

The making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain: conversations with British Muslim 'elites'

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**The making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain:
conversations with British Muslim 'elites'**

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3 **The making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain:**
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5 **conversations with British Muslim ‘elites’**
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10 **Waqar I. U. Ahmad and Venetia Evergeti**
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15 **Abstract**
16

17 The common nomenclature of ethnicity, race and colour has been found wanting in theorising and
18 dealing with the Muslim presence in Britain. This study of 24 prominent British Muslims - including
19 political, policy and academic/intellectual ‘elite’ – explores the making and representation of Muslim
20 identity in Britain. We explore this through three considerations: Muslimness as a ‘master status’;
21 leadership and representation in relation to British Muslims; and the public performance of Muslimness
22 during ‘key moments’.
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34 **Key words:** cultural racism; Islamophobia; elite; Muslims; politics of identity; racialization
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38 **Introduction**
39

40 Notions of race, colour and ethnicity have dominated both theoretical and policy considerations in
41 relation to population diversity in the United Kingdom. Recently, however, the focus of debate has
42 shifted from the politics of colour and race to ethnicity and religion (Peach 2005). Modood and Ahmad
43 have noted that because of the ‘political crises featuring Muslims rather than Asians or non-whites per
44 se –from the Rushdie Affair in 1988-89 to the first Gulf war in 1991, the controversies around Muslim
45 faith schools, 11 September 2001, the resulting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the 7 July 2005
46 bombings – the term ‘Asian’ has ceased to have much content as a political category’ (Modood and
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3 Ahmad 2007, p. 187). 'Muslim' has instead gained considerable prominence as a category of
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5 identification in recent debates on diversity and its management.
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10 This shift has also been highlighted in 'official' state categories of identification for ethnic and migrant
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12 minorities. The 2001 Census included a voluntary question on religion. Future Censuses are likely to
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14 build on this and, additionally, include questions on 'national identity' (ONS 2007). This is an
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16 important shift in the official discourse on identity and belonging, a move also welcomed by the
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18 Muslim Council of Britain (ONS 2007).
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24 One consequence of this shift to 'Muslim' as the predominant identity is the racialisation of
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26 Muslimness. Communities characterized by differences of denomination, regional background,
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28 ethnicity and linguistic heritage, are increasingly presented as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass,
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30 now seen akin to an ethnic or racial group, with presumed deterministic values diametrically opposed
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32 to, and threatening the values of the civilized West (e.g. Kundani 2007; also Naber 2000, for the USA).
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34 In his powerful analysis of anti-Muslim racism, Kundani notes how being a Muslim increasingly acts
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36 as a racialised symbol of difference, with Islam being portrayed in public and policy discourses as an
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38 ethnicity or race, opposed to 'whiteness' or 'Britishness'. The fundamental role of Muslim civilization
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40 in the very birth of modern Europe is conveniently forgotten (Fletcher 1992; Armstrong 2000; Hellyer
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42 2007). Equally, alliances with those of other faiths and no faith, over a range of struggles over
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44 resources, policies and recognition, go unacknowledged. In policy and political terms, Islamophobia is
45
46 often at the heart of the politics of recognition of Muslims in Western European discourses (Eade 1996;
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48 Vertovec 2002; Kundani 2007). In the post September 11th and July 7th context, such debates have
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50 become even more prominent. As a result of the 'war on terror' Muslims have been propelled to the
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52 forefront of the political agenda and questions have emerged in relation to the fit between British or
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3 Western values and Muslim identity (Vertovec 2002). This has serious implications for Muslims and
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5 how they espouse or resist various identifications. Meanwhile, attempts continue to be made to theorise
6
7 these phenomena, often in the wake of challenges posed by political and policy crisis (Asad 1990;
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9 Hellyer 2007; Kundani 2007; Parekh 2008).

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14 Given this background, in this paper we will explore the interactional order of Muslim identity
15
16 formation and its different manifestations during key moments. Using empirical data from our study of
17
18 prominent Muslims in Britain, we will examine the way our respondents articulate the emergence of
19
20 Muslimness as a primary identification of Muslims, how Muslimness is represented and how it is lived
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22 or performed during key moments (the Rushdie affair, September 11 or the Israeli attack on Gaza).
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28 29 **Methods and Analysis**

