

## Made in Britain – the Birth of the Adjectival Muslim?

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### Themes & issues

We can speak of three generations of Muslims now settled here since the 1960s saw the first large-scale migrations. Our focus is how different generations navigate relations across three distinct religious and social worlds: traditional Islam imported from their relatives' homeland; expressions of Islam drawn from across the Muslim world – the *umma* – now accessible at a click of a mouse; and Britain itself, where among a new generation of graduates and professionals, many are seeking new and expansive readings of Islam to connect with their lived experiences. A minority opt for a violent jihadi Salafi/ISIS perspective (see Sam Harris, Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance, A Dialogue*, Harvard, 2015).

Most first generation migrants, the majority from rural South Asia, belonged to different ethno-Muslim communities, where culture, religion and ethnicity were frequently conflated. For many of their children and grandchildren this will no longer do. Faced with questions at school and at work, especially post 9/11, 7/7 and now ISIS, they have had to become more self-conscious and articulate. We are also seeing generational shifts from avoidance to engagement with wider society.

It is clear that much of the Muslim world is undergoing multiple **crises** – given the transnational nature of British Muslim communities, they are not immune from these (see Innes Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent, Inside British Islam*, Hurst & Co., 2014). Crises can generate **candour** and self-criticism, as well as defensiveness and denial. We are also seeing the need to **Contextualise** Islam in Britain (see 'Contextualising Islam in Britain' 2009<sup>1</sup> and 2012<sup>2</sup> reports).

It is evident that Muslims are not uniquely religious; or that Islam, in reality, impacts their lives in the same way. A recent study on political participation among young British Muslims, identified four different sorts of Muslims:

Those who downplay their Muslim identification and retain simply a symbolic ethno-religious identity; those with a cosmopolitan, internationalist and multicultural identity; those with a dual identity, thinking of themselves as British Muslims (the largest single group); and finally a small group who prioritise their Muslim identity and for whom a British identity is at best secondary and purely pragmatic, with little emotional attachment to Britain (Asma Mustafa, *Identity and Political Participation Among Young British Muslims* Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

### Muslims in Britain: a changing landscape

The Muslim Council of Britain, MCB, produced an important report in June 2015, *British Muslims in Numbers, a Demographic, Socio-economic and Health profile of Muslims in Britain drawing on the 2011 Census*. Compiled by a young, female sociologist at Oxford University, it includes data painting a nuanced picture, both positive and negative.

Demographics, Age profile & ethnicity: the Muslim population has grown from 1.55 to 2.71 million from 2001-2011 – of which 77,000 in Scotland and 3,800 in Northern Ireland; this accounts for 4.8% of overall population [OP] but 8.1% of all school age children (5-15); 33% of Muslims 15 or under (cf 19% overall population OP), median age 25 yrs (cf 40 in OP). 47% of Muslims are UK born. 68% have roots in South Asia & more than 75% live in the inner city conurbations of Greater London, W. Midlands, N-W and Yorkshire and Humberside.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/webteam/shared/pdfs/misc/Contextualising\\_Islam\\_in\\_Britain.pdf](https://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/webteam/shared/pdfs/misc/Contextualising_Islam_in_Britain.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Contextualising-Islam-in-Britain-II.pdf>

Education & socio-economic profile: the proportion of Muslims in the 'higher professional occupation' category is 5.5%, (cf to OP 7.6%). The percentage of Muslims over 16 with 'degree level and above' qualifications is also similar (24% & 27% respectively). 43% of 330,000 full-time students are female. A reduction from 39% to 26% from 2001-2011 with no qualifications. Few young Muslims take up apprenticeships - 0.7% cf to 3.6% of 16-24 year olds; of Muslim women 16-74 18% look after home or family cf to 6% in OP.

Surprises: more than a fifth (21.3%) of Muslims between 16-74 have never worked (this figure excludes students) cf to 4% in OP. Between 2001-2011 Muslims living in the 10% most deprived LA districts in England grew from 33% to just under a half (46% or 1.22m). Some 260,000 Muslim married households with dependent children – 35% cf to 15% for OP. But also some 77,000 Muslim lone parent families with dependent children and 135,000 one-person Muslim households. 13% prison population Muslim in 2011.

