MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS IN BRITAIN TODAY

Living together, respecting difference?

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Introduction

Christians and Muslims have seldom found it easy to understand each other. History and memory matter. The Muslim migrants who made Britain their home over the last 60 years often looked at Britain through a postcolonial lens. Living together, respecting difference, is at best an aspiration, one which needs to take account of the reality that for many immigration is ‘a brutal bargain’ – the loss over time of familiar social worlds, both for the established community and newcomers (Scheffer 2011: 8). It is a loss analogous to a ‘grieving process’, which involves denial, anger and acceptance; very similar to the familiar three-generation immigration trajectory of ‘avoidance, conflict and accommodation’ (36).

Bradford, a northern mill town and the author’s home for 30 years, offers a particular vantage point from which to view this process. Here, Muslim communities have grown in the 50 years since 1961 from 3,000 to 130,000. When I arrived in 1985, many in the inner city congregation where I worshipped were in mourning for a social world that was fast disappearing. The last English butcher had just closed, and the ḥalāl butcher who had taken over was not about to provide their bacon and pork pies. Most of their Muslim neighbours were from a remote, rural area in the mountains of Pakistan known as Azad Kashmir, or Mirpur. Their ward in 2011 was 75% Muslim. Outside London, Muslims with roots in South Asia, particularly the million or so from Pakistan, become the ethnic lens through which Islam is seen.

Bradford, the Church of England and the Muslim communities

Bradford assumed national and international notoriety in 1989 when, in front of the town hall, local Muslims burned Salman Rushdie’s novel The Satanic verses. Before this happened most people were hardly aware of the implications of changing local demographics. The Muslim communities had settled within nine inner city wards, where over time they became the majority. This, in turn, translated into these wards beginning to return Muslim councillors: three in 1961, nine in 1991 and 24 in 2011 out of a total of 90 councillors across the Bradford metropolitan district council’s 30 wards.

The Church of England’s parish system covers the whole of the country. Whether priest, dean of a cathedral or diocesan bishop, all alike have a responsibility for the welfare of a place – parish, city or diocese – as well as congregations. Bradford diocese responded to the new Muslim presence
in the inner city in multiple ways. First, it appointed an interfaith adviser in 1973 and a small committee of people with practical experience of working in South Asia, from where most migrants had originated. This committee provided resource material for the inner city congregations about the religions and cultures of the newcomers, whether Muslim, Hindu or Sikh. Members of congregations were encouraged to become volunteers running language classes, mixed playgroups and youth groups and also on occasion were encouraged to make their church hall available for Muslim worship until the community had saved enough to build their own mosques. To enhance the religious and cultural literacy of local people, a Roman Catholic mission society, the Columban Fathers, supported by the Bradford Council of Mosques, funded a joint trip of Christians and Muslims from Bradford to visit Pakistan in 1989. In all such initiatives the emphasis tended to be the pastoral imperative of embodying hospitality and welcoming the stranger.

Second, the church supported the creation of institutions which provided an opportunity for members of different religious communities to meet and work together on issues of common concern, whether the Racial Equality Council, an Inter-Faith Education Centre or charities such as Common Purpose. Here future leaders developed the skills and confidence to work across religious and ethnic communities. It is no coincidence that the first Muslim Lord Mayor of Bradford, appointed in 1985–86, was a member of the Racial Equality Centre, where he honed such skills and competences.

Third, Christian chaplains used their presence in institutions to make space for the specific concerns of Muslims and those of other religions. In 1999 this bore fruit with the commissioning of the first batch of hospital visitors from all religions trained to support the multifaith chaplaincy.

Fourth, the local bishops have frequently deployed their position in the city and nationally, when they sat in the House of Lords, ‘to affect the temper and challenge the terms in which issues were discussed, whether the dismissal of Muslims as “fundamentalists” or homogenising them with Sikhs and Hindus within the category “Asian”’ (Lewis 1993: 133).

Finally, church leaders have stood up for religious minorities when an issue of justice and equity was at stake: in Bradford this meant supporting the Muslim desire for *ḥalāl* school dinners in the teeth of opposition from animal rights activists, supported by the far right.

This chapter will make clear how such a pattern of activities has developed in the last 20 years, which in Bradford has included two riots involving young British Pakistani men in 1995 and 2001, anxieties around home-grown Islamist terrorism since 7/7 and, latterly, has joined the list of towns where between June 2009 and May 2013, eight different groups of Muslim Pakistani men . . . were convicted of sexual grooming . . . an epidemic of male perversion’ (Miah 2013: 98). This threatens to conflate Islam in the public mind with abuses within a particular ethnic community.

