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British Muslims

Media Guide

Ehsan Masood

Ehsan Masood

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Introduction

'We live in a world where dialogue is the only way progress can be made, a world where different belief systems have to coexist. We cannot presume that everyone will share our views.' These words were addressed mainly to Muslims, but also to anyone else with the power of reasoning, by a Muslim woman in a letter to the *New Statesman* at the height of the cartoons affair. They make a very good epigraph to this book.

This publication gives an account of Britons who feel themselves to be the target of antagonism. A joint enterprise of the British Council and a number of Muslim organisations, the book is written in the belief that much hostility and negativity is founded in, and fostered by, misunderstanding. It is neither paranoid nor rose-tinted. It does not presume that agreement in all things is possible; but it does work on the basis that disagreement – as long as it is shaped by sound knowledge rather than prejudice – can be useful, constructive, civilised and civilising for the whole of our society.

Those in Britain and around the world who write about this country and its people sometimes need reminding that 'we' include almost two million Muslims. This is the basis of a new sense of ourselves – even perhaps a much-debated new sense of 'Britishness' – and it is important to ensure that it includes all of us.

As the cartoons arguments and consequent tragedies have unfolded in recent weeks, we have seen how brittle the inclusiveness of European societies can be, and how superficial the understanding of the rights and responsibilities of freedom. But we have also been reminded that those of us who are Muslims hold as many different opinions as do those of us who are not.

In sending this book out into the world, therefore, I reflect that we are a nation that has been long changed and much influenced by migration, and often for the better. At our best, we offer the world a model of a free and open society in which we believe passionately, a society in which rights are defended and promoted, but in which restraint is also prized.

I have watched, sometimes with apprehension, the way Britain has handled the cartoons issue. But, so far, I have also felt a growing sense that – however ill-considered the reactions have been in some cases – there is cause for pride in the temperate responses and growing understanding evident across the breadth of our society. That is not an excuse for complacency or the result of self-righteousness. Both would be dangerous and foolish. It is the product of practical evidence.

I remember with measured optimism a comment made at a British Council meeting a year or two ago, by a Muslim participant: 'Some of the most intelligent and constructive debate between Muslims anywhere in the world takes place in London,' he said. 'And,' he emphasised, 'that is a British virtue.' So it is. And so must it continue and flourish.

Rt Hon. Lord Kinnock of Bedwellty
Chair, British Council

Preface

This book began with a conversation almost three years ago, at the Muslim College. The two of us sat with its principal, Dr Zaki Badawi, and talked about the need for clear, dispassionate explanation of who, in all their variety, British Muslims are, what they care about and what they do. That conversation was shaped by 9/11 and reactions to it among Muslims and non-Muslims; and the process of writing this book has been punctuated by war, bombings and, most recently, the confrontations that began with the publication of caricatures of the Prophet by a Danish newspaper.

Sadly, as we go to press, Dr Badawi is no longer with us to see the book that he helped inspire, having died in January 2006 at the age of 83. It is more necessary than ever, and it carries with it the clear message that he, and the Muslim organisations that are involved in the project, and the British Council, all felt to be central: that we need to understand each other better, to dispel as much as we possibly can the fog of false assumptions, both innocent and malicious, which hang over relationships between 'mainstream Britain' and its Muslim minorities. Dr Badawi dedicated much of his life's work towards establishing dialogue and challenging misconceptions. Our hope is that this publication will prove to be one of many legacies to his work, and will encourage those writing about Islam and Muslims to appreciate their unique position as communicators.

This book addresses those who write, and speak, about British Muslims, whether in our own country or abroad. The editorial process has thrown up many issues, some predictable, some surprising, some tricky – but all of them constructive. We ourselves feel that we understand better than at the beginning of the project how our partners think, what they hope for and what they fear. Mutual knowledge and friendship has paid dividends in a book that neither of us could have published, in this form, without the other.

It is particularly appropriate that we share this short preface, and speak in the first person plural: the fears, insecurities and misunderstandings of recent years can be addressed only by a new and more generous understanding of what we mean when we use the word 'us' and by our common desire for a better and brighter future. And so we, its two publishers, commend this book to its readers.

Martin Rose
Director, Counterpoint
British Council

Dr Anas Al-Shaikh Ali
Chair, Association of Muslim Social Scientists

Chapter 1
Britain's Muslims: an overview

The British Museum in London contains an 8th-century gold coin minted by King Offa of Mercia. The coin is unusual because it contains Arabic writing. On one side it says: 'There is no deity but God, without partners.' On the reverse it reads: 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God.' This inscription is what is called the *shahadah*, the first 'pillar of Islam'.

Little is known about why Offa chose to inscribe a coin with Arabic text, but the coin represents one of the earliest known connections between Islam and Britain. There are other links, too, from the past, including those made through the Crusades, a series of military campaigns to recapture Jerusalem from Muslim rule between the 11th and 13th centuries.

Other contact, during the Middle Ages, came through learning and the transfer of knowledge from the Middle East to Europe, often through the translation into Latin of Arabic scientific and medical manuscripts. Diplomacy and trade deepened contacts and, in the 17th century, the universities of Cambridge and Oxford established chairs in Arabic.

The British Empire contained very large numbers of Muslims. Lord Salisbury, the Victorian Prime Minister, once commented that Britain was the greatest Muslim power on earth. Small but growing numbers of Muslims came to Britain. In the 19th century Muslim seamen from Yemen settled in small communities in Liverpool and Cardiff, but it wasn't until the late 1950s that significant numbers of Muslims began to come to Britain to make up for the post-war shortage of man power in British manufacturing industry, healthcare, education and transport.

Islam in Britain today

According to the 2001 census, there are now at least 1.6 million Muslims in Britain. By most estimates, that figure today is probably closer to two million.

The census tells us that most Muslims live in and around London. They number some 600,000 and speak more than 50 languages. In all, 38 per cent of all British Muslims live in the capital. Ten London boroughs have Muslim populations that exceed 20,000. The highest density is in Tower Hamlets on the edge of the City of London, which is home to 70,000 Muslims, mostly of Bangladeshi origin.

Elsewhere in the UK, Pakistanis are predominant among Birmingham's 140,000 Muslims and among the 75,000 who live in Bradford. Blackburn, Burnley, Dewsbury, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester and Oldham are also home to significant numbers of Muslims.

According to the census, one million Muslims in Britain are of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian origin. The majority are Sunni – though there are no accurate figures for the proportion of Sunni and Shi'a. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Nigeria and Algeria continue to provide a steady source of migrants, but Britain's newer Muslim citizens also come from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo and Somalia – essentially, countries where there has been political conflict in recent years. There are 180,000 Muslims who describe themselves as of white origin, of whom 63,000 describe themselves as white-British.

Among the 660,000 Muslims from Pakistan, the overwhelming majority of the first generation of migrants came from rural parts of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir (particularly a district called Mirpur, close to the capital, Islamabad). They came to Britain mainly to work in the textile industry. Many of their original homes are places that even today still lack much of the infrastructure of modern life, such as uninterrupted electricity, running water, functioning schools, adequate health care and adequate employment. There are currently estimated to be about 14,200 converts to Islam, slightly under one per cent of the British total.

In education and employment, Muslims are among the least successful of minority groups. Compared with the population as a whole, Muslims are three times more likely to be unemployed (15 per cent against five per cent) and much more likely to live in deprived areas (15 per cent of Muslims live in the ten most deprived districts against 4.4 per cent of the population as a whole). In more than 60 per cent of Muslim households, the main breadwinner is on a low income.

The overall performance of Muslim children in schools is below the national average, but it is improving, and girls are outperforming boys. One indication of the state of things to come is that one in two Muslims now enters further or higher education, against 38 per cent for the white population. That said this is lower than the rates for children of Indian and black-African households. Also, according to the Department for Work and Pensions, 76 per cent of Muslim graduates of working age are in jobs, compared with the overall graduate employment rate of 87 per cent.

It is fair to say, however, that the primary motivation for most migrants to Britain was betterment of their economic situation and that for most there have been tangible benefits over the circumstances they left. Their contribution to the culture, politics and infrastructure of Britain is significant and growing. At the same time the experience of embedding Islam in Britain is clearly changing Britain; but it is also changing Britain's Muslims.

The mosque is Islam's place of worship and Britain now has at least 1,600 mosques. Britain is also the base for an expanding English language Muslim media. The three British Muslim charities, Muslim Aid, Islamic Relief and Muslim Hands, are major players in international development. Moreover, London is one of a handful of global centres (and the only one in a non-Muslim country) for the $250 billion Islamic finance industry. There are also at least 130 schools operated by Muslim charitable trusts – many of which, however, are quite poorly resourced.

The Houses of Parliament have four Muslim MPs and several Muslim members of the House of Lords. Britain has some 200 Muslim local councillors of all political persuasions. Five Muslim schools have access to state funds. Younger Muslims are joining the senior ranks of the civil service, and Muslims are QCs, stars of business, the media and sport, or even simply famous for no other reason than being famous.

As with any community, Britain's Muslims also have their fair share of challenges. For example, South Asian households (particularly Bangladeshi and Pakistani ones) can be authoritarian, seeing rights and obligations to the family as more important than individual concerns. The normal tensions that exist between parents and children can be made worse by differences in language (English is spoken by most Muslim children as a first language), as well as differences in attitudes to marital choice. The concerns of younger Muslims have led to the setting up of two national helplines. The newest of these is the Muslim Youth Helpline, based in London.

Diversity in a single faith

In general there are excellent relations between Britain's various Muslim communities. Most Muslims in Britain belong to Islam's majority Sunni branch, though accurate figures are not available for the proportion of Sunnis to Shi'as. There are also a small number of Muslims of the Isma'ili school, a branch of Shi'ism, which is headed by the Aga Khan. On the whole, both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims follow one of the five schools of legal thinking – the Hanbali, the Maliki, the Shafa'i, the Hanafi and the Ja'afari – all of which originated in the Middle East.

There are also other minority groups represented in Britain, descended from Muslims, but which Sunni and Shi'a sects regard as not being Muslim. They include the Ahmadis of South Asia, the Druze of Lebanon and the Alawis from Syria.

Muslims originating from Pakistan overwhelmingly belong to a branch of Sunni Islam called Ahl As-Sunnah wal-Jama'at. The founder of this branch was Ahmed Raza Khan, a prominent Muslim scholar, preacher and anti-colonialist, who was born in the district of Bareilly in the north of India in 1856. Because of the connection with Bareilly, Khan's followers became known as 'Barelwis', though this is a label that they themselves do not like to use, and associate with their opponents.

The Ahl As-Sunnah school is strong on spirituality and also helped give rise to South Asia's *Qawalli* music. Its followers tend to be members of Sufi orders, whose leaders often trace their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad. In Britain, Muslims of this school are represented by the recently formed British Muslim Forum, a federation of 300 mosques and Muslim community institutions.

Other South Asian Muslims in Britain belong to what is called the Deobandi school, which for many years stood in opposition to the Ahl As-Sunnah school. The Deobandi school takes its name from an influential Islamic seminary in Deoband, north India, established in 1867 and which still exists today. At its core is a desire to uphold moral values in society.

Many of the 400 affiliates of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) who represent religious organisations tend to be sympathetic to the Deobandi school. The MCB does, however, include some members from Ahl As-Sunnah and from Shi'a organisations. Of the 22 Islamic seminaries in Britain, most follow variants of the Deobandi school.

