# MILLET OR MINORITY — MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

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This research report considers some aspects of the Muslim community in Britain, its constituent groups, their origins and affiliations, and their place and identity in relation to the wider community. The terms 'millet' and 'minority' indicate two possible tendencies, towards, respectively, being a separate entity with their own laws, or integrating with British society while retaining their own cultural traditions. The two may not be mutually exclusive, and eventually neither may be applicable.*

Muslims in Britain cannot at present be classified as a homogeneous group, due to their variations as regards national origins, language, background, present occupations and future aspirations.

## BACKGROUND AND ORIGINS

Although Muslims have lived in Britain since the 19th century, these were small and fairly self-sufficient groups. It was chiefly after World War Two, and the subsequent Partition of India in 1947, that large numbers came to seek work, generally single men from India or Pakistan intending to return home after having saved sufficient money. Since the early 1960s, due largely to immigration restrictions, the emphasis has been on family reunion, which has meant the establishment of a more settled community, with its own social and religious infrastructure.[1]

The main body of Muslims here today hold British nationality and originate from the Indian sub-continent: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Like Hindus, Sikhs and others, these Muslims constitute an 'ethnic minority', the official term for non-indigenous national groups. There are also professional and business men, probably mostly Arabs; diplomatic staff, often with their households; political exiles; students and long-term visitors, from the Arab countries, Malaysia, East and West Africa, Indonesia, South-East Asia. There are converts of European origin, varying greatly in motivation and their degree of cultural adaptation, who may be attracted to one or other Sufi tariqa.

Estimates of Muslims at present resident in Britain vary widely, the most realistic being somewhere below one million.[2]

As with nationality, so with religious affiliation. Muslims include Sunni, Shiᶜa, Ismaᶜilis; from the Indian sub-continent, there is a division between Deobandis ('Wahhabis') and Brailvis, though in some cases this polarisation perhaps really represents tribal or geographical differences, as between Pathans and Punjabis. There are members of the controversial Ahmadiyya, well organised and particularly active in daᶜwa.

## WHAT IS MUSLIM IDENTITY?

Although the Muslim community is thus divided, it can also be seen to be searching for a common identity. Being Muslim may be a way also of preserving national and cultural identity. So, does religious or national loyalty come first? —

* For further details and documentation: J.S. Nielsen, 'Muslim Immigration and Settlement in Britain' Selly Oak *Research Paper* No.21, March 1984; P. Johnstone, 'Christians and Muslims in Britain', *Islamochristiana* 7, 1981, 167-199.

especially for a British citizen. Are some customs actually 'islamic' or 'cultural'? Is the idea of *umma* betrayed by integration with the host community? Is true Islamic life possible in the West, where Muslims are in a minority? What is the place of the shari<sup>c</sup>a? Not all these questions have an answer, but they highlight the issues.

## THE BRITISH RESPONSE: OFFICIAL

The comparatively rapid growth of the Muslim population, as indeed of other 'ethnic minorities', was mainly in large urban centres with, initially, good opportunities for employment. The presence of large numbers of Muslims was perceived in the first place as an increased demand upon educational and health facilities and the social services. In the attempt to prevent discrimination, the Community Relations Commission (CRC) was established in 1968, then in 1977, under the Race Relations Act, was merged with the Race Relations Board, to become the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) with informative, supervisory and advisory functions.[3]

## EDUCATION

Education authorities have responded with a 'multi-cultural' syllabus; and, to overcome language problems, have provided special English teaching for new arrivals, extra tuition, training for their teachers, centralised or at-home language tuition for women, and where possible, mother-tongue teaching in schools.[4]

Religious Education (RE) has changed radically in recent years, in recognition of this new 'multi-religious' character of Britain's schools. The 1944 Education Act, envisaging a basically Christian background for most pupils, required RE in schools, and a daily act of worship ('Assembly'). Today, in some large conurbations, schools may contain up to 90% Muslim pupils. The existing RE system has been revised and many schools have, instead of the older syllabus, something on the lines of 'comparative religion'.[5] Sometimes this can bring about a response from local residents which shows confusion between religious and ethnic identity: any reduction of Christian content in the syllabus is seen as an attack upon British identity.

