

## MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

Archaeological evidence shows there was contact between Muslims and the British Isles from the eighth century. Beginning with these historical roots, Sophie Gilliat-Ray traces the major points of encounter between Muslims and the British in subsequent centuries and explores Muslim migration to Britain in recent times. Drawing upon sociology, anthropology, politics and geography, this comprehensive survey provides an informed understanding of the daily lives of British Muslims. It portrays the dynamic of institutions such as families, mosques and religious leadership, and analyses their social and political significance in today's Britain. Through the study of the historical origins of major Islamic reform movements, it draws attention to the religious diversity within different Muslim communities, and sheds fresh light on contemporary issues such as the nature of religious authority and representation. It also considers British Muslim civic engagement and cultural life, particularly the work of journalists, artists, sports personalities and business entrepreneurs.

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# MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

*An Introduction*

SOPHIE GILLIAT-RAY



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*Dedicated to my cohort of British Muslim sisters:*

*Batool, Farat, Fauzia and Karima*

*‘This is my jihad – to give the British people a true picture of Islam,  
a picture of love, respect and peace.’*

*(Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, Imam, Leicester)*

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## *Preface*

This book aims to provide an accessible introduction to the history, the institutions and the diversity among Muslims in Britain, drawing upon the academic scholarship of the past three decades. As the television journalist Rageh Omaar has observed, there is ‘a hunger for an understanding of Islam in relation to British experience’ (Omaar 2006: 11), but so far there are few sources to which students of contemporary religion might turn. This book aims therefore to meet the need for an introductory academic text, which reflects and synthesizes the wealth of interdisciplinary writing and research about British Muslims that now exists.

Writing about communities of people, including British Muslims, is in any circumstances difficult:

It is inadequate to seek to define what Islam is and what being a Muslim implies primarily or even exclusively on the basis of observations of the actual behaviour of a group. The most accurate description of a Muslim community does not necessarily reflect what Islam can and does mean to many Muslims. In all religious traditions and communities, there are persons and events that obscure rather than reflect what many of those who live in it see as the true character of their faith. (Bijlefeld 1984: 220)

The religious label accorded to Muslim citizens does now appear to have some problematic dimensions. Increasingly, Muslim identity is viewed as reified and exaggerated. A criminal is now a ‘Muslim thief’, the local GP is a ‘Muslim doctor’, and so on. The trouble with this is that Muslims cannot be seen simply as human beings: they have to be perceived mainly through the religious prism. Giving them a one-dimensional description, however important, undervalues the complexity of that person. (Hussain, D. 2008: 40)

Mindful of these warnings, I have nonetheless sought in these pages to sketch out the key debates and issues surrounding Muslims in Britain. Some degree of generalization is unavoidable, but the consequences of this can be leavened to some extent by quoting the personal stories and reflections of individual travellers, biographers and pioneers, both past and present.

The answer to the straightforward question ‘who are British Muslims?’ might seem obvious at first. But ‘Muslim’ is a description or label which may not always be important to those to whom it is applied. Likewise, the self-ascription ‘Muslim’ can be more or less meaningful at different times in the life of an individual:

The stereotype of Muslims assuming an identity that is religious above all else and that is incompatible with the secularized, modern public sphere belies the highly variable ways in which Muslims practice and conceive of relationships between religion and politics and between cultural difference and membership in the public. (Nagel and Staeheli 2009: 99)

When I refer to Muslims in Britain in this book, I am aware that I am privileging a particular (religious) identity over other multiple identifications primarily to define my field of study (Kalra 2000), and with awareness of the danger of constructing essentialized notions of what ‘British Muslims’ are like, individually or collectively. By prioritizing religious identity over other identifications, there is a danger of artificially presenting a supposedly ‘authentic community’ (Eade 1996a: 63) purely on the basis of religion, which then goes on to become subject to political and academic interventions which further reinforce particular conceptions of what being a ‘British Muslim’ involves. So there are considerable difficulties in writing about Muslims in Britain, and indeed about ‘the Muslim community’, because of the supposition of homogeneity contained within the word ‘community’, and because of the problems of artificially prioritizing one identity (religious) over others (class, gender, ethnicity, generation, politics) (Samad 1998). In order to avoid giving the impression of a monolithic ‘Muslim community’, or ‘Muslim world’, a new lexicon is often advocated both within and outside academic discourse (Quilliam Foundation, July 2009)<sup>1</sup> and this new vocabulary rests upon the idea of diverse and distinctive ‘Muslim communities’.