The Jama'at Tabligh (Party of Preachers), the world's largest Muslim evangelical organisation, is also sympathetic to the Deobandi school, though it has its own theological reference points. Three million people attend its annual three-day gathering held in Bangladesh. The organisation's European headquarters is based in a large mosque complex known as the 'Markaz' in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire.

Engaging Britain

Until the late 1990s, many Muslim community institutions and voluntary groups chose to function independently of wider Britain. There were good reasons for this: for example, they experienced little interest from public, private and charitable organisations in the work they did, and many, in turn, did not feel the need to benchmark their experience with that of other groups.

Partnership projects between Muslims and non-Muslims began to emerge after the election of 1997, and have been accelerated following the events of 9/11 and the London bombs of 7 July 2005. Following the latter, the government invited 100 influential Muslims to set up seven working groups called Preventing Extremism Together, and asked for recommendations through which mutual concerns could be met.

Some joint activities between Muslims and non-Muslims are designed to portray Islam from the perspective of Muslims. They include Islam Awareness Week, a national festival of activities organised principally by the Islamic Society of Britain, but which has the support of the government. Also in this category is *The Muslim News* Awards for Excellence, an annual event that seeks to raise the profile of Muslim role models. The awards are backed by government departments, industry and other institutions such as the police service.

A second category of engagement is that in which Britain's Muslims are making a conscious and organised contribution to wider Britain. Perhaps the most prominent of these has been the involvement of the Muslim Association of Britain in the Stop the War coalition. This involvement led directly to the setting up of the Respect Coalition, a left-wing political party that has strong Muslim representation, and which won its first parliamentary seat at the 2005 General Election.

Meanwhile, in 2005 Britain's Muslim charities enthusiastically took part in Make Poverty History, a campaign in which Britain's main development charities lobbied the government to increase the amount of money given as foreign aid and to wipe out the debt that poor countries owe to the UK.

Britain's Muslim charities were also prominent in collecting funds and distributing assistance to communities hit by the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami, and the earthquake that hit Kashmir in 2005 – both in partnership with mainstream UK and international charities.

Another significant development was the emergence of London as one of a handful of centres for the development of the $250 billion Islamic finance industry. Muslims from Britain are at the forefront of this field, marrying centuries-old financial principles with the design of innovative products in savings, investment and home-buying that can be as attractive to non-Muslims as they are to Muslims.

The year 2006 began with scenes that many non-Muslims have seen frequently on their screens: images of Muslims protesting over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were published in Denmark and later in other EU countries. One very significant reason that Muslims have taken offence at the cartoons is their portrayal of the Prophet as a terrorist.

There is a strong sense, and not only among Muslims, that the repeated publication of these cartoons has had a strong element of bullying to it. But there is also a feeling that those Muslims who have reacted violently and threateningly have played into their antagonists' hands.

The consensus among Muslims is that Islam does not allow images of the Prophet, yet this does not detract from the fact that culture, music, humour and entertainment have a place and a long history in Islam.

Islam continues to inspire art and culture to high standards, and in Britain this is taking on a particularly British flavour. Examples of this will be on display in Britain during 2006 at two national events: the Festival of Muslim Cultures which is a collaboration of Muslim groups and Britain's major arts organisations. Together, they plan to mount exhibitions, talks and conferences that showcase art and culture from or about Muslims. A second initiative, Islam Expo, a collaboration between the office of the Mayor of London and the Muslim Association of Britain, will also take place in London in 2006.

Islam, Islamic, Islamist

How do you describe terrorism committed in the name of religion? Why is a 'Muslim fanatic' to be feared, but a 'Muslim football fanatic' celebrated? And what, if anything, is the meaning of a 'fundamentalist'?

Living languages constantly acquire new words and phrases, often through the influence of words from other languages and cultures. The embedding of Islam in Western countries now means that, in English at least, words such as 'hijab', 'imam' and 'shari'ah' among several others, are often no longer italicised, a sign that editors, writers and readers do not regard them as foreign.

Why then is there disagreement between Muslims and many in the media on the use of Islam-related words and phrases in English? Why do phrases such as 'Islamic terrorist' (used to describe Osama Bin Laden) or distinctions such as 'fundamentalist Muslim', 'radical Muslim', and 'moderate Muslim' cause concern?

Many Muslim community organisations believe that such descriptions help to form an impression among readers and viewers that Muslims are violent, that most Muslims support violence, or that Muslims are 'immoderate'. Many also believe that phrases such as 'Islamic terrorist' are a contradiction because they imply that violence is supported in the Islamic faith.

Words such as 'fundamentalist' in fact mean something very different when retranslated from English into languages that are spoken in predominantly Muslim countries, such as Arabic. To most of the world's Muslims, a fundamentalist is simply someone who carries out the requirements of Islam, such as regular prayers, fasting, hospitality to visitors and helping to alleviate poverty.

Before the 9/11 attacks on the USA, the Muslim Council of Britain brought together journalists and executives from the print and broadcast media. The idea was to discuss how Islam and Muslims are described in the media, to listen to different perspectives on the issue, and to find words and phrases that are sharper and more precise in describing an event or a set of beliefs.

The group, however, did not continue after 9/11 in part because those who carried out the 9/11 (and subsequent) attacks did so out of what they considered to be an Islamic duty. This appropriation of Islam has made the vital dialogue over how Muslims are described and represented, a good deal more difficult.

Many journalists now use the word 'Islamist', instead of 'Islamic' to refer to a person or organisation committing terrorism in the name of faith. Use of the word Islamist is not universally agreed upon because it is also used (by foreign correspondents and researchers) to describe political movements rooted in an understanding of Islam.

Perhaps one clue to what lies in the future comes from a reading of the Muslim media in the UK and abroad. If there is a consensus, it is that a choice of word or phrase depends entirely on the perspective of the publication, and the message its writers and editors want to convey.

The British Muslim magazine *Q News*, for example has used 'Islamic terrorism' to describe acts of violence claimed to be committed in the name of Islam. Similarly, more secular-leaning English language newspapers and magazines in the Muslim world use phrases such as 'Islamist parties' or 'right-wing Muslims' when describing Islam in politics. But publications such as *www.islamonline.net* that are more sympathetic to Islam in politics like to use the phrase 'religious parties'. Islam Channel's editors use 'human bombs' to describe what are otherwise known as 'suicide bombers'.

In reporting the controversy over the Danish cartoons, most English newspapers in Muslim countries have preferred to use the word 'caricatures', instead of 'cartoons' on the grounds that 'caricature' better describes images that they feel are intended to mock, rather than amuse.

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www.dwp.gov.uk

National census data on religion can be found at
www.statistics.gov.uk

Chapter 2
Minarets from the motorway

There are at least 1,600 mosques in Britain.
Many reflect the priorities of first generation
Muslim migrants, but others are embracing change.

The mosque (*masjid* in Arabic) is Islam's place of prayer. Often characterised by a dome and one or more minarets, many new mosques began to appear in Britain shortly after the migration of significant numbers of Muslims in the late 1950s.

Mosques were among the first British-Muslim registered charities and were built with funds collected locally, as well as from governments, philanthropic foundations and wealthy individuals in Muslim countries.

As in much of the Muslim world (particularly in South Asia and Arabic-speaking countries), the main function of a mosque in the UK is to provide space for congregational prayers for men and women. An increasing number, however, are developing into multifunction community centres, providing educational and social, in addition to religious activities. A similar trend is taking place among mosques in the United States.

Most UK cities have at least one large, purpose-built mosque, complete with an expansive prayer hall, library and after-school classes for children, known in this context as madrassas (madrassa is also used to describe Islamic seminaries in the UK and abroad). The majority, however, are smaller, built from detached and semi-detached houses, converted warehouses, flats, basements, even former churches. If a mosque is small, Muslims will rent room-space from public libraries, school halls and other large spaces to get together for prayers on Fridays and other important festivals.

First mosques

The first British mosques are believed to have been built in the late 1800s in Cardiff and Liverpool, which became home to small communities of Muslim merchant seafaring families who came to Britain from Somalia and Yemen. The English convert to Islam, William Abdullah Quilliam, established one early British mosque in 1887 on Mount Vernon Street in Liverpool. After a donation of £2,500 from the Sultan of Afghanistan in 1889, he also established an Islamic institute in Brougham Terrace with room for 100 Muslims to pray there.

The institute was an early example of the potential of the mosque to become a centre for learning, and an institution that would serve all communities in addition to Muslims. The Friday prayer sermons were in English and in Arabic and the institute offered courses in arts, science and law. A weekly debating and literary society attracted many non-Muslims who also participated in prayers, hymns and sermons on Sundays. A printing press in the basement churned out copies of a newspaper, *The Crescent Weekly* as well as a monthly journal, which was later distributed to more than 20 countries.

In 1940 the UK government allocated £100,000 to buy a site for the first purpose-built mosque in London, in exchange for space to build an Anglican cathedral in Egypt – Egypt has many Orthodox Coptic churches. The idea for such a mosque had initially been suggested in 1916 by Lord Headley, a prominent convert to Islam, who had begun a campaign for a state-funded mosque to be built in memory of Muslim soldiers who had died fighting for Britain in World War I. The mosque was eventually built in 1944 and occupied more than two acres of land at Hanover Gate in Regent's Park, which had been donated by King George VI.

In 1977, a much larger mosque, renamed The Islamic Cultural Centre & London Central Mosque, opened on the same site, at a cost of £6.5 million. The funds for this mosque were donated by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Saudi Arabia still contributes to the mosque, which is managed by a committee comprising ambassadors to London from Muslim countries. The mosque's imams come from Egypt, having been trained at Al Azhar University in Cairo.

Mosques in the media

Britain's mosques make local, national (and sometimes international) news, for a wide variety of reasons. Mosque openings and charity fund-raising, festivals and schools events all attract coverage. Planning permission battles and internal management disputes also draw reporters, and the whole issue of training for imams is a perennial favourite.

The Woking Mosque

Britain's first purpose-built mosque to use a non-Western architectural style was built at Woking in Surrey in 1894, but this was no ordinary mosque.

The idea for the mosque came from a non-Muslim, Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, a civil servant and educationalist who had served in colonial India as a commissioner for education and later helped to found the University of the Punjab.

Before returning to Britain, Leitner persuaded Shah Jahan Begum, a member of the royal family of the princely state of Bhopal in North India, to help pay for a new mosque and oriental research institute.

The mosque itself closed down for a decade after Leitner's death until it came to the notice of Khwaja Kamal Ud Deen, a barrister and Muslim missionary from India. Through his efforts the mosque reopened in 1913 as the headquarters of what became known as the Woking Muslim Mission.

Refurbished on its centenary in 1994, the Woking Mosque continues to set new standards for Muslims in Britain. Recently, it became one of the first British mosques to elect a woman on to its management committee.

Since the London bombs of 7 July 2005, improvements to the management of Britain's mosques, and the education and training of imams have become a national public policy issue.

The majority of Britain's imams come from the countries of South Asia, with a minority from parts of the Middle East and elsewhere. In these countries, a mosque imam is someone whose principal job is to lead the prayers, and in all but the largest mosques it can be a part-time vocation, or even an entirely voluntary one.

Full-time imams in Muslim countries are educated in religious seminaries sometimes known as *Dar al-Ulum* (or house of sciences). They receive extensive training in Arabic, Islamic history and theology. By contrast, they receive less (or no) formal training in foreign languages, natural sciences, or in vocational subjects such as chaplaincy, how to work with children, and pastoral care.

The majority of mosques are registered with the Charity Commission. Many trustees of mosques often put in long hours of work, but with little formal training or knowledge in how to manage a non-profit organisation, and how to improve services, particularly for women, the elderly and for people with special needs.

