission, said he believed many elements of the UK were "institutionally Islamophobic".

"Since the 11 September attacks the single most important concern has been police harassment of Muslims," said Dr Sajid. "Even one of the country's Muslim peers, Lord Ahmed, has been stopped twice by police."

While there were many examples of authorities properly addressing the needs of Muslim communities, he said, there were more than enough examples where communities believed they were being excluded or ghettoised.

This could spark fresh rioting and increase the influence of extremists.

'Institutionalised'

"These communities need help and want to be proud to be British. But government and public bodies are not backing up words with actions," said Dr Sajid.

Dr Richard Stone added: "The only area where there has been major change is within Muslim communities themselves.

Islamophobia 'getting worse'

"Government has not taken on board, in a deep way, the anti-Muslim prejudice in this country."

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), which was among those to submit its opinion to the commission, said "very little progress" had been made to tackle Islamophobia since the 1997 report.

Secretary-general Iqbal Sacranie cited a 41% increase in "stop and search" operations on Asians revealed by the Metropolitan Police Authority and a "virulently anti-Muslim" televised party political broadcast by the far-right British National Party as examples of the government's failure to tackle racism.

He said: "We have been witnessing a relentless increase in hostility towards Islam and British Muslims and it is clear that existing race relations bodies have been either unable or unwilling to combat this phenomenon effectively."

"Islamophobia is becoming institutionalised," he added.

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Rev. Moon on appeal against exclusion order

Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int.*

HRWF Int. (27.04.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> -- On March 30-31, 2004, a British court will hear Rev. Moon's appeal against the exclusion order preventing him from coming to Britain to minister to his church which was issued by the Home Secretary David Blunkett in May 2003. In a statement released this month,

the International Coalition of Religious Freedom says "If the Home Office is successful, it will result in greatly increased government control over religious practices and greatly curtail religious freedom for all faiths. In essence, the Home Office is for the first time asserting openly the right to use the crown prerogative to decide who may enter Britain, to control religious practices and to curb the development of any religion of which it disapproves according to criteria that it decides entirely by itself. If successful in defending Rev Moon's appeal the Home Office will in effect be able to act in immigration matters as a de facto 'Ministry of Religion'."

On 18 December 2003, the US State Department released its Fifth Annual Report on International Religious Freedom and was quoted as saying: "The Unification Church has attempted to have the ban on travel to the United Kingdom of its leader, Reverend Sun Myung Moon, lifted. While the Home Office has stated that Reverend Moon's presence would not be expected to generate any large-scale public disorder, on May 15, they sent a letter to Reverend Moon informing him that he should not attempt to enter the country based on the grounds that his 'presence there would not be conducive to the public good for reasons of public order'."

Rev. Moon's attempts to enter the UK

Since 1978, the Home Office has now sought to exclude Rev. Moon from Britain four times. The three previous attempts all ended by being judicially overturned as unlawful. Each time a different ground was put forward for exclusion from the previous one and in three of the four cases the ground even changed in mid case. In the current case the initial ground ("concern for public order") has now been withdrawn and replaced at the last minute with "concern about violation of individual rights".

1978 (May): Rev. Moon was prevented from entering the UK when he arrived for a visit at Heathrow airport but given temporary leave to remain. His subsequent appeal was allowed by Chief Immigration Adjudicator Peterkin on the grounds that the refusal had been illegal and he was allowed to and did stay in Britain for 4 months (till September 78).

1991: On August 22, 1991 Adjudicator Richards upheld an appeal against refusal of entry clearance dating back to 1989 which had been based initially on the grounds of Rev. Moon's character and conduct and at the very last minute on public order concerns. He ordered an entry clearance to be issued and it was.

1992: Rev. Moon applied in Seoul for an entry clearance. Without referring the matter to London this was granted based upon the August 1991 decision. In the 1995 proceedings below it emerged that the Home Office in London was upset about this when they found out.

1995 : On Nov 1st, Mr Justice Sedley granted an order for "judicial review" of an order refusing an entry clearance to Rev. Moon on the grounds that involvement in his church led to disruption in relations with their families of those who joined and issued a "declaration" that it was "unlawful by reason of procedural unfairness" in that representations from Rev. Moon had not even been considered and thus "of no effect".

The UC is recognised as a bona fide religion in the UK, as being for the public benefit and 'charitable' in English law.

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Muslim leader calls for curbs on rogue preachers

The Age (01.04.2004) Britain's most prominent Muslim leader has demanded a crackdown on "rogue" Islamic preachers, blaming them for brainwashing young men with sermons promoting holy war against the West.

Iqbal Sacranie, the secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain, was backed by the families of some of those arrested in Tuesday's anti-terrorism raids in south-east England.

Police continued to question eight men about the seizure in west London of more than half a tonne of fertiliser thought to be part of a plot to explode a car or truck bomb.

Mr Sacranie said he had been urging the Government for some time to introduce an offence of incitement to religious hatred which could be used against fundamentalists who operated on the fringes of a few mosques.

"These elements are preaching a message of hatred and violence which is against the Koran," he said. "They have nothing to do with Islam. There are more than a thousand mosques in Britain. We are not aware of this sort of activity in more than one or two."

Mr Sacranie made his appeal for tougher legislation after taking the unprecedented step of writing to every mosque in the country urging them to help in the fight against terrorism.

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