To the Muslims, a 'comparative' approach is unsatisfactory, since it puts other religions on an equal footing with Islam. Specifically Islamic instruction is provided by the local Muslim community, generally in the mosque in the evenings, though sometimes school premises are made available. Classes are divided into age groups, and teaching includes Urdu and instruction in the basics of Islam, Qur'an recitation and memorisation. The whole system is strongly traditional, and the contrast with the western style of schooling during the day can place a burden upon even the most bright and adaptable youngsters.[6]

## ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

Traditionalist bodies, with a strong sense of their responsibility concerning the preservation of Islamic values, are inclined to think that such part-time instruction is not sufficient. Their call for separate Muslim schools is not always echoed by the parents, who may simply want their children to get on well and profit from the British educational system. Almost all agree, however, on wanting single-sex schools for their daughters.

The establishment of separate Islamic schools would meet with some problems. However, in 1974 a section of the Muslim community adapted a large disused building near Bury, in N-W England, for use as a madrasa. In 1975 'Darul Uloom al Arabiya

al Islamiya' was formally opened. Students come not only from Britain but from abroad, and a strict daily time-table is followed, on the mediaeval madrasa pattern. Several more such schools have been established: in the north (Bradford, Dewsbury) and in London; none has as yet been given status as a 'voluntary' school within the public sector.[7]

## ORGANISATIONS AND IDENTITY

The Muslims' own sense of identity may be indicated by their official organisations, whose chief priorities are the provision of facilities for ritual worship and education. Both are significant for the preservation and continuity of Islam.

In the early stages, a number of small, usually local, advisory groups were able to care for the needs of the community; but as numbers increased, larger, national organisations were established.

## MOSQUES

The acquisition of a place for ritual prayer is one of the first concerns of a local Muslim community. This may involve adapting a house or other building, or later, constructing a purpose-built mosque, where funds permit. The number of mosques today is not known precisely, since a *masjid* varies from a converted terrace house or rebuilt warehouse to a large *jami*ᶜ mosque. A fair estimate would be between 450 and 500.

The first of the purpose-built mosques date from the 1890s, at Woking and Liverpool. Others, with considerable financial support from Muslims locally and abroad, have existed since the 1960s at Manchester and South Shields; since the 1970s at Preston (two, 1970 and 1974); London; Birmingham; Glasgow and Bristol (1981). The Central Mosque in Regent's Park, completed 10 years ago after negotiations dating back beyond the 1940s, sees itself as a centre for the whole Muslim population of the U.K., as well as a place of prayer for those in and around London. It contains a library, several large classrooms, and a residential unit, and to it is linked the Islamic Cultural Centre, which publishes the Islamic Quarterly. Two new mosques are planned for Birmingham, and a large one is being built in Whitechapel, East London.

The mosque can also have a symbolic value both as a reminder of a traditional way of life and as a 'resource of identity' in relating to British society. In planning and building its mosque, 'islamic' in style, the local Muslim community states its presence as part of the wider community, while at the same time preserving cultural and religious identity, with an easily recognisable base.[8]

The first organisation to which a Muslim may belong will be the Mosque Committee, with its educational and welfare concerns. At a meeting in London, 22-24 April 1983, a British Council of Mosques was established,[9] a new organisation to clarify the role of the mosque and to encourage Muslim education, while seeking friendly contacts with official bodies outside the muslim community.

Larger organisations include three which, with some overlap of personnel, reflect views of the Jama'at-i-Islami. These are the U.K. Islamic Mission (1962), with centres in more than a dozen large cities; the Islamic Foundation, Leicester (1966), which publishes books on Islam, and has produced a useful Muslim Guide for the help of teachers, social workers and others; the Muslim Education Trust (1964), which provides peripatetic teachers of Islam and publishes primers for schoolchildren. It was instrumental in forming a National Muslim Educational Council (1978).[10]

The Union of Muslim Organisations was formed in July 1970 with the aim of co-ordinating the activities of all Muslim groups in Britain; much concerned with

education, it favours separate Muslim schools and has hopes for an Islamic university.[11]

At a more international level, the Islamic Council of Europe, established in May 1973 with headquarters in London, seeks to integrate the Muslims in Britain with those on the Continent. Its concerns are actually more world-wide, and its publications include the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in Islam.[12]

## SPECIALISED GROUPS

Smaller groups are also represented. The Isma^c^ilis have a research Centre in London, with a well-stocked library, and conduct an MA programme in conjunction with London University and McGill. They publish a journal *Ilm*, and hold symposia and open meetings. A new centre was opened in London on 24 April 1985, built with assistance from the Aga Khan Trust.

