Western Europe

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Muslims in Britain: Entering the Mainstream?

In August 1999, on the day that eight British Muslims from Birmingham were convicted in Yemen for allegedly planning a terrorist campaign, the BBC's prestigious news programme – 'Newsnight' – debated the issues raised. The presenter spoke to four people in the studio: a defence lawyer, a relative of one of the accused, a journalist and the secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB).

The four guests on the programme were Muslims. Three were confident, articulate young men with regional British accents. The MCB official located the problem in terms of disproportionately high levels of unemployment and educational underachievement among sections of the community; but was careful to leave open the question of their guilt. The relative of one of the accused (a PhD student) insisted on the innocence of the men and rehearsed a familiar litany of government inactivity because of prejudice and 'Islamophobia'. The defence lawyer refused to present this as a Muslim issue at all, but rather simply focused on the fact that young Britons had been tortured to extract false confessions thereby rendering the whole legal procedure null and void.

The journalist argued that whatever the rights and wrongs of this particular case, it pointed to a continuing failure of the religious leadership to connect with the world of young British Muslims. This meant that a not inconsiderable number were attracted to the ranting of maverick militants such as Abu Hamza al-Masri, the self-styled Egyptian sheikh, whose son and godson were among the accused Britons. Some vulnerable youngsters could find themselves entrapped by the glamorized jihad rhetoric of such radical groups.

'Newsnight' indicates how far Muslim communities have come in the decade since *The Satanic Verses* affair. Then, the communities felt marginalized from British civic and public life with few articulate spokesmen capable of translating anger into argument. The BBC now had little difficulty in finding a range of able British Muslim professionals to debate the issues themselves. Further, with the birth of the MCB in November 1997, the Muslim communities have the best approximation yet to a representative body.

Seeking the common good

The MCB chose, for its inaugural convention and accompanying glossy literature, the slogan *Seeking the Common Good*, which deliberately echoed an influential document published a year earlier by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales – *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching* – intended to influence the national debate in the run up to Britain's 1997 General Election. The MCB has also learned from the influential Jewish Board of Deputies, the respected representative body for Jewish affairs in Britain, the need to enlist the support of as wide a range as possible of Muslim organizations and individual professionals and academics. In its style, ethos, and willingness to relate to government and public bodies, the MCB has deliberately distanced itself from the controversial and provocative self-styled Muslim Parliament, child of the late Kalim Siddiqui.

Reshaping public discourse

It was clear from the television discussion that the term 'Islamophobia' has now entered public discourse. The term was popularized by an influential report – *Islamophobia, a Challenge to Us All* – published in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust. Until this inquiry, race relations in Britain had routinely ignored 'religion' as an important component in the identity and self-understanding of minority communities. The commission indicated that for many in the minority communities to demean and vilify 'Islam' was as exclusionary as racism and sapped their confidence to engage confidently with wider society.

The present government has responded positively to many of its recommendations. While Muslims have long been involved in local politics with a handful appointed as Lord Mayors, it was only in 1997 that the first Muslim Member of Parliament (Labour) was elected from the South Asian communities who comprise 75 % of Britain's 1.4 million Muslims. The government also appointed three Muslim peers to the House of Lords; the ten year struggle to enjoy the same right to state-funded schools as Christians and Jews was won in 1998; the government agreed to include a religious affiliation question in the 2001 census when it was clear that Christian and Jewish organizations supported this Muslim demand. The Home Office has latterly funded a research project to determine the extent of religious discrimination in Britain. While some of these measures are more symbolic than substantive, they cumulatively suggest that British Muslims do not have to render invisible their Muslim identity if they are to participate in public life. Finally, the Prime Minister's active advocacy of military intervention to support the Kosovars has begun to challenge the widely held Muslim view that British foreign policy is necessarily anti-Muslim.

The search for religious guidance

A cursory reading of Muslim publications in Britain indicates that the adequacy of the training of imams remains a continuing source of anxiety and debate. Many continue to be invited from South Asia and most lack the linguistic and cultural skills to connect with young British Muslims. However, one South Asian tradition – the Deobandis – now has a network of over a dozen *madaris* in Britain.