UK educational institutions are now beginning to step in to provide some of this training to imams and to mosque trustees. One of the pioneers of imam training courses in the UK is The Muslim College, in west London, established by the late Shaikh Zaki Badawi, a former Director of the Islamic Cultural Centre in London. In addition, the Markfield Institute of Higher Education offers a course in mosque management. Eton College and the London Metropolitan University are among the first UK educational institutions to have a full-time imam on their academic staff.

There are now 22 colleges in the UK dedicated to training imams. They admit pupils from the ages of 11 to 18. Pupils at these seminaries follow a combination of the National Curriculum, with Arabic and Islamic studies. Many also memorise the Qur'an.

The issue of what is called 'capacity building' is an important challenge facing Britain's mosques. Capacity building in this context refers to being able to deliver a more effective and professional service to communities.

The prayer in Islam

Prayer in Islam, as in all of the world's major religions, is a fundamental pillar of faith and designed to strengthen belief. It is seen as the best way of communicating and forming a one-to-one relationship with God, and as a way of standing up and being accountable for the conduct of daily life.

It comprises a series of movements and recitations. Sunni Muslims will pray for a minimum of five separate times each day. Shi'a Muslims have slightly different arrangements for prayer time.

In Muslim countries, mosques invite the faithful to come and pray through a special call-to-prayer that is broadcast to nearby households over a loudspeaker. Prayers, however, can be offered on any clean surface. Worshippers, for example, often prostrate on prayer carpets, small pieces of cloth, even small pieces of paper.

The prayer itself can last as little as a few minutes, and is always recited in Arabic – even if (as is often the case) the worshipper does not understand the meaning of the words. Non Arabic-speaking worshippers are encouraged to learn Arabic, though this is not regarded as a condition of accepting Islam.

Friday is Islam's day for congregational prayers. The prayer is preceded by a short sermon, which is always recited in Arabic, though increasingly also in English and other languages.

There is a consensus among Islam's traditions that men can lead mixed congregational prayers and that women can lead women-only prayers. A minority also believes that women can lead mixed prayers.

An Imam for Today

Modern debaters about whether imams should be home-grown or brought from abroad might do well to note an advertisement for the position of imam at the Grand Mosque in Istanbul in the time of Suleiman the Magnificent, who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1520–1566.

Some of the requirements were as follows:

1st To have a good command of the languages of Arabic, Latin, Turkish, and Persian
2nd To have a good understanding and knowledge of the Qur'an, the Bible, and the Torah
3rd To be a scholar of Shari'ah and Fiqh
4th To be a scholar of physics and mathematics up to teaching standard
5th To be skilled in chivalry, archery, and duelling
6th To be of pleasing appearance
7th To have a nice, melodious voice

A version of this advertisement was first published in the October 2005 issue of *Emel* magazine.

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Muslim Directory
www.muslimdirectory.co.uk

For an updated listing of UK mosques
www.salaam.co.uk

Chapter 3
Politics

In the last 15 years there have been big changes in Muslim political consciousness and engagement, arising from developments at home and abroad.

In recent years, at least three developments have been pivotal in shaping the political experience of Muslims in Britain. They are:

- the publication in 1989 of *The Satanic Verses*, a novel by Salman Rushdie, the British writer of Indian origin
- the election of a Labour government in 1997
- the rise of Al Qaeda, and the terrorist attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001, and subsequent attacks in London, Madrid and in other cities.

Of these three, it is the aftermath of *The Satanic Verses* that has so far had the most lasting impact. The controversy over the novel, for example, led to the formation of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The arrival in government of Labour, meanwhile, led to the first Muslims elected to the House of Commons and more Muslims appointed to the House of Lords, as well as state funds for private Muslim schools (of which there are five at the time of writing); and a question on religion in the 2001 census.

The MCB, together with other lobby groups campaigned successfully for the inclusion of a question on religion in the national census. The question is voluntary. But for the first time it allowed for a fairly accurate count of Muslims in Britain, and has given British Muslims a sense of their own collective weight and importance.

Not all Muslims welcomed the religion question, however. This is because of concerns that governments should not have access to data on private religious beliefs. The religion question in the census also raised concerns among some non-Muslims. One of these concerns is a perception that in identifying themselves primarily as a faith community, Muslims are creating distance between themselves and non-Muslims.

This issue also has a wider reference because multiculturalism in Britain has traditionally been defined on the basis of ethnic origin. There are some from within the secular left and anti-racist campaigners who feel that demands for recognition of religious identities, which they view as a private matter, are a challenge to secular societies, and opening the door to what they see as religious fundamentalism.

The census question, none the less, can be seen as part of a growing sense among Muslims to be identified by their faith, and not just their ethnic origin. Many Muslims believe that recognition of faith will lead to more effective services in areas such as social welfare, education, health and housing.

The Satanic Verses

Published in 1989, *The Satanic Verses* was a fictionalised account of Islam's first few decades in 6th-century Arabia. Like the cartoons of the Prophet published in Denmark at the end of 2005, *The Satanic Verses* was controversial because it was seen as presenting an insulting caricature of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam (and his wives). The Prophet is venerated by Muslims all over the world. He is rarely (if ever) the subject of speculative fiction and Rushdie's novel inflamed global Muslim public opinion to a degree not anticipated by Muslims or non-Muslims. There was worldwide controversy.

Meanwhile, in Britain, a large number of Muslim voluntary groups united in a campaign to have the book banned. At the same time they began to lobby for laws that would prevent such a book from being published again, and that would make it illegal to insult Muslims or caricature Islam, in the same way that the laws on blasphemy were seen as protecting Britain's Christian communities. They also called for new laws that would protect Muslims from discrimination in employment. At the heart of the campaign was a desire for British Muslim identity to be recognised.

The Conservative government of the time did not agree with these arguments. Ministers did not want to ban a work of fiction, and they were not convinced that there was sufficient evidence of religious discrimination to warrant a new law. They were also frustrated at having to deal with many (and often divided) community groups, which is why Michael Howard, when Home Secretary, suggested at one meeting that the many heads of community organisations that had come to see him might want to establish an umbrella representative body. This was one of the drivers to the setting up of the Muslim Council of Britain in 1997.

Five years before the formation of the MCB, however, Muslim Britain experienced a different vehicle for political representation. This was the Muslim Parliament, an innovative experiment, inaugurated in 1992. It was intended to be a political system grounded in the idea that if the UK state felt unable to accommodate Muslim concerns in the wake of *The Satanic Verses* crisis, the solution for Muslims was to create a set of self-sustaining institutions independent of mainstream Britain. These institutions would include schools, businesses, and even a separate 'parliament' to govern Muslim affairs, complete with an upper and lower house and treasury. Since the death of its founder, Kalim Siddiqui in 1996, however, the parliament has become a debating forum on issues such as free speech, forced marriages and mosque reform, a radical departure from its origins.

Representing Muslims in Britain

The MCB is little different in its structure and operation from any other British non-governmental lobby group in that it is critical of many aspects of government policy, but is happy to effect change from within the structures of parliamentary democracy. The MCB is a federation of some 400 local and national groups. It holds regular elections and is staffed by a small number of paid officials and many more volunteers.

The MCB is dominated by those of its affiliates that have roots in anti-colonial political Islam from the Middle East and South Asia. These affiliates include the Muslim Association of Britain, the UK Islamic Mission and Islamic Forum Europe. The MCB has traditionally had less support among groups that follow what they call Traditional Islam (inspired by Sufism) and members of Shi'a communities – though this is slowly beginning to change.

Other Muslim groups

Not all Muslims believe that any one organisation can capture the range of Muslim opinion. This diversity among Muslim groups helps to explain the emergence of several newer umbrella organisations for British Muslims. These include the British Muslim Forum (BMF), a network of some 300 mosques, community and youth groups, which share an affiliation to Traditional Islam, or Sufism. The BMF includes essentially many of those groups that chose not to affiliate with the MCB and opted (earlier) to ally themselves with the Muslim Parliament. There are also many Muslim community groups that choose to remain independent of any collective organisation.

The genesis of the MCB coincided with the return of Labour to government in 1997. The organisation's members had been building contacts in the Labour party from before the 1997 election. This sustained lobbying resulted in Labour agreeing to several longstanding demands, including state funding for schools run by Muslim charities, a law protecting Muslims from discrimination in employment, and a law that would make it a criminal offence to incite people to hate someone on the grounds of their religion – a direct legacy of the campaign to have *The Satanic Verses* withdrawn from the shops.

What Labour also did (politically) was to give Muslims a voice inside parliament, and a degree of access to parliament and government not seen since negotiations for the independence of India and Pakistan in the 1940s. Starting from a base of no Muslims in either house of parliament, today there are four Muslim MPs representing the Labour party in constituencies in the North, the Midlands and the South; and six Muslims in the House of Lords (four Labour and two Liberal Democrats). The Vice-chair of the Conservative Party, Saeeda Warsi, and the Deputy President of the Liberal Democrats, Fiyaz Mugal, are also Muslims. The Prime Minister and members of the cabinet are often found speaking at, or attending, important Muslim events. And younger Muslims have joined Whitehall departments. Despite this progress, the numbers of Muslim parliamentarians does not yet reflect the proportion of Muslims in the UK population. According to some estimates, there should be 20 Muslim MPs in the House of Commons. All parties, including the Conservatives, have selected Muslims as Prospective Parliamentary Candidates at least since 1992, and there have been a number of Muslim MEPs.

Preventing extremism

The discovery of bombers, born or based in Britain, ready to kill in the name of their faith has made the prevention of extremism of high priority – for Muslim community groups as well as the government.

Days after the 7/7 tragedy the government convened a meeting with prominent Muslims, which, in turn, led to the setting up of a working group entitled Preventing Extremism Together, or PET. One hundred Muslims from all walks of life came together to discuss how best to meet the needs of Britain's Muslims and also to find ways of reducing the risk of future acts of violence and terrorism in the name of Islam.

The PET working group came up with a list of 60 recommendations, some of which are now being put in place through a partnership between government and Muslim community institutions.

The recommendations include a scheme to establish a new national advisory body for imams and mosques, at arm's-length from the government, which would advise on best practice in mosque management and the training of imams; and a new organisation that would advise on setting syllabuses used to teach children in after-school classes. The recommendations also include a roadshow of influential Muslim writers, scholars and thinkers who travel the UK giving talks to audiences of younger people. One recommendation that has so far not been accepted is for a public inquiry into the 7/7 bombings.

Some Muslim community groups did not take part in the PET exercise. For them it amounted to little more than an exercise in public relations and they believe that it was designed to show the wider public that the government is in control of minority communities.

The impact of 9/11 and 7/7

The period since the attacks of 9/11 has coincided with some pressure on relations between leaders of Muslim community groups and the government. Leaders of Muslim community organisations still have frequent access to ministers and civil servants at the highest level, but many British Muslims feel anger and frustration at UK support for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as at new (and proposed) anti-terror legislation – Muslim leaders (including those inside parliament) believe such laws are having a disproportionate and negative impact on Muslims. There is also frustration at the government's reluctance to hold a public inquiry into the London bombs of 7 July 2005, an idea that has the backing of opposition political parties.

Such is the disaffection with Labour that many Muslims traditionally loyal to Labour have begun to look to other UK political parties, particularly those opposed to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many Muslims have joined and voted for the Liberal Democrats. They are also prominent in the anti-war movement, as well as the Respect party founded by former Labour MP George Galloway. His victory in 2005 over a sitting Labour MP in the East London constituency of Tower Hamlets, seems to have been largely owed to Muslim voters defecting from longstanding Labour allegiance. Respect's vice-chair, Salma Yaqoob, a Muslim of Pakistani origin, came second to the sitting MP in the Birmingham Sparkbrook constituency, which has a large population of Muslims of Pakistani origin.

