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**Can the Islamists Contribute Positively to European Societies? The case of the  
Federation of Student Islamic Societies in Great Britain**

**Abstract**

**Czy islamiści mogą wnieść pozytywny wkład do społeczeństw europejskich? Pojawienie się  
muzułmańskiego społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Wielkiej Brytanii**

Jose Casanova w swojej dobrze znanej pracy o roli katolicyzmu w trzeciej fali demokratyzacji argumentuje, że publiczna religia może oddziaływać jako znacząca przeciwwaga w stosunku do hegemoni instytucji państwowych i rynkowych. Stawia on także ważne pytanie o to czy wszystkie religie publiczne mogą jednakowo dobrze spełniać taką rolę (Casanova 1994). Według Samuela Huntingtona i wielu innych naukowców odpowiedź na to pytanie jest negatywna. Zapominając, że jeszcze nie tak dawno Chrześcijaństwo było uważane za nieprzystające do nowoczesnej demokracji (Esposito 1996, 2003), Huntington poczynił w swoim „Zderzeniu cywilizacji” wybitnie pesymistyczne obserwacje dotyczące niedopasowania demokracji do świata Islamu. Jego zdaniem społeczna mobilizacja Islamu nie może prowadzić do demokracji i pojawienia się społeczeństwa obywatelskiego (Huntington 1998). W niniejszym, opartym na badaniach terenowych, artykule spojrzano na Islam jako na religię mniejszości (1,8 miliona wyznawców), tak jak ma to miejsce w Wielkiej Brytanii, i wzięto jako przykład trzy muzułmańskie organizacje działające w tym kraju (Federation of Student Islamic Societies, Islamic Society of Britain and Muslim Council of Britain). Organizacje te uczestniczą aktywnie w debacie na temat praw i obowiązków obywateli brytyjskich wyznania muzułmańskiego. Autor pokazuje jak w przeciwieństwie do społecznej percepcji umacniają one poczucie obywatelskości nie zaś je pomniejszają.

Jose Casanova in his well known work on the role of Catholicism in the third wave of democratization argues that public religion can act as a significant counterweight to the hegemonic institutions of the market and the modern state. He also asks a crucial question whether all public religions are equally good at playing such a civility-enhancing role (Casanova 1994). According to Samuel Huntington the answer to this question is negative. He

seems to forget that not long ago Christianity was considered incompatible with modern democracy (Esposito 1996, 2003) and reserves some of the most pessimist observations in his influential '*Clash of Civilizations*' on democracy's incompatibilities for the Muslim world. In his view, the public mobilization of Islam is unlikely to be conducive to democracy and emergence of civil society (Huntington 1998)<sup>1</sup>.

The public mobilization of Islam takes place not only in the Muslim countries but also in Western Europe, which is a home of around 14 million Muslims. The Muslim populations that have emerged in this part of the world as a result of intensification of the migration processes after the Second World War are today relatively well integrated with the host societies and highly organized. In such countries as France, Germany and Great Britain the number of Islamic organizations extends 1000. A significant number of them strive to mobilize the faithful around different issues ranging from the aid to the poor in the Muslim countries, to the provision of the founding by the state to the Muslim schools. Is their mobilization unfavorable to the European democratic order and civil society, as one could expect following the argumentation of Huntington, or it is rather civility-enhancing one? This is a main question that the article based on the fieldwork material<sup>2</sup> attempts to answer. It addresses it by analyzing the activities of one of the strongest Islamist<sup>3</sup> organizations in Britain (Federation of Student Islamic Societies – hereafter FOSIS), where according to the latest census carried out in 2001, 1,6 million people consider themselves Muslims. However, before we move on to analyze the activities of the FOSIS in the light of the main question of the article it is essential to explain what do we mean by a civil society, and what impact religion may have on it.

