After 9/11: British South Asian Muslims, Islamophobia, Multiculturalism, and the State

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Abstract

In light of the events of 9/11 and the subsequent actions and reactions on the part of nation-states in the West and "terrorists" in the East, this paper discusses the concepts of Islamophobia (political and media-manufactured) and multiculturalism in the British context. Rising Islamophobia, state actions, and media reactions to 9/11 have led to changing definitions of the "good multicultural society." British Muslims are caught in a quagmire: Their loyalties are questioned by a society and polity that is still in the processes of establishing its "Englishness" from its "Britishness," while growing Islamic political radicalism undermines the already precarious relations between British Muslims and the state.

Introduction

There has been a Muslim presence in Britain since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Muslim seamen and traders from the Middle East began settling around the major British ports.[1] Muslims from the British Raj

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in India also came to England to study or trade. The community's major growth, however, dates from the post-Second World War immigration of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians to fill specific labor demands in declining industrial cities in the southeast, the Midlands, and the north.[2] In the 1990s, there was an intake of eastern European and Middle Eastern Muslim refugees emanating from such places as Bosnia and Kosovo, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq.

Although conceptual overlaps exist, the British discourse on racialized minorities has been transformed from "color" in the 1950s and 1960s[3]; to "race" in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s[4]; to "ethnicity" in the 1990s[5]; and to "religion" in the present climate.[6] Here, Islam has the greatest profile. British popular discourse has shifted from seeing minorities as homogenous entities to discerning differences within and between "Blacks" and Asians; then, within South Asians, to differences among Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis; and finally among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. Religion has emerged as a major social signifier.

In Britain, the burgeoning interest in religion has come from both an awareness within the ethnic minority population of Islam and from its heightened international profile. Comprehensive demographic data on British Muslims became available only after a question on religion was included in the 2001 Census of the United Kingdom. Indeed, the vast majority of Britain's 1.6 million Muslims are from South Asia (around 1 million, two-thirds of whom are from Pakistan, less than one-third from Bangladesh, and the remainder from India). The residual Muslim population is from North Africa, eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia. Around one-third of all British Muslims are under the age of fourteen. In addition, the Muslims remain concentrated in older post-industrial cities and conurbations in the southeast, the Midlands, and the north. Their population has grown from about 21,000 in 1951 to 1.6 million at present.[7]

Today, these Muslim groups are more likely to be living in some of the most inferior housing stock, have the poorest health, tend to significantly underachieve in education, and are underemployed or, more likely, to be unemployed in the labor market when compared with their non-Muslim South Asian peers. Many of them, specifically those from the rural areas of Azad Kashmir (Pakistan) and Sylhet (northwest Bangladesh), are working in the declining or highly competitive manufacturing, textile, and catering sectors; living in inner city housing built at the turn of the twentieth century (which often needs substantial repairs and maintenance); and live as joint and extended families in restricted zones of ethnic and cultural maintenance.

They remain close to kith and kin, extending their religious and cultural manifestations of life, and thus help to shape their presence in Britain.[8]

The present is also a period in which subsequent generations of British South Asian Muslims have begun to question their parents' religious and cultural values. Furthermore, the increasing link between local and global capitalism is an important phenomenon to consider. Deindustrialization, technological innovation, and the internationalization of capital and labor have helped to ensure that many of them remain at the bottom of society. These patterns emerged early on in their immigration and settlement from the late 1950s right through to the early 1980s. However, these social divisions remain very much alive today – largely as a function of pernicious structural and cultural racism as well as the fact of increasingly competitive labor, education, housing, and health markets.[9]

In terms of anti-discrimination legislation, British state policy toward Muslims has been inconsistent at best and patchy at worst. They are also becoming increasingly overrepresented in prisons. On the whole, Muslims from South Asia have come to represent a minimal contributory role within the socioeconomic and sociopolitical milieu of British society. Nevertheless, several positive elements have materialized, and it is important to build upon them: the provision of *halal* food and more sensitive dress codes in the army, and female members of London's Metropolitan Police Service can wear the hijab (headscarf).[10]