A Shi^c^a Sufi organisation based in Texas publishes translations of classical texts and original works, and a journal *Nuradeen*. They are represented in the U.K. by the Muhammadi Trust and the Zahra Trust.

For students in Further and Higher Education, there are Islamic societies in most cities, which concentrate on preserving the Islamic allegiance of their members, for whom they provide welfare and other assistance. There is a central body, the Federation of Islamic Students Societies (FOSIS), to which individual societies can relate.

Rivalries do exist within and between some of the larger mainstream societies as well as smaller ones, and sometimes within local communities. All, however, are united in seeking a specifically Islamic upbringing for the younger generation, however precisely this may be envisaged.

## LAW AND SHARI^C^A

The legal situation in the U.K. does not allow for 'recognition' of Islam as a religious community, as can happen, for instance, in Belgium, Germany and Austria. Religious requirements of Muslims will, in the main, be classified under education, public health, etc., and be negotiated with employers or local authorities rather than with central government. Points of law which often concern Muslims as religious questions, include Islamic education; Islam in English family law; planning permission for mosques; and the food law of the U.K. (obtaining halal meat). These questions were discussed at a symposium held in April 1980, under the auspices of the Islamic Cultural Centre and the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Birmingham.[13]

A more specific and difficult question is the request that shari^c^a family law be applied to Muslims in Britain. For some years, this issue has been regularly aired and persuasive arguments advanced at, e.g., a conference in Birmingham convened by the Union of Muslim Organisations in 1975. Main areas of relevance would be marriage and divorce, where the question of custody of children after a marriage break-up causes particular problems.

Not all Muslims support the demand for introduction of shari^c^a law, and it may be assumed that some in fact prefer to live under the British legal system while resident in this country.

The formation of a 'millet' might well be a result of separate Islamic law, setting the community apart from their fellow-citizens; whereas 'minority' status is common to several groups, is less closely defined, and is more socio-psychological than legal or economic.

## INDEPENDENT RESPONSES: CHURCH AND EDUCATIONAL

Non-government organisations also take an interest in Muslims, aware of the specifically religious nature of this ethnic minority. The Leeds University Community Religions Project, within the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, was set up in 1976, and in 1983 the work was broadened into a study of ethnic minority religions in Britain, its main aim being to undertake a national survey of the religions of ethnic minority groups recently settled in Britain.[14]

In 1976, largely in response to the World of Islam Festival, the British Council of Churches formed an Advisory Group on the Presence of Islam in Britain. This Group developed in 1977 into the Committee for Relations with People of other Faiths (CRPOF), with consultative groups to examine special issues. In 1981 the Committee published *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain*. Other individual churches are providing their members with information on Islam and other faiths. As a side-effect, the encounter with Islam has in some cases helped to strengthen Christian identity in a positive way, putting denominational differences into perspective.[15]

Also in 1976 was established the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, at the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham: a centre which was to be a joint venture of Christians and Muslims, seeking to explore the living traditions of the two faiths 'in total obedience to their respective faiths and in a spirit of openness to one another and of trust.'

Activities have expanded over the past nine years, and include M.A. and Ph.D. supervision for the University of Birmingham; teaching of Arabic; extension work and courses for specialised groups; an annual Summer School; two Survey projects, on the presence of Islam in Europe and in Africa; a programme dealing with resources in Christian-Muslim relations, linked to the two survey projects but focusing on theological issues. Information gathered is made available through the Centre's publications: *Newsletter*, *News of Muslims in Europe*; *Abstracts: European Muslims and Christian-Muslim Relations*; *Research Papers* on specialised subjects; the *Bulletin of Islam* and *Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa*.

The Centre's work is at a practical and academic level, and its concerns cover most of the issues which affect Muslim 'identity' in Britain and on mainland Europe. The Centre and its publications, backed up by visits, interviews and publications of other organisations, have been my own main source of information and assistance in preparing this Report. Although this is necessarily a view from outside of the Muslim community, every effort has been made to present a balanced, though brief, outline of the present situation of Muslims in Britain.

