

BRITISH MUSLIMS AND THE BRITISH UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM

Amjad HUSSAIN*

ABSTRACT

This paper first of all introduces the reader to the British Muslims and their history during the last 150 years. It identifies the diversity within the British Muslim community as stemming from various strands such as (i) numerous ethnic communities immigrated from their homelands for economical and political reasons during the last 150 years and settled in Britain as ethnic clustered groups (ii); there were different views of Islam within these ethnic groups that made them even more diverse and so mosques and communities were identified not only according to ethnicity and language but also their interpretation of Islam and (iii) the generation gap created by the difference of identity felt by the younger generation in compared to the older generation which led to an even more diverse interpretation of Islam within the United Kingdom. Thus, you can come across the Barelwi, the Deobandi, the Salafi (various divisions) and numerous other Muslim organisations created after or at the end of the European colonisation. However, even with all of these differences there is a growing trend towards a common British Muslim identity which may be compared to the Turkish or Pakistani Muslim identity. Hence, this article examines the need for the Muslim community of Britain to understand its own background and divisions so as to be able to establish their own independent identity in a Western country.

Keywords: British Muslims, Muslim Minorities, Islam and West.

ÖZET

Britanyalı Müslümanlar ve Britanyalıların İslam Anlayışı

Bu makale, öncelikle İngiliz Müslümanları ve onların yüzelli yıllık geçmişini ortaya koymaktadır. Burada özellikle şu noktalar vurgulanmaktadır. Birincisi, ekonomik ve siyasi nedenlerle son yüzelli yılda anayurtlarını terkedip, çok farklı etnik kökenlerden gelerek buraya göç edip yerleşenler bulunmaktadır. İkinci olarak, bu farklı etnik gruplar içinde farklı İslam yorumları onları daha da çeşitli kılmış ve böylece camiler ve topluluklar sadece ait oldukları etnik köken ve dile göre değil aynı zamanda bu farklı yorumlara göre de ayrılmışlardır. Üçüncü olarak, İngiltere’de genç

* Dr. Amjad Hussain is a lecturer in the School of Theology and Religious Studies, Trinity College, Carmarthen, the University of Wales, UK.

nesil tarafından hissedilen kimlik farklılığı eski nesille olan nesiller arası uçurumu daha da artırmaktadır. Bu şekilde Brelvi ve Deobandi, Selefî ve Sömürge sonrasında oluşmuş çok çeşitli diğer Müslüman organizasyona rastlanabilmektedir. Buna rağmen tüm farklı yaklaşımları ile beraber, Türk ve Pakistan Müslümanlığı kimliği ile karşılaştırılabilecek bir İngiliz İslam kültüründen bahsetmek yaklaşımı giderek artmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu makalede İngiltere’de Müslüman toplululuğun kendi geçmişi ve farklılıklarını anlaması gerekliliği üzerinde Batı’da kendi bağımsız kimliklerini nasıl kuracakları irdelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Britanyalı Müslümanlar, Müslüman Azınlıklar, İslam ve Batı.

In the 21st century, Britain is now not only a country that is recognised to have Protestant, Catholic and Jewish citizens but also a diverse Muslim citizenship. This Muslim community is very diverse not only in its ethnic identities but there are even wider variations in terms of class, education and ideological standpoints. According to Census 2001 there are 1.5 millions to 2.5 million Muslims in Britain today and 80 % of these are of Indian sub-continent descent. Approximately 10,000 of Britain's Muslims are white or African-Caribbean reverts. The rest of the Muslim population comprises of Turks, Arabs, Persians, Africans and many other Muslim ethnicities.¹ There is unfortunately a misconception of the portrayal of the Muslims in the United Kingdom. “Islam is portrayed as monolithic and Muslims as homogenized; diversity and differences are ignored...all Muslims are one and the same.”² However, as stated above, there is a wide diversity within the Muslim community in Britain. This phenomenon of a wide diversity within the Muslim community is due to the history of the Muslims in Britain, which from the outset, exhibited extreme diversity.