### **Religion and the Civil Society**

The notion of the civil society originally coined by the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in 17<sup>th</sup> century, as an alternative to kingdom and church, has come to be commonly understood today as designating an arena of non-governmental institutions and associations

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<sup>1</sup> For critique of the Huntington thesis in regard to the Muslim world see for example: Hafner 2001, Gheytanchi 2001, Esposito 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The empirical data for the article was gathered during the author's stay as a Marie Curie Fellowship at the University of Bradford from June to December 2003. In the course of research the author has carried out 32 qualitative interviews with members of various Muslim organizations and participated in a number of events organized by them, such as for example the 4-day FOSIS annual conference entitled 'The Role and Responsibility of Muslim Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' (Nottingham, 19-22 June 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The word 'Islamist' is used in the text to describe the organisations and their members that believe the role of religion should not be limited to the private sphere of life and argue that Islam is not only a religion, but a system that also governs the political, economic and social spheres of life.

which are nevertheless supportive of civic well-being and the sense of purpose, agency and freedom of citizens (McKinnon and Hampsher-Monk 2000:2). Inclusion of individuals into these institutional spaces stretching between family and state through their membership of clubs, associations, groups and churches has been a subject of sociological research since the inception of the discipline. As Bryan Turner notices, while political membership as expressed primarily through the franchise constitutes a general framework for citizenship, participation in civil society provides its substance (Turner 2003).

One of the most unexpected aspects of the global resurgence of civil society that we have been experiencing in the recent years has been the role of religion in this process. As Jose Casanova points out, this revival was especially surprising for all those who took for granted the main premises of the theory of secularization: that religion in the modern world is likely to decline and become increasingly privatized, marginal, and politically irrelevant (1994). Contrary to Alexis de Tocqueville who emphasized the importance of religious institutions in American civil society, a significant number contemporary scholars focusing on the process of privatization of religion ceased to view religious associations in the West as 'the schools' of civil and political associationism crucial for a democratic states. Instead, having emphasized the notion of privatization of religion they were assuming that political secularism, or the separation of the church and state which took governments out of the business of coercing conformity, means also that religion would be gradually taken out of public life. This approach however turned out to be nothing else but an example of wishful thinking. Religion not only remained a public matter but what is more, religious groups have started to play more active role in the society than before. This could happen because the freedom of religious expression, as one of the fundamental human rights, is not confined to guaranteeing the private faith and practice of individual persons but gives religious communities the right to participate in public debates (Bielefeld 2000:91). Various religious communities across the globe did not resign from this right and kept playing with lesser or greater success a civility-enhancing role.

According to Jose Casanova who has analyzed the role of the Catholic church in the third way of democratization, religion can contribute to civil society under 3 conditions: firstly, it must give up its monopolistic claims and recognize religious freedom and freedom of conscience as universal and inviolable human rights; secondly, it has to voluntarily disestablish itself from the state, and lastly, it should take a form of a modern public religion (2001:3). If one tries to apply these conditions to the situation of Islam in Britain then s/he finds out that most of the Muslim organisations comply with these requirements. They have

largely recognized religious freedom and freedom of conscience and as organisations of a newly established minority religion fulfil the second condition and are excluded from the third one. However the condition of disestablishment from the state one may also understand as freeing Muslim organizations from the financial support which some of them receive from the foreign states. In this case it seems that rejecting such support and finding alternative sources of funding (what many Muslim organisation had to do anyway when after the terrorist attacks in USA in 2001 and Spain in 2003 it become increasingly difficult to obtain money from the Muslim world), could also be beneficial to building an independent Muslim civil society.

The crucial questions, however, are what there is in religion that might be beneficial for the civil society and why religion, which takes no direct part in the government of society, should be regarded as the first from many political institutions. The answer to the first question one may find already in the writings of Tocqueville who saw the civility-enhancing role of religion mainly in the fact that it enables its followers to transcend egoistic and solipsist individualism and develops something that he calls '*self-interest rightly understood*'. (Tocqueville 1990, I: 305) This appropriate 'self-interest' allows the individuals involved in religious groups not only to work towards common goals, but also to forge connections across large segments of the population, spanning communities and regions, and drawing together people from different ethnic backgrounds and occupations.

