

THE MUSLIM COUNCIL OF BRITAIN



Mike Robinson,
Editor,
BBC Panorama,
Room 1118,
201 Wood Lane,
London,
W12 7TS

23rd August 2005

Dear Mr Robinson,

Thank you for your reply last week to the Muslim Council of Britain in which you assured us that the John Ware Panorama documentary, A Question of Leadership, would “remain true to the BBC hallmark of fair and impartial reporting...”

We accept that the track record on the whole for the Panorama programmes and certainly the BBC, is one to be admired. It is precisely for this reason that we are saddened and shocked at what we see as a grossly unfair presentation of both our community and our organisation.

We believe that the programme that was aired on Sunday 21st August 2005 on BBC1 was dishonestly presented, mischievously edited and clearly aimed at maligning the Muslim Council of Britain and its major affiliates including the Muslim Association of Britain, the Islamic Foundation, Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith and the Leeds Grand Mosque, without regard for the facts.

In the following pages we have outlined clearly the reasoning behind our assertions. We now ask you to fully investigate our concerns.

At a time when British Muslims are under enormous pressure because of the actions of a few criminal individuals, it is very regrettable that the Panorama team did not approach this programme with a more balanced outlook. While responsible Muslim organisations are actively engaged in finding ways to bring more British Muslims into the mainstream and sensitively deal with anger and a sense of exclusion, the sensationalist style of your programme was in our view completely irresponsible. Worse still, John Ware clearly entered the debate with a preconceived idea of how Muslims should behave, and then sought out individuals, who have very little grassroots support, to try and support his conclusions.

We can only hope that the spirit of journalistic integrity that exists within the BBC will encourage it to fairly consider the reasons behind our sense of deep disappointment at John Ware's programme.

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Yours sincerely,

Inayat Bunglawala,
Secretary,
Media Committee,
The Muslim Council of Britain

Cc: Mark Thompson, Director-General, BBC
Helen Boaden, Head of News, BBC
John Ware, Reporter, BBC Panorama

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Main Concerns About The Panorama Programme Aired on 21.8.05

Dishonest Omissions

a) The programme portrayed the MCB as being 'in denial' about extremism. The MCB makes no claims about perfection and we do have many shortcomings. However, it was deeply unfair of the Panorama team not to make mention of the MCB's efforts to help promote the common good by sending a letter – following the Madrid bombings - to every Islamic organisation and mosque in the country urging vigilance against the terror threat and cooperation with the police. In addition, in September 2004, the MCB printed 500,000 copies of a Pocket Guide on Rights and Responsibilities. This contained a section on 'Vigilance and the Terror Threat' in which we prominently printed the Anti-Terror Hotline Number. Why was this not mentioned – is it because it would have undermined the 'denial' case that John Ware was trying to build?

b) Sir Iqbal Sacranie was questioned in the programme in detail about statements attributed to some of our affiliates. By contrast, Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui (of the Muslim Parliament) was approvingly quoted in the programme several times and was not questioned in the programme at all about the far more controversial statement about bombing No 10 Downing Street made by his deputy Dr Yaqub Zaki which appeared in the national newspapers on the very morning of the Panorama programme. Why was this?

Dishonest Presentation

a) The Panorama programme presented a quotation of Mawlana Mawdudi as saying that an Islamic state – which his party Jamaat-I-Islami continues to campaign for - bears:

"...a kind of resemblance to the fascist and communist states..."

The purpose of Panorama quoting this line seems to us clearly to try and create a certain negative impression in the minds of its viewers about the MCB affiliate, the Islamic Foundation, whose Chairman, Professor Khurshid Ahmad, is a prominent member of the Jamaat-I-Islami party.

It is well known that it is possible through mischievous editing to choose carefully selected lines from the writings of just about any author which will then make it appear to suggest he is saying the polar opposite of his actual words. This task is made all the more easier if viewers are shown the writings of a foreign author who was writing in a rather different time and place. What is less well known is that programmes such as the BBC's Panorama would indulge in this kind of manifestly dishonest practice. Compare the above quotation that Ware provided his viewers with the actual full quotation from Mawdudi's book, Islamic Law and Constitution:

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“Considered from this aspect the Islamic State bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states. But you will find later on that, despite its all-inclusiveness, it is something vastly and basically different from the totalitarian and authoritarian states. Individual liberty is not suppressed under it nor is there any trace of dictatorship in it. It presents the middle course and embodies the best that the human society has ever evolved.” (Islamic Law and Constitution, Chapter on The Political Theory of Islam, 9th edition, Lahore, 1986, p146)

In the full quotation, it is evident that Mawdudi was actually saying something quite different to what the carefully selected quote that Panorama used, said.

b) The Panorama team questioned Sir Iqbal Sacranie about a statement made on a website of the MCB affiliate Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith.