The history of Muslims in Britain commenced with the opening of the Suez Canal in the late 1860’s, which brought the first significant number of Muslims into Britain from Yemen and other Middle Eastern countries. Many Muslim sailors, who worked mostly in the engine rooms of British merchant navy ships, settled in port towns such as Cardiff, Liverpool, London, Glasgow and industrial towns such as Sheffield where they found work in the steel industry. During the same period, William H. Quilliam, a lawyer in Liverpool,

¹ Amjad Hussain, “Islamic Education: Why is There a Need for It ?” *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Volume 25, Number 3, December 2004, pp. 317-323.

² Kai Hafez, *Islam and the West in Mass media*, (New Jersey: Hampton Press), 2000.

is popularly recognised to be the first white British to have become Muslim in 1887. He founded the Liverpool mosque and the Muslim Institute and published the weekly Muslim magazine 'The Crescent'. However, it was not until the end of the Second World War that the Muslim presence in the United Kingdom swelled significantly, establishing permanent and highly visible communities.³

This presence after the Second World War of Muslims was constant and the immigration process was through 'waves' of immigrants leaving their native lands for mostly economical reasons. The first wave came from the Indian subcontinent between the 1950's and 1970's. Pakistani and Indian young men ventured to the United Kingdom as a means to raising the standard of living for their families, who remained back in the Indian sub-continent. They strongly believed that their time in the United Kingdom would be temporary and that they would return back home as soon as possible. The regions that these new immigrant came from was the Gujarat region in India and the Punjab region in Pakistan. The largest group in Pakistan emanated from the Mirpur area in Punjab in the 1960's, when the government built *Mangla* dam submerged 250 villages, leading to the mass exodus of families to the United Kingdom. By this time most immigrant from India and Pakistan were not coming alone but with their families. This is the period when one sees the building of many mosques, the corner shop and the establishment of Muslim supplementary school for children in the mosques. The supplementary schools, also known as 'Qur'anic schools' were established during the late 1960's and early 1970's. In these supplementary schools, Islamic education was imparted by the imported Imams to the pupils in the late afternoon after school hours or during the weekends.⁴ When Bangladesh was created in 1971, after the civil war between East & West Pakistan, many Bangladeshis from the Sylhet region also began settling in the United Kingdom. This was the third wave of Muslim emigration into Britain.⁵

A further 'wave' of Muslim immigration happened during the 1970's. In Africa countries such as Uganda and Kenya, after their independence from their colonial masters, experienced the 'Black Pride' Africanisation growth and in Uganda the Muslims of the sub-Indian continent descent were expelled with their white counterparts

³ Steven Vertovec, *Islamophobia and Muslim recognition in Britain*, <http://www.oup.com/pdf/0195148053-01.pdf>, 06/06/2007

⁴ Amjad Hussain, "Saving the Crisis of Islam in Higher Education", *Journal of Beliefs and Values, Special Islam Edition*, Number 2, July 2007, p. 2.

⁵ P. Lewis, *Islamic Britain*, (London: I. B. Tauris,) 1994, p.16.

by Edi Amin. In Kenya and other places in Africa most of the Indian Sub-continent descents decided to leave for Britain before such events began in their own respective countries. During the same time, the Turkish/Greek unrest in Cyprus reached its height and many Cypriot Muslims relocated to Britain. During the 1980s and 1990s further 'waves' of Muslims immigration arrived in Britain mainly as refugees from war torn countries such as Algeria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Bosnia, Iran and Iraq.⁶

Thus, the Muslim communities have traditionally lived as clusters within various British cities, for example almost half of the total number of Muslims in Britain live in or around London and 60% of the largest group of Muslims of Pakistani origins live in the West Midlands, Yorkshire and surrounding areas of Manchester. In Birmingham, the Muslim community now account for 8-10 percent of the city's total population. In London, however, one can also see the pattern of diversity between the Muslim populations clearly. A significant number of Bangladeshis live in East London, whereas the Pakistani settlement there is low. The Turkish/Cypriot live almost exclusively in the inner city areas of East London and there is also a considerable Arab community in certain areas of London.⁷