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31 Our study focuses on qualitative interviews with 24 prominent Muslims. It aimed to gauge their
32
33 perspectives and experiences in relation to the challenges Muslims face, their own religious and
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35 political attitudes, the future of British or European Islam and how their Muslim identity may interplay
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37 with their professional lives. It relied on loosely structured conversations, allowing the discussion to be
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39 shaped by the respondent around key themes.
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46 Access to 'elites' is not easy. In this study, personal knowledge as well as referrals from other
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48 respondents and colleagues assisted recruitment. The sampling frame consisted of potential respondents
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50 personally known to Ahmad, those identified from Muslim and other websites, names listed in the
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52 Muslim Power 100 publication and suggestions from colleagues and friends.
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3 While all the interviews were conducted by Ahmad, in English, several required some knowledge of
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5 Arabic, Urdu and Farsi. They also required knowledge of Islam and Muslim communities. Interviews
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7 were regarded by respondents as conversations between equals. Challenge and counter challenge was
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9 therefore not uncommon. But equally, Ahmad had to avoid the pitfalls which can befall 'insider'
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11 researchers – especially the assumption that the interviewer and interviewee share each other's
12
13 experiences and world views – by questioning assumptions and where appropriate, providing
14
15 alternative perspectives. The respondents were assured that their anonymity would not be compromised
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17 in whatever we publish. We therefore provide only as much information on individuals as is consistent
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19 with making a particular point, but without compromising anonymity
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27 Interviews were conducted during October 2008 and February 2009. Most interviews were of 45-90
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29 minutes duration. Of the 24 respondents, 9 were female and 15 male. Twenty three interviews were
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31 recorded and transcribed; notes were taken on the remaining one interview. Table 1 provides summary
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33 details of respondents.
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35
36 Table 1 about here
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41 Sociologists have considered the 'nature of elites as fundamental to understanding the characteristics of
42
43 their societies' (Savage and Williams, 2008, p1; see also Scott, 2008), but interest in elite studies has
44
45 declined in British sociology. Consistent with Scott, we use the term 'elite' to refer to respondents in
46
47 positions of considerable influence because of their education, formal positions, links within civil
48
49 society, political or representational power, or involvement in professions or government. While some
50
51 may not have defined themselves as 'elites', in their narratives our respondents acknowledged their
52
53 influential status within and outside their communities. We have categorised our respondents as
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55 political, policy and academic/intellectual 'elite'. The three categories of 'elite' hide considerable
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3 internal diversity. For example, three of the six political elite were parliamentarians, two were
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5 prospective parliamentary candidates and the remaining one was a senior local politician and a one
6
7 time Lord Mayor of a significant British city. The policy elite included senior civil servants, local
8
9 authority chief officers and voluntary sector leaders. Finally, the academic and intellectual elite
10
11 included seven senior academics, two writers and one artist. Further, these are flexible categories and
12
13 many respondents could be categorised under more than one of these categories. For these respondents
14
15 the category used reflects their current predominant role. . To protect anonymity, we refer to
16
17 respondents as follows – Politic 1-6 identifies the political elite; policy 1-8 refers to the eight policy
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19 elite; and academic1-10 relates to the academic and intellectual elite.
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26 Transcriptions were checked against the recorded interviews and corrected, including for Islamic terms.
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28 The initial analysis by Evergeti, was developed through dialogue between and further interrogation of
29
30 data by both authors. Our analytical approach is an interactionist one, looking at the meanings social
31
32 actors attach to particular social settings and the way they form and negotiate their identities according
33
34 to their interpretation of given situations. This involves a descriptive and inductive analysis of the
35
36 experiences, attitudes, relationships, meanings and actions of those under study (Evergeti 2006a). Such
37
38 an approach reveals the interactional dynamics of group identity and its various manifestations in
39
40 various social contexts. The analysis involved a number of phases: a close examination of the interview
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42 data; identifying important topics in each interview; comparing and contrasting material in all
43
44 interviews and creating a taxonomy of key themes.
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52 **Findings and Discussion**

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55 The interviews covered a number of themes. In this paper we will concentrate on the issue of Muslim
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57 identity, organising our findings under three key, overlapping areas – the journey towards
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3 'Muslimness' as a key identification in Britain; representing 'Muslimness'; and living 'Muslimness'
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5 during key moments to demonstrate the still contingent nature of this identity.
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10 *From 'black to Muslim to terrorist': the making and negotiation of 'Muslim' identity as a master*
11 *status trait*
12