### A mosque managed by women?

The Bradford Muslim Women's Council [MWC] generated considerable media interest with their proposal in the spring of 2015 to create the first all-women managed mosque in the UK and a centre of excellence for Muslim women. Their public consultation on August 2<sup>nd</sup> was well structured: they had three invited speakers to commend and defend the proposal : a respected traditionalist – Shaykh Akram Nadwi from Cambridge (for an engaging biography of him see Carla Power, *If the Oceans were Ink, an unlikely friendship and a journey to the heart of the Qur'an*, Holt and Co., 2015); a young female academic Dr Shuruq Naqgib, an Egyptian, who lectures at Lancaster University, and Dilwar Hussain, a policy adviser from Leicester, who chairs the reformist initiative, 'New Horizons in British Islam'.

At one level this is another welcome expression of a new generation of savvy British Muslim professionals developing city and region-wide organizations to critically engage their own communities and wider society. Indeed, the MWC was preceded in 2010 with another Bradford-based network – the Professional Muslim Institute [PMI] – to support Muslim professionals across the region and begin to address 'the lack of meaningful and effective leadership within the Muslim community in the district' (*Keighley News*, 27-03-10). Its Youtube videos indicates the range of issues it seeks to tackle, from on-street grooming to a book launch of an engaging autobiography by a Liverpool barrister, Zia Chaudhry (*Just Your Average Muslim*, Grosvenor House, 2013).

However, the MWC has done more than contribute to a burgeoning Muslim 'third sector'. It has sought to draw attention to some of the most troubling issues exercising the Muslim world today – our focus - as well as modeling a way forward.

### Managing seismic changes within the Muslim world: [1] the increased visibility and influence of women

The personnel of the MWC includes some of the most able and successful Muslim women in the city: one ran a multi-million Joseph Rowntree research and action project in the city for ten years; another was the highest ranking Muslim officer in the local authority, a third has just won an award as a local playwright, a fourth sits on the national Christian Muslim Forum and has an M.A. from the prestigious Peace Studies Dept at Bradford University. The keynote address at their 'Daughters of Eve' conference in 2011 was given by Pakistan's pioneer Muslim scholar Professor Riffat Hassan.

The MWC comprises British Muslim women who live in a society which guarantees religious freedom. This means, in the words of Professor Mona Siddiqui – the first professor of Islam and Interreligious Relations at Edinburgh University- that religious affiliation is no longer 'a destiny determined by birth' but for many, the subject of a deliberate choice' (*My Way, a Muslim Woman's Journey*, I.B.Tauris, 2015). These women have inherited the fruits of several generations of women's struggles. They benefit in wider society from a measure of gender equality and some are dismayed when their own communities, for religious and cultural reasons, seem reluctant to embody such norms. So they are looking for a more expansive and emancipatory reading of their tradition.

This is by no means straightforward as is also clear from Professor Siddiqui's autobiography. She worried that gendered segregation has become increasingly common at many social events with *hijab* or *niqab* deemed expressive of 'a seemingly unquestionable piety'. In emphasizing an Islamic otherness, such clothing has 'created a culture of defensiveness and insularity'. Further, with 'Muslim women...so often the victims of injustice and abuse of rights in different parts of the world...to reduce gender relations to the specifics of dress is in my view very unfortunate'.

#### Managing seismic changes within the Muslim world: [2] religious authority questioned & pluralised

Professor Siddiqui is aware of the many reasons for the resurgence of a conservative Islam world-wide, but the one which troubles her most is the ongoing intellectual crisis. She cites the late Algerian scholar, Muhammad Arkoun (d.2010), a lecturer at the Sorbonne in Paris, who wrote the provocative work entitled the *Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, which pointed out that the Muslim world had simply not kept up with intellectual, political and scientific developments of the last few hundred years. This meant that traditional religious leaders immured in their religious institutions, were unable to describe reality accurately, let alone interpret it Islamically (an expanded edition has been translated into English under the title, *Islam: to reform or to subvert?* Saqi Books, 2006).

