Between Diaspora and Mainstream: Making Sense of Muslim Communities in Britain

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Introduction

To understand the diverse ethno-Muslim communities which have made Britain their home over a period of sixty years requires insights drawn a variety of academic disciplines, especially migration studies, the sociology of religion and history. These studies illuminate the specificities of competing understandings of Islam that migrant communities brought with them from their countries of origin. It is also clear that second and third generation British Muslims have to negotiate relations between three distinct religious and social worlds: traditional Islam imported from their relatives' homeland; expressions of Islam drawn from across the Muslim world – the *umma* – now accessible at a click of a mouse; and, Britain itself, where, among a new generation of graduates and professionals, some are seeking new and more expansive readings of Islam to connect with their lived experience, while others, albeit a small minority, are also tapping into 'shaykh google' and the social media to embrace violent, jihadist readings of their tradition. There is a wealth of diversity within British Islam and this short article simply gives a brief and sketchy overview of some of the main trends.

Muslims in Britain: outliers in Western Europe?

A political scientist studying the emerging Muslim elites in Europe (parliamentarians, city councillors, community activists and professionals involved in civic and self-consciously Muslim organisations) noted that in five of the countries she studied between 10-22 per cent could be described as 'neo-orthodox', that is, those who consider western norms are incompatible with Islam, which means Muslims must attempt to live separately while remaining loyal citizens. The outlier in this research was Britain, where the percentage identifying as neo-orthodox was over 70 per cent.¹ This reminds us that no one is Muslim-in-general. As we shall see, a very conservative traditionalism has become entrenched in a majority of Britain's mosques which means that alternative readings of Islam have to find institutional space outside such mosques. This in combination with other factors begins to explain the attraction of 'Islamism' (ideological and political) to educated Muslims disillusioned with a fossilised traditionalism which does not seem to speak to their condition.²

¹ Klausen, J. (2005). *The Islamic Challenge, Politics and Religion in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.95.

² Shavit, U. (2014). *Islamism and the West, from "cultural attack" to "missionary migrant."* London: Routledge, offers a useful definition of 'Islamism' as 'an ideology that regards Islam as the exclusive source of political authority, and political activism as the instrument to instate Islam. An islamist is a person who ties this ideology with a specific political and social program and seeks to implement that program using political means' (p.3). Shavit analyses the thinking of key second generation, mainstream Arab Islamist intellectuals such as Yusuf al-

A traditionalist scholar's teachings

To indicate some of the tensions generated for British educated Muslims let us briefly examine the teaching of a British-trained Muslim scholar, a legal expert, Mufti Saiful Islam. In his book of legal advice he gives answers to questions put to him from within his tradition.

With regard to modern science, the mufti is a creationist, evident in his answer to the question 'Can you explain what Evolution is and how wrong Charles Darwin's theory is regarding man? What does the Holy Qur'an say about the beginning of life?' His creationism is influenced by the Turkish writer Adnan Oktar who publishes under the pen name of Harun Yahya. Saiful Islam's book shop is full of Yahya's pamphlets, which embody 'a muscular form of creationism' which are 'fiercely opposed to the theory of evolution.'³

The Mufti's views on women are very conservative. A questioner asks: 'Many Muslim sisters travel to far towns and cities and even to different countries for higher education or employment without any *mahram* [a person to whom marriage is not permitted]...Is it permissible for them to travel without a *mahram*?' The mufti is categorical in his answer:

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

In all, the impression given is that on important matters Islam is a self-contained world. This is borne out by the following comment:

Islamic lifestyle has no parallel. Islam provides moral guidance to every aspect of human life and gives the solution to our daily problematic issues. The Holy prophet is an exemplary role model for the whole of mankind. *So the question arises, why is there any need for Muslims to emulate the conduct of others?* (emphasis mine).

Qaradawi (b.1926) on how they envisage relations between Muslim and Western societies. His study examines three theories central to their work: The first theory suggests that the Muslim world has been subject to a cultural (or ideological) attack that aims at de-Islamizing Muslim societies, an attack which has been largely successful and must be countered with a process of re-Islamization. The second theory diagnoses the West as a godless, materialistic, hedonistic and corrupt civilization in decline and prophesies that Islam will rise to lead humanity in its stead. The third theory posits that Muslim migrants will bring about the Islamization of the West (p.2). Such views are widely shared by South Asian Islamists.

³ See Filiu, J. P. (2011). *Apocalypse in Islam*. Berkley: University of California Press, p.172.