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14 Identity construction, ascription, acceptance or resistance are multi-faceted, contingent and contested
15 processes. Often one aspect of personal or group identity becomes more salient through a web of social
16 interactions in various social and historical contexts, thus creating what Hughes has called a 'master
17 status trait' (Hughes 1945; see also Bauman 1996). A master status can be externally imposed, resisted
18 or absorbed and negotiated at different historical or biographical points. A master status carries with it
19 'auxiliary traits' that often define stereotypically a particular identity, for example the Islamophobic
20 view that defines 'Muslims' in relation to taken-for-granted negative elements such as being
21 'intolerant' 'anti-Western', 'radical' or 'extremist'. Several respondents commented on how the
22 journey to Muslim identity in Britain gained cultural and political salience – a two way process in
23 which external pressures and internal desires were equally at work, according to some of our
24 respondents. National and international events – the Rushdie affair, the Gulf Wars, the War in
25 Afghanistan, Western political interference in Muslim countries, responses to what our respondents
26 universally considered as appalling events of September 2001 and July 2005 – were regarded as key to
27 the emergence of a sense of Muslim identity on part of the Muslim community, and the external
28 imposition of 'Muslim' as a master identity, over a diverse set of communities.
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53 So how did a 'Muslim' identity become the predominant identification of Britain's ethnically and
54 denominationally diverse Muslim populations? We begin with two narratives. First, a female academic
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3 (Academic 6) with a history of research in the field argues that the change was both internally desired
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5 and externally imposed:
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8 Well, there are two challenges in my view. One challenge comes from the society in which
9
10 they live - the majority society - and that is they insist on identifying them as Muslim. This is a
11
12 recent development ... that started in the '80's, especially with Islamic activism, reaching
13
14 Britain with the Rushdie affair. Before that there was no reference to those communities as
15
16 being Muslim - they were either Asian..., sometimes people also referred to them as blacks or
17
18 by their nationality such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and others. But suddenly from the 1980's
19
20 the 2 million people were identified by the whole society as Muslim. The second point was that
21
22 they themselves started seeing themselves and articulating their presence in Britain as Muslims
23
24 rather than as people whose parents ... have come from – let's say Kashmir or Bangladesh or
25
26 Gujarat or the Punjab - ...and this shift has actually, in my view, been detrimental to the
27
28 presence of Muslims in Britain ...
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36 She notes that this coincided with a global trend emphasizing Muslimness as a key identification:
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38 As a result of this particular historical context in which this identity as a Muslim became
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40 prominent - not only in Britain but the rest of the world - Saudi Arabia to Egypt, to Iraq, to
41
42 other places - people have moved away from this national or ethnic belonging to the global
43
44 identity of being a Muslim and in a way what is happening today in the world with globalisation
45
46 has given credibility to this because being a Muslim means that you are part of a wider global
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48 community, which globalisation encourages through, for example, easy travel, tele-
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50 communication, the internet, all these new kind of communication technology that came with
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52 ... globalisation, encouraged and reinforced the fact that we are now Muslims whose networks,
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54 loyalties cross the borders to other places. If we ask for example your parents or my parents,
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3 they would not have identified themselves with this global community, they would have seen
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5 themselves as coming from this little village or that little village or that country. But from the
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7 1980's, especially with the young generation, there is a shift in the way we Muslims present
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9 ourselves and the way the others perceive us.
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14 Similar sentiments were articulated by a female political activist and policy professional (Policy 8),
15
16 who also emphasised the importance of 'Sheikh Google' - by giving ready access to global
17
18 communication, news, religious knowledge and to internet based communities - in creating and
19
20 sustaining a global Muslim identity. A leading local politician (Politic 3), however, notes that this
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22 identification is the latest in a number of identifications that Muslims of his generation, now retired,
23
24 have negotiated, more or less willingly:
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29 ... I once said to the journalist He said 'what do you think about yourself now,
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31 where do you stand being a Muslim in your position?' and I said 'I came to this country
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33 40 - 45 years ago. At that time I was described as black and I fought against
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35 [oppression], as a black person, politically I described myself as black. Then later on I
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37 became an Asian and then 10 - 15 years ago I was a Muslim and now if you ask me
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39 honestly, I am a 'terrorist'.' So image has changed over the years, from black, to Asian,
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41 to Muslim, to terrorist.
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48 Alongside external ascriptions of Muslim identity, Muslims themselves were active participants in the
49
50 making of the 'Muslim identity'. This, sometimes 'fictive unity', as described by Werbner (1991), was
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52 sustained both by common distress at the hardships experienced by Muslims across the globe, by
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54 reference to the notion of a global Ummah, and as noted by Academic 6 above, by globalisation and
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3 technology (see also Klausen 2005, p. 27). A local authority chief officer (Policy 2) noted that
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5 Muslims felt under siege and:

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7 ... the impact of that is that it is creating Muslim community identity in a sense, because when
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9 you are feeling oppressed or you see an aggressor, you stand together and you create an identity,
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11 a new identity...
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17 Whether a unified 'Muslim identity' is a positive development or not, depends on who attributes or
18
19 claims it, how it is performed in the public sphere and the symbolic and ideological boundaries of
20
21 belonging that it encompasses. All of the respondents' accounts of the complex and sometimes
22
23 contradictory meaning attached to Muslim identity indicate the way in which an identity is a constantly
24
25 negotiated, contingent performance, 'an emergent property of an ongoing interpersonal bargaining'
26
27 (Watson 1981, p. 453). Nor can the move to Muslimness as the primary identity be absolute. Many of
28
29 our older respondents, active in colour and race oriented struggles of the last three decades of the 20th
30
31 Century, found it difficult to sustain a coherent narrative around Muslimness, constantly slipping into
32
33 the language of race and racism; some nostalgic about the one-time broader alliances across religious
34
35 and ethnic boundaries, others regarding this as an era of naivety. In some cases, respondents attempted
36
37 to forcefully assert a 'normative' Muslim unity, later accepting the diversity and sectarian rifts within
38
39 the Muslim communities. This is illustrated by the following terse response, to Ahmad's contention
40
41 that the Muslim society suffers from sectarian divides:
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47 Policy 7 There's no sects in Islam. There's schools of thought. [sits up and raises voice to make
48
49 his point]
50

