BOOK REVIEW

'THE INFIDEL WITHIN': MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN SINCE 1800

Ansari, H. (2018). *'The Infidel Within': Muslims in Britain Since 1800*. London, UK: Hurst Publishers.

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In this monograph, Humayun Ansari, Professor of the History of Islam and Culture at Royal Holloway, University of London, covers its topic, Muslims in Britain since 1800, in two parts: "Arriving, 1800-1945," and "Staying—1945 Onwards." The central question revolves around identity and belonging as is evidenced by the title of the introduction: "Is there a British Muslim identity?"

Ansari challenges both reductionist discourse on Britishness and homogenous understandings of Muslims in Britain. Questions of identity are framed with the notion of "hybrid identities." He paints a picture of shared religious identity using the Islamic term *umma* that signifies a "world-wide community which does not recognize national or racial differences" (p. 7). The book explodes any notion of Islamic homogeneity in the U.K. by detailing many differences found among British Muslim groups over the last two centuries.

Yet, Islamic diversity in the U.K. not-withstanding, Ansari writes of an emergent British Muslim consciousness in the face of threatening New Right policies of separatism that move away from multiculturalism—events like the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War also played a role. That is, while great diversity exists in the British Muslim population, "all have had to face the reality of living as a minority under non-Muslim rule" (p. 13). The introduction concludes with a historical discussion of 'native' British converts to Islam and young British Muslims (p. 15-22). In general, both groups actively promoted

http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jmp
DOI: 10.2979/muslphilcivisoc.4.1.04

similarities between Islamic and British or Christian ideas and practices. For example, Jesus was acknowledged as a prophet of God and some Muslims would say that a Muslim was a "better Christian" (p. 15). Young British Muslims, primarily composed of immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants, generally highlighted their identification with Islam as more important than being British. However, they were often more secular than their parents—"challenging of received wisdom" and "questioning of the traditional male-dominated order within Muslim communities" (p. 22).

During the time covered by the first major section of the book, "Arriving, 1800-1945," class more so than race or religion (directly) determined the experiences encountered by Muslims in Britain. In addition, fears of sexual predation (in part, reflecting contestations over gender norms: should women mingle with men in society?), Social Darwinism plus eugenics, and cultural paternalism confronted and disempowered Muslims in the British Empire. Prior to WWI, much of Muslim immigration to the U.K. was a consequence of empire and colonialism with its supporting ideology of the "civilizing mission" or the three Cs (Christianity, Commerce and Civilization). Islamic responses included perseverance (see the account of Quilliam's Muslim congregation in Liverpool), pan-Islamism, and Muslim modernism (p. 90-92). As is often the case, military conflict created opportunities for evolutions of civil society. In this case, "more Muslims than ever before formed part of the fabric of British society" and gained "a measure of acceptance in their localities" (p. 99-100). But, the text is relatively silent on precise reasons for and examples of these positive changes except to say that relative acceptance was the result of a level of assimilation. Whatever the exact case with regard to greater inclusion of Muslims in British society, deep difficulty and hostility remained.

The second major section, "Migration to Britain after WW2" divides post-war Muslim migration into two phases. From 1945 to the early 1970s, economic growth required cheap migrant labor in large numbers. This period ended with changes to global economic patterns in the wake of the 1973-74 oil crisis (p. 162). From the 1970s onward, "involuntary or coerced" relocation caused by crises in countries of emigration has been the source of much of Muslim immigration to the U.K. (p. 176).

