

Islam Today

Written Assessment n. 5

“9-11 damaged the status of Muslims in the United Kingdom”. Discuss.

It is well known that after the attack of September 11 2001, the acts of racism and actual violence against Muslims in Western countries have increased. Both the scientific literature¹ and the press² have extensively dealt with this topic. Even today, 20 years after the attack, Muslims have to face such discrimination³, in the knowledge that there is no turning back and that the impact of 11 September is destined to last for a long time. The images of the attack, and Osama Bin Laden colonized the imagination, and the media contributed to creating a dangerous association between terrorism and Islam⁴. The immediate recognition of Muslims linked to visible signs, such as the veil or the beard, has made the latter's life more difficult and has increased the risk of racism and discrimination. Paradoxically, even non-Muslims have been wrongly attacked precisely because of visible signs associated with Islam. It is the case of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh-American entrepreneur, who was murdered in a hate crime after the September 11 attacks⁵. This and other examples exacerbate the already existing racism towards Islam and Muslims. “Whilst Islamophobia's roots are firmly planted in a pre-9/11 context, a post-9/11 impetus has been the dangerous catalyst driving its evolution, diversification and acceptance – including those manifestations of the phobia that have sought to identify and target South Asian communities in the name of new forms of cultural and religious difference”⁶ (p.65). Within the United Kingdom, the case of the Pakistani Muslim community in Northern Ireland is emblematic. If before 9/11 they adapted to the socio-political context of the region and their main interests were business and their family, choosing a less visible and politicized way of being Muslim, this changed immediately after 9/11. In addition to being in the spotlight for the first time, they suffered some violence and were thus pushed to adhere to a more committed Islam. For the first time, “they had to face the same stereotypes and mistrust that South Asian Muslims often suffer from in Britain...they had to face the new political values that the words Muslim and Islam have acquired in that society. Paradoxically, these two circumstances have driven Pakistanis in Northern Ireland towards a political and religious activism that was unusual

¹ Strzyzewski, A. (2013). *Islamophobia in the American literature and Culture post 9/11*. Grin; Peek, L. (2011). *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11*. Temple University Press; Cesari, J. (2009). *Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion, Politics and Law*. Routledge; Geaves, R., Gabriel, T., Yazbeck Haddad, Y., Idleman Smith, J. (2017). *Islam and the West Post 9/11*. Taylor & Francis Ltd; Kumar, D. (2021). *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: Twenty years after 9/11*. Verso Books.

² <https://abcnews.go.com/US/20-years-911-islamophobia-continues-haunt-muslims/story?id=7973204>.

³ <https://www.rota.org.uk/content/two-decades-after-911-attacks-british-muslims-still-feel-impact>;
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/09/muslim-americans-reflect-on-the-impact-of-9-11/>

⁴ Von Sikorski, C., Schmuck, D., Matthes, J. & Binder, A. (2017). “Muslims are not Terrorists”: Islamic State Coverage, Journalistic Differentiation Between Terrorism and Islam, Fear Reactions, and Attitudes Toward Muslims. *Mass Communication and Society*, 20:6, 825-848.

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/14/balbir-singh-sodhi-murdered-family-american-dream>

⁶ Allen, C. (2005). From Race to Religion: the New Face of Discrimination. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

before this date”⁷ (p.233). Post 9/11 has seen attacks on this community grow. Their businesses have had economic losses. They no longer represent a neutral political presence but a new threat. If before they were at least called "Paki", after 9/11 they were often called "Bin Laden"⁸. The events of 9/11 sanctioned a reconfiguration and a reinterpretation of identity by the Pakistanis in Northern Ireland. If previously they had tried not to join and not take a stand on international events on Islam, this is no longer possible as of 9/11. If before 9/11, Islam was "one" of their identities, after it became "their identity", with active involvement in the causes of Islam worldwide. Far from only affecting Pakistanis in Northern Ireland, this phenomenon has been found in other areas and communities in the United Kingdom. In general, young British Muslims find themselves having to opt for a specific affiliation and loyalty: to be Muslim or to be British⁹. Taking a quote from Baumann, “Ethnic identities are nothing more than acts of ethnic identification frozen in time. When the social climate gets colder, so to speak, they can freeze and harden; when the social climate gets warmer, they can thaw and melt, giving rise to new forms. Ethnicity is not an identity given by nature, but an identification created through social action”¹⁰ (p.38). 9/11 exacerbated tensions and "cooled" the social climate by freezing ethnic identities. The social pressure on young British Muslims forced to choose between loyalty to Islam and loyalty to the UK is a clear example of this. In the face of the great heterogeneity of Muslims in the United Kingdom, if some will opt for national affiliation, adopting a more Westernized lifestyle, others will fall back to Islam, as a bulwark of identity in opposition to the rampant cultural and religious racism aggravated by the facts of the 9/11. Nevertheless, even when they choose Islam over their British identity, recognizing themselves primarily as Muslims rather than British, they do so as Islam becomes the only means to overturn a situation of exclusion and discrimination by the West. As Parveen Akhtar explains well, the return or revival of religion does not necessarily coincide with a greater religiosity on the part of the supporters of this more politicized Islam: “Radical or ‘political Islam’ refers to the use of the religion as a means to overthrow the dominant socio-political systems of a particular country and replace them with a new system based on the teachings of the Qur’an. Thus a ‘return to religion’ does not denote the idea of a religious revival in traditional terms. It does not necessarily refer to an increased adherence to the Islamic code, but instead, refers more to individual empathy with a religious identity; an identity that provides group solidarity and belonging”¹¹ (p.165).