51 Ahmad There's schools of thought.
52

53 Policy 7 There's no sects in Islam. All believe in Allah, the Prophet, the Quran.
54

55 Ahmad That's fine, that's fine.
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3 Policy 7 There's no difference whatsoever.
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5 As we will see, this respondent later laments the internal divides within the Muslim communities in
6
7 relation to representational leadership.
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12 While the emergence of Muslimness as a primary identity and its representation formed a key theme in
13 these narratives, how Muslimness was negotiated with other identity claims was not lost on our
14 respondents. Many interviewees talked about the tendency of policy and media debates to wrongly
15 classify them as a monolithic, undifferentiated 'Muslim community' (see Evergeti 2006a; Modood et al
16
17 2006).
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26 Most of our participants resisted such a unifying, single categorisation, referring to regional, linguistic
27 and ethnic differences, as well as the plurality of Islam across time and space. There are two important
28 issues emerging from such accounts. One is to emphasise the tolerance of diversity in Islam, thus
29 demonstrating that Islam, historically has been multicultural, encompassing various cultures and
30 ethnicities but also accommodating other faiths. Some respondents, for example, referred to the
31 constitution of Madina at the time of the Prophet as an early example of multiculturalism, built around
32 alliances with Christians and Jews of Madina. The second relates to the way various aspects of Muslim
33 identities are formed and negotiated depending on the socio-historical, political and cultural context –
34 diversity rather than identikit Islam is the hallmark of Muslim history. A writer with an interest in faiths
35 in South Asia (Academic 4), argued that South Asian Muslims should be proud of the thousand year
36 shared history with Hindus. Equally she feared that a homogenised, ahistorical and notionally global
37 Islam may be emerging in pockets with dubious claims of authenticity, propagating an austere,
38 restrictive, Wahabist theology – see also Grewal, 2009. The respondent introduced above (Academic 6)
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40 along with several others, spoke of the inherent diversity of Islam:
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3 Islam is a universal religion and ...[its] strength [is] that it was able to incorporate ethnic and
4
5 cultural difference ... therefore what is happening today in terms of making us all homogenous
6
7 - making us all pray in the same way, making us all believe in the same and practice our faith in
8
9 one particular way - is a recent development that is not at the heart of Islam.
10
11

12 She related this diversity to the lack of a formal central authority or clergy in Islam, a point also made
13
14 by others, although one noted the existence of de facto clergy in the shape of Imams and Ulema
15
16 (Academic 10):
17

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19 We have never had a Church, we have never had a Pope, we have never had a kind of higher
20
21 council of Ulema speaking on our behalf ...and this is why it has managed to succeed and
22
23 spread in places so different from the cultural, geographical origin of it. ...it is a religion which
24
25 allows the incorporation of difference ...there are multiple opinions, multiple fatwahs,
26
27 depending where we are
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31 Pluralism in Islam has been well documented in the relevant literature (Fletcher 1992; Armstrong 2000;
32
33 and for recent considerations Klausen 2005; Modood and Ahmad 2007).
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38 Other identifications were also important to our respondents. For example, a policy respondent (Policy
39
40 8) noted that a Muslim woman was leading a national campaign against domestic violence, very much
41
42 as a woman and not as a Muslim. A novelist and academic (Academic 7) talked about the importance
43
44 of locality identity, in deciding to send their daughters to the 'lousy' local school, with a large (white)
45
46 council housing estate intake:
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48

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50 ...we... consciously decided to send our kids to this school knowing that it was quite a lousy
51
52 school, with the belief that, actually, ... it kind of, fucks up the ecology ... if I take her [older
53
54 daughter] ... to another school, it's almost like wealth extraction, you know, ... brain drain...
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3 Indeed Alam and Husband (2006) have noted the strong sense of locality loyalty among Bradford's
4 young Muslims. Others (Amin 2002; Kundani 2007) have argued that the 2001 street disturbances in
5 Northern cities related to a strong sense of locality identity, with young Muslim men protecting their
6 'patch' against both racists from outside of their area and the local police.
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13 ***Representing Muslims: political and representational leadership***

14
15 Although respondents welcomed some recent positive developments, most expressed concerns in
16 relation to representation and leadership and argued that important changes needed to take place both
17 within British politics and the Muslim communities to facilitate Muslims' full participation in British
18 society. To illustrate this, we pick two areas – political leadership and representation of Muslims as a
19 collective; however we leave our respondents' personal roles as leaders for a separate discussion. First,
20 several were critical of both the lack of and 'mediocrity' of political leadership given by Muslim
21 leaders. Following on from an interview with a parliamentarian [Politic 2] at the Houses of Parliament,
22 Ahmad was invited to lunch with the respondent and a Jewish academic engaged in interfaith work.
23 Discussion led by the parliamentarian focused on the paucity of Muslims in both the Houses of
24 Parliament (then four MPs and ten members of the Lords). The parliamentarian and the guest
25 contrasted this with an estimated 40 Jewish MPs and more than 80 members of the Lords, from a
26 population about one-eighth the size of the Muslim population. That the Muslims in the two Houses of
27 Parliament were broadly South Asian and exclusively of Pakistani origin in the Lower House was
28 noted by our respondents, and used by one respondent (an aspiring national politician) to entice her
29 ethnic community to engage in party politics, while acknowledging the strong support from some of
30 these MPs (Politic 5). Others were pleased at the increase in numbers but critical of the quality of some
31 of the parliamentarians, 'at least we have our share of mediocrity', said one respondent; although the
32 Muslim ministers (then two) were singled out for praise, few parliamentarians had made memorable
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3 interventions, noted some, while others pointed that some of the appointees to the Upper House lacked
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5 the stature commonly expected of Peers.
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10 The increasing Muslim political leadership at the local level was acknowledged by many. However,
11
12 some respondents were critical of both what had been achieved at the local level and the nature of
13
14 political engagement; arguing that success, for South Asians and especially Pakistanis, relied more on
15
16 community and biraderi allegiances than party politics:
17

