

UWTSD

Islam Today (HPRS7006)

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4. Discuss the impact of Islam during the past forty years in the United Kingdom

Introduction

The end of World War II marked a significant wave of migration of males from rural background from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, all former colonies of the British Commonwealth to UK, taking up “unskilled work in British factories and mills from the 1950s.”¹ Subsequently, there was another wave of immigration when “news of legislative changes intended to curb new immigration (e.g., the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act) led to a dramatic increase in the number of women and children coming to join their menfolk in the UK”.² This pioneer group of immigrants from South Asia were largely Muslims. In 2001, the United Kingdom (UK) 2001 National Census, for the first time included a question on religion since 1851.³ The census revealed and confirmed that the Muslims were the second largest religious grouping in the UK.⁴ By 2010, the Integrated Household Survey estimated the Muslim population to be about 2.5 million, representing 4.2% of the overall population.⁵ Most of the Muslims concentrated in the inner cities area in the urban areas with around 40% in London and the remaining Muslim population residing outside of London in places such as Birmingham, Blackburn and Bradford.⁶ These Muslims have come to UK mainly in search of a better life and socio-economic prospects. However, their low education and unskilled status have caused them to be sorely left behind in the British society with majority of them being in the low-income bracket, having poor health and living conditions, and experiencing high employment rate.⁷ Besides the presence of these pioneer Muslim migrants from South Asia, UK has also saw the arrival of Muslims from

¹ Sean McLoughlin, ‘United Kingdom’, in *Yearbook Of Muslims In Europe* Volume 3, ed. by Jørgen Nielsen, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibaşi, Hugh Goddard, and Brigitte Maréchal (Leiden: BRILL, 2011), pp. 595-615 (p. 595).

² Sophie Gilliat-Ray, ‘The United Kingdom’, in *The Oxford Handbook Of European Islam*, ed. by Jocelyne Cesari (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 65-103 (p. 68).

³ McLoughlin, p. 595.

⁴ Ibid, p. 595.

⁵ Ibid, p. 596.

⁶ Ibid, p. 596.

⁷ Ibid, p. 596.

East Africa and the Arabs from the Middle East who are more socially mobile and affluent and most recently asylum seekers from Somalia and Iraq.⁸ With the presence of these significant groups of Muslim in UK, this paper will discuss the impact of Islam on the British society socially, economically, religiously and politically in the last forty years.

Socio-economic Impact

There is direct impact of Islam in the UK in terms of the increase in the overall Muslim population. Between 2001 and 2011, the increase in the Muslim population in Britain was largely attributed to the higher birth rate in the Muslim communities.⁹ Furthermore, in this same period, it was estimated that the number of people who converted to Islam in UK grew from 61,000 in 2001 to 100,000 in 2010.¹⁰ It is interesting to note the significant increase in conversions during this period, given that it coincided with the rise in Islamophobia, hate-crimes and discrimination towards the Muslims in UK after the 9-11 and 7/7 incidents.¹¹ Jawad opined that in recent years many white people in UK from affluent background have converted to Islam.¹² Some converted because they married Muslims and they had to convert while others converted because they were attracted to the “simple message of monotheism” or to the spiritual values of Sufism, known in the West as Islamic mysticism.¹³

The conversion of these middle-class white people to Islam has brought about a positive change for Islam in the British society. They comprised about 12% of the total Muslim population in UK.¹⁴ Yet, this elite group of converts has the power to influence “Islamic discourses”, dialogue with the government and partner them to combat

⁸ Ibid, p. 596.

⁹ Gilliat-Ray, p. 71.

¹⁰ McLoughlin, p. 597.

¹¹ Haifaa A. Jawad, *Towards Building A British Islam: New Muslims' Perspectives*. (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 4.

¹² Ibid, p. 4. Some of these new converts are “Joe Ahmed-Dobson, the son of the former cabinet minister, Frank Dobson; Mathew Wilkinson, a former headboy of Eton; Nicholas Brandt, the son of an investment Banker; Jonathan Birt, the son of the former director-general of the BBC, John Birt; the son and daughter of Lord Justice Scott, who investigated the arms-to-Iraq deal; Emma Clark, the great-granddaughter of the former Liberal prime minister, Herbert Asquith; and, very recently, Lauren Booth, the sister-in-law of the former prime minister, Tony Blair.”

¹³ Ibid, p. 5-6.

¹⁴ Sophie Bowlby and Sally Lloyd-Evans “You Seem Very Westernised To Me’: Place, Identity And Othering Of Muslim Workers In The UK Labour Market.’, in *Muslims In Britain: Race, Place And Identities*, ed. by Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 37–54 (p. 39).

Islamophobia, build social cohesion and help uplift the main Muslim community to integrate with the rest of British society.¹⁵ Most importantly, they are able to show to the general masses that Islam is compatible with “celebrated British values such as mutual respect, openness, tolerance, fairness and justice.”¹⁶ Converts such as former popstar Yusuf Islam and Sarah Joseph, “editor of Emel magazine, a high-quality Muslim publication that targets both Muslims and non-Muslims” have also contributed to the promotion of the good image of Islam in British society by doing good works through their respective vocations, wealth and affluence.¹⁷ The presence of these middle class Muslims converts as well as the wealthy Arabs from the Middle East in UK has also brought about positive socio-economic impact in the country. Gilliat-Ray noted that today, London is a “major centre for the international ‘halal’ market” as well as for “Islamic banking and finance”.¹⁸ It was reported in 2008 by then Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, that British Muslim (presumably comprising majority of this group of middle class converts) contributed over £31 billion to the UK economy.¹⁹ Juxtaposed against this group of middle-class British converts to Islam would be the economically disenfranchised and socially marginalised majority South Asian Muslim converts.²⁰ The South Asian Muslims comprised about 68% of the total UK Muslim population and they “experienced the highest unemployment rates, the highest proportions of long-term unemployed and the lowest occupational profile”.²¹ Such is the wide socio-economic disparity between the South Asian Muslims and the White British Muslim converts.²²

Religio-Political Impact

The two most significant religio-political impact of Islam upon UK in the last forty years would be the institutionalisation of Islam and the implementation of the multiculturalism

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 79.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 79.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 81-83.