**Do we live together?**

More than three-quarters of all Muslims are clustered in four of the 10 English and Welsh regions. The 2011 census indicated that the Muslim communities had grown from 1.5 million to 2.7 million in 10 years, amounting to 5% of the population. This figure, however, obscures the pattern of growing concentration in deprived, inner city conurbations. The Yorkshire and the Humber region overall has but 6% Muslim, but within it the Metropolitan district of Bradford comprises 25% Muslim, with some 43% of all schoolchildren.

Bradford by 2012 had 40 primary schools and 10 secondary schools where 85% of the pupils are Pakistani, all within nine of the district’s 30 wards which are already Muslim majority or fast becoming so. The same pattern is evident in the three other regions with large Muslim concentrations. Between 2001 and 2011 Muslims residing in the 10% most deprived Local Authority Districts in England grew from 33% to just under half (46% or 1.22 million) (Ali 2015: 46). This
suggests a significant and growing section of Muslims are living in ‘separate and sequestered communities’ (Turner 2008: 148).

This is only part of the picture. There is also within the Muslim communities a growing business sector and professional middle class. According to the 2011 census the proportion of Muslims in the ‘higher professional occupation’ category is 5.5%, which is comparable to the overall population – 7.6%. The percentage of Muslims (over 16) with ‘degree level and above’ qualifications is similar to the general population (24% and 27% respectively). With regard to Muslim women, 29% between the ages of 16 and 24 are in employment, compared to approximately half of the overall population, and ‘43% of the 329,694 Muslim full-time students are female’ (Ali 2015: 19). Eighteen per cent of Muslim women are ‘looking after home or family’, compared to 6% in the general population (Ali 2015: 63).

Such generally positive developments need to be qualified at two points. A perceptive Muslim 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’ (Imtiaz 2011: 57). Second, a study of 5,523 Pakistani and Bangladeshi-heritage students of business studies 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’ (Hussain and McLoughlin 2013: 692–3).

What is significant is that such upwardly mobile Muslims, as with other minority communities, are leaving inner city ethnic enclaves and moving into super-diverse neighbourhoods. Those belonging to the white British who are leaving such areas are tending to move into white majority areas where their relatives and friends reside. In short, across all minority communities in 2011, 4.1 million or 41% ‘live in wards that are less than half white . . . [t]his compares with about a million (25% of the minority population) living in white-minority wards in 2001. . . . There are a growing number of zones in which minorities are relatively isolated from whites’ (Kaufmann and Harris 2014: 52 and 56, italics added).

**Not easy being young, British and Muslim**

Whether or not growing up in such ethno-Muslim enclaves, second and third generation British Muslims are having to negotiate relations across 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 the social media to embrace violent readings of their tradition.

A recent article in *The Times* newspaper by a Bradford imam sought to explain the traumatising impact on the ‘war on terror’ generation of ‘vilification and demonisation’:

Most of them have to negotiate the challenges of identity, integration and inclusion on their own, sometimes having to act as their own parents and influenced by their peers or social media. Imagine their frustrations when no one is listening to you and giving you a voice, when your parents don’t understand, when the mosque doesn’t understand – and the imam definitely does not understand you.

*(Karmani 2015, italics added)*
These comments remind us that young British Muslims are inevitably caught up in the turmoil across the Muslim world. In addition, the imam points to a widening intergenerational gap expressed in a crisis of authority, political and religious. So, in Bradford in 2012 a maverick politician, George Galloway, capitalising on an intergenerational civil war within the majority Pakistani Mirpuri community, won one of the safest Labour seats in the country. His opponent was accused of benefiting from bloc votes of his dominant clan, which excludes young people from outside the charmed clan circle. An astute political commentator noted that 'without years of neglect, stemming from an accommodation with [Labour and Conservative] power brokers to exploit . . . clan voting solidarity, . . . there would not have been fertile ground for Galloway in Bradford' (Baston 2013: 10).

Elsewhere, in Birmingham, in majority Pakistani Mirpuri areas such clan politics ‘still dominates electoral politics’ (Akhtar 2013: 176), while in the London borough of Tower Hamlets the recent victory in local politics went to an elected mayor who was able to capitalise on ‘a Bengali style politics through patronage and kinship ties’, albeit reflecting an Islamist politics (Tatari 2014: 132).