Another feature of religion which may have an important impact on civil society is that religious ideals are potentially powerful sources of commitment and motivation, so that people will make enormous sacrifices if they believe themselves to be driven by a divine force (Putnam 2000:67). This feature is of an ambiguous nature since it may result both in bringing the individual closer to the life of the society, as well as, isolating him or her from it. Thus, religious communities through their activism may either reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups, or they may create inclusive social capital<sup>4</sup>. In other words, they may stimulate production of the bridging social capital which has been described by Putnam as 'sociological WD-40', or bounding social capital which can be understood as 'sociological superglue'. While the first one may result in strengthening of the civil society, the later one may bring about the emergence of 'moral communities' which might be trying to isolate themselves from larger society and in a longer term might result in building parallel societies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> By 'social capital' I mean after Putnam '*connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them*' (2000:19).

<sup>5</sup> Here it is also worth reminding that it was the formation of the second kind of social capital that allowed the perpetrators of the attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon to realize their plan

At the individual level religion also contributes to the civil society through the fact that religious people are unusually active social capitalists. As research shows religiously involved people seem simply to know more people (Putnam 2000:67) and thus their assets in ‘the favour banks’ are significantly larger than the assets of the people who meet and know fewer people. This, for example provides the religious social capitalists with much wider range of allies, than that of non religious people, if they decide to exercise their citizen rights.

As far as the second question is concerned, religion should be regarded as the first from many political institutions according to Tocqueville because religious involvement is a crucial dimension of civic engagement (2000:69). It should be also regarded as such from historical point of view. Religions and religious communities have provided throughout the history the organizational and philosophical bases for a wide range of powerful social movements (i.e. the Solidarity movement in the communist Poland or current anti-war movement in Britain led by the Muslim Association of Britain - MAB).

However the observations about religion’s role as political institution hold true only to religions and religious communities which have a public face. As Putnam aptly observes privatized religion may be morally compelling and psychically fulfilling, but it embodies less social capital which is important to carry out any political action (2000:74). It seems that the Prophet Muhammad was well aware of this when he stated: *“It is better to join another person and pray than to pray alone and it is more superior in the company of two men and the bigger the congregation the more liked it is by Allah.”*<sup>6</sup> The importance of the congregational prayer in Islam is being often emphasized also by Muslim leaders in Britain who want in this way inhibit the process of privatization of religion that is taking place within the Muslim communities, as well as, to ‘save’ some social capital. Now let us move on from the theoretical deliberations to our case, that is the analysis of the FOSIS activities and their possible influence on the Muslim and larger civil society.

### **The Islamist Organisation and Civil Society**

First of all we need to explain why we have decided to focus on this particular organisation and not on the other ones. The choice to look at the FOSIS was made not only because it is closely linked with one of the most dynamic revivalist movements within contemporary Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood (ar. *Ikhwan Muslimin*) established by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928, but above all, because it has one of the largest and most diverse memberships

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<sup>6</sup> Hadith about the importance of congregational prayer in Islam quoted on <http://www.inter-islam.org/Actions/Congregation.html> (accessed on 30.04.2004)

and numerous activists of other Muslim organisations in the country and abroad began their careers from it.

The Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) which was set up in 1962 is one of the oldest and most established Muslim organisations in the country. With the membership of 22 250 students (out of estimated around 30 000 Muslim students on British campuses), links to over 100 Islamic student societies and established relationships with the National Union of Students (hereafter NUS), and other key student organisations in the country and abroad<sup>7</sup>, FOSIS is today one of the leading Muslim student organisation not only in the UK but in Europe. The organisation which has only one paid position of the office manager has developed since the time of its inception a variety of resources (i.e. it owns two hostels in London and one in Swansea) and specialised teams to assist and represent Muslim students within universities and other educational institutions making it a primary source of reference for Muslim as well as non-Muslim organisations. However, the FOSIS, as a vital part of the Muslim NGO sector, cannot be ignored not only because of its influence on today's Muslim university population but also because of its network of the former members with whom it stays in contact. People who were once in the FOSIS are now leading politicians or leading persons within different foreign countries. For example, vice – emirs of Malaysia and Sudan were executive members of FOSIS. Also scholars such as Tariq Ramadan and Dilwar Hussain were involved in the activities of FOSIS and many other people who are now active in all spheres of social life.

Apart from being fluidic, the membership of FOSIS is extremely diverse both in ethnic and religious terms. One may find amongst its members women and men from around the whole world and the supporters of all possible movements within Islam. In this sense it reflects the mosaic of the Muslim student population which consists of members of all possible groups. The organisation is proud of its neutrality and openness to different agents or agencies within Islam (as long as they do not contradict the basic doctrines of Islam). According to vice-president of FOSIS, Abdul Wajid Khan *'there is no one kind of group that runs FOSIS. We will not allow one group or way of religious thinking to take over. That allows many kind of groups to find their place within FOSIS... Many groups that will not talk to one another are willing cooperate with FOSIS and thus we are able to mediate between*

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<sup>7</sup> For example FOSIS is an active member of the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO) which was founded in 1996 in Brussels to provide a social context in which various national Muslim youth organisations might come together in order to discuss and act on matters of common interest. The Forum has in recent years established itself as a credible voice and resource for the next generation of European Muslims, and has formed valuable linkages with institutions such as the European Parliament.

*them*' (Interview with AWK). In practice the neutrality of the organisation means existence within it of extremely different worldviews.<sup>8</sup> This was especially clear during the FOSIS annual conference in June 2003, when the conference participants (members of the Islamic societies from around the country) at many sessions were confronted with two contradictory discourses. For example, while Sarah Joseph (from Islamic Society of Britain) and imam Ibrahim Moghra (from Muslim Council of Britain) were encouraging the conference delegates to get involved with various FOSIS activities and with dialogue with wider society, imam Abdur Rashid from the USA was openly discouraging them to '*mix with unbelievers*', and called for '*establishment of Islamic moral communities*' isolated from the wider society. Many of the conference delegates felt deeply confused about the message the organisation was putting forward to them simply because the 'revolutionary ideas' of imam Abdur Rashid could not be in any way reconciled with the 'moderate and pragmatic' approach of imam Ibrahim Moghra. By inviting speakers with radically different worldviews the organisers wanted 'to cater for needs' of all conference delegates among whose there were supporters of the isolationist Tablighi Jama'at, militant Hizb ut-Tahrir and Young Muslim advocating civic engagement – to name just three.

The conference speakers have accounted differently for 'religious radicalisation' of certain segments of the student population. Whereas Abdul Wajid Khan has suggested that it should be perceived as an effect of a general search for identity, then according to Anas Osama Altkiriti (Muslim Association of Britain), this has its roots mostly in 'the student mentality', that is students' propensity to take an extreme position wherever they stand and in a disadvantaged position of Muslims in the country. In his opinion '*For far to long the Muslim community in this country was oppressed, put in the corner and now we are fighting back often in an unbalanced way*' (Interview with AOA).