18
19 ... it is the village politics of Pakistan and Azad Kashmir that is being played out. It isn't
20
21 actually the UK politics that's driving these forces. There is one very good example just very
22
23 recently in Birmingham where people have switched camps from Labour to Liberal and still got
24
25 elected. ...you ask any of these candidates 'what does your Labour Party stand for, what's the
26
27 manifesto of the Liberal Party?' they haven't got a clue because that isn't the manifesto they
28
29 are standing on actually. This is about biraderism... (Policy 2)
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36 This and some other respondents see biraderi as a retrograde institution, confining political power
37
38 among biraderi members irrespective of their political aptitude or credentials, a view supported by
39
40 Klausen (Klausen 2005, p. 24).
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45 The problem of weak and uninspiring leadership, according to some, extended beyond party politics:
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48 And one of the big things around 7/7 is, my goodness, you know, our leadership is terribly
49
50 weak, who's come forward here, the same usual suspects, parochial, biraderi driven, self
51
52 appointed leaders in many senses. Who are the younger people, [and even] when the young
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54 people start coming through, well, what are they really saying, they're just presenting a new
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3 labour line here? Where's the independence, where is that scrutiny, ... where are those parts of
4
5 resistance? (Academic 4)
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10 Secondly, respondents regarded the representation of Muslim interests through national Muslim
11 organizations as a key concern. While some improvements were noted – several respondents praised
12 the Muslim Council for Britain as an honest, broadly democratic, though over-ambitious experiment –
13 there was much criticism of several organizations purporting to represent British Muslims. The lack of
14 formal religious hierarchy in Islam, noted as a welcome feature by respondents above, contributes
15 towards the lack of formal leadership among Muslims – Muslims simply do not have, with the
16 exceptions of one or two branches of Islam, institutions such as the Chief Rabbi or the Archbishop of
17 Canterbury. Even if you could create a single, homogenous Muslim voice, legitimated by governmental
18 support and engagement, our respondents would not welcome this. Real and meaningful representation
19 must have inbuilt diversity, fluidity and tension:
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33 ... there is no monolithic Muslim community, right, so all different kinds of Muslims must be
34 allowed to speak for themselves, ... who speaks for Muslims ... has been ...[a] contentious
35 issue for a long time, most of the leaders are ... the elder generation, which does not reflect the
36 hopes and aspirations of the younger people or speaks their language, so I think, you know, we
37 need a new younger leadership. (Academic 10)
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45 Thus argues a writer and public intellectual with involvement in establishing the MCB. He goes on to
46 argue that external imposition of leadership must be resisted:
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49

50 But it's also a question of how the external forces see Muslims and how they represent them
51 and how they allow that representation to, you know, to actually take place. The government
52 ... says that Muslim Council of Britain represent Muslims and they only want to talk to them,
53 ... that is not what I would regard as general representation, that's imposed representation.
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3 Because the following week the government says, actually, the MCB does not represent the
4
5 Muslims, and they are not going to talk to them and here is a new Sufi Council, they represent
6
7 the Muslims... I think the Muslims must represent themselves, ... the Government can't tell us
8
9 who should...
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15 The issue of who represents Muslims, in relation to national organizations in favour with the British
16
17 government, relates not only to exclusionary politics but also inner community politics and
18
19 'authenticity claims' of *how* and by *whom* should the community be represented, as noted by our
20
21 respondent above. This was also discussed with the policy respondent introduced earlier (Policy 7),
22
23 who first became involved in Muslim affairs through student politics in the 1970s. He was very critical
24
25 of efforts so far; the conversation starts with the recently created Mosques and Imams Advisory Board
26
27 (MINAB), sponsored by the United Kingdom Department of Communities and Local Government, but
28
29 then goes on to cover the British Muslim Forum (BMF), the Al-Khoi Foundation, the MCB and the
30
31 Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the four key institutions for some time in favour with the
32
33 British government:
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38 Policy 7 It [MINAB] is a useless body.

39 Ahmad You think it's a useless body.

40 Policy 7 It probably will never – it will die before it even starts.

41 Ahmad But if people like [---] are involved in it, why is it useless?

42 Policy 7 Yes, well, because it is at the moment four main organisations– the MCB, Al-
43
44 Khoi Foundation, the Muslim Association and the British Muslim Forum... The
45
46 British Muslim Forum is divided into nine groups ... It doesn't have a central
47
48 authority apart from [...] ... (They have)...created seven people [as] lifelong
49
50 trustees. According to British law, it's not democratic. ... You go to the website
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3 and you can see 200 mosques, but when you ring the mosques and ask 'Are you
4 members?' 'No'. 'Have you seen the constitution?' 'No'. 'Have you become a
5 member?' 'No.' So now it is a dead body.
6
7
8

