

Provide a report explaining the complex factors influencing Muslim religious identities in the UK.

The purpose of this research report is to demonstrate a personal perspective of the specified question, through use of key themes, entailed from in-class discussion and recommended reading materials, both online and/or in physical copy via use of campus facilities. In addition, wherever possible, I shall endeavour to introduce concepts and ideas from ulterior sources, whether conventionally academic or otherwise appropriate. Core influencers shall include: Jorgen Nielsen's *'Muslims in Western Europe'*, which considers the course of Muslim immigrational patterns across the continent, as-well-as an examination into the developmental practices of said "communities". *'Young, British and Muslim'* by Philip Lewis will also be addressed as a key point of reference.

The origins of Islam in Britain can be strongly attributed to the scale of her military might, and the consequential colonisation of large portions of Islamically influenced territory. Britain's naval supremacy, allowing for "free-reign" over sea lanes, bolstered the East India Trading Company's influence, factored, in-part from the territorial expanse of the Indian subcontinent, from which, the largest proportion of British Muslim ancestry derives. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, aided in the strengthening of these accolades.¹

Initially, employment was the main motivator for trans-continental migration, with trading companies such as the E.I.T.C. recruiting seaman for their merchant vessels, whilst imperial policy enabled members of the British Commonwealth to migrate to domestic Britain freely; that is until July 1st, 1962, when the 'Commonwealth Immigrants Act' upended it. Such legislation was certainly instilled as a means of curbing the ever-increasing influx of migrants, from which a sizable majority were of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, and to whom, I will later address more closely.² Leading to this, and throughout the 1950's, so called 'travel agents' actively facilitated the annual "settling" of 10,000 plus persons from these regions, notably through use of family networks, which allowed for the heightened rapidity with which human trafficking could be enacted upon the shores of Britain, and in a not all too dissimilar circumstance to that which can be seen today. Networks that had thus learnt penetrable methods of evading their own exit controls, now began applying these methods to bypass British border control.³

The topic of my interest takes heed from the above - with the field of human geography at the forefront of my academic pursuits, however, condensed rather more-so to that of 'migration' in both the immigrant and emigre sense; with attendance to the often unspoken or indeed de-platformed citizen perspective. Naturally, as with any subject matter as vast as that to which this piece is ascribed, focus may be applied to wherever one sees fit.

¹ Ron Geaves, 'Britain', in Svanberg, I. & Westerlund, D. (ed.) *Islam Outsied the Arab World*. (New York: St. Martins Press, 1999), p. 357.

² Jorgen Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p.40.

³ Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, p. 39.

Subsequently, this report will conjoin my own perspectives by examining some of the complexities deriving from the seemingly opposing content of Islamic and British culture.

My introductory discourse has been intentionally fixated to that of the past, as a necessary tool for addressing the present, especially given that immigration to Britain as a whole, whether indeed Muslim or not, is a result of past and current economic “availability”.

According to *Nielsen*, ‘Rates of immigration during the 1950’s were very directly related to the swings in employment in the general labour market in Britain’⁴, at which time, accelerated growth was being experienced; and thus, there was an economically visceral requirement for stimulating the working population and thus real GDP.⁵ However, the desire for short term gains may have had long term negative effects, leading perhaps, to such complex factors that may be influencing Muslim religious identities today?



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The above graph illustrates how, upon the passing of the ‘Commonwealth Immigrants Act’ in 1962, the nation was pursuing a sharp incline of unemployment that would eventually peak to a level unseen since the immediacy of post-war Britain in 1947. With family networks in place, and experience rendered, inward migration was still flourishing. ‘Almost half of the

⁴ Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, p. 40.

⁵ Tejvan Pettinger ‘UK post-war economic boom and reduction in debt, 28 January 2017
<<https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/11697/debt/post-war-boom/>> [Accessed 11th December 2019].