Islamophobia

'Islamophobia' is a single word that describes the fear, hatred, or prejudice that some people hold about Islam and Muslims. There is no agreed definition, but examples of what many Muslims and non-Muslims regard as Islamophobic behaviour include systematic discrimination against a person because he or she is Muslim; physical assault or attack motivated by a hatred of Muslims; and speech or writing that is intended to cause harassment, lead to racial or religious tensions, or public order disturbances.

Prejudice against Muslims on the grounds of their race or faith has existed for centuries. But it is now the subject of substantial academic research, as well as policy action from, among others, academic researchers, national governments, (including member states of the European Union) and the United Nations.

Following the attacks of 9/11, in May 2002, the EU's European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia published what is still the most comprehensive study of Islamophobia in EU member states. The study, conducted by the University of Birmingham, collated evidence from all of the then 15 EU member countries and confirmed what ordinary Muslims and Muslim community institutions have long suspected: that verbal and other forms of abuse and violent attacks targeted specifically at Muslims happen with regularity across the EU. Serious examples have included death threats, attacks on mosques and houses, assaults with body parts of pigs and beer bottles, the removal of women's headscarves and abuse to women and children. There is also much lower-level animosity of many kinds.

Islamophobia was brought to national attention nearly a decade ago in 1997 following a report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, which was published by the race relations think tank the Runnymede Trust. The report's authors included journalists, academics, religious leaders and policy-makers (both Muslim and non-Muslim). The group was chaired by Gordon Conway, the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sussex.

The report of the Runnymede Trust (and a subsequent follow-up study that was published by the Uniting Britain Trust in 2004), also highlighted how the media, in the opinion of the report's authors, have contributed to a prejudiced view of Muslims. Examples of this include newspaper columnists who refer to Islam as an evil or extremist faith, and cartoonists who depict ordinary Muslims as being violent. The 1997 Runnymede report called on the National Union of Journalists to develop professional guidelines for journalists. These guidelines have yet to be written.

The extent of Islamophobia in the media is itself a contested issue among journalists. Journalists also disagree among themselves as to whether highly critical comment about Islam represents a risk to public order or community relations. There are robust opinions on all sides. Some, on what could be regarded as the liberal left, for example, believe strongly that newspaper columns that are highly critical of Islam, or repeated news items on hijab bans, honour killings and mosque disputes contribute to (or make worse) a prejudiced view of Muslims.

But others argue that so far there is no evidence of an increase in attacks on Muslims, or other forms of anti-Muslim prejudice that is the direct result of media reports. They point out, moreover, that in a representative democracy, no government or public authority can tell its newspapers what they can or cannot write (subject to existing laws). They also believe that 'the potential to cause offence' is not sufficient justification not to write or publish. And they wonder why, if most politicians and church leaders can grasp why it is important for citizens to be able to criticise any aspect of a society, why it is that leaders of Muslim community institutions seem to want to be exempted from this?

Links and further reading

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Chapter 4
Young Muslims and education

Britain's Muslims are predominantly young, but they are also the least qualified of all of Britain's faith communities. University entrance rates among younger Muslims are rising.

Britain's Muslims are predominantly young, with half aged under 25. Muslim families are also more likely than non-Muslim families to have dependent children. And in some local authorities, up to one-third of children are Muslims.

Young people, when encouraged, supported and given opportunities to excel, help societies to remain vibrant, innovative, forward-looking, and at the same time stable and secure. With so many young people, Britain's Muslims are poised to play a larger role in Britain's future. Among Muslims, for example, half of those aged 18 to 30 are in post-compulsory education, compared with 38 per cent of the wider population. And in recent years, younger generations of Muslims have been emerging as stars of politics, entertainment, sport and media.

Looked at more closely, in 2001–02, nearly half of all young people from Pakistani households aged 18 to 30 were in higher education. It is clear that more young Muslim women are going to higher education, often with the support of their families. The figure for Bangladeshi young people is 39 per cent, 71 per cent for children from Indian backgrounds and 73 per cent for Black-African children.

But this is not an unmixed picture: the data also tell us that a majority of Muslims in further education attend the former polytechnics and colleges of higher education rather than the older universities, and that drop-out rates are high. Half of eligible Muslim young people are therefore not at university; and underachievement at primary and secondary levels is significant.

According to the 2001 census, for example, fewer children of Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents obtained five GCSE passes at grades A–C than the children of any other community except those from black-British households. The census also says that Muslims of working age in Britain are the least qualified among all faith groups. Moreover, Pakistani and Bangladeshi children are more likely to be excluded from schools than are children from white non-Muslim families.

What is clear is that among those Muslims who do well in primary and secondary school, a large proportion go on to obtain further education and training, and in future years, this trend is likely to continue upwards.

To help accelerate the numbers of Muslims in higher education, attention is being given to finding ways to improve the educational performance of Muslim children in schools – particularly those children who live in large and mostly poor urban conurbations.

What community groups, government and policy-makers know is that a child's performance in school is strongly linked to the education and professional qualifications of his or her parents. Children from low-skilled households (regardless of their ethnic or religious background) do less well in school than those from more educated families. While many of Britain's Muslim parents are ambitious for their children, what they often lack (compared with better-educated parents) is the ability to communicate well in English to teaching staff and to be involved in out-of-school activities. Poverty is associated with limited prospects in education and employment, for Muslims as for non-Muslims.

Some progress is being made in addressing this situation. An overarching priority, for example is to improve communication and trust between schools and parents. For example, under the RAISE project in Yorkshire, Muslim community organisations have been brought in by schools to help them communicate better with parents of Muslim children.

Another priority is to improve the links between mainstream education and what is taught in evening mosque schools. Attendance amongst children at mosque schools varies and can be as frequent as two hours daily for six days every week, or can be limited to weekend classes. Often, teaching styles in mosque schools are different from those of mainstream schools. Some mosque schools recognise that they can play a valuable role in helping to raise overall educational standards and offer supplementary classes in literacy, numeracy and science subjects.

Generation gap

For those who choose to do so, the task of combining the requirements of faith, culture, family and country is often not an easy one, and there are signs that for some of Britain's younger Muslims, it does not come easily.

The Muslim prison population, for example, is a larger proportion of the total than the comparable proportion of the general population. and the number of Muslims in prison doubled between 1993 and 2000. In 2002 there were 5,379 Muslim men in prison (compared with 430 Sikhs and 256 Hindus). The range of crimes committed include both minor and major offences involving theft, burglary, drugs offences and fraud. The government has addressed one aspect of this problem by appointing a Muslim adviser to the Prison Service, including provision for Muslims and the appointment of Muslim chaplains (currently 26).

For these and other younger Muslims in Britain, an important concern is to be able to negotiate differences of opinion with older generations, particularly parents. And one topic where differences can be acute is that of choosing a partner for marriage.

Marriage in Muslim societies is traditionally a decision that is made with the consent of families, and is not ordinarily regarded as a decision that two individuals will make on their own. In wider Britain the reverse is mostly true. One effect of this is that children from Muslim families in Britain who choose not to involve parents in identifying future spouses often need to embark on a process, not unlike a negotiation, to convince parents that offspring can be trusted to make the right choice.

Some young people refer to Qur'anic teachings on marriage, which give individuals the right to choose whom to marry. This has led to the emergence of many introduction agencies aimed exclusively at Muslims.

Negotiations with parents on marriage and other issues can be made more complex by a language barrier. Many younger Muslims in Britain have grown up immersed in the English language and in British culture. It is common among British Pakistani households, for example, to hear parents communicating to their young in Urdu or Punjabi, and children responding in English.

The need to find ways of helping children and parents understand each other's perspectives is one of the factors that has led to the emergence of several dedicated Muslim voluntary groups, both locally and nationally. The largest (and among the newest) of these is the Muslim Youth Helpline, based in London, which provides services to younger Muslims from around the UK.

Breakdown in family relationships and mental health issues are the two most common reasons why 5,000 younger Muslims called into the Helpline in the 12 months to July 2005. One in three of the calls was about depression. Callers are put through to a trained counsellor aged between 18 and 25, who is fluent in English. Counsellors try, wherever possible, to reconcile the interests of parents and children, where these are in opposition.

Reconciliation, however, is not always possible, particularly in the small number of cases in which children of Muslim families are forced to marry against their will, and, in some cases, are taken abroad for this purpose. Recognition of transcontinental forced marriages prompted the government to establish a Forced Marriages Unit jointly funded by two government departments, the Foreign Office and the Home Office, and the unit handles some 250 cases every year, mostly from Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The government, on the advice of Muslim voluntary groups, has begun to support additional initiatives designed to raise confidence levels in younger Muslims, more so following the London bombs of 7 July 2005. It is widely recognised, for example, that younger Muslims need more inspiring leaders from within their own peer group, and that more Muslim role models need to be promoted.

To both these ends, government departments support *The Muslim News* Awards for Excellence, a nationwide scheme sponsored by *The Muslim News*, now in its sixth year, that rewards excellence in 14 different categories, from art and culture, to science and sport. The government has also recently supported a roadshow of Muslim scholars who travel the UK giving lectures to audiences of younger Muslims about the basics of Islam. The roadshow is organised by three Muslim groups: the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS, a Muslim student union), the magazine *Q News*, and the youth group Young Muslim Organisation (YMO).

Private Muslim schools

At the time of the 2001 census, Britain had 371,000 Muslim children aged five to 16. Some 20,000 of these were in the 130-odd schools maintained by Muslim charitable trusts. Today, five of these schools receive state aid.

By contrast, 99 per cent of Britain's 7,000 state-funded faith schools are Anglican or Catholic. For comparison, in 2001, there were 33,000 Jewish children of school age who were entitled to 13,000 places in state-maintained Jewish schools.

The first state-aided Muslim school was Islamia Primary, a mixed school founded 22 years ago by Yusuf Islam, formerly known as the pop singer Cat Stevens. It has over 200 pupils enrolled, aged between four and 11 and is based in north London. After several refusals, it won state support in 1998.

For children who attend a Muslim school, the practice of Islam permeates many aspects of their lives. Pupils start the day with a daily service; they are taught Islamic Studies, Arabic and the Qur'an, alongside the national curriculum. Girls wear the hijab, though most schools regard this as part of the uniform, and not a requirement of Islamic law. Pupils are also encouraged to ask questions, to debate, analyse and to disagree – as they would in any other British school.

Established in 1992, the Association of Muslim Schools (AMS), supports those developing full-time schooling for Muslim children. As with the best schools of any faith, the best of Britain's Muslim schools are popular with parents because they shine in academic league tables and because they offer an environment for children in which faith, morality and ethics are given importance. Many are also ethnically diverse. Twenty-three nationalities, for example, are present at Islamia, which is reflective of its diverse local population.

However, the vast majority of private Muslim primary schools situated in areas such as the midlands or northern towns of England, are less diverse. None as yet admits non-Muslim families, though this is now likely to change as many commentators (including government ministers and leading educationalists) believe that, in line with Christian and Jewish faith schools, Muslim schools will benefit by setting aside places for children of other faiths.

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Chapter 5
Muslim women

Muslim women's organisations in Britain are defying stereotypes and, at the same time, providing a lifeline to women and families in distress.