9
10 Ahmad Sorry, are you talking about MINAB or the BMF?
11

12 Policy 7 British Muslim Forum. MAB and Al-Khoi, Al-Khoi is a think tank of the Shia
13 branch of Imam Al-Khoi from Iraq, which even Iran doesn't recognise, the
14 Imamia Institution doesn't recognise, the majority Shias don't want to know
15 about the Al-Khoi Foundation. There are four or five individuals only and they
16 don't have command of their own school of thought either because they are
17 articulate in human rights and with the United Nations and have been linked
18 with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office so that's why they've been brought
19 in. The Muslim Association of Britain is an Arab brand of Islam, within the UK,
20 pro Palestinian people and they don't have the support. All Arabs put together
21 are only 11 % of the total [UK] Muslim population and the majority of people
22 don't follow them at all because they're politically motivated... The only
23 credible organisation remains the MCB, but the MCB don't have resources.
24 ...they have five to six hundred mosques and institutions attached to it – ... but I
25 don't feel they can deliver because others are trying to undermine the MCB,
26 including their other three organisations ...
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48 While trenchant and partisan, this perspective illustrates the contested nature of Muslim community
49 representation.
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55 Several were critical of a lack of Muslim women in representational roles, including a female
56 prospective parliamentarian (Politic 6), who lamented the lack of support from the Muslim community
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2
3 and particular difficulty in access to the male space of the local mosque, something she felt would be
4
5 afforded to male Muslim and both male and female non-Muslim candidates. Respondents blamed
6
7 patriarchy rather than Islam for this marginalization, one (Policy 7) citing that Prophet Muhammad had
8
9 appointed a woman, 'Umme Waraqa as an Imam...', and that Aysha, the Prophet's wife, was an
10
11 acknowledged teacher and leader, even leading in a battle against Ali, the fourth Khalif. However,
12
13 several of our respondents also talked about Muslim women providing leadership, including in political
14
15 campaigning and civil action in relation to key events, as we see below.
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21

22 ***'Forty times a woman before a Muslim before the Gaza conflict, forty times a Muslim than a woman***
23
24 ***now': performing Muslimness during 'key moments'***
25

26 Identity plays out in the everyday – the school gate conversation, the work place, what you wear or eat
27
28 - as well as during 'key moments'. Several noted that the negative symbolism of being a Muslim has
29
30 affected the everyday realities of Britain's Muslims – the journey from being 'black' to 'terrorist', as
31
32 noted above. Hughes (1945) has explained how social situations result in contradictions and dilemmas
33
34 of status and in what follows we will focus on how Muslim identity is 'performed' during three key
35
36 moments.
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43 *The Rushdie Affair:* For several respondents, the Muslim identity as key public identification of British
44
45 Muslims, above race, ethnicity or regional identifications, emerged with the Rushdie affair – see
46
47 Modood 1990; Asad 1990; Piscatori 1990; Sardar and Davies 1990. Two of our established
48
49 intellectuals and writers (Academic 5 and Academic 10), responded in the way they knew best, through
50
51 writing.
52
53

54 Academic 5 ...the *Satanic Verses* affair burst on the scene in late '88, early 1989 and that's really ...
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56
57 what made me then think about being a Muslim. And my father who was a devout
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3 Muslim and ...my spiritual mentor - I spoke to him about it. I realised how hurt he was
4
5 ...and I realised that Muslims weren't going to be able to take this. Because up to that
6
7 point my instincts were pretty libertarian ...so yeah, 'let's talk about things rather than
8
9 ban books'

10
11
12 Ahmad Many people would argue that the academic discourses in relation to ethnicity and race
13
14 and racism were felt wanting in terms of dealing with *Satanic Verses* and the way in
15
16 which Muslims reacted.
17

18
19 Academic 5 Yeah, well I entirely agree with that and so I said to my Dad 'what can someone like me
20
21 do?' ... He said 'look, our family has a strong sense of public service and public duty,
22
23 you are a privileged person with the education you have achieved, you should help your
24
25 community in whatever ways that you can. But I will give you one piece of advice and
26
27 that is don't get entangled with the Mullahs' and ... in a way I have just followed that
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29 advice.
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36 Academic 10 also engaged in a range of intellectual interventions – writing, speaking and appearances
37
38 in media. While defending the right of Muslims to be offended by the *Satanic Verses*, these and other
39
40 respondents argued the importance of the kind of interventions above; arguing one's case rather than
41
42 burning books. According to our respondents, the Rushdie affair had firmly separated Muslims apart
43
44 from other minority ethnic and faith communities. Muslims now personified 'otherness'. The affair
45
46 created a stigmatised identity with negative stereotypes of the alien, uncompromising, un-British
47
48 Muslim firmly ingrained in the public imagination in a matter of days. Muslims were no longer a
49
50 collective of diverse communities but were portrayed as a monolithic, immutable mass, behaving in
51
52 deterministic manner against the interests and values of civilised Western people.
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3 *September 11 and July 7*: While Muslims were associated with intolerance and backwardness after the
4
5 Rushdie affair, many respondents noted that they were being labelled as terrorists and extremists after
6
7 the 9/11 and 7/7 bombings, having to work hard to resist this ascribed 'master status'. 'I think ... 9/11,
8
9 as a moment, has had a defining impact on identity, place, purpose and that is having an impact', noted
10
11 a one time senior civil servant (Policy 5) working closely with the British government in September
12
13 2001, a view also supported by a female parliamentarian (Politic 4):