[John Ware:] I'm quoting from Ali Hadith. As I say it's quite an important affiliate of yours and just to give you one example from their website, they say of Jews and Christians: 'Their ways are based on sick or deviant views' and that 'imitating the Kuffaar leads to a permanent abode in hellfire.' That's a 'Them and Us' culture, isn't it, that's a slippery slope.

In fact, this quote appears to have been taken from an article by an American author Muhammad al-Jibaly which appeared on the 'Downloadables' section of Ahl-I-Hadith website. It is not from an actual Ahl-e-Hadith publication. Would it not have been more honest to have clearly pointed this out to your viewers? Or would this have undermined the case that Ware was trying to build.

c) Another voice approvingly quoted by Panorama is Dr Taj Hargey who was described as the Chairman of the Muslim Education Centre, Oxford. He was quoted as saying the MCB is mainly composed of “Indo-Pakistanis”.

The Census of 2001 showed that of the 1.6 million Muslims in Britain, around 68% of them had their origins in the Indian subcontinent. As a body which seeks to bring together British Muslims, it is therefore inevitable that the MCB will mainly consist of people who are “Indo-Pakistanis” – yet Ware allowed Dr Taj Hargey’s remark to go unchallenged.

d) Concerning the Shabina Begum case, Dr Taj Hargey was quoted as saying that the jilbab (long women’s garment) has “no validity in Islam whatsoever...there is no religious verse, there is no Qur’anic ayah, there is nothing in the Qur’an that says you must wear the jilbab.”

Dr Hargey’s assertion that there is nothing in the Qur’an about the jilbab is quite simply wrong. We would refer Dr Hargey to Surat al-Ahzab (al-Qur’an 33:59) where the Arabic word ‘jalabib’ (plural of jilbab) clearly occurs in connection with the recommended dress for the Prophet’s wives and ‘nisaa al-mu’mineen’ (believing women). It was unacceptable of John Ware’s Panorama team to have

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let Dr Hargey's assertion once again go unchallenged. What adds to the unfairness is that Ware did not mention that the Barrister who defended Shabina Begum's right to wear the jilbab was none other than Cherie Blair, the wife of the Prime Minister. Was this not mentioned because it would have undermined Ware's argument that the jilbab is a manifestation of 'political Islam'? Finally, many other schools do allow the wearing of the jilbab by Muslim schoolgirls without it causing any problems whatsoever, yet Ware, once again, did not mention this. This omission would have left the unsuspecting viewer to believe that it was Shabina who was behaving intransigently, instead of Denbigh High School, which made the headlines precisely because it refused to allow Shabina Begum to exercise her rights.

In addition, it should be noted, that almost all of us in the Muslim Council of Britain had never previously heard of Dr Taj Hargey. However, we did find the following item on the internet:

<http://www.macopinion.com/columns/intelligence/01/11/21/>

We wonder whether the Panorama team investigated this allegation before they decided to present Dr Hargey as an 'influential Muslim'?

We have to say that Dr Hargey's ill-informed contributions to the programme were only reflective of the Panorama team's own poor research and fast and loose approach to the facts.

Dishonest Description

a) One voice quoted approvingly in Ware's documentary was Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui who was described in the programme as the 'Director of the Muslim Institute'. We are told that *'a decade ago he believed Islam and politics should be fused. Now he thinks the only way Muslims will join the mainstream is if that link is broken.'* Why did John Ware not inform his viewers that Dr Siddiqui is also the head of the 'Muslim Parliament'? Could it be that this was omitted because it would have undermined his argument about Islam and politics not being 'fused'?

b) Ware spoke appreciatively of those Muslims who do not allow their faith to influence their political outlook. He went to a mosque in Birmingham and said that *'Muslims here follow the Sufi stream, like most in Britain. They do not politicise their faith, theirs is personal and spiritual.'*

It is indeed true that many Muslims admire Sufi teachings. However, Ware does not provide any evidence to show that 'most' Muslims in the UK follow the 'sufi stream' or that they believe that Islam is only 'personal and spiritual' and should not influence their political beliefs.