The answer to this rhetorical question is clear. Wider society for Saiful Islam takes on the appearance of an assault course with trip wires everywhere to embarrass the devout: at school or in offices he might be expected to shake hands with the opposite sex; socialising with Muslims, let alone non-Muslims, is best avoided because of doubts over whether any of the food offered is properly *halal*. Muslim women might suppose they can initiate divorce proceedings in a British court, but, of course, unless they get the husband's approval from an Islamic Council they will be living in sin. In a society where all financial products accrue or incur interest Muslims must avoid any interest bearing account and avoid working in most financial institutions. 'One must decide between temporary worldly gains and the curse and anger of Allah.' There is little warrant here for relating to people of other faiths, still less the possibility that wider society may have something to teach Muslims. The overall logic is to create a parallel world, minimising interaction with non-Muslims.⁴

I have chosen this scholar because his views are mainstream within the traditional Sunni 'school of thought' to which he belongs. This tradition – *Deobandi* – imported from South Asia, has been most successful in institutionalising itself in Britain running over twenty 'seminaries' and accounting for some 40 per cent of the total mosque capacity.⁵ This pattern of institutionalisation of traditional Islam has no parallel across Western Europe and begins to explain the huge presence of 'neo-orthodoxy' among Muslim elites. Further, his views on gender are consistent with a thousand years of Qur'anic and legal commentary across the pre-colonised Muslim world on the Qur'anic verse (4:34) which seems to permit husbands to beat disobedient wives as a last resort. A female Muslim scholar has argued that this verse has been used to justify the view that 'men have direct, unfettered access to God...[while] women's relationship to God is mediated by men, who must oversee their wives' moral well-being.'⁶

No one is a Muslim-in-general

The Muslim communities that began to migrate to Britain in large numbers in the 1950s to meet labour shortages in heavy industries carried with them radically different histories and diverse cultural baggage. There are some 100,000 Muslims from Turkish backgrounds in London: they have little public profile and seldom feature among the faces of angry young radicals protesting against this or that issue. The Turks were never colonised; rather, they were the colonisers of a huge empire including much of southern Europe and the Arab world. Further, since the 1920s, they have been exposed to an uncompromising, doctrinaire secularism which Ataturk borrowed from the French. Today, Turkey is part of NATO and wants to join the European Community.

⁴ Shaykh Mufti Saiful Islam. (2010). *Your Questions Answered*. Bradford: JKN Publications, pp.79, 248, 208-209.

⁵ See Bowen, I. (2014). *Medina in Birmingham Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*. London: Hurst and company, pp. 19 and 7.

⁶ Chaudhry, A. S. (2013). *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.12.

This in marked contrast to many Muslims from South Asia who shape the public profile of Islam, especially outside London. According to the 2011 census, they comprise 70 per cent of the 2.7 million British Muslims (4.8 per cent of the population): 43.2 per cent are of Pakistani heritage, 16.5 per cent Bangladeshi and 8.3 per cent of Indian heritage. South Asia was colonised by the British. They are often referred to by commentators and social scientists as the new Irish. As with the Irish they carried into Britain negative stereotypes of the British and vice versa. This is evident in the content and ethos of Islamic 'seminary' training, explored later.

Algerians, Egyptians and Saudis, from whom were drawn the 'Arab Afghans' who comprise the backbone of al-Qaida related groups such as the Islamic State, have never been numerically significant in Britain. Most Arabs in London either fall into the category of international commuters, well educated students who have chosen to stay, or political exiles.

Ethno-religious clustering and local politics as examples of a 'settler' mind-set

Notwithstanding the ethnic diversity of Muslim communities in Britain, in Tower Hamlets it is Bangladeshis who dominate, comprising 30 per cent of the residents, with the next largest ethnic population, Indians, just 2 per cent, and white communities accounting for 53 per cent. The situation in Tower Hamlets indicates the political danger of two rival ethnic blocs. An 'independent', Lutfur Rahman, was elected as Executive Mayor in a bitter dispute with the local, Labour Party. 'In December to February 2010/2011, for example, Mayor Rahman used his office to direct £150,000 to three mosques which some allege are involved in extremism...The resulting controversy demonstrated the level of fear and anxiety that resulted from the election of a man who is perceived by many as the representative of just one of Tower Hamlets' two competing ethnic groups.'⁷ Many northern mill towns are also characterised by such bi-cultural realities.

Outside London, it is Pakistanis (70 per cent of whom have roots in Azad Kashmir, one of the least developed areas in Pakistan) who provide the ethnic lens through which Islam is seen. Their traditionalism is kept alive by substantial exchanges of religious leaders, politicians, investment, as well as surprisingly high levels of transcontinental marriages: in the cohort of mothers born between 2007 and 2011 in one northern city, 80 per cent of parents were born overseas.⁸ Just over a half of the Muslim communities are under 25 as against a third in wider society. Since the average number of children in Pakistani and Bangladeshi families are 4.7 and 4.2 compared with 2.3 nationally this suggests that Muslim communities could almost double within the next twenty years.⁹

⁷ See Wind-Cowie, M. (2014). 'On the Ground 2: Tower Hamlets and Newham', in Goodhart, D. (Ed.), *Mapping Integration*. London: Demos, p.99.