Disquiet with many aspects of how Islam was taught and practiced precedes colonialism. In the eighteenth century 'a powerful impetus to renew and revive Islam to return to the pure faith of the *salaf*, or the righteous early Muslims' emerges in India, Central Arabia, West Africa and Yemen (Jonathan A.C Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad, The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*, Oneworld Publications, 2014). In India, under the leadership of Shah Wali Allah (d.1762), the movement was not militant and largely confined to education. This was not true of two other leading revivalists, ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) in Central Arabia or Usman Dan Fodio (d.1817) active in what now we call northern Nigeria. Both 'envisioned purifying Islam as a mission that must be carried out by force...[casting themselves] in the exact same position as the Prophet's founding community over a millennium earlier: the lone messengers of monotheism carrying God's word to their pagan surroundings by force of arms' (*Misquoting Muhammad*). Dan Fodio was even declared caliph of the new Islamic State of Sokoto.

The challenges facing the Muslim world were multiplied and deepened with colonialism. Then, Muslim thinkers had, from a position of weakness, to cope with a confrontation with 'a more powerful civilization but also a new stage in human history' (Brown). One of the baneful results of this encounter was the fracturing of Muslim education into two parallel systems: the traditional Islamic 'seminaries' – *dar al 'uloom* – which trained the '*ulama*, Islam's religious scholars who ran mosques and other Islamic institutions, and the western colleges and universities which taught modern disciplines to Muslim elites. The urgency to bridge the gap and ways of doing it was spelled out more than forty years ago in a seminal text – Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity, Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (University of Chicago, 1982). The continuing failure to do so is the rationale of the creation in 2012 of the Centre for Research and Evaluation in Muslim Education (CRÈME) at the Institute of Education, London University.

Mutual hostility between the products of both systems still seems to prevail. This has led to the prevalence of a facile and self-congratulatory, apologetics generated by Islamist and Salafi Muslims across the Muslim world which has squeezed out serious intellectual work and thinned out once rich traditional Islamic religious sciences (see the anguished masterpiece by Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God, Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). One further example will suffice. Professor Ebrahim Moosa, a South African and one of America's leading Islamic academics, was initially trained in a traditional Deobandi 'seminary' in India – the Deobandi franchise is the largest in the UK – recently returned to India to research whether the curriculum of such 'seminaries' had changed in the four decades since he left. He concludes: 'no [seminary] integrates modern science, social science, and the humanities...in conversation with the core traditional curriculum... [The] objection to [such] new disciplines is associated with a fear and loathing of a materialistic West whose knowledge traditions are viewed

as poisonous' (E.Moosa, *What is a Madrasa?* Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

#### Managing seismic changes within the Muslim world: [3] deepening, intra-Muslim sectarianism

In the past sectarianism has often been 'the elephant in the room'; however, it is now being acknowledged by Muslims. In a recent issue of the political monthly, *Prospect*, its arts and book editor Sameer Rahim, in a piece entitled "Who Speaks for Islam in Britain?" draws attention to the fact that Sunni Islam is a de-centralized religion with no official structure of legitimate authority, with most mosques organized around discrete ethnic groups and characterized by 'different sects [which] barely speak to each other' (January, 2016). A whole issue of *Critical Muslim* - 'Sects' - is devoted to a searching exploration of sectarianism in Islam, past and present (April-June 2014). In an excellent blog a Bradford Muslim councilor, in the context of discussing the MWC's proposal, points out that the city's mosque 'leadership is largely men from the first generation...[embodying] the Pakistani or cultural dynamics of the community that has established them...trapped in time and place that belongs somewhere else. In these the management is led by secular clan/caste based politics, religious sectarianism and/or 'dogma'. (See 'Muslim women's mosque', June 1<sup>st</sup> 2015, <http://cllrshabbir.blogspot.co.uk> ).