One important implication of this work for the nonprofit and voluntary sector is raised briefly in the introduction when Ansari lists a variety of Muslim voluntary associations to illustrate the diversity of Islam in Britain. Scholars such as Estelle James posit that diversity, and in particular religious diversity, leads to the proliferation of nonprofit

and voluntary organizations and activity (James, 1993). This connection between religious diversity and the voluntary sector is strong, even if mostly implicit, throughout the book. An important subset of religious nonprofit organizations are religious educational enterprises. The tension described between advocates of (Islamic) religious education and public education raises issues of the boundary between religion and government; and, it resembles similar contestations in other countries (e.g. in the U.S. between some conservative Christians and advocates of non-sectarian education) (p. 336f). Elements consistent with the secularization thesis of religion in Western societies are also present throughout this work, which regularly addresses the challenge for British Muslims posed by the secular nature of British society (e.g. p. 407). Ansari shows a variety of responses —ranging from less confidence in religious authority to greater religious commitment—of British Muslims to secularization.

Another connection between Ansari's work and civil society is the documentation and discussion of philanthropic and religious paternalism in the 19th century. Interestingly, Thomas Clarkson and other abolitionists along with the *Society for the Protection of Asiatic Sailors,* the *Sailor's Magazine* and the *Evangelical Magazine* trained their attention on the conditions of sailors, including a majority Muslim group of seamen known as 'lascars' (p. 71-74). Here, notions of the "deserving" poor, paternalism, and proselytism are all consistent with broader historiography and critiques of philanthropy.

A final comment on *The 'Infidel' Within* vis-à-vis the study of philanthropy and civil society is to note that the penultimate chapter details the evolution of Muslim organization in Britain in the post-WWII era. This, of course, is the same era in which the nonprofit form proliferated exponentially in the West and around the globe. Among the organizational types described are mosques, umbrella groups, welfare and social service agencies, cultural organizations, and organizations dedicated to Muslim youth and Muslim women.

Moving in a different direction, the book is, in part, an exploration of the tension when divergent religio-cultural groups live together. The title, *'The Infidel Within,'* implies as much. On the one hand, the author does an excellent job chronicling ways in which British Muslims and Muslim immigrants have had to adjust or accommodate themselves to British culture—frequently dealing with racial and religious prejudice and xenophobia. On the other hand, in this meeting and mixing of diverse peoples, the book seldom ponders various legitimate concerns of British or host-culture law, culture and customs. For example, Ansari casually mentions the lack of success

"incorporating elements of Islamic law in various areas of English law" without exploring the philosophical questions implied (p. 406). We are also told that "some elements of English law—e.g. usury, abortion, homosexuality, gambling, the sale and consumption of alcohol, and the absence of capital punishment--*might even appear* to be in conflict with Islamic principles" (emphasis added, p. 240). One struggles to see how "might even appear to be in conflict" is an accurate and dispassionate characterization.

The Salman Rushdie affair may be one of the best illustrations of the challenges that the book downplays. Ansari writes apologetically, "their [British Muslims] sometimes violent campaign [against Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*] suggested they had not quite understood British cultural sensibilities" (p. 245). In addition, the book dismisses British Muslim support for the fatwa of Ayatollah Khomeini condemning Rushdie to death as "media-manufactured" (p. 245). Undoubtedly, these defenses (both about British cultural sensibilities and media hype) are partly true. Yet, there is an obvious element to this story of conflict or divergence over deep-seated values and ideals. In the present moment, as currents of globalization and nationalism roil and unsettle people around the globe, this book misses an opportunity for a more profound and productive exploration of how societies can successfully navigate worldviews, religions, traditions and cultures in tension.

However, this omission is likely the result of the important central focus of the book: to give voice to on an often subjugated, overlooked and voiceless minority. In a world of great inequalities and prejudice, we should be grateful to Ansari for this masterful piece of historiography and cultural commentary. '*The Infidel Within*,' with its detailed historical account, champions dignity and rights for Muslims in Britain. Yet, the careful chronicling and voicing of the struggles of one minority can be read to support the same aspirations for dignity and rights for all minority populations whoever and wherever they are. Ansari's well-researched and written book will appeal to scholars of religion, civil society, philanthropy and history. It could also be a valuable tool for advocates of religious freedom, minority protection and ecumenism.

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References

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