⁸ See Goodhart, D. (2013). *The British Dream: Successes and failures of post-war immigration*. London: Atlantic Books, p.78.

⁹ Pauly, R. (2004). *Islam in Europe: integration or marginalization?* Farnham: Ashgate.

With regard to the Pakistani Kashmiri community, ethnic clustering in inner city wards translated into the selection of councillors. In Bradford, this triggered a political crisis, albeit different from Tower Hamlets. At the root of the Bradford situation is the importation of a Kashmiri clan structure, at once patriarchal and hierarchical, with landed clans at the top and artisan clans at the bottom. Such clans (referred to as 'brotherhoods' / *biraderi*) operate as a patron-client system with clan members allegedly more interested in representing the interest of their own clan than their constituency. Such clans are exclusionary freezing out able young British Muslims, especially women outside the dominant clans.¹⁰

The socio-economic location of British Muslims

If Muslims are to be equitably incorporated within British society, policy makers will have to focus at city level where Muslims are disproportionately concentrated. These are cities, especially in the north of England, where the industries, especially textiles, which attracted migrant labour have collapsed. Since most young Muslims are from 'a working-class with the majority...living in neighbourhoods considered to be the most deprived wards in England...[this is] reflected in statistics as underachievers, anti-school rather than pro-school and generally displaying signs of disengagement with school authorities.'¹¹

Sarfraz Manzoor, writer and political commentator, considers the 'perpetuation of first-cousin marriages and spouses brought over from Pakistan' has consolidated 'monocultural communities' with 'prejudices in that community never challenged, only reinforced.' This was an environment enabling the Trojan Horse episode in Birmingham where an intolerant and aggressive form of Islam sought to take over certain schools, which 'left unchecked, [would] confine schoolchildren within an intolerant, inward-looking monoculture that would severely inhibit their participation in the life of modern Britain.'¹²

Despite narrowing the educational gap in the last few years, as with all communities, the gap between male and female success within the Pakistani community remains wide. Thirty-five per cent of Muslim children are growing up in households where no adult is in employment (compared with the national figure of seventeen per cent) and unemployment levels are three times the national figure. The persistence of conservative attitudes to gender segregation (*purdah*) partly explains why some sixty-eight per cent of Muslim women are economically inactive, as compared to less than thirty per cent for Christian women and approximately thirty-five per cent for Hindu and Sikh women.

¹⁰ The success of the maverick Respect candidate, George Galloway, in winning one of the Labour Party's safest seats, Bradford West, in March 2012 is inexplicable without understanding the dynamics of such clan politics. See Lewis Baston, *The Bradford Earthquake*, The Democratic Audit, 2013.

¹¹ Ahmed, S. (2009). *Seen and Not Heard, Voices of Young British Muslims*. Markfield: Policy Research Centre, Islamic Foundation, pp.39-40.

¹² Manzoor, S. 'To be a British Pakistani today means distancing myself from the news. How did this happen?' (2014, September 1st) *The Times*.

Of course, the Muslim communities are generating a middle class as youngsters go to university. However, while this development is to be welcomed, two caveats have to be included. A perceptive commentator worries about 'cultural illiteracy amongst Muslims'. This, he explains, in terms of most graduates pursuing careers in the 'technical, scientific, medical, financial or legal professions...There are relatively few Muslim graduates in the humanities and social sciences...By default, the career choices of our best and brightest means that we remain culturally delinquent and unable to recognise the subtleties required for the art of persuasion.'¹³ Secondly, a study of 5,523 Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage students of Business Studies based on data from the national Student Survey, 2008-2010, noted that 'British Muslim students get comparatively low A-levels grades, overwhelmingly enter post-1992 universities (former polytechnics), live at the parental home during term-time, and are decreasingly satisfied with the quality of the higher education they receive.'¹⁴

Brent is not Leicester is not Bradford

Different cities have quite distinct profiles: Brent one of the most ethnically diverse Muslim communities in UK. It is where the upwardly mobile British Bangladeshis move to from Tower Hamlets. A localised study indicated that there are some thirty ethnic groups in Brent.¹⁵ This ethnic diversity has generated huge creativity with Brent the home of Islamic Human Rights groups, pioneering Muslim women's groups (*An-Nisa*) and the home of British Muslim magazines in English. Further north, in the east Midlands, a majority of Leicester's Muslim communities are 'twice migrants' with origins in East Africa. They fled brutal Africanization under Idi Amin, and arrived with considerable 'cultural capital'. They had learned to live as a minority in East Africa over the previous fifty years, were English speakers, and had generated commercial and professional networks. They have contributed greatly to local economy.