If imported clan politics fail to engage young British Muslims, the continuing importation of imams or their training in British ‘seminaries’, which still look to a curriculum and ethos drawn from a mother house in South Asia (where some 70% of British Muslims have their origins), creates another chasm. The most successful South Asian franchise, the Deobandi tradition, has ‘twenty-two . . . darul ulooms [seminaries] in Britain’ (Bowen 2014: 19). A recent study of this tradition in India by an academic who revisited the seminaries where he himself had trained four decades earlier concluded that none ‘integrates modern science, social science and the humanities’, disciplines ‘associated with fear and loathing of a materialistic West whose knowledge traditions are viewed as poisonous’ (Moosa 2015: 51–6).

The institutionalisation of a reactionary traditionalism on a scale unrivalled elsewhere in western Europe explains, in part, why Muslims in Britain seem outliers with regard to other European Muslims. In a study of the emerging Muslim elites in six European countries, a political scientist discovered that in five countries between 10 and 20% considered western liberal norms as incompatible with Islam, suggesting Muslims should attempt to live separately while remaining loyal citizens. In Britain the figure was over 70% (Klausen 2005: 95).

**Rude boys, coconuts and extremists**

Unsurprisingly, academics find that many young Muslims are morally adrift, alienated alike from mosque, home and wider society. One study of working class Bengali Muslims in Tower Hamlets speaks of ‘the spectacular failure’ of mosque personnel to connect with a new generation born and educated in Britain, which generates a ‘gaping void’ in relevant religious guidance (Gest 2010: 120–1). Another, focusing on young men in Bradford, observed that:

> Many youths feel alienated from the messages espoused from the pulpit . . . sermons privileging Pakistani issues leave the youth with an abject lack of contextuality. Lamentations over a great and lost civilization, coupled with a continued contempt for the British believed to be responsible for the post-colonial Pakistani morass, leave the youth with little inspiration. . . . [This translates into] cynicism and disdain . . . towards the mullahs. (Khan 2012: 24–8)

The response of professionals to such styles of preaching is increasing exasperation, evident in the title of an essay in a recent collection: “‘Creating a society of sheep’? British Muslim elite on mosques and imams’. As well as rehearsing the previous points, it laments the ‘masculinisation of
mosques . . . only 2% had women on governance committees . . . [with] male interpretations of Islam, based on de-contextualised and dehistoricised readings of the Qur’an and . . . a few Hadith . . . diminishing women’s position in Islam’ (Ahmad 2012: 173).

The failure of many mosques to engage young people, especially women, begins to explain the proliferation of Muslim groups online, seeking to address issues which remain taboo in the Muslim family or mosque. An example is the Muslim Helpline which includes support for gay Muslims, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, even a Council of ex-Muslims.

A social psychologist who researched Muslim youth cultures in Bradford developed a three-fold typology of identities: the rude boy, extremists and coconuts.

Rude boys mix between three cultures: African-American hip hop, Northern [UK] Pakistani and Northern Industrial. The blending of these cultures produces a hybrid identity which is all too familiar in many Northern cities. Extremists are described as such by those who are less practising [Muslims] because they are perceived to have developed an unbalanced approach to their religion. Coconuts are those who are brown on the outside but white on the inside . . . [the latter] faces the challenges that are associated with an assimilationist identity within modern culture. As an individual becomes successful then he or she questions what to take forward and what to leave behind.

(Imtiaz 2011: 85)

Imtiaz considers that the extremist is most challenging for a religious leader to manage. ‘Extremism . . . is the result of a total incomprehension about how to integrate into wider society without losing one’s integrity’ (88). A Muslim theologian and educator who researched the attitudes towards Islam of some 400 Muslim students aged 16–20 in three sixth-form colleges in Birmingham has added depth to these categories. He devised a typology around the twin poles of commitment and exploration. Those with a religious commitment not informed by personal exploration he characterised as ‘foreclosed’; those showing little evident interest in religion he dubbed as ‘diffuse’; and those searching to make sense of religion he labelled ‘exploratory’ (Sahin 2013: 119–48). Those with a diffuse identity (Imtiaz’s coconuts) believed in the basic tenets of Islam but did not participate in Islamic practice – for them Islam was more an identity marker than a personal commitment; those with a foreclosed identity viewed Islam in an ahistorical manner, with Islamic law essentialised as unchanging and applicable to all times and places (Imtiaz’s extremists) – they 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, Sahin concluded, was to engage with the exploratory aspiration of students, because they too would otherwise become either diffuse or foreclosed.