Furthermore, the idea that Sufis only follow a 'personal and spiritual' Islam is another common misconception and shows insufficient research on Ware's part.

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Muslims who follow the 'sufi way' as well as others are both in the same Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA) coalition party as the Jamaat-i-Islami in Pakistan. This is the same Jamaat-i-Islami that Ware attempts to portray as extremists. The primary anti-colonial jihadist movements of the 19th century were all sufi-inspired. For example, Imam Shamil in Daghestan belonged to the famous Naqshbandi order, Umar al-Mukhtar in Libya to the Sanusi order, Amir Abdul Qadir in Algeria to the Qadiri order and so on.

In addition, Ware's statement that the UK is a 'secular' country is not entirely true. There are members of the Christian clergy in the House of Lords and Britain has an established Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury regularly comments on social, economic and major political events. Christian values and teachings have been a major influence behind the Welfare state, the NHS, etc.

Ruth Kelly, the cabinet minister, has made no bones of her commitment to Opus Dei, remarking, "I am a practicing Catholic. Clearly I have strong personal principles. I would have to abide by them in my political career if they are strong personal principles." (The Guardian, 17th December 2004).

Look also at George Bush. His conception of Christianity very obviously informs his political beliefs and actions.

The Pope often meets with world leaders and comments on world affairs.

So it is strange that when Muslims seek to be guided in their social and political beliefs and actions by their faith, Ware describes this in the programme as 'playing politics with religion in a secular country'.

c) Ware stated in the programme that: *'One overt sign of separateness is that of Muslim women covering themselves.'* Why is the wearing of the hijab or jilbab regarded as a 'sign of separateness'? Does Panorama believe the Sikh turban or the Jewish yarmulka (skullcap) are also 'signs of separateness'?

Biased Account of Israel/Palestine Conflict

John Ware's programme made a pretence of being impartial and nowhere was this more clearly exposed than in the section about the Israel-Palestine conflict. It is worth quoting Ware in full:

[Ware] "The Israel-Palestine conflict is over land and holy sites. It's a rallying cry for young martyrs in the global ummah. Islamist groups like Hamas have used terrorist tactics against Israel because they want to destroy it. Israeli military operations targeting the Islamists have also caused many civilian deaths."

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Ware tried to sound balanced to the unsuspecting viewer. Yet we would not have known from listening to Ware that it is the Israelis who for decades now have been illegally occupying Palestinian lands in defiance of numerous UN resolutions. We were told by Ware that Hamas use 'terrorist tactics' against Israel but were not told about terrorist methods used by Israel against Palestinians. When describing the assassination of the quadriplegic Hamas leader and Islamic scholar Shaykh Ahmad Yasin by Israel, Ware referred to it simply as an 'Israeli missile strike'. Ware gave no indication of the imbalance in power between the two sides and the disproportionality in the numbers of casualties where since the year 2000, four Palestinians have been killed for every Israeli.

Ware made a big fuss of Sir Iqbal Sacranie having attended a memorial meeting for Shaykh Ahmad Yasin and asked Sir Iqbal: "You did not have to go to that memorial service in the central mosque...you could have chosen not to go." Would Ware make a similar fuss about British Jewish leaders who have repeatedly met the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who was found by Israel's own Kahane commission of being 'indirectly responsible' for the massacre of over two thousand Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps? Somehow, we doubt it.

Ware evidently approves of the secular democracy we live in and the freedom of speech we enjoy. He castigated Sir Iqbal Sacranie for his opposition to Rushdie's blasphemous book 'The Satanic Verses'. However, when it came to British Muslims expressing their opinions freely Ware suddenly became a lot more censorious and demanded that Imams not declare the war on terror as a war on Islam.

[Ware to Sir Iqbal]: "Isn't it important for you as the leader of the Muslim community in Britain to put the Imam of the Leeds mosque right when he says that the war in Iraq is about plotting to decrease the faith of Islam?"

Conclusion

We believe our observations above about John Ware's Panorama documentary clearly show that the programme was maliciously motivated and we call upon the Panorama team to apologise to the MCB and all British Muslims for what was a shoddy and Islamophobic piece of work which will contribute to furthering distrust and divisions in our society.