14
15
16
17 ... there was a different view of Muslims as being at least industrious and relatively quiet and
18
19 that really was completely shattered by 9/11. So we now have the added burden of terrorism
20
21 and Islamophobia - which does make it extremely difficult. I mean, two difficulties - one is that
22
23 the label terrorist, ... but also any money that the Government is spending they are spending it
24
25 on extremism. So if we want to do any kind of community research we have to adopt the name
26
27 extremist, do it under the label extremism in one way or another, albeit preventing extremism.
28
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33
34 Almost all our interviewees protested that following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, the media
35
36 have used essentialist 'securitised' (Brown 2008) portrayals of Muslims: As a senior local politician
37
38 (Politic 3) put it, exaggerating to make a point, '...the image of the Muslim after 9/11 has become so
39
40 distorted that every Muslim now is perceived to be a terrorist...' In Mamdani's words this has created
41
42 notions of 'good Muslims' who are 'secular and westernized' and 'bad Muslims' who are 'anti-modern
43
44 and fanatical' (Mamdani 2004); and our respondents argued that 'good Muslims' were constantly
45
46 challenged by government and the media to repudiate radicalism and terrorism. The discussion of the
47
48 stigmatization of Muslim identity as inherently 'extremist' also opens up the question of 'authenticity
49
50 claims' that is who is accepted as a legitimate member of the specific social group and who is not. Our
51
52 respondents reacted not only against the external stereotypes but also against extremists and terrorists,
53
54 with whom, in their view, the British Muslims have little sympathy. They also resented the constant
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1
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3 external demands, including from the government, that ‘moderate Muslims’ demonstrate their loyalty
4
5 to the state by standing up against the radicals in their communities, arguing that the communities are
6
7 already doing this, but they will not do this if ordered to do so (e.g. Academic 1).
8
9

10
11
12 *Israeli attack on Gaza:* The Israeli attack on Gaza (which took place in late 2008, during the
13
14 fieldwork) was viewed by many Muslims as a time when they felt compelled to exert their Muslim
15
16 identity. Muslim anger was evident in the media, local communities, mosques and street
17
18 demonstrations –where the majority of demonstrators were non-Muslims, a point noted as a sign of
19
20 hope by many respondents. We illustrate the significance of this event with reference to one
21
22 respondent (policy 8). This respondent expressed both anger and the determination to make her
23
24 contribution. The event clearly impacted on her sense of who she was. Reflecting the contingent nature
25
26 of identity, she described herself as ‘forty times a woman before a Muslim before the Gaza conflict,
27
28 forty times a Muslim than a woman now’, thus revealing the inter-subjective and interactional order of
29
30 identity formation (Evereti 2006b). As someone who makes common cause with women and men of
31
32 other faiths and no faith, around a number of areas of civic engagement, she was outraged at what she
33
34 regarded as carnage of women, children and men in Gaza, while the world stood aside. This sentiment
35
36 was widely shared across Britain’s Muslim (and large swathes of non-Muslim) population, including
37
38 anger over British government’s policy in relation to the Middle East which alienates Muslims and,
39
40 according to many other respondents, may contribute to the radicalisation of younger people.
41
42
43
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48 ... international policy has a huge, huge amount to do with radicalisation, that’s where a lot of
49
50 the anger comes from. If you get three meals a day and got a roof over your head, you are
51
52 pretty much chilled out... But the thing is your brothers and sisters aren’t chilled out [in other
53
54 countries], your brothers and sisters are getting battered and they are using your tax money to
55
56 do it ... For me, it is a massive issue - and I know - I have got to admit Gaza happened - I was -
57
58
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60

1
2
3 if there was ever a time I was going to get up that would have been it and it was only because I
4
5 had the wherewithal to know that Palestinians didn't need another martyr, that stopped
6
7 me...(Policy 8)
8
9

10
11
12 Events in Gaza spurred her to act, an example of pockets of strong leadership being provided by

13
14
15 Muslim women:

16
17 ...we just –... raised £15,000 and that was just a bunch of girls that got together that were
18
19 affected and we thought like 'what do we do?' The other thing that we do is we are politically
20
21 mobilising. I am a political activist anyway, but even having been one of those, I sat there for
22
23 so long after the first bomb fell, just thinking 'how could I have let this happen?', knowing full
24
25 well that I had not done enough and I think there is a growing understanding amongst Muslims,
26
27 particularly Muslim youth, but also I would say ... the thirty somethings - there is an
28
29 understanding that we haven't done enough ... in ... standing up and saying 'no, enough is
30
31 enough and we are not having this anymore'... I heard [young people] say 'we will never let
32
33 this happen again and we will do what it takes to never let it happen'.
34
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41 Young Muslim women and men (in alliance with non-Muslim) students were prominent in
42
43 demonstrations and other action, including peaceful sit-ins in 22 British universities –agreements with
44
45 the university administrations to end sit-ins, resulted in pledges of several million pounds in book and
46
47 equipment aid to Palestinian universities.
48
49

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51
52 This respondent made an important distinction between Muslim and Islamic identities. The former she
53
54 described, as a 'cultural' identity, not tied to religiosity but to a sense of belonging to the Muslim
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3 Ummah. Therefore outrage may be equally felt among the devout in the mosque as among the less
4
5 devout in the pub (see also Samad, 1992).
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9