Pic. Jak Kilby ©

'Paradise lies at the feet of mothers,' the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, implying that heaven awaits those who take care of their mothers. At its founding in the 6th century, Islam is widely regarded as having given women many rights that they did not have. These include the right to work and gain an education; to own property; to inherit; to marry someone of their own choosing; the right to sexual gratification within marriage; the right to respect; equality before God; and the right to vote.

In Western countries today, however, the words 'Islam' and 'women' leave a different impression, and often one of oppression and inequality. This is an impression that is forged by some inequalities that do exist. Some Muslims have restrictive views on gender roles, which they ascribe to Islam. One of these views is that women do not need income that is independent of men; another is that women do not need to be directly involved in governance structures, for example, by standing as prospective members of parliaments. This view however, has not prevented many Muslim states from electing women as presidents and prime ministers, for example Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey.

In recent years, however, more Muslim women from around the world have been looking to Islam to reclaim rights that they believe were given to them more than 14 centuries ago and that are enshrined in the Qur'an. Some Muslim women describe this as 'Islamic feminism' – though the phrase is contested and many Muslim women do not use it. In part this is because these women regard Islam as a vehicle for empowerment and also because they regard the family as being important to society. Many Muslim women draw on the Qur'an to argue that men and women are created 'different but equal'. Hence, while they accept that men and women will have different roles in society, this is not to say that one is superior to the other.

In its essence, this perspective argues for rights for women within religious traditions. It uses statements from religious texts such as the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad to argue that denial of rights for women come, not from Islam, but from local cultural practices. Islam, according to this argument, does not dictate the detail of how women should dress, or who they should marry – these come from non-Islamic customs and traditions of countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, the Arab states, Turkey and elsewhere.

In Britain, two of the oldest organisations whose members represent such a perspective are the Muslim Women's Helpline and the An-Nisa Society. *An-Nisa* is an Arabic phrase meaning 'the women' and is also the title of the fourth chapter in the Qur'an.

The An-Nisa Society is both a campaigning organisation and a provider of social and educational services to Muslim families in London. It was among the first Muslim groups to highlight (in the mid-1980s) that most of Britain's Muslims live in poverty, and that Muslim children significantly underachieve in schools. The society was also among the first to urge departments of education, health, housing and social services to use religious belief as an ally in efforts to improve standards for communities (such as most Muslims) who regard their religious identity as being more important than, for example, an ethnic one.

The Muslim Women's Helpline, on the other hand, is not a campaigning charity and instead provides a confidential nationwide telephone support, referral and counselling service for women in difficulty or in crisis.

As British charities go, An-Nisa and the Muslim Women's Helpline are not unusual; but in the context of British Muslims, they are pioneering institutions. Founded in the mid-1980s they were a response to a very practical need from members of families in distress. These families included women and young people who were denied their rights, subjected to violence, and who had few places to go for help within Muslim communities.

In the 1980s, family breakdown or domestic violence were not easy messages to put across within Muslim communities. The (mostly male) leadership of many British Muslim community organisations was more focused on campaigning for rights for Muslims abroad and less interested in domestic concerns. At the time, there was also a relative lack of support from mosque administrations, government departments and from established women's rights groups.

The latter strongly disagreed with the idea of promoting women's rights through faith (as well as through Muslim family structures), and saw this as promoting oppression.

Despite being born out of shared circumstances, the two organisations are different, both in the solutions they seek to offer women and families, and in terms of where they stand as leaders of Muslim Britain.

The Muslim Women's Helpline, for example, seeks to work in partnership with Muslim community institutions such as members of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), to which it is affiliated. The An-Nisa Society, on the other hand, has opted to stay outside of the MCB. Its members are critical of the Council and many of its member organisations, partly because few of the MCB's members include women in decision-making roles.

There are other regionally based Muslim women's support organisations across Britain that respond to locally defined needs, as well as several smaller welfare and social groups such as Moroccan or Pakistani women's associations. Some women of Muslim background also look outside faith-based structures for answers to questions of gender roles, rights and family relationships. But those who do so would probably use a secular or non-religious vocabulary to describe what they are doing.

What is hijab?

Hijab is an Arabic word that means 'curtain', but which today describes the many different styles of head covering used by Muslim women all over the world. It is sometimes complemented by the *jilbab* (an ankle-length coat), and/or the *niqab*, a veil that covers the whole face except the eyes.

There is debate among Muslim theologians as to whether hijab, *jilbab* and *niqab* constitute a religious requirement. Disagreement hinges in part on differing interpretations of several verses in the Qur'an that describe incidents in Islamic history in which the Prophet's wives were asked to cover themselves. Some theologians argue that these verses imply that all women must do as the Prophet's wives did. But others disagree and argue that there is no explicit commandment in the Qur'an that requires all Muslim women to cover their hair but stresses modesty in dress and manner for both men and women.

The debate notwithstanding, in Britain (as in other countries), Muslim women are increasingly being seen wearing Islamic styles of covering, often in families where their mothers did not do so.

The hijab has been in the public eye in Britain long before the events of 9/11. An early example was in 1989 when two teenage sisters, Fatima Alvi and Ayesha Alvi, were sent home from Altrincham Grammar School in Manchester for wearing headscarves. They were later suspended, but this decision was eventually reversed by the school's governors.

More recently, schoolgirl Shabina Begum from Luton won her case against Denbigh High School, which had refused permission for her to wear the *jilbab*. The case caused controversy in part because the school has a large number of Muslim girls, as well as a Muslim head teacher, and has a flexible uniform policy that permits hijab, long trousers, as well as the *shalwar kameez* trouser suit, which is the predominant form of dress for men and women throughout Pakistan.

As a sign of the times, one of Britain's newest Muslim women's groups was set up in 2003 to campaign for the restoration of the right of women all over the world to wear hijab. The organisation is called Protect Hijab and it believes that governments do not have a right to interfere with what its members see as a religious obligation. A strong focus of its work is on France, Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey, all of which have public restrictions on wearing hijab, and some (such as Belgium and the Netherlands) have banned the *niqab* on security grounds.

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Chapter 6
Borrowing and investing religiously

‘Islamic’ finance is changing the way Britons borrow, invest, save and spend.

Want to build a motorway, lease a new fleet of aircraft, buy a house, or set aside regular savings to see your children through university? There is now a recognised Islamic financing scheme that can help you to achieve your aims. What is more, you don't have to be a Muslim to benefit.

Islamic finance today is an unlikely global phenomenon. The size of the industry is an estimated £250 billion at the time of writing and is growing at the heart-stopping rate of 15 per cent a year. It owes this remarkable rate of growth to a combination of factors. These include: rising global consumer demand, advances in technology, the prospect of greater profits, increased public awareness of ethics and social justice, an enduring marriage of tradition with modernity, and historically low interest rates in Western countries. In backing Islamic finance, companies and individuals in Britain, continental Europe and the USA are all waking up to one of Islam's best kept secrets, and London is emerging as an important hub, along with Bahrain, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

Pioneered by thinkers, economists, Muslim religious scholars, governments and banks in Malaysia, Middle Eastern countries and Pakistan, Islamic financial products are today offered by some 250 institutions worldwide. In Britain, these include household names such as Citigroup, HSBC, Credit Suisse and Deutsche Bank. The range of products, too, is expanding all the time.

So what exactly is Islamic finance, and how is it different from conventional finance?

Modern Islamic financial products are constructed around a major principle in ethics: that they avoid dealing in what is called *riba* in Arabic, and which translates in English as usury, meaning variable, or excessively high rates of interest. The consensus among Muslim scholars is that interest cripples the poorest and most vulnerable members of a society and thus are seen as being in opposition to the goals of justice and equity for all in society irrespective of wealth. Interest on the whole is regarded as an obstacle to economic and social justice in part because of a belief that it helps to concentrate wealth in a small number of hands and that it is unethical for a lender (such as a bank) to profit excessively at the expense of a borrower simply because the lender has more money.

How does Islamic finance work in practice? There are a variety of ways of organising finance without interest. Indeed, it is this potential for research and innovation in financial planning that attracts many (non-Muslim) financiers to the idea. In one type of Islamic mortgage, for example, the bank (and not the borrower) will buy a house, and will lease it back to a borrower at a higher price. Both HSBC and Lloyds TSB have an Islamic mortgage product in which the borrower repays the bank what is in effect a fixed monthly rent for a defined period of time (such as 20 or 25 years).

So far it is commercial banks that are dominant in Islamic home financing in the UK. The former building societies have still to decide if they are going to join in. One reason for this is that estimates for future demand among British Muslims for Islamic home-buying products are uncertain. Another reason is that the former building societies believe that a long-term, low, fixed-interest loan, for example, offers similar benefits to borrowers as an Islamic product, except that it does not carry the 'Islamic' name.

Investing according to Islamic principles is in many ways no different from conventional ethical investing in that funds will not be invested in alcohol, gambling, tobacco, and similar industries. But Islamic investment is popular among large corporations too. At a time when interest rates are at historically low levels, Islamic finance is proving to be popular among large investors and corporations in part because it offers an additional source of financing for those who want to borrow; and also because it offers the potential of higher rates of return on investments for those who want to invest. Islamic finance is particularly popular with the aviation industry. British Airways, Brit Air, Emirates and Thai Airways are among many airlines that have financed the purchase of aircraft using Islamic methods.

Islamic commercial banking is not new to Britain. More than a decade ago, Al Barakah bank, part of the Dallah Al Barakah group, also had a presence in the UK. The bank was popular with some Muslims as well as British Muslim community organisations, but it had to close down as it was unable to comply with changes to licensing requirements for UK banks following the collapse of the international banking group Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI).

But it wasn't long before Islamic banking returned. As with so many pivotal developments in the recent history of Islam in Britain, it was the election of the Labour government in 1997 which allowed this to happen.

After Labour's election victory, Howard Davies, Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, was appointed to chair the new Financial Services Authority (FSA), which had succeeded the Bank of England as the agency responsible for banking regulation. Davies was interested in whether Islamic commercial banking could work in the UK. In 2003 he made what has come to be seen as a landmark speech to a conference of bankers from the Middle East effectively inviting applications to set up a new Islamic bank in Britain. In the audience were a group of bankers who took him at his word and a year later the first branch of a new bank, the Islamic Bank of Britain, opened in Birmingham. The bank today has five branches and has plans to expand in the years ahead.

At the same time, the government also convened a working group comprising leaders of Britain's Muslim community organisations, bankers and members of the FSA to discuss, among other things, how UK financial regulators could oversee new Islamic financial products. UK banking and taxation laws were modified and the result has been a steady introduction of new Islamic financial products including mortgages, current and savings accounts, and savings products from established high street names.

Regulating theology

The Financial Services Authority's (FSA) role includes protecting consumers as well as promoting public awareness of finance and financial literacy among young and old. What this means is that as a regulator of Islamic financial institutions in Britain, it is likely that the FSA may find itself more involved in theological issues as Islamic finance expands in Britain.

One distinctive feature of Islamic finance is the role of what is called the shari'ah board. Every institution that offers an Islamic product will have a (usually paid) advisory board of Muslim scholars. Their role is to confirm that any financial product that carries an 'Islamic' prefix is in line with the principles of shari'ah – known in the financial trade as a 'shari'ah-compliant' product. However, because there is much debate as to what constitutes shari'ah, there is often much disagreement within (and between) shari'ah boards as to what constitutes an acceptable Islamic financial instrument.

For example, what may be acceptable to one shari'ah board may be rejected by another. As Islamic financial products expand in the UK, it is likely that this will be accompanied by an increase in public enquiries to the FSA about how financial products are defined as being 'Islamic'.