It is from such communities as Brent and Leicester that the YUMMIE phenomenon has emerged: Young Upwardly Mobile Muslims who provide a market for the beautifully produced Muslim life style magazine *Emel* and the journal *Critical Muslim*. They also are the pool from which activist Muslim groups are drawn, young professionals who have pioneered the *City Circle*, a space in London where Muslims working in the city can debate what it means to be a British Muslim; the young adults in their twenties who created the Muslim Youth Helpline counselling service, creating an institutional arena where issues of sexuality,

¹³ Atif Imtiaz, S. M. (2011). *Wandering Lonely in a crowd: Reflections on the Muslim Condition in the West*. Markfield: Kube Publishers, p.57.

¹⁴ See Hussian, D and McLoughlin, S. (2013). "United Kingdom." In Nielsen, J. S. (Ed). *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Volume 5, Leiden: Brill, pp.692-693.

¹⁵ Listed in S.R.Ameli. (2002). *Globalization, Americanization and British Muslim Identity*. London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Publications.

relationship and mental health can be discussed; issues which are frequently taboo among elders and religious leaders. They have also pioneered a vibrant Islamic Youth Culture.¹⁶

In contrast to Brent and Leicester, Bradford (like many northern cities) has suffered massive de-industrialization with high levels of unemployment. Some sixty thousand textile jobs were lost between 1960-1990. The majority of the city's growing Muslim community have roots in rural Kashmir and is a very young community: in the 2011 census the Muslim population comprised circa 25 per cent of the district but 43 per cent of the school population. The Pakistani communities include a growing 'underclass', with a significant section of young men underachieving in schools, joining an intractable white underclass on outer estates. This opens the door to extremists in both communities intent on capitalising on a widespread feeling of malaise, whether the BNP or *Hizb at-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation: a radical movement with roots in Palestine). Both are carriers of a supremacist ideology, one based on a selective interpretation of 'Englishness', the other an equally tendentious interpretation of Islam. Alas, YUMMIES are also involved in such radical, anti-western movements as well as constructive movements such as the Islamic Youth Culture.

Youth alienation amongst sections of British 'Pakistani' and white communities translates into major problems of crime, drugs and anti-social behaviour. The prison population now includes a disproportionate 'Muslim' component, some seventeen per cent. Such factors accelerate the flight of the affluent in *all* communities and can threaten business conduct. Relations between British Pakistanis and English communities are rendered difficult by a number of factors: a measure of residential segregation of communities which is even more apparent in schools which have become ever more ethnically homogeneous; as well as high levels of youth unemployment which means there is little interaction at work. This means that all too often, there are neither opportunities, institutional spaces, nor a common vocabulary to talk openly and honestly about problems within and between communities: fear of being labelled racist, if wrongdoing is challenged; fear of confronting the gang culture, the illegal drugs trade and growing intolerance, harassment and abuse that exists across communities. In part, such fears paralysed professionals from dealing with sexual grooming in towns such as Rotherham.

Identity and belonging: not easy being Muslim after 7/7

Since the 1990s there has been a new emphasis on 'identity politics'. Muslim identity politics was apiece with multiculturalism and the pluralisation of interest groups, whether the basis was race, gender, sexuality or regional. Where one could argue that one's identity needed recognition, resources and representation followed. As one acute social scientist noticed, Muslim identity politics became:

¹⁶ Herding, M. (2013). *Inventing the Muslim Cool, Islamic Youth Culture in Western Europe*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

integral to local community politics and thrives through romantic, global solidarities as wars and massacres in Palestine, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Gulf, Chechnya, Kashmir, India and so on fill our newspapers and television screens and lead some young, British-born Muslims to reinvent the concept of *umma*, the global community of Muslims, as global *victims*.¹⁷

Such politics persisted in the new millennium with Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria adding to the list of grievances. While educated Muslims would organise aid to stricken areas or join radical groups, among working class Muslims in the inner cities, most young men did not involve themselves in Muslim organizations. Instead, they used Islam in the construction of an assertive identity which was often little more than a tribal badge of identity.¹⁸

There is a satisfying and seductive allure about self-representation as victim. It relieves communities from self-criticism. However, this has been less easy after 7/7 which was a shock for Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The fact that British Muslims had visited such an atrocity on fellow citizens began a period of soul searching in sections of the Muslim community.¹⁹ However, it also opened Muslim communities to intense and sustained scrutiny, whether from the media, politicians, academics and the intelligence services. Hardly any aspect of community life has been spared the unwelcome glare of media attention: specific cultural practices and abuses have been unhelpfully conflated with Islam: everything from 'forced marriages', female gender mutilation, head scarves and face coverings (*hijab* and *niqab*) to gun crime, sexual grooming gangs and heroin distribution. Moreover, stoning for adultery and amputations for theft, as practised by Saudis and the Taliban, are presented as if normative for all Muslims in all places for all time.