10 **Conclusions**

11
12 We have presented the perspectives of our respondents without laboriously comparing and contrasting
13
14 the views of the three categories of 'elite', nor of men and women. Instead we have brought out
15
16 differences where appropriate. We have noted that the older respondents found it difficult to maintain a
17
18 sustained narrative around Muslimness and some framed Muslim oppression in terms of racism. Many
19
20 have noted the racialisation of Muslims, which justifies their treatment as an undifferentiated threat to
21
22 civilisation (Kundani, 2007; Brown 2008; Naber, 2009; Grewal, 2009). Mostly, women and men held
23
24 similar perspectives. However, women were more likely to refer to issues of gender than men, but
25
26 several of the men accepted that Muslims were less accepting of women than was Islam, a theme of
27
28 recent Muslim feminist scholarship (e.g. Ahmed, 1992; Wadud, 2007). The participants' accounts in
29
30 this study demonstrate diverse ways of being Muslim, the challenges that Muslims in Britain face and
31
32 how they negotiate plural identities.
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41 It was evident in our respondents' narratives that their orientation to different identities becomes an
42
43 important link between interaction and encompassing social order (Zimmerman 1998). Activities in a
44
45 certain setting produce 'identities-as-context' (for example 'Muslim identity' post 9/11) where
46
47 participants continuously realign their situated identities in order to assume or resist a particular
48
49 meaning attached to them (e.g. 'terrorist'). 'Muslim' becomes the 'master status' (Hughes 1945), both
50
51 externally assigned and, at least by many, aspired to internally. The master status carries with it cultural
52
53 stereotypes such as 'terrorist' or 'extremist', as 'auxiliary traits'. We have noted the efforts to resist
54
55 these external impositions with reference to the historical and spatial diversity of Islam (Fletcher 1992;
56
57
58
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60

1
2
3 Armstrong 2000). We also noted the tension among some respondents, straining to maintain a narrative
4
5 of unity by referring to normative positions of oneness of Islam, while at least temporarily ignoring de-
6
7 facto diversity and division (Werbner 1991).
8
9

10
11
12 The relationship of Muslimness to the state apparatus of definition and control was also noted. British
13
14 foreign policy was noted as a problem and associated, by our respondents, with radicalization of young
15
16 men. Respondents resisted external impositions of Muslim leadership, arguing for a plurality of
17
18 leadership, including leadership by younger people. While many were critical of the current status of
19
20 Muslim leadership, we also noted welcome positive leadership being provided by women and younger
21
22 people, and according to some respondents, a new mood to challenge oppression of fellow Muslims.
23
24 However, just as Section 11 funding in the 1980s was recognized for its perverse impact on creating
25
26 'distinct cultural needs', thus fragmenting more inclusive alliances and collective voluntary sector
27
28 provision of services, so the current funding under Preventing Violent Extremism is related by
29
30 respondents to de-facto acceptance of state definitions of Muslim problems. The state thus associates
31
32 radicalism directly with extremist violence, and funds its prevention in isolation from tackling poverty,
33
34 low educational attainment or unemployment, all inherent and indelible problems (see Platt 2007);
35
36 Muslims accept this in order to gain whatever limited funding is available. Thus the state defines
37
38 through its ideological, legal and administrative apparatuses, that what it does is in the best interests of
39
40 the Muslim communities (see Ahmed 1992 for historical parallels in relation to Egypt). As our
41
42 respondents noted, Muslim identity in Britain has widely been associated with intolerance, rigidity and
43
44 alienness; public image of Muslims therefore remains one of 'otherness'. Mamdani notes that such
45
46 essentialist characterizations are the result of what he calls 'culture talk', which sees something
47
48 inherently wrong with Islam rather than providing a political analysis of our times.
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3 Identities become transparent on boundaries of social interaction. While our respondents note that the
4
5 construction of Muslim identity and its alignment with 'otherness' has impacted on the everyday
6
7 interactions with non-Muslims, the meanings of Muslimness come into sharper relief during, what we
8
9 have called, 'key moments'. We chose two key moments which our respondents regarded as
10
11 particularly significant in 'making us Muslims', and the third because of its currency as it took place
12
13 during data collection. The Rushdie affair and September 11 were regarded as key definitional
14
15 moments which impacted not just on public association of Muslims with intolerance, alienness and
16
17 danger, they also challenged both the theoretical nomenclature for understanding population diversity
18
19 in Britain and the policy apparatuses constructed around notions of culture, race and racism (see Sardar
20
21 and Davies 1990; Parekh 1990; Modood 1990, and on 2001 street disturbances, Amin 2002).
22
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29 In this study, the notion of being a 'Muslim' presents itself as a complex and contested construction,
30
31 differentially and contingently espoused by the Muslim community, often competing with other
32
33 identifications (see Baumann 1996 for broader debate), but uniformly imposed externally as a
34
35 homogenous identity.
36
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41
42
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46
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Table 1: The sample

Category	Gender		National background							Total	
	Men	Women	Pakistani	Indian	Bangladesh i	Turkish	Libya n	Saudi- Arabia n	Egyptian		Iranian
Political	3	3	1	2	1	1				1	6
Policy	7	1	5	2		1					8
Academic	5	5	6	1			1	1	1		10
Total	15	9	12	5	1	2	1	1	1	1	24

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