Islamophobia: Definitions, Media, and Politics

In Britain, notions of cultural and social identifications of the "Other" stem from an understanding and experience of imperialism and colonialism.[11] Islamophobia is defined as the fear or dread of Islam or Muslims. Although the term is of relatively recent coinage, the idea is a well-established tradition in history. Since the genesis of Islam in 622, Europe's awareness of Muslims has been overwhelmingly negative. During this long contact, the established European powers have found it convenient to portray Islam and Muslims in the worst possible light, so as to prevent conversion and to encourage European resistance to Muslim forces on the borders. Although there have been periods of learning and understanding on the part of the English, there has also been ignorance, conflict, and the demonization of Islam.[12] Muslims have been portrayed as barbaric, ignorant, closed-minded semi-citizens, maddened terrorists, or intolerant religious zealots.[13] Such negative characterizations are still present today, as seen in the negative

representation and treatment of the Muslim "Other," which are designed to aggrandize the established powers and thereby legitimize existing systems of domination and subordination.

Just as present-day Islamophobia relies on history to fill in the substance of its stereotypes, the contemporary fear of Muslims has it own idiosyncratic features connecting it with the more recent experiences of colonialism, decolonization, immigration, and racism. The Runnymede Trust[14] stated that Islamophobia is created analogously to xenophobia, the disdain or dislike of all things "foreign." Seven features of Islamophobia were identified: Muslim cultures are seen as monolithic, Islamic cultures are substantially different from other cultures, Islam is perceived as implacably threatening, Islam's adherents use their faith to gain political or military advantage, Muslim criticism of western cultures and societies is rejected out of hand, the fear of Islam is mixed with racist hostility to immigration, and Islamophobia is assumed to be natural and unproblematic.

However, it is important not to treat Muslims as an undifferentiated mass, for there are many ethnic, cultural, social, economic, and political differences between individuals and groups. This taxonomy of Islamophobia is very relevant today. But while racism on the basis of "race" continues, the anti-Muslim shift suggests markers of difference of a social and religiocultural nature. Furthermore, while traditional markers of "race" have been afforded legislative protection, the same does not hold for "religious" markers, where protection is restricted only to ethnically defined religious communities through case law, namely, members of the ethnic Jewish and ethnic Sikh communities in Britain. (However, it is understood that inciting religious hatred has been legislatively addressed, and a European directorate outlawing religious discrimination in employment took effect in December 2003.)

Despite Muslims being targeted by right-wing groups with "more subtle forms of racist prejudice and hatred" after 9/11, they nevertheless remain outside the domain of anti-racist legislation.[15] Concurrently, recent events have also seen Muslims represented in a range of different media that have worked collectively to reinforce negative beliefs and perceptions. The social and religious foundations of Islam, as well as Muslims in general, have attained such a degree of notoriety that their "visibility" is immediately recognizable in entirely negative and detrimental frames of reference. Since 9/11, the situation has both deteriorated and intensified. Islamophobia has gained such a discursive prevalence that western European society is becoming even more uncritically receptive to an array of negative images and perceptions about Islam and Muslims.

Muslims in Britain feel that part of the reason for their continued existence as an unaccepted and often despised minority is based on the presence of the "evil demon": the media.[17] The charge of media bias needs to be taken seriously, as the coverage of "extremist groups" and "Islamic terrorism" has increased dramatically in recent periods. The language used to describe Muslims is often violent, thereby inferring that their movements are also violent. Arabic words have been appropriated into universal journalistic vocabulary and invested with new meaning, one that is generally extremist and aggressive. For example, jihad now signifies a military war waged by Islamists against the West, whereas its true Qur'anic meaning is, in fact, far broader and refers more to the idea of struggle. Words such as fundamentalist, extremist, and radical are regularly used in apocalyptic headlines across all sectors of the British press.

Indeed, the current portrayal of British Muslims is part of a "new racist discourse."[18] This "new" racism differs from the "old" racism in that it is more subtle but, at the same time, explicit in the direction it has taken. In the post-9/11 era, politicians have used the people's fear of Islam for their own ends. By focusing on the "war on terror" instead of Islam, politicians use the existing anti-Muslim frame of reference but replace it with the idea of "terror."[19] This reporting is compounded by its focus on the "enemy within" or the loyalty of British Muslims to Britain. Reasons for the increased presence of these themes in newspaper reporting are symptomatic of the increased fear of the "Islamic terrorist" since the 9/11 attacks (and, subsequently, the bombings in Madrid on 11 March 2004).