Many educated Muslims have begun a process of further self-education, tapping into 'Shaykh Google' to find answers to the many questions a skeptical wider society are now asking about Islam. This can have both liberating and disturbing consequences. British Muslim women are also finding their voice and beginning 'to question their elders by comparing what they had discovered in the sources of Islam with what their elders believed. This situation occurs in a range of issues from forced marriages to seeking higher education....females [are] particularly vociferous in discussing the topic of education...They argued that their parents' expectation of them and what they understood as their rights and responsibilities as a Muslim were, at times, at polar opposites...[This can generate] constant battles about topical issues or [the] leading of double lives.'²⁰

¹⁷ Modood, T. (2005). *Multicultural Politics, Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p.160.

¹⁸ See Samad, Y. (1998). "Media and Muslim Identity: Intersections of Generation and Gender", *Innovation*, 11:4.

¹⁹ For these developments see Lewis, P. (2007). *Young, British and Muslim*. London: Continuum.

²⁰ Ahmed, S. (2009). *Seen and Not Heard, Voices of Young British Muslims*. Markfield: Policy Research Centre, Islamic Foundation, pp.42-43.

For many young Muslim men living in inner city areas there has been a process of multiple marginalisation, from wider society, mosque and home. Such young men seek sanctuary with their 'mates' on the streets.²¹ A study of working class, Bangladeshi men in Tower Hamlets, also noted the 'spectacular failure' of imams to connect with the young, which left 'a gaping void in guidance'. A youth worker observed that:

Most mosques don't want to engage the younger people. Their committees are run by the elders, and they don't understand that young people don't want to go to mosques just to pray like the elders. They want a place to talk, laugh, learn, socialize and network.²²

Living in a society well as a Muslim minority requires investment in Islamic institutions to generate serious rethinking of the Islamic tradition for this new and perplexing reality which encompasses one in five Muslims worldwide. A South African Muslim scholar, now at Notre Dame University in America, has identified with unexampled clarity the enormity of the task ahead:

The body of thought that the project of re-thinking...attempts to confront is premised on a triumphalist ideology: an age when Islam was a political entity and empire. A cursory glance at this intellectual legacy will show how this ideology of Empire permeates theology, jurisprudence, ethics, and espouses a world view that advances hierarchy.²³

At a conference some years ago, he told me that he was working on a book with the poignant title *After Empire*, in which he seeks to disengage the religious disciplines from the imperial narrative in which they are embedded, since that narrative is now dysfunctional.

Specific intellectual challenges facing Muslims as a minority

Thus far, the focus has been on social issues and the patterns of exclusion which British Muslims face. This is important because many young Muslims, especially in the inner city, face similar problems to white working class lads: poor education, impoverished environment, high levels of unemployment, a situation in which young men, 'hoodies', become the new folk devils. However, Muslims also face a new set of intellectual tasks posed by being a minority in western society. This is over and above making a multiplicity of practical accommodations to a culture and society which is very different to that which their parents or grand- parents left behind. For example, in restaurants owned by Muslims there is a spectrum of positions on the provision and sale of alcohol – *haram* in Islam: some

²¹ See Khan, S. A. (2012). 'The phenomenon of serial nihilism among British Muslim youth of Bradford, England.' In Ahmad, F. (ed). *Muslim Youth, Challenges, Opportunities and Expectations*. London: Continuum, pp.23-25.

²² Gest, J. (2010). *Apart: Alienated and Engaged Muslims in the West*. London: Hurst and company, pp.120-121.

²³ Moosa, E. (2000). 'Introduction' In Rahman, F. *Revival and Reform in Islam*, Oxford:Oneworld, p.26

restaurants will not sell it themselves but allow diners to bring it in with them; others will sell it themselves and some of the largest and most successful will not allow it on their premises.