Sahin worried that traditional seminarian formation engendered a foreclosed identity. To address such issues he has developed an innovative MEd programme to furnish imams 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.

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**Christian and Muslim collaboration in the public and civic domain**

A recent study, *Taking part, Muslim participation in contemporary governance*, makes clear that Muslims are increasingly active across three policy domains: ‘equalities and diversity; partnerships with faith and inter-faith bodies for the purpose of welfare and service delivery; and security
and counter-terrorism’ (O’Toole et al. 2013: 11). The study seeks to shed light on Muslim participation by focusing both on governance at the national level and in three cities: Birmingham, Leicester and the London borough of Tower Hamlets.

Time and again Taking part mentions the importance of the Church of England and its personnel, sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground. Typical is the following comment:

In Tower Hamlets and Birmingham local forums on equality and economic sustainability have been established in which faith actors and issues of ethnic and faith diversity are prominent: thus the ‘Fairness Commission’ in Tower Hamlets is headed by an Anglican priest . . . whilst the ‘Social Inclusion Process’ in Birmingham is headed by the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham . . . and features a commitment to embracing ‘super-diversity’.

In Bradford, a year before 7/7, the Anglican bishop, a professor of peace studies at the local university and a leading local policeman established an embryonic Civic Network of sectoral groups across the district (education and youth, business, community and voluntary sector, faith groups, and media, and politics). There were a number of triggers for this initiative. The first were the Madrid bombings in March 2004 and the subsequent insistence by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner that an attack in Britain was almost inevitable. The second was a seminal academic study by an American academic which asked in the context of India: why did three cities implode into Hindu-Muslim violence after the Ayodhya debacle, while three other cities with similar religious demographics did not? His broad conclusion was that while everyday interactions – children playing together, participation in each others’ religious festivals – were important, the crucial variable was the presence or absence of a variety of ‘interethnic and associational’ forms of civic engagement involving both communities, whether business, professional organisations, cultural groups or political parties (Varshney 2002: 11).

The Bradford initiative encouraged each sector involved to identify and invite young ‘Asian’ Muslim professionals. The reasoning was to incorporate a new generation of young people who were often excluded by their elders; also, it was vital that there was adequate Muslim involvement to signal that the Civic Network was rooted in a shared appreciation that any terrorist atrocity would be considered an assault on all people and communities rather than being allowed to exacerbate Muslim and non-Muslim tensions. The meetings were specifically to get each sector to reflect on what they would do to prevent an escalation of conflict following an atrocity. A plausible scenario was developed by the police to which the invitees had to respond. Five sector meetings in the course of 2004 were convened, and then a meeting of representatives of all sectors at the Bishop’s home, where a respected academic talked about the international situation and reminded those present that most respected anti-terrorist specialists agreed with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner’s comments.

One of the aims of the sector meetings was to encourage and enable different institutional actors to talk to each other. For example, it became clear that there was minimal interaction between schools and the youth service, or between schools, the local college and university. Each sector also chose a couple of people to meet together across sectors to share experiences and suggest complementary courses of action.

The Civic Network proved its worth on 7/7 when it met and was able to enact a range of proposals: the Education Authority sent schools guidelines on how to address the issue; the local Chamber of Commerce and the Asian Trades Link, a sister organisation representing Asian, largely Muslim, businesses, publicised a prepared joint statement. The police capitalised
on the network, which had involved some 100 people, and held a series of meetings, especially with vulnerable communities, to reassure them that attacks on them or their places of worship would not be tolerated. There were high-profile signings of a civic condolence book for victims by a cross-section of civic dignitaries and young people from all communities; further, mosque, synagogue, cathedral and Hindu temple were opened for silent prayers for all the communities.

Making institutional space for a new generation of Muslims

The study Taking part also notes the Christian turn in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coa-

lition government, exemplified by the £5 million awarded to fund the Near Neighbours (NN) programme launched in autumn 2011 to promote interactions across faith and nonfaith groups in four urban areas, Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester and parts of East London. More than half the money went to bilateral groups, the Christian–Muslim Forum, The Council of Christians and Jews and the Hindu Christian Forum, all of which were pioneered by the Church of England but include other Christian denominations. A further £2 million is devoted to small grants from £250 to £5,000 to enable local projects involving two different communities in the four designated areas. It is administered by the Church Urban Fund, and applicants require the signature of the vicar in whose parish the activities take place. The aim is to encourage mutual learning and social action across divided communities. So far, some 39% of participants have been Muslim and 36% Christian. The report concludes that ‘NN does seem to be a success in terms of demonstrating the Church of England’s vitality, creativity and perhaps unique position for brokering solutions to common problems’ (O’Toole et al. 2013: 51).