Why despite its mixed message and giving shelter to people belonging to organisations such as Hizb-ut Tahrir, FOSIS should not be ignored as an important part of Muslim civil society? First of all, because the usage of a 'Muslim power' approach in mobilisation of student population however strong it is (in reality it varies from university to university), it is only one way of encouraging Muslim students by FOSIS to greater political activism. The organisation uses also other platforms of mobilisation of Muslims to activism in the public

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<sup>8</sup> FOSIS neutrality meant also that the organization opposed the NUS motion on banning Hizb ut-Tahrir from the university campuses. The FOSIS president, Mr Patel on this occasion said: "*Even though we at FOSIS often have strong reservations about the methods of this group, we feel it was wrong and unfair that this motion was expressed in such an Islamophobic manner and with no consultation with the Muslim mainstream.*" See NUS conference 2004 on [www.fosis.org.uk](http://www.fosis.org.uk)

sphere, such as, a discourse on rights and duties related to citizenship, a colour-blind human rights and human dignity approach and an approach based on extension of the concepts of racial discrimination and racial equality to include anti-Muslim racism (Modood 2003:109).

Secondly, even if some of the FOSIS campaigns might be of conflicting nature the organisation still should be viewed as part of the civil society because the activism for Islamic causes beyond the boundaries of the nation, motivated by deep loyalties to Muslim elsewhere, not only allows students to express their solidarity with Muslims from other parts of the world, but also enhances their practical civic consciousness as citizens of the nation and accelerates their integration into British civic politics. The same outcomes we can observe while analysing the FOSIS mobilisation around ‘local Islamic causes’.

Let us have a closer look now at the activities of FOSIS to show the evidence for this. The organisation which aims inter alia at ‘*representing Muslim Students and Islamic Societies and protecting and promoting the interests of Muslim students*’<sup>9</sup>, apart from organising seminars, speakers tours, and study courses, runs also eight campaigns. Half of them are examples of campaigns which are mainly nourished by despair at the victimisation and humiliation of Muslims in places such as Palestine, Kashmir, Gujarat and Iraq or triggered by what Tarik Modood calls ‘a Muslim power approach’ (Modood 2003:109). Such military disasters and humanitarian horrors, as those mentioned above, evoke a strong desire to express solidarity with oppressed Muslims through the political idea of the *ummah*. The FOSIS campaigns which aim at educating students about ‘the truth of the struggle of people in Palestine and Kashmir’, the situation of Muslims in Gujarat and ‘destruction of the nation in Iraq’ enable Muslim students to revive the idea of the global community of Muslims ([www.fosis.org.uk](http://www.fosis.org.uk)). However before they do it, the organisation and its individual members need to identify a range allies, and thus acquire the language and politics of civic protest. The material which I have gathered shows that the FOSIS has been very skilful in doing so. The organisation has been cooperating, for example with Palestine Return Centre (PRC) and Friends of Al-Aqsa (FOA) on the Palestine Campaign; with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) and the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) on Iraq campaign and anti-war demonstrations<sup>10</sup>; with a variety of aid agencies and Muslim and non-Muslim charities including Human Appeal International and Muslim Hands on helping people in Kashmir and Gujarat and with the NUS on various other projects.

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<sup>9</sup> see [www.fosis.org.uk](http://www.fosis.org.uk)

<sup>10</sup> Especially that on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2003, which brought to the streets of London around million people.



Paradoxically, then, through these campaigns which revitalise the idea of *ummah*, the Islamic societies and their members have become embedded in a civic culture of human rights protest and have become comfortable with cooperation with other activists irrespective of their religious or ethnic background. This is even more so if we look at the remaining four other campaigns concerning such ‘local issues’ as, religious discrimination, role of Muslim women in the society, prayer facilities on the campuses and Muslim healthcare. Since there is no room to elaborate on each of them we should concentrate only on one.