It is worthwhile recalling that Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) did not envisage minority Muslim communities formed by voluntary economic migration from Muslim to non-Muslim lands. More than a quarter of a century ago, the late Sheikh Dr Zaki Badawi (d. 2006) lamented the fact that Sunni 'Muslim theology offers, up to the present, no systematic formulation of the status of being in a minority.'²⁴

Nor are Muslims better equipped for interfaith dialogue with Christians. One of the few British Muslim scholars who has actually studied Christianity regrets that 'a frank super-sessionism written into the Islamic tradition leaves little need for "curiosity" about "the otherness of the other."' ²⁵ This has created a huge hole in Islamic training. While Muslim scholars, especially those tasked with giving legal answers (the *mufti*) are required to have some basic knowledge of the local customs and practices of the people amongst whom they live, he noted that:

In Europe, I am not aware of any madrasa which is in the business of training 'ulama [in] even the basic concepts of the Judaeo-Christian traditions ... Furthermore, there is an urgent need to introduce the intellectual and cultural trends of Western society into Muslim seminaries's syllabi.²⁶

Making sense of Muslim diversity

To understand Islam and Muslim communities in Britain, there is an imperative need to understand the ideologies and ethos informing the main Islamic movements in Britain, imported largely but not exclusively from South Asia which the migrants carried with them. To this end, Innes Bowen, a BBC journalist, has produced an indispensable guide with the revealing title: *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*, in which she outlines the history, key ideas and some of the main personalities of the most significant movements in Britain: how they are organised, transnational links and their respective stances on gender, jihad, attitudes to wider society and governance. The strength of the book comes from eighty interviews conducted during its seven year gestation. As a good journalist, Bowen is adept at uncovering the debates and tensions within and between movements. For example she rehearses 'the classic bits of mis-information' entertained by Sunnis about Shias shared with her by a convert to Sunni Islam who became a Shia.²⁷

²⁴ Badawi, Z. (1981). *Islam in Britain*. London: Ta Ha Publications, p. 27.

²⁵ Siddique, A. (1997). *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*. London: Macmillan, p. 196.

²⁶ Siddique, A. (2000). Fifty Years of Christian-Muslim Relations, *IslamChristianity*, 26, 51-77. A promising initiative has just begun at Cambridge – www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org – whereby a course is being developed to address such lacunae. On its website a number of CMC Papers can be downloaded: No 1 is entitled 'Some Reflections on principles of Islamic Education within a Western Context' and itemizes the enormity of the challenges ahead.

²⁷ Bowen, I. (2014). *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*. London: Hurst and Company,

Bowen is right to insist that ideology is important. She was shocked by the ignorance of such ideologies exhibited by 'politicians, interfaith groups, police and journalists who interact with these Islamic groups:'

The phenomenon of 'home-grown' terrorism in Britain cannot, for example, be explained in purely sociological terms. Those involved in terrorist plots have come from a wide range of ethnic, social and educational backgrounds. The only thing they have in common is a shared set of ideas and a willingness to act on them.²⁸

Bowen's work will, hopefully, challenge lazy generalisations about Islam and Muslims in Britain. In future, discussion and policy will have to be informed by her detailed knowledge of the eight main movements in Britain, to each of which she devotes a chapter: Deobandis, Tablighi Jamaat, Salafis, Jamaat-e-Islami, the Muslim Brotherhood, Barewli, the Shia 'Twelvers' and the Ismailis.

Bowen's work reflects the ethos of the BBC at its best: informative, impartial – by which I mean an insider can recognise themselves in what she writes – yet identifying worrying issues and thus not neutral. She does not play down the existence of gender segregation in many traditions, nor the fact that certain trends are complicit in violence – if not in Britain, then overseas. Occasionally she will reproduce a comment that clearly shocked her: whether a Deobandi insider who points out Muslim children from a young age are subject to 'subtle demonization' directed at wider society or an academic whose researches indicate that Tablighi Jamaat have promoted 'a sense of paranoia and disgust of non-Muslim society.'²⁹

A crisis in religious formation?

Bowen's work describes well the traditionalism of the Deobandi mufti who featured earlier. However, to understand the crisis in religious formation and possible ways forward we need to hear from Muslims in Britain who have either studied in such seminaries or seek to teach its graduates.

Hamid Mahmood - a Muslim graduate of one of twenty two Deobandi seminaries in the UK – shared with me his MA thesis which drew on interviews with graduates who, like him, had left the institution some years earlier and offered a critical insight into its intellectual and social world. The picture Hamid paints is revealing. First, most of the graduates argue that the training they were given only equipped them for working in mosques, where many were

p.136.

²⁸ Bowen, I. (2014). *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*. London: Hurst and Company, p.1.

²⁹ Bowen, I. (2014). *Medina in Birmingham. Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*. London: Hurst and Company, pp.27 & 47.

employed part-time and consequently had to eke out a living by working in 'Asda, B and Q and as taxi drivers'. Some were angry at the waste of so many years of religious formation which left them virtually unemployable outside poorly remunerated jobs in the mosque. One commented poignantly that the curriculum left him 'helpless' and 'paralysed' due to the lack of career paths open to him and lack of recognised qualifications. As for what they had learned, they realised that there was not a healthy balance between religious disciplines and wider 'worldly knowledge.'