These observations are amplified by recent comments by Muslim scholars themselves. First, that by the Dean of Cambridge Muslim College, Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad (Tim Winter) in a panel discussion on 'Trust in Religious Leadership' convened by the Woolf Institute in Cambridge, where he shared a platform with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi. Asked about whether the Muslim community might have a figure head equivalent to the Chief Rabbi, he explained that Muslim communities were 'not yet sufficiently mature to accept as a figurehead someone not doctrinally or ethnically of their background' (*Church Times*, 'Christian, Jewish and Muslim panel debate collective mistrust', 20-11-15). Shaykh Shams Ad-Duha Muhammad, a Deobandi scholar & Director of Ebrahim College in Tower Hamlets, in two articles in the college magazine, 'Islamique' - 'Let's Agree to Disagree' - laments the fact that in a global city such as London it is critical for the health and future well-being of the Muslim communities to learn to live well with their differences, yet such is not 'an integral part of the teachings of most groups or teachers'. Good Muslims are 'too busy attacking one another, trying to prove that they have discovered true Islam' that little energy is left to address 'bigger priorities such as their own intellectual, spiritual and moral development...spreading the universal message of Islam...combating problems faced by the community such as criminality, substance abuse, gang culture, and moral degeneration'. An influential Sufi Muslim who has a wonderful website listing most mosques in the UK with ethnic and sectarian background, also includes searing articles on 'sectarianism' which he blames for excluding able converts from mosque management, as well as radicalization (see [www.Muslimsinbritain.org](http://www.Muslimsinbritain.org) ).

#### Managing seismic changes within the Muslim world: [4] a place for women as leaders?

Within many Muslim communities there remains an often deep-seated reluctance to acknowledge the legitimacy of women as leaders or sharing leadership with men, whether in religious or political institutions. One reason, touched on in the Muslim councilor's blog, is the continuing vitality of patriarchal attitudes embedded in imported ethnic 'clan/caste based politics'. A civil war among Bradford's Kashmiri clans enabled the maverick politician Galloway to be elected in 2012 (see L. Baston, *The Bradford Earthquake*, Liverpool, Democratic Audit, 2013). Wherever one ethno-Muslim community dominates, this pattern of politics obtains - in London this is true of Sylheti Bengalis in Tower Hamlets, but not in Hackney and Newham marked by considerable Muslim diversity (see E. Tatari, *Muslims in Local Government*, Leiden: Brill, 2014).

Yet of the 6 new intake of Muslim MPs in 2015 all but one were women, who now comprise 8 of the 13 Muslim MPs at Westminster. As with Naz Shah's victory in Bradford, this had more to do with the Labour party's policy of identifying all women short lists for certain seats than the Kashmiri clans suddenly changing its spots.

Typical of the views of local Deobandi imams is that of the legal specialist, Mufti Saiful Islam, who runs two private

schools in Bradford, as well as a non-residential ‘seminary’ for those with family responsibilities. His views are expressed in his book published in 2010 – *Your Questions Answered* – which has a print run of 5,000. He is asked: ‘Many Muslim sisters travel to far towns and cities and even to different countries for higher education or employment without a *mahram* [a person to whom marriage is not permitted]... Is it permissible for them to travel without a *mahram*?’ The mufti’s answer is unequivocal:

[A] woman is prohibited from travelling alone... even when going... to perform *hajj*. In comparison to this, travelling for higher education or employment are of lower degree of importance... [since] Islam has placed the responsibility of a woman’s maintenance on her father before her marriage and on her husband after her marriage, and *has not allowed women to leave their homes without any urgent need*. Therefore travelling for higher education or for employment purposes without a *mahram* is not permissible (p.244).

The mufti also reminds his readers that one of the signs of the Day of Judgment is that ‘businesses will expand to the extent that the wives will begin to assist their husbands to conduct trade’ (p.284). Such views stand in marked contrast to Qari Asim, a young Sufi-Barelwi scholar who is also a practicing lawyer from Leeds (see [imamsonline.com](http://imamsonline.com)) – he is part of the MWC network and is the one ‘local’ imam who commands their confidence and is invited to speak from their platform.

#### For the peace of the city: the MWC navigates a difficult path forward

The MWC is unapologetically about empowering women but also bridge-building across the deep divides within the Muslim communities. Their centre of excellence is, in part, inspired by the ‘big tent’ of St Ethelburga’s Peace and Reconciliation Centre in London. Members of MWC have long been active in many peacemaking initiatives in the city pioneered by the bishop, police and academics from the Peace Studies Department at Bradford University. These range from developing a city-wide network to mitigate the impact of terrorism, providing leadership training for young leaders drawing on all communities, or contributing to a women’s peace network. Only time will tell whether the MWC can prevent the deepening of rifts – at least locally – which shadowed the birth of the adjectival Jew in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

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