## REFERENCES

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2. Nielsen (1984), 2-3; *Census 1981; Country of Birth* (London: HMSO, 1983); K. Knott and R. Toon, 'Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in the UK: Problems in the estimation of religious statistics', *Religious Research Papers*, no.6, Leeds University, 1981.

3. *Between Two Cultures: A Study of Relationships in the Asian Community in Britain*, CRC, 1976.

4. *Meeting their Needs: An Account of Language Tuition Schemes for Ethnic Minority Women*, CRC, 1977; A. Little and R. Willey, *Multi-Ethnic Education: the way forward*, Schools Council Pamphlet 18, London 1981; EEC: Council Directive 25 July 1977 (77/486/EEC).

5. The issues of multi-faith education have been approached by among others the Standing Committee for Interfaith Dialogue in Education (established 1973), and by the SHAP Working Party (so named after the original meeting place, in North West England), which publishes an annual *Calendar of Religious Festivals* and *Shap Mailing* for teachers.

6. S. Crishna, *Girls of Asian Origin in Britain*, YWCA 1975.

7. Primers available at the I.C.C. include: M.E. El-Geyoushi, *Primary Islamic Teachings for Children*, Parts I & II; M.A.E. Siddiqi, *Elementary Teachings of Islam*, M.E.T. On Darul Uloom, cf. D. Shepherd and S.W. Harrison, *Islam in Preston*, 2nd edn., 1979, 72; 'Muslims get their own school', *New Society*, 28 June 1979.

8. S. Barton, 'The Bengali Muslims of Bradford', Selly Oak *Research Paper*, No.13, March 1982.

9. *Times*, 25 April 1983; *News of Muslims in Europe*, 20, 27 March 1983.

10. M.Y. MacDermott and M.M. Ahsan, *The Muslim Guide*, Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1980.

11. *Guidelines and Syllabus for Islamic Education*, UMO 1976; *National Muslim Education Council: Background Papers*, UMO 1978.

12. *al-bayān al-ᶜālamī ᶜan ḥuqūq al-insān fi-l-islām*, London 1981; an English version, *Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights*, London 1981. Literal translations in English and French, in *Islamochristiana* 1983.

13. 'Islam in English Law and Administration: A Symposium', Selly Oak *Research Paper*, No.9, March 1981.

14. Leeds University, Dept. of Theology and Religious Studies, Research papers.

15. The CRPOF has produced, apart from *Guidelines* (revised edn., 1983), *Can We Pray Together?* 1983, and by K. Cracknell, its secretary, *Why Dialogue? a first British Comment on the W.C.C. Guidelines*, BCC 1980; *Considering Dialogue (Theological Themes in Interfaith Relations 1970-1980)*, BCC 1981. More recently, a translation by K. Cracknell of the German *Christen und Muslime im Gespräch* has appeared' *Christians and Muslims talking together* (BCC 1984).
Other churches' publications include: *With People of Other Faiths in Britain: A Study Handbook for Christians*, Mission and Other Faiths Committee of the United Reformed Church, 1980; *Shall we greet only our own family?* Division of Social Responsibility, Methodist Church, n.d.

**Related works by the author of this paper:**

1. "Christians and Muslims in Britain", Islamochristiana 7, 1981, 165-199.

2. "Medicine in Islam", in *World Religions and Medicine*, Institute of Religion and Medicine, 1983.

**Note**: The recently-published "Swann Report" *(Education for All: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups*, HMSO 1985) draws attention to the value of RE. It can help to "broaden the horizons of *all* pupils ... to enhance their understanding of a variety of religious beliefs and practices, thus offering them an insight into the values and concerns of different communities". The Committee considered that religious *instruction* should be properly the responsibility of the community concerned, whereas religious *education*, giving a wider view and appreciation of other faith communities, would be part of the school curriculum. But they noted that the attitude of some Muslims was that the two were synonymous, seeing no need for a broader approach to religious education. (Such attitudes can probably be found elsewhere too).

The majority of the Swann Committee concluded that the provision of separate schools would not contribute to the welfare or development of the ethnic minority communities themselves. A group of six members, however, prepared a statement to the effect that ethnic minorities do have a right to establish voluntary aided schools.