Recently a group of imams from within this tradition produced a series of pamphlets for Muslims in Bradford. These pamphlets offer an unvarnished, yet selective picture of Muslim street culture: drug taking, 'lavish wedding parties' whereby 'the sunnah of the prophet-[is] replaced with ridiculous Hindu and other *kafir* traditions'; neglect and abuse of wives; indifference to Islamic education of children; an increase in divorce; and a penchant for playing loud music from 'obscene films', even when passing mosques. What is significant is that the imams realize that to challenge such behaviour they have got to communicate in English and that it is not enough to simply rehearse Islamic prohibitions, but that reasons have to be given (e.g., the pamphlet criticizing gambling cites material produced by the organization Gamblers Anonymous).

Further, because the products of such *madaris* are too numerous to provide jobs in local mosques, there is the beginning of a tentative engagement with mainstream educational institutions. In 1998 the first group of such imams joined a BA course for primary teachers in Birmingham. If such a venture proves successful this could have a major impact on the ethos and curriculum of the *madaris* themselves bridging the chasm that now exists between school and mosque.

Three other developments are worthy of mention. The Islamic Foundation in Leicester has an Inter-Faith Unit which produces the informative *Encounters, Journal of Inter-Cultural Perspectives*. One of its staff has spent two years in Rome with the Dominicans studying Catholic theology before studying Protestant theology at a British university, where he is now working on a PhD in which he is developing a Qur'anic hermeneutics in dialogue with Christian hermeneutic developments. Here, then, a Muslim institute is laying the foundations for an Islamically serious encounter with religious pluralism.

Islamic studies are beginning to multiply in British universities with Muslims beginning to contribute to all branches of Islamic scholarship. As I write this I have in front of me an introductory work on the Qur'an written for British Muslims and non-Muslims, another scholarly work on the origins of Islamic law, some splendid translations of works by al-Ghazzali, an innovative article 'Women's Human Rights in Islam: towards a theoretical framework' and an insightful study of the radical movement Hizb al-Tahrir. While all of these scholars are working in Britain, their origins are from across the Muslim world, whether Egypt, Palestine, Pakistan, or Britain.

Because Britain is home to Muslims from all over the world, something of the intellectual excitement generated by this diversity and debate can be overheard in the English-speaking Muslim press which has also emerged in the last ten years, notably *Q-News*. Further, since English is now the second language of the *umma,* innovative developments in Islamic thought developed in Britain could have an impact on debates across the Muslim world.

Managing multiple identities

So far, the focus of this report has been – self-consciously – Islamic groups in Britain. However, the mass of Muslim youth in the larger urban conurbations, whether East London, Birmingham or Bradford, have minimal involvement with such groups. Muslims usually guess that no more than 10 % are involved, whether in local cities or on university campuses.

A recent publication 'Community flashpoints and young British Muslims' (1999), edited by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, rehearsed the findings of three seminars organized by the prestigious Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). The seminars' findings make for sober reading: sections of 'Asian' youth, excluded from wider society and by internal community patriarchies, often dissipated their energies in inter-group hatreds and prejudices. Black fighting Asian, Sikh youth fighting Muslims or radical Hindu groups, one Muslim sect fighting another. While there is a confident and informed Islamic identity emerging among some British Muslims, there is also a reactive and strident 'Islamic' identity emerging among many young Muslims in inner city areas, where most continue to live. The research of Dr Yunas Samad suggests that this had more to do with identity politics than with Islam.

Clearly, an understanding of developments within Britain's Muslim communities requires us to be alert to the specificities of the national and local situations, the ethos within the proliferation of transnational groups, whether rejectionist, isolationist or engaged, as well as the extent to which geopolitical rivalries – national, ideological and sectarian – impact on the British scene. What is clear from the British experience is that Muslims are beginning a serious dialogue with Christians and Jews.

Zygmunt Bauman has coined the useful term 'glocalization' which reminds us that globalization can often reinforce local and particular, as well as transnational identities. Across Britain in Muslim communities originally from Pakistan, local elections are increasingly contested by rival Kashmiri *biradaris* (clans). One conclusion is clear: those involved in researching and debating these issues will increasingly include British Muslims themselves. ✦

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