¹⁸ Gilliat-Ray, p. 73.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 73.

²⁰ Bowlby and Lloyd-Evans, p. 51-52; Tahir Abbas, *Islamic Radicalism And Multicultural Politics: The British Experience*. (London, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 74-76.

²¹ C. Peach, ‘Muslims In The 2001 Census of England And Wales: Gender And Economic Disadvantage’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29.4 (2006), 629–655 (p. 645).

²² Richard Gale and Peter Hopkins, ‘Introduction: Muslims in Britain – Race, Place And The Spatiality Of Identities’, in *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, ed. by Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 1-19 (p. 7-8).

policy. Firstly, the institutionalisation of Islam “indicates the process of formation of organizations (associations, schools, mosques, and so on) that are designed to meet the needs of the Muslim population that lives in Europe.”²³ It also refers “to the public recognition that these organizations” can receive from the government.²⁴ In UK, we can see that this process of institutionalization of Islam is in place. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) was one of the earliest umbrellas of Islamic associations to be formed in 1997.²⁵ It acts as a “representative” of British Muslim interests to dialogue with the government and lobby for British Muslims rights such as “calling for stronger legislation on religious discrimination and incitement to religious hatred, and state funding for for Muslim schools”.²⁶ There were also Islamic schools such as Islamia Primary School which was started through a ground up initiative and was funded by Yusuf Islam but subsequently became the first Islamic faith school to be state-funded.²⁷ As Ferrari and Bottoni noted, as part of the government’s strategy to promote social cohesion and integration, state-funded Islamic schools “are required to adapt their programs and curricula in order to actively promote democratic citizenship”.²⁸ Mosques were also one of the earliest buildings to be established in the process of the institutionalization of Islam. Mosques act as communal places for Muslims to gather and network as well as provides religious education.²⁹ Today, there are as many as 2000 mosques and Islamic centres in Britain.³⁰ Thus, through the provision made for the formation of representative bodies, establishment of places of worship and Islamic schools in UK by the UK government, one can see the impact Islam has on UK that leads to this institutionalization process.

Secondly, the impact of Islam in UK is seen through the implementation of the multiculturalism policy in 1980s.³¹ Multiculturalism “emphasized antidiscrimination, equal opportunities, and recognition of difference” when implementing government

²³ Silvio Ferrari and Rossella Bottoni ‘The Institutionalization Of Islam In Europe’, in *The Oxford Handbook Of European Islam*, ed. by Jocelyne Cesari (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 620-655 (p. 620).

²⁴ Ibid, p. 620.

²⁵ Gilliat-Ray, p. 81.

²⁶ Gilliat-Ray, p. 81-82.

²⁷ Jawad, *Towards Building A British Islam*, p. 81.

²⁸ Ferrari and Bottoni, p. 643.

²⁹ Gilliat-Ray, p. 74.

³⁰ McLoughlin, p. 603.

³¹ McLoughlin, p. 598.

policy.³² The guiding principle of multiculturalism helps gain recognition for the Muslim community in the 1980s especially where education was concerned. Multiculturalism acknowledges the right for the Muslims in UK to keep their difference and to have equal rights as British citizens.³³ However, the Muslims are also to participate in the national culture as active citizens and to work on social cohesion and integration with the majority British society.³⁴ While multiculturalism promotes religious equality and equal rights on paper, Muslims are still facing discrimination in their everyday life in terms of education and employment opportunities. Furthermore, following the 9-11 and 7-7 terrorist incidents, increasingly in UK, multiculturalism is facing resistance and comes under fire as a failed rubric for policy making and has made some retreat.³⁵ Critics felt that the policy of multiculturalism further segregates and separates the Muslims from the British society at large. But Modood notes,

After a long period of hegemony, political secularism can no longer be taken for granted but is having to answer its critics; there is a growing understanding that the incorporation of Muslims has become the most important challenge of egalitarian multiculturalism.³⁶

Thus, Modood argues that multiculturalism should not be done away with. Instead, moderate multiculturalism must continue to be promoted to manage the race and religion issues in UK.³⁷ More should be done to emphasize each other's commonality instead of differences and the goal of "egalitarian multiculturalism" must be kept alive³⁸

Conclusion

The impact of Islam remains to be seen and felt in UK in the years to come. For Islam to have a positive impact on UK society, more must be done by the state to protect the Muslims from discrimination and unequal treatment. It must begin by uplifting the socio-economic level of the majority South Asian Muslims through education and reskilling for more employment opportunities. Islam is the religion of the largest minority group in UK and the second largest religion in UK. The UK government cannot

³² Gilliat-Ray, p. 82.

³³ Tariq Modood, 'Muslims and the Politics of Difference', in *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, ed. by Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 193-209 (p. 198).

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 198.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 204.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 196.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 206.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 206.

simply ignore Islam or just deal with it on the surface. Finally, as Modood puts it well, UK society needs to remember “Muslims are not a ‘them’ but part of a plural ‘us’, not mere sojourners but part of its future.”³⁹

(Word Count: 1505)

³⁹ Ibid, p. 207

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