In business

'A nation of shopkeepers' – Napoleon's famous description of Britain – applies more to Britain's Muslims these days than it does to many other communities.

That is because small businesses remain the cornerstone for Muslim involvement in UK enterprise. Muslims (along with Jews) are more likely to be self-employed than any other group. One in five Muslims is self-employed (compared with one in three people with a Jewish background, and one in ten for other communities). Moreover, ten per cent of London's 250,000 businesses are owned by people with family connections to South Asia.

Many Muslim-owned business are concentrated in the retail (food and clothing), distribution, hotel and restaurant trade. Indeed, it is these industries from which the first crop of Muslim business leaders is emerging, including for example figures like Sir Gulam Noon of the Noon Group food company. According to the London-based market research firm Datamonitor, Britain has more than 5,000 Muslim millionaires with liquid assets between them of more than £3.6 billion. They include Shami Ahmed, founder of the Joe Bloggs clothing label; Sir Anwar Pervez, founder of the Bestways Group, which supplies products to the independent retail sector; and Perween Warsi, founder of S&A Foods, which manufactures and supplies ready meals to supermarkets.

Many of the Muslims currently in politics also have (or have had) successful careers in business. They include Sir Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain, Mohammad Sarwar, Labour MP for the Govan constituency in Glasgow, and three members of the House of Lords: Nazir Ahmed, Amir Bhatia, and Waheed Alli.

These examples notwithstanding, the majority of Muslims in business find it difficult to make the leap from small-scale to big-time. For some this is because they prefer to operate as a small business. For others, however, it is because they lack the skills and the knowledge to expand or to move into non-traditional areas. The Institute of Directors has recognised this, as has the government. Last year, Chancellor Gordon Brown promised to set up new centres that would help young people from minority and faith communities to fulfil their ambitions in enterprise.

In a speech to a gathering of Muslims last year, Brown said: 'I have learned much from your entrepreneurial flair and talent. And with business creation higher in the Muslim community than in many other sections of our society, British Muslims are playing a vital role in the next stage of Britain's economic development.'

Links and further reading

Print

The Contribution of Asian Businesses to London's Economy, a report prepared by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (December 2001)

Internet

Speech by Gordon Brown at The Muslim News Awards for Excellence (23 March 2005)
www.muslimnews.co.uk/awards

Financial Services Authority
www.fsa.gov.uk

Institute of Islamic Banking and Insurance, London
www.islamic-banking.com

Islamic Bank of Britain
www.islamicbankofbritain.co.uk

National Statistics
www.statistics.gov.uk

Chapter 7
Charity at home and away

Britain's Muslim charities are forging a new globalisation in Islamic charitable giving.

Muslims regard charitable giving as an important priority in their lives. Such is its importance that many scholars of religion place giving to charity alongside praying to God. One of the principles behind charity in Islam is the idea that everything on earth belongs to God, which implies that humans are essentially trustees of any wealth that may be in their possession. What follows from this is that it becomes an obligation to ensure that this wealth is evenly distributed and that no one should have to go without. One of Islam's five pillars is what is called *zakah* (Arabic for purification). It is in effect a small wealth tax on all Muslims of sufficient means, which can either be given directly to the poor, or entrusted to the state for the welfare of the poor.

Perhaps because of this, according to one estimate, citizens of Muslim states give ten per cent of what they earn to charitable causes. What is all the more surprising then is that until recently, the Muslim charitable scene has lacked a visible presence in the wider world of giving in Britain and in other countries of the Western world. Why is this so? Two reasons come to mind: strictly speaking, Muslims are not encouraged to advertise charitable works, partly on the grounds that this may embarrass those in receipt of charitable donations. Another reason is that, until recently, most Muslim charitable organisations focused very much on national concerns and avoided thinking of themselves as global institutions along the lines of large charities such as Oxfam or Plan International.

This is now beginning to change, and as with so much about developments in contemporary Islamic thinking, some of it is being pioneered by Muslim organisations in Britain. After the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, and particularly the earthquake that hit Kashmir in 2005, the roster of big-spending international charities was joined by its first British Muslim members. Within two days of the earthquake that struck Kashmir, the Birmingham-based charity Islamic Relief, along with the other two large Muslim charities in Britain, Muslim Aid and Muslim Hands, offered £1.75 million in emergency relief.

Islamic Relief is the largest of the three and arguably the best-connected to mainstream Britain. A little over two decades old the charity is a veteran provider of humanitarian relief in the aftermath of famines, floods and wars in Bangladesh, Bosnia, Kashmir and Sudan among other places. It operates as any large British charity would: it sources its income from a mix of individual donations, business, government and multilateral organisations such as those in the United Nations and the World Bank. It has a network of worldwide field offices; in most of the countries in which it works (including Britain) its senior staff have access to prominent ministers and civil servants; and it lobbies on policy issues that affect the charity and the countries in which it works. Islamic Relief is also getting its teeth into the international aid policy agenda and sends delegations as observers to meetings of the United Nations, for example. All of this is not new in the world of charitable organisations. What is perhaps unique about Islamic Relief, Muslim Aid and Muslim Hands, however, is that in acting like the large, international NGOs that they have become, these organisations are carving out new territory in Muslim charitable giving.

What is this new territory?

When they were first set up, the intention of the larger British Muslim charities of the modern age was to provide emergency humanitarian relief and longer-term capacity-building assistance to Muslims living in predominantly Muslim countries – and frequently to countries or regions where Britain's Muslims had connections. This has had to change and today these charities insist that they do not prioritise their giving on the basis of faith. The 'Islamic', or 'Muslim' in their title refers to the act of giving, and does not mean that recipients need to be Muslim, or – for those that are Muslim – particularly observant. At the same time Muslim charities have joined mainstream lobbying and networking organisations, such as the British Overseas Network for Development Charities (BOND); and Islamic Relief has become a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee, which co-ordinates major international humanitarian appeals.

A second aspect of this new territory is that in order to raise more funds, carry out more development work, attract media attention and lobby on the national and international stage, British Muslim charities are beginning to recruit professionally trained staff in each of these areas. Among the skills they increasingly need are in fund-raising, policy expertise, advocacy, research and media. These are skills that Muslim charitable organisations (not unlike non-Muslim ones) did not feel a need to employ in their earliest days.

A third aspect is in the religious profile of their UK staff. Because of the links between the Muslim faith and charitable giving, for example, there was an understanding that staff working for British Muslim charities would make an effort to observe Islam in a public way. Female members of staff, for example, would be expected to wear headscarves to work, and staff would be required to join in congregational prayers unless they had a good reason not to. This has now been relaxed to a large extent. But most British Muslim charities still mostly recruit Muslim staff.

Working more closely with mainstream Britain, recruiting more professional staff, and relaxing their attitudes to religious observance has brought with it new challenges and new tensions for British Muslim charities. Most ordinary Muslims in Britain are not at all used to the idea of the modern, professional charity and its relatively arms-length relationship with its donor base. In addition, the idea that their hard-earned donations will be used to recruit lobbyists, researchers and press officers in London (as opposed to directly helping the poor in Muslim countries) is not altogether a welcome one for many. Funding from governments and multilateral agencies also means that charities will inevitably become tied up with broader political agendas.

Partly because of this there will always be room for the Muslim equivalent of the traditional 'DIY' small British charity – funded as so many are by the proceeds of sales of cakes, samosas and kebabs, coffee mornings, charity auctions, and the staple collection tin passed round the rows of worshippers at mosques on Fridays. These charities take pride in their smallness and thus their ability to act quickly. Many of them were involved in the Kashmir earthquake, for example. They included teams of junior doctors who clubbed together to provide direct emergency medical relief, as well as others who pooled their money to buy food, clothing and tents. Many then took it upon themselves to hire container trucks and accompanied these trucks to make sure that the aid reached its intended destination.

Links and further reading:

Print

The Idea of Philanthropy in Muslim Contexts
Jon Alterman and Shireen Hunter, US Agency for International Development (2004)

Internet

Islamic Relief
www.islamic-relief.com

Muslim Aid
www.muslimaid.org.uk

Muslim Hands
www.muslimhands.org.uk

Chapter 8
The untold story of Britain's Muslim media

Britain has been a base for much of the world's global English language Muslim media for nearly 50 years – a tradition that continues to this day.

The English language and relatively relaxed attitudes to censorship and press registration are two reasons why Britain has always been an attractive place for anyone wanting to establish English language media. Minority communities, non-Western organisations and non-Christian faith groups that want a global audience for their message tend to choose London as their centre of operations.

The earliest Muslim periodicals in English date from the beginning of the 20th century. But mass-media institutions emerged in Britain at the same time as the beginning of migration of Muslims from South Asia in the late 1950s.

An important aim was to provide English speakers with an interpretation of world events (particularly developments in predominantly Muslim countries) through what was – and is – considered an authentically Muslim view. This is in part because many Muslims believe that the mainstream English language media does not portray world events in a way that is sympathetic to their concerns.

Many of the earliest print publications had strong links to Pakistan, in that they were often staffed by Pakistani journalists, were funded from sources inside Pakistan, or were sympathetic to newer Muslim ideologies that were emerging from Pakistan, at that time a new and confident Muslim state.

A Muslim view of the world

The Muslim News International was one of the first of these publications and was established in London in 1963 by Karachi-based philanthropist Ibrahim Ahmed Bawany. In its size, shape, design, photography and typography, Bawany produced a periodical modelled on the US news weeklies, but which provided its readers with a distinctively Pakistani-Muslim window on world events.

The magazine published for 13 years (it moved to Karachi shortly after its launch) and was influenced to a degree by the politics and theology of the Islamist reformer and politician Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi, as well as other Muslim movements of the time.

Mawdudi's thinking, however, found a more direct media outlet with the setting up in 1971 of a news weekly called *Impact International* by a group of young professionals with direct ties to Mawdudi. The magazine, which is still published out of London, is possibly the oldest UK-based Muslim periodical and 'at its peak' had 12,000 monthly subscribers all over the world.

Almost at the same time came *The Crescent*, a fortnightly newspaper on global current affairs. The *Jang* (an Urdu word meaning 'war, conflict, or disagreement'), Pakistan's largest-selling Urdu daily newspaper, also established a London edition in the 1970s for the growing community of diaspora Pakistanis.

The 1980s saw two further entrants to the London-based Muslim print-media stable. These were *Arabia: The Islamic World Review*, funded from sources in Saudi Arabia and *Africa Events* and its stablemate *Inquiry*, a Muslim equivalent of today's *Prospect*. Both these magazines were funded for a time from sources in Iran.

Also in 1980, the Agency Afghan Press was set up. This was a Muslim news agency with a mandate to influence Western media coverage of the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan. The agency sent Pakistani journalists across the border to report from inside Afghanistan and worked with the approval of the US administration. It also had close links to Mawdudi's political party, the Jamat Islami and was close to the seven member Mujahideen alliance fighting for control of the country.

From global to local

Up until the mid-1980s, publishing was still an expensive business to be in. But the falling price of personal computers and availability of desktop publishing software allowed many writers and editors who had worked on the first generation of magazines (mostly those in the *Inquiry* stable) to establish several new publishing vehicles that concentrated much more on the concerns and aspirations of the UK Muslim community. These included *The Muslim News* and the magazines *Muslim Wise*, *Q News* and *Islamica*.