Even though majority of Muslim in the United Kingdom are Sunnis (90%) and a small minority is Shiite (10%), there are many divisions to be found within the British Sunni community. Although, the diversity of the Muslim population in Britain may be easily understood on the grounds of the varying countries and perhaps cultures and language of origin, the depth and breath of divergence between various groups runs at a much deeper level. Primarily, there are now Muslims of all origins (Pakistani, Bangladesh, Indian, Turk, Arab etc.) who are British born and identify themselves as British Pakistani or British Turk. This in itself is a very compact definition filled with diversity but it is the difference of interpretation within the Islamic tradition that makes British Muslims the least monolithic society. It is true that in the past and still in the present, especially with regards to the older Muslim generation and the recent Muslim immigrants to Britain, the dividing line between communities was and is based on ethnic identity, language and culture. However, even in these ethnic communities there have always been divisions within the community, for example in Indo-Pakistani communities there is the Barelwi tradition, based on popular Indian folk Islam and the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Nielson, *Muslims in Western Europe*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 1995, pp.42-45.

Deobandi tradition which counteracts this kind of folk Islam but at the same time creates its own cultural Islam. These kinds of old sectarian division within communities can be seen in all of the various Muslim ethnic groups that have come to Britain, since they have brought these with them from their own respective countries.⁸

However, what makes the picture even more muddier is the different interpretation of Islam due not only to the cultural gap but as well the generation gap. Thus, at this point we have many second and third generation Muslims of all ethnicities, including native white and Black West-Indians, which seem to have more in common with each other due not only to their British identity, the English language but as well their Muslim identity. This is due to generational differences according to Akbar S. Ahmed, who describes the young Muslims of all ethnic background as citizens who do not want to be seen as meek and invisible immigrants of past generations but want to assert themselves in society.⁹ The economical status amongst them has also changed the status of British Muslims, as they are better educated than their parents and grandparents, have university places, have middle-class jobs such being a lawyer, doctor, teacher etceteras, are involved in music and media and all of this is making them search for a British Muslim identity. There is also a wide difference between those Muslims who 'practice' their religion and those who do not, but are still passively Muslim by accepting the articles of faith. For those who are looking to 'practice' their religion it is their parent's culture that time to time becomes the big obstacle. There are certain cultural traits that bring considerable dilemmas in the lives of British born Muslims, such as the acceptance of forced arranged marriages, an identification of an ethnic culture with Islam, which reinforces the suspicions of the West that Islam is alien to their culture, Friday sermons are still in many mosques carried out in the ethnic languages, which the British born Muslims may not comprehend.¹⁰

It has been argued that most Muslim parents of the first and second generation born in the United Kingdom were not educated in Islam themselves but their belief structures were highly influenced from their cultures. "The parents' belief structure may correspond to the life experiences of those living in rural Pakistan or India, thus they do not accord with the life experiences of those who have been born

⁸ P. Lewis, *Islamic Britain*, (New York: I. B. Tauris), 2002, p.200.

⁹ Akbar s. Ahmed, *Islam Today*, (London: I. B. Tauris), 2001, p.172.

¹⁰ P. Lewis, *Islamic Britain*, (New York: I. B. Tauris), 2002, pp.197-198.

and raised in the west.”¹¹ Thus, the British Muslim finds herself or himself grappling with his or her ethnic culture to comprehend their Islamic identity; this becomes even more complicated when a British white or West Indian Muslim tries to fit into one of the numerous ethnic Muslim identities. As P. Lewis argues,

“It is a confusing time to be young, Muslim and British....Muslim cries for unity, and the renewal of an Islamic identity have exposed disunity and the fractured intellectual tradition of a religion transported from several different countries”¹²

There are number of academic scholars who have written with regards to trying to categories British Muslims groups or tendencies. Muhammad S. Raza does this by categorising British Muslims into three groups: The ‘cultural’ Muslim, who maintains Islam purely as an expression or identifying element of culture or ethnicity; the ‘secular’ Muslim, who no longer practises the religion but may still passively believe in the articles of faith and the ‘practising’ Muslim for whom the expression of Islam encompasses every facet of life.¹³ This is a good basic categorization to commence with but the main critique of this classification must be that it is over-simplistic and very rigid for such a diverse society as the British Muslim community. Daniel Brown, on the other hand, suggests five approaches that Muslims take in British society: These are ‘adoptionism’, whose followers, arguably either embrace or are seduced by modernity; ‘revivalism’, which reacts violently against modernity, ‘modernism’ which argues that there needs to be intellectual and social development of the faith since it has been impeded and distorted by a failure to recognise general and specific principles in the Qur’an, ‘conservativism’ based on the traditional *ulama*’s views of Islam and ‘personalism’ which relates specifically to Sufi tradition.¹⁴ The critique of Brown’s categorisation is that he first of all perceives the ‘*ulama*’ to be a group which he does not identify and argues that they try their best to ignore the modern world, secondly he generalises the Sufi tradition to be one of ‘retreat’ and personal spirituality whereas Sufi orders have been known to be very socially active within Muslim society.