Islamophobia is also present in British politics. In the summer of 2001, Britain witnessed some of its worst inner-city disturbances in nearly two decades. Young British South Asian Muslims, living in the deprived inner cities of Bradford, Oldham, and Burnley, clashed violently with local police. Their pent-up fury was a result of generations of socioeconomic exclusion, as well as a clever targeting of sensitized areas by right-wing groups working to manufacture ethno-religious tension. However, it was the government's responses to the disturbances, in reports published soon after 9/11, which must be considered.

For example, an illustration of Islamophobia in politics can be seen in New Labour's idea of "community cohesion."[20] In keeping with New Labour's rhetoric of inclusion, this idea masks what is effectively a case of "blaming the victim." Home Secretary David Blunkett MP, while promoting this idea, announced a test of allegiance. He referred to the problems of the "excess of cultural diversity and moral relativism" that prevents posi-

tive change, and also referred to English language issues and female circumcision in speeches soon after 9/11. In other words, he conflated many different behaviors and cultures with that of the South Asian Muslim community in northwest England. Although these are important issues in their own right, as well as part of a process of making civil society more democratically functional, these were not the factors behind the "riots."

This segregation is thought to be self-imposed and the cause of racism, rather than a result of it. Alhough economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized they are, on the whole, willing to participate in society.[21] Segregation is the result of racism and discrimination. But at the same time, identification with Islam is the reason given for segregation. It is relatively easy to blame people and their values while ignoring processes, institutions, and wider local area dynamics (though it is recognized that Muslim communities can mobilize class and ethnic resources to develop religiocultural, social, and economic infrastructures to support their existence).

As New Labour makes preparations for reelection in June 2005 and an unprecedented third term in power, and although there have been genuine shifts in its approach to multiculturalism, citizenship, and social justice, during its second term, the policy of assimilation has been rejuvenated.[22] Blair's Britain is defining a new ethnicity – Englishness as opposed to Britishness – in an era of globalization and devolution. Eager to embrace the capitalist project, New Labour is also at pains to offer answers to the economic, political, and social anxieties and tensions faced by Britain's poor, many of whom are members of various ethnic minorities and Muslim.[23] The young South Asian Muslim men of Oldham, Bradford, and Burnley who confronted the police in such dramatic scenes during the summer of 2001 do not suffer the problems of being "under-assimilated." Indeed, their predicament is that of a society divided by racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia.

Lessons from History and 9/11's Impact

Ever since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Muslims have become a focus of attention.[24] Pictures of 3 million men and women on the streets of Tehran, shown on television screens all over the world, shocked many in western Europe. The Salman Rushdie affair of 1989 highlighted the extent to which the media and British Muslims (who vociferously opposed the book's publication) became "emotionally unhinged" over the issue, and how Britain's South Asian Muslims were shown to be weak and intolerant when, in fact, they were merely expressing their opinions on *The Satanic Verses*.[25] This

piece of fiction, which deeply offended Muslims, gave rise to discussions of freedom of speech, blasphemy laws, and the protection of non-Christian religions in Britain.

In addition, the first Gulf War (1990-91), the genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993-96), the Oklahoma bombing (1995), the Taliban in Afghanistan (1997-2002), Grozny and Kosovo (1999), the recent Palestinian Intifda (since September 2000), and the war on Iraq (2003) have all played a part in creating a transnational Muslim solidarity; a genuine and conscious identification with others of the same religion. Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis[26] – positioning East and West, as well as Islam and Christianity, as diametrically opposed and irreconcilable has only served to build upon growing anti-American sentiment and increased Orientalism through oversimplification and generalization.

Nothing, however, could have prepared the world for the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Reactions were swift, and associations between Islam, terrorism, and the notion of a "Christian versus Islamic" conflict only served to further fuel anti-Islamic and anti-American sentiment. It gave rise to the efforts of British far-right groups to paint Muslims as epitomizing unwanted difference, and almost excused anti-Islamic violence. In the days following the attack, an Afghan taxi driver was attacked and left paralyzed in London. To the murderers, his beard and attire resembled those of Osama bin Laden – the man thought to be behind the 9/11 attacks. Since then, books and television programs about Islam, the Qur'an, jihad, international terrorism, international security, political Islam, radical Islam, and Islamic militancy have been published to explore and discuss the many elaborated – and often conflated – debates on Muslims and Islam. There appears to be genuine desire to learn more and deliberate the issues in relation to a religion that, for many, has remained relatively unfamiliar, although this is not always carried out without a value-, power-, or honor-free agenda.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Prime Minister Tony Blair MP was keen to present the imminent action against al-Qa'ida as not a war on Islam (although President Bush's comment that the war on terror would be a "crusade" left little doubt in the minds of British Muslims that political Islam was his main target). Blair's dilemma was how "to balance the bombing of Muslims abroad with wooing them at home."[27] On 28 September 2001, a few hours after the attack on Afghanistan, a delegation from the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), Britain's largest single Muslim pressure group (formalized by New Labour in 1999), was invited to Downing Street.