The biggest and the most professionally organised amongst them is probably the Anti-Religious Discrimination Campaign, which FOSIS has undertaken in conjunction with the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR)<sup>11</sup>, NUS, Black Students, and University of Manchester Union. Its ultimate goal is to change British legislation, concerning religious discrimination, which today does not apply in areas outside employment<sup>12</sup> and blasphemy, which at the moment protects only the tenets of the Christian faith, but not the beliefs and practices of other faith groups (Allen and Nielsen 2002). By running this campaign through the organisation of regional seminars, distribution of literature packs, collection of signatures on a national student petition, initiation of a letter writing campaign to government, FOSIS fulfils one of its statutory goals of ‘promoting understanding of Islam and Muslims in an effort to eradicate intolerance and Islamophobia from campuses’. At the same time it allows the students involved in the campaign to practice active citizenship and establish contacts, with both other Muslim and non-Muslim groups. The organisation does not try to ‘appropriate’ religious discrimination and present it as a typically ‘Muslim problem’ but takes a comprehensive approach. In one of the campaign booklets it argues, that *‘reforming the anti-discrimination legislation in Britain and mainstreaming marginalized groups through policy initiatives will make a real contribution towards encouraging greater identification with the State by members of the minority communities and better social cohesion within our communities’*<sup>13</sup>

Analysing the activities of the FOSIS in the light of its contribution to the civil society, one cannot overlook the emphasis which the organisation puts on the Muslim students’ involvement into student politics. Apart from mobilising Muslim students around various

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<sup>11</sup> FAIR is yet another example of organisation which plays a crucial part in the Muslim and wider civil society. The organisation was founded in 2001 as an independent charitable organization which aims at working towards establishing a Safe, Just and Tolerant Britain in which Islamophobia and racism have no place. See [www.fairuk.org](http://www.fairuk.org) (accessed on 12.05.2004)

<sup>12</sup> The EU Employment Equality Directive which makes it unlawful to discriminate against workers because of religion came into force actually only from 2nd December 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Religious Discrimination. The Time for Change is Now. FOSIS campaign booklet

'Islamic causes' the organisation encourage them also to take active part in the major campaigns of the wider student population. Recently, for example, the FOSIS has called on all students to protest against the government plan to introduce university Top-Up Fees. With the encouragement of FOSIS, there are every year more and more Muslim students participating in the political processes on the level of universities, and thus taking an important step towards future involvement in 'real politics' after the completion of their studies. The publication and diffusion by FOSIS such booklets as, for example 'A Guide to Running for Student Union and NUS Conference Elections', 'A Guide to Motions in the Student Union' and 'Guide to Election Campaigns' seem to give the intended results. During this year's NUS annual conference FOSIS brought a record 85 delegates from various political factions and groups under a united banner. Their involvement had a direct impact on the outcome of the NUS presidential elections. The tactical voting of the Muslim students ensured that the left-wing candidate (Kat Fletcher) won the elections, ending a 22-year monopoly of Labour students in NUS. During the same conference Muslim delegates managed also to pass a motion on "Racism in Education", which ensures 'that the Hijab, along with the Jewish skullcap, is allowed to be worn at all academic institutions, and the NUS will campaign for it' ([www.fosis.org.uk](http://www.fosis.org.uk)).

## **Conclusion**

In general Islamism is equated with 'radical Islam' and viewed as hostile to modernity. As we have demonstrated on the example of FOSIS, this one-dimensional image of Islamism has very little to do with reality. Various intellectual and political currents coexist not only within the whole movement but also within single organisations. Thus, the FOSIS can contribute positively to the democratic order and civil society by, for example, coming together with other non-Muslim organisations to lobby the government for change in the law concerning religious discrimination, and at the same time, it can undermine this order, by refraining from criticism of the groups that call for the establishment in Britain of the Islamic state. This article has argued that, despite the FOSIS *laissez-faire* policy towards groups such as Hizb-ut Tahrir, its preoccupation with ideas of *ummah* and Islamic identity, and excessive usage of the negative mobilisation techniques, the work which it does is invaluable for the formation of a stronger Muslim civil society in Britain and the inclusion of Muslims into the mainstream society. This is because FOSIS through its campaigns and activities provides not only spaces for learning of a capacity for action and for responsibility, but also plenty of room for learning of the self and of the relationship of self and other, which are the crucial parts of social

citizenship (Delanty 2002). It provides spaces within which Muslim students may practise active citizenship and build not only bonding but also bridging social capital.

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