Tariq Ramadan is another scholar that has tries to identify the different tendencies of Muslim in the Western world. He does

¹¹ S. Gilliat, *Perspectives on the Religious Identity of Muslims in Britain*, (PhD thesis, University of Wales, Lampeter), 1997, p.173.

¹² P. Lewis, *Islamic Britain*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994), p.13.

¹³ Raza, Muhammad S., *Islam in Britain: Past, Present and the Future*, (London: Volcano Press), 1991, pp.10-40.

¹⁴ D. Brown, *Islam*, (Oxford: Blackwell), 2004, p.207.

however, not include Muslims who are what Raza called ‘cultural’ or those he called ‘secular’. His tendencies only relate to those Muslims for whom Islam is the pivotal reference point in their reasoning and actions. For example ‘scholastic traditionalism’ is a tendency which appears attractive to majority of Muslims since it means to follow the four schools of law and do not accept any new textual or legal interpretation. However, this tendency makes one entrenched in one position, which leads to static traditionalism. This appears widely in Indo-Pakistani and traditional ethnic groups who are as well inclined towards ethnic culture due to this tendency. The second tendency is ‘Salafi literalism’ which is similar to the ‘scholastic traditionalism’ but differs in the sense that the Muslims of this tendency do not follow the four schools of law. This tendency is popular with many Muslims who feel strongly against ethnic cultural influence on Islam. The third tendency is that of ‘Salafi Reformers’ who seek ‘interpretive discussion’ of texts, recognising western constitutional structures. This tendency according to Ramadan influences a lot of the different Muslim associations in the United Kingdom. The extreme tendency of ‘political literalist Salafism’ fuses the social and political elements-leading towards a opposition to the Western society and on the other side is the ‘liberal/rational’ tendency which is derived from Western thought and seek assimilation of Muslims into the Western society. Both of the last tendencies have but a few Muslim followers in the United Kingdom.¹⁵ However, it could be strongly argued that the tendencies of British Muslims are not as black and white as Ramadan has pictured them since many of the different tendencies could be found within the same Muslim groups in Britain, such the ‘*Deobandi*’ and ‘*Tablighi Jamaat*’.

In conclusion, it could be strongly argued that there is such a concept as the British Muslim in Britain; however it can also be seen above that there are numerous and varied organised expressions or understandings of Islam in the United Kingdom. This diversity appears not only from ‘denominational’ divides such as Sunni or Shiite, or sectarian differences such as ‘Barelwi’ and ‘Deobandi’ but also from ethnicity, encompassing culture and language. This diversity is further exacerbated by ‘generational’ differences regarding a newly evolving search for a new understanding of Islam amongst the new generations of British Muslims. According to Hachinebioglu, British Muslims seem to have at this point the potential to create their own Muslim identity, “Islam in Britain and British Muslims especially with

¹⁵ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2005, pp.24-28.

the help of converts will produce religious, cultural and social contributions”¹⁶ As a consequence; there are now numerous Muslim identities within Britain due to the social-historical background of the British Muslim. However, gradually there are emergent signs of at least a growing common identity for the British Muslim, in comparison to the common identity of the Turkish or Pakistani Muslim.

Akbar S. Ahmed eloquently describes this new discovery of the British Muslim, “in a crucial sense they are staring from the beginning...rejecting what their fathers stood for and what their elders spoke of...Each generation must now rediscover Islam for itself”¹⁷

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¹⁶ Ismail Hacinebioglu, “İngiltere’de İslam ve İngiliz Muselmanlığı”, *SOBE*, 2006/3, p.55

¹⁷ Akbar s. Ahmed, *Islam Today*, (London: I. B. Tauris), 2001, p.234.