Paraded to the media were smiles and shaking hands. On 9 October 2001, the MCB issued a press release strongly denouncing the war, an action that incensed New Labour. Although the MCB did not support the anti-war demonstrations, it clearly did not want to further alienate the government – an important trade-off was taking place with politicians that would ultimately gain the upper hand. This led to the beginning of the end of MCB's cozy relationship with Number Ten.

Furthermore, at the time, pressure was applied to the five British Muslim parliamentarians (namely, MPs Khalid Mahmood and Mohammed Sarwar, and the peers Lord Ahmed, Lord Patel, and Baroness Uddin) who apparently were "encouraged" to sign a letter denouncing the events of 9/11 and partly justifying the retaliatory bombings (*Guardian*, 13 November 2001). Khalid Mahmood MP soon denied, however, that he had signed any such letter (*Guardian*, 16 November 2001).[28] Regardless of the accuracy of these claims, it is clear that challenging struggles are taking place over issues of consultation, dialogue, and the maintenance of the Muslim presence within New Labour.

Both external and internal forces affected the positions of British Muslims before the 9/11 events. After this tragedy, both external and internal factors have been exacerbated. Externally, the international agenda now dominates domestic politics, security and anti-terrorist measures have been tightened, and citizenship tests are required for new immigrants. It is also important to consider the disturbances in the north in 2001, as the government's reaction to them has had direct implications for British South Asian Muslims. Internally, young Muslims are increasingly found in the precarious position of having to choose between one set of loyalties in relation to "the other" (Islamic verses British; liberal verses radical), and being impacted by radical Islamic politics on the one hand and developments related to British multicultural citizenship on the other. This creates tensions and issues, which encourage some to take up the "struggle" more vigorously, while others seek to adopt more western values, for example. Although a simplistic distinction, this observation does have a genuine value in the current climate. Further research is needed to help distinguish the depth and breadth of the issues involved here.

British multiculturalism is a distinctive philosophy that legitimizes demands upon unity and diversity, seeks to achieve political unity without cultural uniformity, and cultivates among its citizens both a common sense of belonging and a willingness to respect and cherish deep cultural differences. Although this is an admirable ambition, it is not easily achieved. In

fact, there are few examples one can use to verify its success. The New Labour experiment has had both high successes and low failures – the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Human Rights Act 1998, the Stephen Lawrence Report (1999). But as a result of 9/11 and the northern "riots," public policy has focused on domestic security and the war against terrorism.

Both of these have significant impacts on British Muslims. The important point to emphasize here is that the complicated story of integration and exclusion cannot be understood in the terms set by Home Secretary David Blunkett MP around "assimilation" and "integration." Multiculturalism has strong limitations, because it rejects "cultures" that do not correspond to nation-states. Cultural nationalism is about present politics, not ancient memory, although that memory is used as an instrument. Developments to this philosophy suggest that while the categories of "British" and "English" are being formed and re-formed, Muslims in Britain are considered by their religion first and foremost. At the same time, many of them are disempowered, disenfranchised, disenchanted, and disaffected groups existing at the margins of Britain's economy, society, and polity. Furthermore, there are issues at the inter-generational level, particularly in the current climate of globalization, that relate to how Islam (and Muslims) is currently being recognized, treated, and appreciated. In the post-9/11 climate, British Muslims are at the forefront of questions in relation to what it means to be British or English. The basis of this rests in issues on the global agenda as well as local area concerns in relation to community cohesion, citizenship, and multicultural philosophy.

Concluding Thoughts: A New Multicultural Citizenship

The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent reactions seem to have permeated many areas of everyday life for Muslims everywhere, and no less so than in Britain. As an event, it has implications that go far beyond merely "international terrorism." In fact, these implications are linked to politics, religion, and issues of cultural differences in an effort to maintain harmonious societies and democracies in the West, which contain a significant number of Muslims (approximately 25 million). In the Middle East, as revealed in the aftermath of the war on Iraq, further unrest, political turmoil, and violent action and reaction are the main features of the current climate. In the near future, as western targets may well become increasingly targeted by extremist groups, relations between Muslims and their western hosts will continue to remain problematical, with discussions focusing on citizenship, civil soci-

ety, multiculturalism, and political representation and participation (as components of democracy), and identity, gender, inter-generational development, radicalism versus liberalism (as components of the individual).