The emphasis of the curriculum, apart from learning Qur'an and Hadith, was learning venerable, medieval texts within an interpretive tradition which they were expected to reproduce rather than challenge. The learning of the texts was an act of piety rather than a critical exercise. Such texts would be studied without an understanding of their historical context nor located within an understanding of the development of the legal tradition to which the Deobandis belong. The author drily remarks that it is 'difficult to understand how a close and focused reading of texts explaining medieval transactions and business laws could help the student in an ever-changing economy of the 21st century.'

Hamid surmises that such a pattern of a-contextual study mirrors much traditional 'atomistic' style of interpreting the Qur'an verse by verse. In seeking to explain this fossilised tradition of learning he speculates that it was the trauma of colonisation in the 19th century which generated this defensive mind-set which was all about creating the 'seminary' as 'ideological fortress...[with] defensive, impenetrable walls that would allow no ideological explosives to breach its fortifications ...[its] pedagogy was devised to protect Islam as opposed to allow its natural evolution.' Such conservative '*ulama*' see change not as a legitimate, evolving historical process, which must be understood and faced, but of 'conspiracies' which have to be uncovered and resisted. He mentions a couple of welcome attempts to re-think this legacy but clearly feels that they are very much as yet in the minority.³⁰

Let me now turn to a young Turkish scholar, Dr Abdullah Sahin, a theologian and educator, who has pioneered an innovative M.Ed in Islamic Education in the UK to address the disconnect between the intellectual and social world of the imam and British Muslim youngsters. In his doctoral study, Dr Sahin researched the attitudes towards Islam of some 400 Muslim students, aged 16 to 20, in three sixth-form colleges in inner-city Birmingham. Most had parents from South Asia. He devised a typology around the twin poles of commitment and exploration. Those with a religious commitment not informed by personal exploration he characterized as 'foreclosed'; those showing little evident interest in religion he dubbed as 'diffuse'; and those searching to make sense of religion he labelled

³⁰ I am grateful to Hamid Mahmood for allowing me to cite from his excellent M.A. thesis, *The Dars-e Nizami and the transnational, traditionalist madaris*, Queen Mary, University of London, September, 2012. The full text is available at <http://hamidmahmood.co.uk/2012/11/01/the-dars-e-ni%E1%BA%93ami-and-the-transnational-traditionalist-madaris-in-britain/>

‘exploratory’. Those with a diffuse identity believed in the basic tenets of Islam but did not participate in Islamic practice. Islam was more an identity marker than a personal commitment. Those with a foreclosed identity viewed Islam in an a-historic manner, with Islamic law essentialised as unchanging and applicable to all times and places.

The ‘foreclosed’ usually envisaged an unbridgeable gap between an idealised Islam and the rest of society which was dismissed as morally decadent. Those with an exploratory identity aspired to interpret Islam as relevant to their lives outside the home and ethno-religious enclave. The challenge for the Muslim educator was to engage with the exploratory aspiration of these students, otherwise they, too, in time would become either diffuse or foreclosed. Sahin worried that traditional seminarian formation with its teacher-text centred approach and memorizing-based methods simply focused on the outward teaching of Islam: memorizing a body of religious knowledge, rather than creating a dialogue.

He concluded that despite the fact that most young British Muslims speak and think in English, there does not exist a well-worked out Qur’anic pedagogy in English. This left a majority either ignorant of this fundamental source of Islam or at the mercy of radical, transnational Islamic groups. This drove him to develop his innovative M.Ed programme to furnish imams and other Muslims with the historical and contextual skills to understand how their revered texts were themselves responses to social change in the past and how they might quarry their tradition for insights and resources to respond with equal imagination to rapid social change today.

In conversation, he pointed out that the majority of ‘*ulama* on the course start with a ‘foreclosed’ identity. After all, for them in their seminaries, Islamic education generally reflects an authoritarian and rigid process of knowledge transmission centred round the authority of the teacher and the text. Interestingly, Dr Sahin duplicated this study in a wealthy, Muslim majority country (Kuwait) and found similar problems.³¹

Imams and de-radicalisation

Initiatives such as those of Dr Sahin, along with some imams moving out of their comfort zones to become chaplains and teachers, are contributing to the creation of a pool of imams equipped to understand wider society and connect with young Muslims. This has begun to show results with some 100 imams publicly appealing to young British Muslims not to join the Islamic State in Syria.³² However, before such imams can become a critical mass and act as agents of de-radicalisation and positive change, a number of key structural issues will have to be addressed. In too many mosques the imam remains a low level functionary, poorly educated and lacking any contractual security. A survey of 300 mosques in 2008

³¹ I have quoted from chapter 8 of Sahin, A. (2013). *New Directions in Islamic Education, Pedagogy & Identity Formation*. Markfield: Kube Academic.