The Muslim News, a free newspaper paid for by advertising, was set up in 1989 and was followed by *Q News* three years later. *Q News* targeted younger Muslims in Britain and introduced its readers to contemporary magazine design by borrowing from the then recently revamped *Guardian*. This pair of first-movers has since been joined by *Muslim Weekly*, a newspaper published out of East London, *Emel*, an aspirational glossy, lifestyle title also published from London, and *New Civilisation*, a political monthly published by the UK branch of the political organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Community media institutions do not have an easy job. Salaries and working conditions are often below average as are resources to cover big stories and pay contributors. Many Muslim media institutions survive on little more than adrenalin, a sense of serving an important cause, and a frequent turnover of staff. Born in an environment where readers often feel under siege from the mainstream media, they try hard to promote Muslim role models among a readership where such individuals are badly needed. But at the same time the editorial content of many (*Q News* is a clear exception here) tends to be low on self-criticism – a price perhaps of the close access that their writers and editors have to leading players in British (as well as international) Muslim life.

Before the World Wide Web, most of these periodicals struggled for readers as there was often little (or no) money for marketing. The internet (and modern communications more generally) has given Britain's Muslim media a global audience, and at the same time opened the doors to an entirely new genre of internet-based media and publishing.

Taking control through the internet

The internet, blogging, and pod-casting have meant that Muslims (like any other community, or sector of professional and social life) now have limitless access to information. Websites exist to satisfy the needs of Muslim men and women of all ages, languages, interests, sects and religious affiliations.

The internet has given Muslims something that they have always felt was denied to them: the ability to set the media agenda and influence audiences without having to go through other media channels.

One of the most popular websites for speakers of English is *www.islamonline.net*. It is published by journalists sympathetic to the modernising wing of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Based in Cairo but with a network of global correspondents, the site contains a mix of daily world news, features, chat, audio and a chance to pose questions on the practice of Islam live to a panel of theologians from different countries.

For those more inclined to what is sometimes called Traditional Islam (or Sufi Islam), one of the more popular sites (published out of Britain) is *www.masud.co.uk*. It contains a compendium of articles and links to, among others, Hamza Yusuf, an influential scholar of Traditional Islam from the USA, popular with UK Muslim audiences, and Tim Winter (also known as Abdal Hakim Murad), who teaches Islamic studies at the University of Cambridge. Another popular site is *www.muslimyouth.net*, which contains frank and open discussion among younger Muslims.

Islam in the air

Al Jazeera television, based in Doha, Qatar, has helped to transform the media in Arabic-speaking countries in ways that few could have foreseen even a decade ago. The station is now poised to launch an English language satellite service in 2006, which is likely to have a significant impact on English language television reporting of Islam and the Middle East.

Many of the station's presenters will be familiar to UK television viewers (including Sir David Frost and former BBC correspondent Rageh Omar). But what is different is that the station's management, editors and producers are a mix of journalists from Arabic-speaking, and other developing, countries, as well as Europe and the USA. Al Jazeera managers say that no single national perspective is likely to frame the station's coverage.

UK viewers were exposed to further innovation (in religious broadcasting) in 2004 with Channel 4's *Shariah TV* show in which a panel of prominent Muslims from Britain were invited to debate issues in the practice of Islam with an invited studio audience of younger Muslims. Panel shows with Muslim scholars are common across the Muslim world, but what was innovative about *Shariah TV* was that younger Muslims were encouraged to question and debate matters of faith.

International broadcasting channels received by satellite from Bangladesh, Pakistan and other countries are all popular with Britain's Muslims, and they include news, entertainment and educational programming. But it is *Islam Channel*, a 24-hour English language Muslim television station, based in London, that is clearest in wanting to spread the faith of Islam and to provide what it sees as a Muslim view of world events.

The channel has been broadcasting to audiences in Europe since 2004. Its programming is a mix of news, sermons and panel discussions. Women are prominent at all levels, both on screen and behind the camera – though always in headscarves. There is a small amount of entertainment, but as yet no programming on music or comedy.

One of the pioneers of alternative approaches to broadcasting in the UK is what are called the network of Ramadan Radio stations. In 1992, Masood Sadiq, a Muslim radio journalist from Bradford applied to the then Radio Authority for a Restricted Service Licence to broadcast to the Bradford area during the fasting month of Ramadan. Such licences were aimed at giving communities more access to the broadcast media in the pre-internet days.

Restricted licences still exist, and today some 40 temporary radio stations broadcast to UK audiences every Ramadan. They contain a mix of chat, sermons, Islamic hymns and Q&A sessions with well-known Muslims, and religious scholars.

Links and further reading

Internet

Q News magazine
www.q-news.com

The Muslim News
www.muslimnews.co.uk

Emel magazine
www.emelmagazine.co.uk

Islam Channel
www.islamchannel.tv

Al Jazeera TV
www.english.aljazeera.net

Islamica Magazine
www.islamicamagazine.com

Chapter 9
Muslims and the mainstream media

A river of reports about Muslims and conflict has generated mistrust between Muslims and the media. Media organisations are taking note, while larger Muslim groups become more accomplished at PR.

Relations between news journalists and those they write or broadcast about can often be complicated. One could argue that a degree of tension is needed between the two in order to help maintain the distance necessary to ensure that reporting is not only accurate, but also fair to all parties, particularly in a dispute. But the tensions that exist between Britain's Muslims and the mainstream media are in many ways greater than between the media and other groups in public life. Moreover, they are characterised by mistrust on both sides.

Islam is perhaps still considered by many in the media to be 'different', in the broadest sense of that word, a foreign faith that sits uncomfortably in Western countries.

Muslim audiences, on the other hand, believe that the media in Western countries does not portray Muslims with the same sense of completeness, as it would, for example, people of other faiths. There is a perception that media coverage of Muslims focuses disproportionately on bad news and on conflicts, with less time given to contributions made in other areas such as the arts, sciences, culture, cuisine, and so on. And many Muslims claim that coverage of what are often many-headed disagreements is often reduced to simplistic descriptions of two sides that oppose each other.

Quite apart from their concerns about domestic media coverage, many Muslims feel that coverage of the world, and particularly the developing world, focuses to a disproportionate extent on disasters and conflicts. While this is a feature of the news business in general – bad news sells better than good – the 24/7 news culture makes British Muslims particularly sensitive to perceived comments on Muslims and Muslim societies in general. There is a similar sensitivity to perceptions that Palestinian attitudes and spokesmen get less airtime on mainstream media than Israeli counterparts.

News from home

Today, it is not uncommon for Muslims from Britain to find themselves the subject of news, often on the front pages of newspapers, or leading the television news bulletins. As with international news about Muslims, violence, conflict and argument also appear to dominate national news coverage of Muslims. In the past year alone, national news stories concerning Muslims have included: the London bombs of 7 July 2005; controversies involving Muslim girls and school uniforms; a BBC Panorama film questioning the ideological roots of the Muslim Council of Britain; and turmoil at the Central North London mosque in the Finsbury Park area of London. Each is an example of conflict, or violence.

The Finsbury Park mosque is a large, red-brick purpose-built mosque, a short walk away from the Arsenal football ground. It serves an ethnically mixed Muslim community. Several terror suspects are known to have used the mosque, chief among them its former Imam Abu Hamza Al-Masri. Al-Masri was removed from his job but continued to defy the mosque's trustees after his sacking by leading congregational prayers on the pavement outside. He was eventually arrested and convicted on charges of inciting terrorism. All of this, together with Al-Masri's physical appearance (two hook hands and only one eye), helped to turn the mosque into a major media story.

Media coverage of the mosque's troubles, in turn prompted the government to propose in 2005 that the courts should be given powers to close down places of worship. The idea was quickly shelved, however, when it was pointed out (by an alliance of Muslim groups, church groups and the police) that Al-Masri's arrest, and the fact that the mosque is now under new management, were both achieved under existing legislation.

What the government's proposed actions show is how constant and prominent media coverage of a single event has the potential to affect public policy. Another effect of what can seem like relentlessly negative news is that it can mean many ordinary Muslims will be increasingly reluctant to engage with the media. This is particularly so if they think that the end result will be negative for their communities, or if they have no way of influencing the outcome of a television programme or newspaper article.

Shortly after the London bombs, journalists from all over the world came to the UK to report on the event, concentrating on its aftermath and its wider implications for Muslims and for Britain. However, many of these correspondents reported that they found it difficult to penetrate beyond a handful of institutions and organisations, and that many people were reluctant to talk – particularly in areas such as the north of England that contain large concentrations of Muslim communities. A team from BBC radio that made a documentary about Muslim schools found that only one school out of the many they contacted agreed to co-operate.

A way forward

There are more Muslims prominent in the British Media than ever before, including Asad Ahmad and Zeinab Badawi at the BBC, Aaqil Ahmed and Sameera Ahmed on Channel 4, and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Sarfraz Manzoor and Anila Baig in the print media. At the same time, much is being done to improve relations between Britain's Muslim community organisations and the media, and many media organisations are taking (or have taken) concrete and often innovative steps to address issues of common concern.

The BBC, for example, responded to the criticism in a Glasgow University study of its coverage of the Israel/Palestinian conflict by creating a new and senior-level post of Middle East Editor with a published mandate to 'enhance our audience's understanding of the Middle East; and to provide extra commentary, focus and analysis'. The corporation has also pledged to increase the proportion of its staff from under-represented communities.

Recruitment is also being addressed by the newspaper industry. The new Journalism Diversity Fund has been set up by the Newspaper Licensing Agency and the National Council for the Training of Journalists, which will pay for six promising young journalists from under-represented groups to acquire training and qualifications in journalism.

To help give more breadth to the content of its Islam coverage, the *Guardian* now convenes an annual forum in which it invites younger British Muslims to debate and discuss issues of mutual interest. The results of the forum are then given prominent coverage in the newspaper.

Examples of more diverse content in the broadcast media include regular and extensive coverage of the Hajj and week-long series of programmes on Islam-related themes on both the BBC and Channel 4. Channel 4 has also broadcast an innovative weekly show called *Shariah TV* in which an invited audience of younger Muslims puts questions about the practice of Islam to an invited panel of scholarly experts. This programme was aimed exclusively at a Muslim audience.

Such Q&A programmes are popular in both the print and broadcast media throughout the Muslim world. But what is innovative about *Shariah TV* is that viewers pose counter questions and debate with the scholars, instead of accepting their answers as the last word, which is how such Q&A programmes have usually been done. Traditionally, ordinary Muslims are used to listening to scholarly advice without questioning it too deeply, a style of learning common across the Muslim world, though not in Britain where imams, teachers and scholars who appear on radio and television are getting used to open-ended questions, debating with their audiences and providing fewer closed answers.

Muslim PR

If ordinary Muslims and small organisations are wary of engaging with the media, larger and more politically active Muslim institutions are showing signs of having become accomplished practitioners at influencing media coverage by using the craft of public relations. They are adept at lobbying journalists, writing letters to newspapers, issuing press releases and staging press conferences.

An early example of this was in 1992, with the launch of the Muslim Parliament. The fact that it became a global media event was in part because of a carefully planned PR strategy. The launch had a dedicated communications team, which ensured that the media knew about it long before it took place and which looked after the needs of journalists on the day, providing quick and unrestricted access to all the parliament's principal people to maximise coverage in the following day's news.

The elements of professional PR are now displayed by many more organisations including Hizb ut-Tahrir and the relatively new political lobby group, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee (MPAC), which invited a Channel 4 camera crew to film its attempts at convincing Muslim voters not to vote for the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, MP for Blackburn, at the last General Election.

The organisation today that generates the most media coverage is the Muslim Council of Britain and its affiliates. The Council has a dedicated media spokesman as well as a media committee that meets regularly and which monitors its extensive press coverage. The MCB regularly meets with senior media executives and it employs working journalists to provide media training to its senior officials.