Given that British South Asian Muslims have reached the third generation, issues of concern have shifted from cultural assimilation and social integration to religious identity and discrimination. The study of Islam and Muslims has become more vigorous, and greater emphasis is being placed on understanding the nature and orientation of British Muslims in more anthropological, sociological, theological, and political science perspectives. Indeed, the first generation of South Asian Muslims kept their religious practices and expressions well within private or community spheres. Subsequent generations have struggled with issues of integration and racism in the climate of the early 1960s; cultural pluralism in the 1970s; free-market economic determinism and the rolling back of the state's frontiers in Thatcher's and Major's Britain from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s; and through to the "third way" center-left politics of assimilationist New Labour ever since then. At the same time, identification with Islam is gaining strength among some members of this latest generation, both as a reaction to racist hostility as well as a desire to understand Islam in more precise detail.

Distinguishing the multiplicity, fragility, and diversity of diaspora identities, and here both as South Asian and Muslim, it is important to appreciate that such a citizenship is not so unsophisticated. To many white British people, participating in this society as citizens is an uncomplicated fact, "a set of clothing that fits like a glove, put on at birth, taken off at death, viewed uncritically and unchallenged." British Muslims have to address citizenship not only within the framework of their host country's legal and political structures, with its emphasis on democracy, secularism, individual rights, and pluralism, but also decide how to negotiate and harmonize all of these in terms of Shari`ah law and various interpretations of and practices in the Islamic state discourse. They have had to discover how to be "good Muslims" in a secular society and how to develop appropriate strategies for living as a minority in a non-Muslim society.

This task has not been easy, given the local, national, and international focus of attention since 9/11. In reality, it has been necessary to reconcile religion-based identity and citizenship, as well as individual rights and community rights, in a setting where the beliefs of others have dominated, without retreating into isolationism. Perhaps above all, they have needed to discover how to "participate in a society which has no need for Islam in its public life." In addition, British South Asian Muslims have inherited the

colonial history of past relations with Britain. Combined with racism, which is endemic, this creates an atmosphere of mistrust.[29] The recent "war on terror," however, is not going to wither away, because it is a war that has no singularly defined enemy; only a set of ideologies, falsely appropriated and actualized by the "clash of fundamentalisms" thesis.[30]

But this global picture is only part of the experience of Islam and Muslims here in Britain. More immediate are the everyday realities (i.e., poor housing, jobs, health, and education). Once many more British South Asian Muslims have a more determined economic and social presence in society, only then will their demands, needs, and requests be met. But to be in a viable position to reach this objective, the elimination of pernicious structural and cultural racism is crucial. The nature and orientation of British multiculturalism is undergoing a severe test, and it will be important to observe closely how Muslims experience it over the next few years. What is apparent, however, is that 9/11 has changed the world, and, along with it, how Muslims will be regarded, considered, and treated for the foreseeable future – possibly for the remainder of the twenty-first century, as Akbar S. Ahmed has argued recently.[31]

What direction this will take is a function of nation-states and their policies toward different Muslim migrants, minorities, and citizens, as well as how Muslims work to adapt to a non-Muslim majority society by closely adopting some of its more central norms and values while challenging others to make their new home a more peaceful, interdependent, and secure place. British society has become even more sensitive to the threat of "Islamic terrorism," while, at the same time, wider events in the world, including the "war on terror," continue to shape the government's attitude toward Muslim citizens as well as to serve as important foci for political, social, and policymaking discussions.

British South Asian Muslims are at a crossroads in their history of immigration to and settlement in Britain. At the same time, one striking feature of their structural experiences is their socioeconomic position. This group constitutes one of the most marginalized, alienated, isolated, discriminated against, and misunderstood groups in society (although there is a small but burgeoning British Muslim elite). They are negotiating a set of identities and realities that are constantly changing, and it will be important to see how they develop in the near future. As research questions continue in the areas of race, ethnicity, religion, and culture, as well as public policy concerns at the local, national, and international levels, the study of British Muslims will provide important and useful findings.

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