Despite the diversity within and outside Muslim communities, I believe it is still meaningful to consider Muslims in Britain as constituting a distinctive social group, on the basis of a generally shared set of core religious beliefs. These translate into religious practices that are often undertaken as part of ‘belonging’ (however loosely) to a distinctive faith ‘community’. Clearly, the boundaries of any group are permeable, and the manner in which individual Muslims express or practise

<sup>1</sup> See the Quilliam Foundation ‘Media Briefing: Welcome Change of Lexicon away from “the Muslim world”’, [www.quilliamfoundation.org/index.php/component/content/article/515](http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/index.php/component/content/article/515), 4 July 2009.

their faith is highly subjective, and shaped by context and circumstance. Notwithstanding the strategic and variable deployment of individual and collective identity claims, Muslims in Britain arguably have sufficiently shared beliefs and practices to warrant their categorization as a distinctive group (see also Open Society Institute 2005: 56). Many Muslims in Britain (though by no means all) have themselves been pressing for this particular recognition for at least the past two decades.

Much contemporary discussion about Muslims in Britain is now taking place against the background of the current ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ agenda. This has generated a wealth of speculative journalistic writing that has sometimes had the unfortunate consequence of framing British Muslims in definite and distorting ways, as ‘Potential Violent Extremists’. This kind of framing does not contribute to an informed understanding of British Muslim lives, or an appreciation of either the history or the diversity within Muslim communities. Much contemporary writing about British Muslims presents an

apocalyptic account of the threat posed to Britain by extremist Islam. (Indeed a fair proportion of the books published about ‘Islamic terrorism’ adopt this tone.) (Reddie 2009: 140)

This book is intended to rebalance current discourse by focusing on issues that are perhaps much closer to the ‘ordinary’ daily lives of British Muslims. The scholarly literature about Muslims in Britain that has been produced over the past thirty to forty years, and which this book aims to synthesize and reflect, has sought to document the history and settlement of Muslims, the processes of institution-building, and the ways in which Muslims think about their lives in British towns and cities. This book aims to bring that valuable scholarship, much of it contained within specialist academic journals, to a new and more general audience. Arguably, it is only possible to understand currents of extremism and so-called ‘radicalization’ among a small minority by acquiring a better appreciation of British Muslim religious history, the contemporary socio-economic situation and major religious institutions. So, while being mindful of the political, religious and social consequences of ‘crisis’ events over the past three decades (such as the ‘Rushdie affair’,<sup>2</sup> and the terrorist atrocity in London on 7 July 2005), and the need to take their impact on British

<sup>2</sup> The Rushdie Affair generated much academic writing, a small selection of which includes Akhtar (1989); Cohn-Sherbok (1990); Modood (1989); Modood (1990a); Weller (2009).

Muslims and wider society seriously (Abbas 2005), this book deliberately shifts the focus back towards the ‘everyday’ lives of British Muslims.

My writing has been informed by a background of teaching and research based in the City of Cardiff. Compared with the cosmopolitanism and metropolitanism of London, and the particular dominance of South Asian Muslims in cities such as Birmingham, Bradford, or Leicester, during the past decade I have come to appreciate the distinctive spirit of internationalism and multiculturalism that is discernible in Cardiff. Perhaps this is a legacy of the City’s historic importance as an international centre for commercial shipping. Muslim seafarers, students and merchants from diverse origins have been passing through and often settling in Cardiff. This history is today embodied in the intergenerational memories of those now living and working within a short radius of the University, and has helped to provide a unique setting for the writing of this book.

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scholarship. I, of course, take full responsibility for the completed manuscript, and its various shortcomings.

Throughout my professional career, I have made many friends around the UK within different Muslim communities, and within various university departments. I am very appreciative of these friendships and would like to express my gratitude for the kindness that has been shown to me over the years. I would like to record particular thanks to my friends in the Muslims in Britain Research Network, the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group, and the British Association for the Study of Religions.

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Cardiff  
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## *Abbreviations*

BMI	British Muslim Initiative
BMF	British Muslim Forum
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
FAIR	Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism
HT	<i>Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr</i>
MAB	Muslim Association of Britain
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
MINAB	Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board
NUS	National Union of Seamen; also, National Union of Students
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
SMC	Sufi Muslim Council
TJ	<i>Tablighī Jamā'at</i>