Links and further reading

Print

Bad News from Israel
Greg Philo and Mike Berry, Pluto Press (2004)

Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All
Runnymede Trust (1997) and the follow-up report, **Islamophobia**
Uniting Britain Trust (2005)

'Muslims and the Media' by Tahira Sameera Ahmed in **Muslims in Britain: Communities Under Pressure** edited by Tahir Abbas, Zed Books (2005)

'Reporting Islam – Media Representations of British Muslims' by Elizabeth Poole in **Muslims in Britain: Communities Under Pressure** edited by Tahir Abbas, Zed Books (2005)

'From Race to Religion: The New Face of Discrimination' by Chris Allen in **Muslims in Britain: Communities Under Pressure** edited by Tahir Abbas, Zed Books (2005)

Internet

The World on the Box: Factual International Programming on UK Television
International Broadcasting Trust (2002)
www.ibt.org.uk

Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001
Chris Allen and Jorgen S. Nielsen, EU Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia (2002)
www.eumc.eu.int

Chapter 10
Art and culture

If you think that Muslims don't know how to have a good time, think again. A reservoir of talent is well on its way to enriching arts and entertainment in Britain.

The public perception of Islam is that of a sombre, austere if not angry faith in which the act of having fun needs divine license. Often, it has to be said that British Muslims don't help themselves. In one attempt at humour, one British Muslim organisation introduced a new line of T-shirts with the slogan, 'Islam: putting the fun back into fundamentalism'.

Up until a decade ago, the British Muslim scene was (on balance) a comedy, art and culture-free zone. Pick up the listings section from any Muslim magazine from the 1980s or 1990s and there would be plenty of religious conferences, talks and discussions to attend all over the UK. But few sources to amuse or entertain.

Similarly, the Muslim English language book publishing industry in Britain concentrates on producing instructional material on religious observance, or translations of classical religious books. Anyone in search of fiction from or about Islam or Muslims would be hard-pressed to find what they were looking for.

Such was the overall climate that when the pop singer Cat Stevens converted to Islam and took the name Yusuf Islam in 1979, he famously destroyed his instruments and stopped making new records for nearly two decades following advice from Muslim religious scholars that doing so would be sinful. They included Suhaib Hasan of the UK Islamic Shari'ah Council and Syed Darsh, a former imam at the London Central Mosque in London. In 1993, a group of concerned British Muslim leaders convened a one-day conference to discuss the extent to which Islam allows music. The overwhelming consensus was that music is not a good thing. They decreed that it is sinful for Muslims to play any instrument except an early Arab version of the drum (known in Arabic as a *duff*); and that the popularity of modern music among young people is leading them astray.

Yet among the majority of young Muslims, these remain at best academic debates. Art, music, film and other forms of culture are as much a part of the daily lives of Muslims as are politics, religion and science. The majority won't think twice before downloading music to an i-Pod or queuing up at the cinema when Daniel Craig makes his first outing as James Bond. The fact that future Hollywood villains are now more likely to be Arabic-speaking (instead of men with cut-glass English or Russian accents) is unlikely to make much difference.

At the same time a substantial number of Muslim Britons have for some years been experimenting with ways of combining their practice of faith with art and culture. The result has been a flowering of the British Muslim cultural scene in ways that seemed improbable back in the 1990s. Demography has undoubtedly played its part, as the growth is dominated by people who today are in their 20s and 30s.

Some of the most innovative work seems to be happening in the area of Islamic hymns and devotional songs. This music has a rich history across the Muslim world from Southern and Eastern Europe to the Far East. Now it seems that Britain is adding its voice to the mix. A group of younger Muslim artists is writing hymns (known in Arabic as *nasheeds*) that do not use string or percussion instruments and rely instead on the *duff* and the strength of an artist's own voice. The most popular artist to date is Sami Yusuf, a 26-year-old British-Azeri singer/songwriter from Manchester, now a household name across the Muslim world thanks to clever marketing and repeated appearances on television in Muslim countries. Yusuf plays to sell-out crowds all over the world.

This awakening in British Muslim culture has not gone unnoticed and is now being nurtured by the British arts establishment. It has led to a number of innovative collaborations, which, if anything, are set to grow in the coming years.

In the field of fine art, for example, one of the oldest is the Visual, Islamic and Traditional Arts (VITA) programme in London, an academic institution established by Prince Charles, which has been reviving traditional techniques in Islamic art and which is very popular among aspiring British Muslim artists. In theatre, British Muslim company Khayyal Theatre is putting on classical Arabic plays in English. Shakespeare's Globe collaborated with Muslim groups in 2005 and organised a season of plays, talks and readings called 'Shakespeare and Islam'.

In music, there is a planned Salaam Music Village, a festival of music from the Muslim world being organised by London-based organisation Cultural Co-operation. In science, The Manchester Museum of Science and Industry is hosting a three-month exhibition called '1001 Inventions' on the contributions of Arabs and Muslims to modern life. The exhibition is in partnership with the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation.

Perhaps the most ambitious collaboration so far is the continuing 12-month-long Festival of Muslim Cultures, the largest Muslim arts festival in Britain since the World of Islam Festival that took place in 1976. The festival is a collaboration between UK arts organisations and many Muslim voluntary groups. The project is ambitious in both scale and content. But perhaps what is most remarkable is how two very different worlds (that of Islam and British arts), which clashed so vigorously over *The Satanic Verses*, have learned to understand each other and to find agreement on issues that divide them, such as how to portray representations of the human image in mutually acceptable ways.

One area of Muslim culture in Britain ripe for growth is comedy. Few Muslim comics have so far made the transition into the British mainstream. One reason may be that writers and producers of comedy are unwilling to risk broadcasting anything that could offend Muslim audiences. Even the writers of the successful Asian comedy sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me*, and the spoof chat show *The Kumars at No. 42* studiously avoid poking fun at Muslims.

There are now several British Muslim comics who have become popular on the fringes, and a few have been able to break into mainstream television. They include British-Pakistani Shazia Mirza, some of whose lines are about patriarchy in Asian Muslim households. Another is Omid Djalili, a British-Iranian stand-up comic, who once played Arab villain roles in Hollywood films. A third is Mina Anwar who played the role of The WPC Maggie Habib in the situation comedy, *Thin Blue Line*.

Despite the potential pitfalls, British television executives are on the hunt for classy, funny comedy from Muslims who can laugh at themselves, while at the same time generating humour that crosses cultural boundaries. Jokes about the Qur'an may well be banned, but gags about men in polygamous marriages might just slip through the veil.

Ball games

Boxing, cricket and rugby are among the sports in which Muslims from Britain excel at the highest levels. But there is comparatively less Muslim participation in other sports, particularly in football, as well as on track and field.

The Muslim contribution to English cricket goes back many years. Nasser Hussain was the first Muslim to captain an England cricket team, but he was not the first Muslim to play for England. That was Iftikhar Ali Khan, a Muslim *nawab* (or feudal prince) from India. Khan played in the infamous Bodyline Series against Australia in 1932. That year, he was also awarded the Wisden Cricketer of the Year award.

One of England's newest cricketing prospects is 22-year-old Lancashire fast-bowler Sajid Mahmood. Mahmood is related to the Bolton-born Olympic silver-medallist boxer Amir Khan. Khan, along with 'Prince' Naseem Hamed and the heavyweight Danny Williams is one of three Muslims prominent in boxing.

By contrast, there are no Muslims in football's Premier League, and comparatively few Muslims are seen supporting club sides. Racism is a major factor in this; something that is widely

recognised by, among others, the Football Association, as well as the Commission for Racial Equality. Another factor (that inhibits women's participation) is the requirement to wear shorts or short skirts.

Partly as a consequence, many cities in the UK support Muslim-only cricket and football leagues. Moreover, Britain is regularly represented by a women-only team at the Islamic Women's Games, which are held in Iran.

Links and further reading

Internet

Shakespeare and Islam Season 2005
www.shakespearesglobe.com

Khayaal Theatre Company
www.khayaal.co.uk

Festival of Muslim Cultures 2006
www.muslimcultures.org

Salaam Festival of Music From the Muslim World
www.culturalco-operation.org

1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim Heritage in our World
www.1001inventions.com
www.muslimheritage.com

Glossary of Arabic terms

'alim An *'alim* is an Islamic scholar, and scholars collectively are know as 'ulama.

da'wah The invitation or call. It describes the Muslim's duty to invite others to Islam.

fatwa A legal opinion given by a Muslim religious scholar or legal authority. It can relate to any matter that is subject to Islamic law.

fiqh The knowledge and explanation of Islam through its laws.

hadith The recorded sayings of the Prophet, sifted, validated and prioritised by early Muslim scholars and an important component of the *sunnah*.

hajj The 'fifth pillar of Islam', consisting of a series of ritual acts performed at Makkah on the ninth and tenth days of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Islamic lunar year.

halal That which is lawful, permitted, good, beneficial and hence praiseworthy.

haram Unlawful and prohibited from a religious standpoint. An epithet applied in general to actions or things considered sinful for Muslims.

ijtihad Often described as 'reasoning by analogy', *ijtihad* is the process of rational extrapolation whereby Islamic scholars extract guidelines for contemporary issues from a corpus of texts that are themselves not seen as subject to reinterpretation.

jihad Literally, *jihad* means 'striving' and describes any sincere struggle for God. The 'Greater Jihad' is a moral, inner struggle; the 'Lesser Jihad' can be a literal battle, but only under strict conditions of self-defence or the protection of others from oppression.

salah The supreme act of worship in Islam, normally (but, to Muslims, inadequately) translated as 'prayer'. There are five appointed times for prayer each day, but it is common to perform additional *salawat*. A person can – and does – perform voluntary ones.

shari'ah For Muslims it represents the eternal, ethical and moral code of Islam based on the Qu'ran and Sunnah. It includes all the religious, liturgical, ethical and legal systems which, taken together, regulate the lives of practising Muslims. It is a great deal more than the family and criminal codes that are often intended by non-Muslim commentators using the name. Contrary to popular opinion, shari'ah is organic and evolving, and contingent to local contexts. See *ijtihad*.

shi'ah Literally meaning 'the party'. A school of thought within Islam. Muslims of the *shi'ah* – known as *Shi'a*, or shi'ites – are the dominant Muslims of Iran, southern Iraq and some other sub-national areas of the Muslim world.

shirk The Islamic concept of the sin of idolatry, the association of partners with God. The opposite of monotheism.

sunnah The established corpus of what the Prophet said, did, agreed to, or condemned. The *sunnah* is a source of the Shari'ah It is the root of the word *sunni*, used to describe orthodox Muslims who follow the *sunnah*. They are the majority of Muslims worldwide.

ummah The global community of Muslims.

'umrah A minor pilgrimage to Makkah, which does not count towards fulfilment of the *hajj*, and may be made at any time rather than during the prescribed *hajj* month.

waqf (pl. ***awqāf***) Charitable endowment or trust set up in perpetuity, usually to support a charitable purpose or religious endowment.

wudhu The ritually prescribed ablutions which a Muslim must make before prayer (specifically salah).

zakah Obligatory alms-giving required of Muslims for the sharing of wealth with the poor and the community. It is the third pillar of Islam.

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Disclaimer: This list contains the names and contact details of a number of the more important Muslim organisations in Britain. The selection carries no suggestion of endorsement by the British Council or its partners; we have attempted simply to list organisations representing a wide spectrum of Muslim opinion, which are open to press contact and have agreed to list their press spokesmen in this book.

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