Regarding the new importance of religion as an identity marker, Chris Allen¹² speaks to us precisely of the shift from race to religion in the discriminatory paradigm that has involved Muslims in the United Kingdom. The author points out that this shift has not been recognized and supported by legislation, leaving Muslims in the UK without legislative protection against religious discrimination: “While racism on the basis of markers of race obviously continues, a shift is apparent in which some of the more traditional and obvious markers have been displaced by newer and more prevalent ones of a cultural, socio-religious nature. However, while

⁷ Marranci, G. (2005). Pakistanis in Northern Ireland in the Aftermath of September 11. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Abbas, T. (2005). British South Asian Muslims: before and after September 11. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

¹⁰ Baumann, G. (2003). *L'enigma multiculturale: stati, etnie, religioni*. Il Mulino.

¹¹ Akhtar, P. (2005). ‘(Re)turn to Religion’ and Radical Islam. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

¹² Allen, C. (2005). From Race to Religion: the New Face of Discrimination. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.

traditional markers of race have been afforded legislative protection, the same is not true for religious markers, concerning which protection is restricted to ethnically definable religious communities. Despite Muslims being increasingly targeted with newer forms of racist prejudice and hatred, as multi-ethnic communities they remain outside the writ of current legislation”¹³ (p.49). Similarly, Ceri Peach¹⁴ points out that over the past fifty years, the British discourse on minorities has shifted from "colour" to "race", "ethnicity" and "religion" in the present period.

Although partial and not representative of the social, political, cultural complexity of British Muslims, the previous examples show how the events of 9/11 generated more open forms of racism and discrimination against Muslims and generated new identity configurations, often dichotomous and polarized. The discrimination suffered by young Muslims, in particular, has spurred a retreat into Islam not only as a religion but as a "liberating" political movement from the oppression Muslims face both locally and globally. Forced to opt for a fragmented and "halfway" version of their plural identity, young British Muslims find themselves having to renounce the very prerequisites of integration and interculturality, where Islam is seen as incompatible with European and Western democratic values. In addition to the serious daily racism, this claim to renounce a part of oneself represents another form of violence to which Muslims are subjected.

References

- Abbas, T. (2005). British South Asian Muslims: before and after September 11. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.
- Akthar, P. (2005). ‘(Re)turn to Religion’ and Radical Islam. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.
- Allen, C. (2005). From Race to Religion: the New Face of Discrimination. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.
- Baumann, G. (2003). *L'enigma multiculturale: stati, etnie, religioni*. Il Mulino.
- Geaves, R., Gabriel, T., Yazbeck Haddad, Y. & Idleman Smith, J. (2017). *Islam and the West Post 9/11*. Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Kumar, D. (2021). *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire: Twenty years after 9/11*. Verso Books.
- Marranci, G. (2005). Pakistanis in Northern Ireland in the Aftermath of September 11. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.
- Peach, C. (2005). Britain’s Muslim Population: an Overview. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.
- Strzyzewski, A. (2013). *Islamophobia in the American literature and Culture post 9/11*. Grin.
- Peek, L. (2011). *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11*. Temple University Press.
- Cesari, J. (2009). *Muslims in the West after 9/11: Religion, Politics and Law*. Routledge.
- Von Sikorski, C., Schmuck, D., Matthes, J. & Binder, A. (2017). “Muslims are not Terrorists”: Islamic State Coverage, Journalistic Differentiation Between Terrorism and Islam, Fear Reactions, and Attitudes Toward Muslims. *Mass Communication and Society*, 20:6, 825-848.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Peach, C. (2005). Britain’s Muslim Population: an Overview. In T. Abbas (Ed.). *Muslim Britain. Communities under pressure*. Zed Books.