³² See imamsonline.com. ‘Over 100 UK imams unite to sign open letter urging British Muslims not to travel to Syria and Iraq’.

indicated that 92 per cent of the imams were foreign born and trained with only 6% speaking English as their first language. This creates a significant disconnect between many mosques and the 52 per cent of British Muslims under 25 years old, most of whom were born and educated in the UK.³³

It is this disconnect which is seen as a factor in a process of radicalisation: British Muslims unable to get answers to their questions often look outside the mosque altogether. There is an emerging consensus that radical anti-western ideas do not translate into violent extremism without the presence of three combustible factors: a Manichean worldview (Muslim versus the infidel); Islam understood as a supremacist, political ideology and a commitment to violence to achieve goals. Research into violent extremism in Britain suggests an additional nuancing of these variables: a sense of moral outrage at crimes committed against Muslims globally and locally; such grievances interpreted as part of a larger war of the West against Islam; a perspective which resonates with personal experience of discrimination, real or imagined; a few individuals are then mobilised through extremist networks, whether face to face or online.³⁴

Of course, insofar as some imams embody a rejectionist, anti-western stance (as documented in Bowen's study) they can be seen as part of the problem. However, as is clear in the case of the Aqsa Mahmood, a young woman, privately educated in Glasgow from a relatively privileged background, 'there was no smoking gun, no family member, no fundamentalist preacher that can be blamed for her radicalisation' She was 'a bedroom radical' drawn into IS through the social media and IS propaganda.³⁵

Peering into the future

It is clear that a new generation of young British Muslim leaders and celebrities is emerging: in the media the likes of the feisty Saira Khan of 'The Apprentice' fame; in sport, the boxer Amir Khan, the cricketer Moeen Ali and Olympic athletics champion, Mo Farah. There are eight MPs and some twenty plus peers in the House of Lords, male and female, including the redoubtable Baroness Sayeeda Warsi. At a local level there are more than two hundred councillors including a number of present and past Lord Mayors.

In all, if one knows where to look, British Muslims have generated some creative thinking: there are websites for progressive Muslims, secular Muslims, even ex-Muslims. Women are very active in the debates within the community: in a new website

³³ See Geaves, R. (2008). "Drawing on the Past to Transform the Present: Contemporary Challenges for Training and Preparing British Imams", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 28(1), 99-112. DOI: 10.1080/13602000802011846.

³⁴ See Sageman, M. (2008). *Leaderless Jihad: Terror networks in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; Pantucci, R. (2015). *We Love Death as You Love Life*, London: Hurst and Co; <http://www.theothinktank.co.uk/comment/2014/09/30/how-do-we-prevent-radicalisation-by-dilwar-hussain>

³⁵ See BBC News online, 'Parents of IS-linked Aqsa Mahmood feel 'betrayed' 3-09-14.

(www.publicspirit.org.uk), Khadijah Elshayyal lambasts 'the gender imbalance in British Muslim organisations'; while Fauzia Ahmad worries about 'British Muslims' relationship crisis.' A new candour is evident. Nowhere is this clearer than in the provocative publication, *Critical Muslim*. Its authors wearily note that traditional Islamic legal thinking, has 'degenerated into a morbid pathology. It is totally devoid of ethics and conscience'. In an issue devoted to 'Men in Islam', atrocities visited against women in Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, not to speak of sexual grooming in British cities, are instanced as 'clear evidence of a culture gone pathological.'³⁶

Such critical commentary is intended to shock Muslims out of denial and intellectual paralysis. It is also the necessary precondition for constructive re-thinking of the tradition. However, the institutionalisation of especially Deobandi traditionalism (unrivalled anywhere else across Western Europe) will mean that making space for different and more expansive readings of Islam which engage with wider society will continue to confront accusations that such expressions of Islam are little more than a sell-out to western modernity. Further, so long as the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Gaza continue (which many Muslims continue to construe as a western inspired war against Islam) relations with sections of the Muslim communities will remain fraught.

In the long term, the most important work often goes on unnoticed. For example, British institutions opening their doors to Muslims and being willing to negotiate reasonable accommodations to Muslim-specific needs, whether Housing Associations, the Scouts or churches. Such relationships across communities can chip away at the encapsulation of certain ethno-Muslim communities and break down suspicion.

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³⁶ I have drawn from *Critical Muslim* 2, 'The Idea of Islam', and *Critical Muslim* 8, 'Men in Islam', p.8 and p.5 respectively.