⁶ Tejvan Pettinger, 2016.

more than 130,000 Pakistani's who had arrived in Britain by the end of 1967 had arrived after the introduction of controls on 1 July 1962.⁷

Turkish migrant figures also peaked in the two years preceding 1962 and with the prospect of London as a political and commercial hub, migrants from Iran (formerly Persia) and the Arab world began streaming-in, in addition to the already existing variegated Muslim "communities".⁸

It is on this last-note that difficulties arise however. Muslim identity as we will explore does not necessarily denote the premise of unity, which 'Muslim' tends to discern as a term increasingly generalised in its usage. Indeed, other religious groups fall "victim" to the same standard whether it be Christian, Judaic, Buddhist etc., however, with such a recent British history (comparatively, that is), to that of the Jewish or Christian faiths; those who subscribe to Islamic doctrine, having come swiftly and variably (culturally and geographically speaking) are seemingly ascribed the same character, both religiously and socially. Philip Lewis outlines this through stating that; 'the complexity and dynamism of Britain's Muslim communities, with their multiplicity of identities, stories, ethnicities and migration histories, is in danger of being reduced to one 'singular affiliation'.⁹ Indeed, the United Kingdom today is most certainly mapped in distinctly different ways; for instance, again, following the words of Neilsen:

The impression is one of a large and varied, cosmopolitan Muslim community in London and the south-east, while outside that region the Muslims are almost synonymous with communities of Indian subcontinental origin'.¹⁰

With reference to Turkish immigration, variation in national identity may go far in highlighting the contrast of religiosity between and within Islamic groups, discerning the obvious truth that distinctions are concocted in accordance to culture. Data used in Lewis' 2007 book, touches on 125,000 Turks residing in Britain. Research conducted on 250 younger Kurds and Turks, found that 68% chose not to subscribe to a religious identity at all.¹¹ Indeed, polls and questionnaires can be far from absolute, since an unwillingness to declare religious affiliation, or answer truthfully could derive from a multitude of reasons, perhaps through belief in advantage or indeed disadvantage, connected to safety, employment or familial concerns, as evidenced in an article published by *The Independent* in 2016 where it was said that "In the course of this inquiry we came across individual Muslims who were reluctant to engage with us for fear that our inquiry was part of the Prevent programme". Indeed 'Britain among all Western European countries, is unique in the extent to which political participation is possible for immigrant ethnic minorities', voices Nielsen¹², however to what extent is uniqueness a positive when such participation may exclude those who so willingly

⁷ Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, p. 40.

⁸ Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, p. 40-41.

⁹ Philip Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), p. 1.

¹⁰ Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, p. 43.

¹¹ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 3.

¹² Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, p. 49.

granted it, or others that hold alternative truths? What if multiculturalism breeds 'cultural-multi-ism'?

Most UK based Muslims derive from societies where Islam acts as the central component of society, culture, as well as the political and judicial framework¹³, therefore they are having to learn how to follow Islam as a minority in a Christian society.¹⁴ Naturally as one expects, first generation migrants reflect Islamic influences more clearly¹⁵, however, concerningly, there is research to suggest that for the younger Muslim population, identities are being formulated around a more radical approach. Accordingly, 'British Muslims aged 16-24 are more religiously conservative than older generations,¹⁶ with 'over a third of young Muslims agreeing with a particular formulation of *sharia*, to the effect that 'Muslim conversion is forbidden and punishable by death.'¹⁷ Lewis acutely emphasises that 'for those who privilege religious commitment over ethnicity, parental culture, or 'identity politics', this can have diverse expressions - mystic, missionary, militant or some combination of these.'¹⁸ In a society where offence is often claimed and publicised, and where 'identity politics' increasingly "runs the show", why should young Muslims not be part and parcel to the same process that is sweeping the gender and sexuality forum? Religious and "minority" representation is as constant as the former two, with attention affixed to all three simultaneously. Under such circumstances, society has become an ideological brawl amongst rivaling town criers, and Muslims are the worst off for a number of reasons...

According to the government's official 2011 census, 22% of Muslim women claimed to not speak English at all, or well enough.¹⁹ Further research found that 44% of out of work Muslim women, claimed they were essentially "housewives".²⁰ Again, statistics can be thwart with misinformation - since the data fails to elaborate more detail, whilst still persisting to carry credence in Western "scientific" culture. For instance, relating the former data set to the latter; if indeed language skills are of a lowly standard, obtaining work would therefore become trickier, and in addition, it may well be that childminding and tending to homely chores proves more cost-effective than job seeking? However, as is evident for those who have immersed themselves in Islamic culture for prolonged periods (as I most certainly have), and as data-sets affirm; gender inequality is still very much central to Islamic-based tradition, and is a likelier culprit, as *The Independent* (albeit reluctantly) manages to squeeze in: 'or conversely, if cultural attitudes regarding gender in Muslim communities mean they are more reluctant for female community members to work'.²¹ Nevertheless, the article expands

¹³ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 5.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 5-6.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Fullfact, *22% of Muslim women say they don't speak English or don't speak it well* (2016)

<<https://fullfact.org/immigration/22-muslim-women-say-they-dont-speak-english-or-dont-speak-it-well/>>[Accessed 11th December 2019].