The Civic Network in Bradford deliberately sought to identify and work with a new genera-

tion of young Muslim professionals who are seeking to transcend the constraints of ethno-Muslim identity politics. This is true of NN projects also. Across the country a new professionalism is becoming evident among Muslim organisations. This professionalism is evident in a document already much cited in this chapter produced by the Muslim Council of Britain, British Mus-

lims in numbers. The lead researcher is Sundas Ali of Oxford University. She and her colleagues have produced an illuminating document which does not shy away from awkward facts. They note that alongside the ‘260,000 Muslim married households with dependent children . . . there are over 77,000 Muslim lone parent families with dependent children. There are also 135,000 one-person Muslim households’. They observe that ‘the number of single parent and one-parent households pose a challenge for Muslim civil society. Little systematic research has been undertaken on divorce rates and issues of social isolation. Mosque imams require briefings on such social realities’. The authors also point out that ‘the higher proportion of Muslims in hostels for the homeless and in prison is an unwelcome social reality, requiring urgent attention by mosques and Muslim civil society’ (Ali 2015: 17–18).

The Church of England when engaging Muslim communities has consistently sought to include all Muslim ‘schools of thought’ and to identify young professionals, especially female interlocutors. This has been true of the national Christian–Muslim Forum, as well as faith leaders’ groups convened by Anglican bishops across the country. NN small grants have gone to supporting many projects involving Muslim women. In Bradford one of the NN co-ordinators is a young Muslim woman. In two northern cathedrals, Blackburn and Bradford, Muslim women have been appointed onto the staff in the recent past to encourage relations across the two traditions. In Bradford, a Muslim Women’s Council has been created by professional women as a counterpoint to the male-dominated Bradford Council for Mosques. The churches include such women in their forums.
Since 2001 the Church of England has also pioneered the Building Bridges initiative, an annual scholarly workshop involving both religions, latterly in collaboration with Georgetown University in Washington. This network has always included women, such as Professor Mona Siddiqui of Edinburgh University, whose experience of the meetings has borne fruit in her pioneering new study *Christians, Muslims & Jesus*.

Particular effort and resources have also gone into developing leadership training for young adults across divided communities. In the first decade of the new millennium, Bradford established the Inter-Cultural Leadership School ICLS, a four-day residential for up to 15 young leaders. Consecutive days were devoted to religious literacy, media skills, leadership training and conflict resolution. The ICLS provided ‘a safe space’ to enable the participants to ‘begin to craft a vocabulary to talk about difficult issues’ (Lewis 2014: 198). NN funding has meant that this type of activity continues.

The hardest group to engage with remain the ‘ulamāʾ. However, there are some who have moved out of their comfort zones and developed new social skills as chaplains and teachers. With the support of the Bradford Council for Mosques, a working party was set up involving Anglican clergy and Deobandi imams to provide guidelines to improve relations between communities (see under ‘References’, *Christian Muslim Forum*, www.christianmuslimforum.org). The document of intent was launched with much local media coverage in October 2008, signed by the Bishop of Bradford and leading Muslim scholars.

### Conclusion

The Church of England over a period of 40 years has funded specialist interfaith advisers, with most dioceses now having a full-time or part-time designated officer. These men and women have developed the local, contextual knowledge to advise clergy, policy makers and church leaders in their engagement with people of other faiths. There is now an impressive ‘presence and engagement network’ across the country resourced by the national Inter-Faith Adviser to the Church of England, who also advises the Archbishop of Canterbury. This indicates that such issues are now central to the life of the established church, as well as to their ecumenical partners.

Among the challenges for the future, two presently emerge as major. The first is to make available safe institutional spaces where difficult issues can be discussed. When converts from Islam to Christianity faced hostility in Bradford, the trust developed over 30 years enabled Christians and Muslims to get ‘beyond formulaic pleasantries of interfaith relations and engage . . . critical issues of religious freedom and tolerance’ (Lewis 2006: 2010). The second is to maintain viable churches in Muslim-majority areas to prevent the further encapsulation and isolation of sections of the Muslim communities, as well to be true to the vocation of an established church to serve all within the parish and city.

### References


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Further reading