²⁰ Siobahn Fenton '6 charts which show the employment barriers faced by British Muslims', *The Independent*, 11 August 2016

<<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/muslims-more-likely-to-be-unemployed-than-any-other-social-group-in-the-uk-mps-warn-a7185451.html>>[Accessed 11th December 2019].

²¹ Fenton '6 charts which show the employment barriers faced by British Muslims'.

on a very real issue, and an issue that brings this paper to a conclusive state (if indeed such can ever be truly had).

As of 2016, 12.8% of Muslims were unemployed²², and whilst adhering to the previous data, a large proportion of females, likely mothers or soon-to-be, are linguistically challenged or inept as-well-as primarily unemployed. Moreover, the majority come from rural contexts²³ whilst ‘many religious leaders, imported into Britain’s mosques from the same rural socio-cultural world, are often at a loss to help their children answer questions about Islam posed by school friends, teachers or youth workers.’²⁴ Such ‘*ulama*, (religious leaders) regardless of their theological credentials, generally have a minimal understanding of British cultural practices and the issues facing generationally younger Muslims’²⁵, nor is their sufficient application of inter-faith dialogue.²⁶

‘There is an urgent need to introduce the intellectual and cultural trends of Western society into Muslim seminaries’ syllabi.’²⁷ as stated by a ‘distinguished scholar’ in *Lewis*, who adds that:

The body of thought that the project of rethinking...attempts to confront is premised on a triumphalist ideology: an age when Islam was a political entity and an empire. A cursory glance at this intellectual legacy will show how this ideology of Empire permeates theology, jurisprudence, ethics, and espouses a worldview that advances hierarchy. What adds to the frustration of millions of followers of Islam is the fact that this triumphalist creed and worldview is unable to deliver its adherents to its perceived goals of worldly success and leadership.’²⁸

It is suggested that Muslim youth are searching for an Islamic identity which they can connect with²⁹, however concerningly, and as an outcome of an overtly “liberal” system, freedom of expression and religious “tolerance” have enabled hard-line-sects such as the Deobandis to flourish; who pursue an orthodox and literal approach to Islam, prohibiting expressions such as music.³⁰ The Channel 4 series, ‘Undercover Mosque’, which aired in 2007, filmed preachers, and material that embodied ‘bigoted, even incendiary anti-Western commentary, purporting to subvert democracy and preparing for jihad and reviling Christians and Jews.’³¹ Women were even portrayed as defunct and deficient beings, deserving of physical abuse’.³²

As stated by *Lewis*, ‘Common religious affiliation can be a far more effective vehicle for large-scale mobilization than nationality,’³³ however, with a situation not dissimilar from that

²² Fenton ‘6 charts which show the employment barriers faced by British Muslims’.

²³ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. 10-11.

²⁴ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, XVII.

²⁵ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. 11.

²⁶ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. 7.

²⁷ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. 6.

²⁸ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. 6.

²⁹ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. XVII.

³⁰ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. 5.

³¹ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. XIV.

³² *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. XIV.

³³ *Lewis, Young, British and Muslim*, p. 5.

of the Protestant-Catholic division, and with Wahhabi funds fuelling Deobandi groups, the battle for ideological control of British Muslims continues, with the younger generation prone to becoming its victims.

If indeed however a more tolerant Barelwis led Islam can prevail in the UK, a more secularist revival may return, following in the footsteps of Turkey, which was never colonised, and influenced heavily by French secularism for over eighty; the ideal of emptying 'public and civil life of religious symbols and formal influence.'³⁴

In conclusion, whilst catering for the specific time-period and document size, I have endeavoured to provide an insight into some of the notable difficulties arising from contrasting cultural practices and ideological differences within the UK Islamic communities, and how this impact influences religious identity. Alongside the key sources of Lewis and Nielsen, I hoped to diversify my findings with statistical data and public news in order to present this report in as well-rounded a way as possible. From the course so far, my existing beliefs, and the narrative of this paper, my conclusion draws on the need to diversify education, through a clear-cut de-construction of all single-faith schools, dismembering religious influence in educational policy.

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³⁴ Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*, p. 3.