



The **MUSLIM**
PRESENCE IN BRITAIN
— Making a Positive Contribution

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The East London Mosque



Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies

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 Let me start by saying that I am delighted and privileged to be here with you today to celebrate the development of the London Muslim Centre (LMC). I am very impressed by the whole facility and the wonderful provision that this is for the community. This is one of the many signs throughout British society that the Muslim community is a permanent feature of the UK.

I would like to begin by talking about Britain's diverse Muslim population and their history. This population has a dynamic, and sometimes surprising, history. As early as 1627, for instance, there were said to be nearly forty Muslims living here in London working as tailors, shoemakers, button makers and one even as a solicitor.

There is some evidence of Ottoman Muslims travelling to England from the end of the sixteenth century. A merchant named Ahmet Efendi, accompanied by a certain Niqula, were believed to be the first Turks to arrive in England. A Turkish bath, opened in 1679, also testifies to the presence of Turks in London at that time. As early as 1777 Monshee Mahomet

Saeed from Bengal was advertising for pupils in London; another who acquired prominence was Sake Deen Mohammed who came with Captain Baker of the East India Regiment in 1784 and was one of the first to settle permanently in England. He set up an 'Indian Vapour Bath and Shampooing Establishment' in Brighton. While he was highly popular with the public, his success was sealed when he was appointed 'Shampooing Surgeon to His Majesty George IV'.

The frequency and duration of Ottoman sailors and traders visiting British ports increased during the nineteenth century with some taking up permanent residence. For instance, according to the 1881 census, there were 8 Egyptians and 44 Turks resident in Merseyside. A transient Muslim population was to be found in the ports and urban centres of Britain in the late 1880s. Arab sailors arrived on trading vessels and war ships belonging to the Ottoman navy, while large numbers of *lascars*, or sailors, from different parts of the Indian subcontinent worked on British vessels. Indeed, from the early nineteenth century onwards, Indian Muslims started to visit Britain in larger numbers.

Muslim migration to Britain leading to the evolution of 'settler' communities of any significant size can be traced as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century when the first relatively permanent Muslim populations were established in Manchester, Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields, and here in the East End of London. Apart from the afore-mentioned sailors, these Muslims included merchants, itinerant entertainers, servants, princes, students and a sprinkling from the professional classes. The vast majority was in some way connected with the British Empire and so came from the colonies or protected territories, such as British India, the Aden hinterland, British Somaliland, Malaya, and the Yemen.

As Muslims settled in Britain, they gradually established institutions that they hoped would enable them to meet their material and spiritual needs. Yemeni and Somali Muslim seamen set up makeshift prayer rooms in their dockyard communities in Cardiff and South Shields in the second half of the nineteenth century. An interesting example was the complex developed by an indigenous convert, Abdullah Quilliam. The Liverpool Muslim Institute - containing a prayer room, an orphanage, a press and a school, the Liverpool Muslim Institute - flourished in the 1890s. It served a significant Muslim

community in an environment that was becoming virulently hostile from top to bottom with the Prime Minister William Gladstone - a practising Christian - railing at the alleged atrocities being committed by the Ottoman Turks on their Bulgarian Armenian subjects.

With the construction of the Shahjehan Mosque in Woking in 1889 - the first purpose built mosque anywhere in Western Europe - the centre of the Muslim community in Britain shifted there. A number of prominent converts contributed to its cultural and religious activities. Among them were some notable figures such as the Cambridge educated peer, Lord al-Farooq Headley; the author of the 'Meaning of the Glorious Quran', Marmaduke Pickthall and Lady Evelyn Zaineb Cobbold, probably the first English woman to go on pilgrimage to Mecca in 1934. The Woking mosque became a symbol of the world-wide Muslim community in Britain during the inter-war period. Muslim dignitaries invariably made a point of attending at the Mosque on their visits to Britain. Implicit in the visits by prominent figures from such diverse environs and denominational backgrounds was the acceptance of the non-sectarian character of the Woking Muslim Mission. Muslims from different tendencies were invited to lead the prayers. The head of the

Ismaili sect, for instance, was welcomed with the same degree of dignity and warmth as the Amir Faisal of Saudi Arabia or King Faruq of Egypt. The tribal chiefs of Kano in Nigeria visited, as did the Grand Mufti of Palestine. All were treated with the respect that was their due.

This Woking-based community stressed tolerance and was prepared to engage in the rational debate on important and controversial issues of the day.

As we know, similar developments were taking shape in the East End of London from the beginning of the twentieth century. This wonderful Mosque is the result of decades of sustained and enormous effort on part of the humble, largely impoverished Muslim community that has been putting down roots in this part of London for centuries.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were an estimated 10,000 Muslims living and working in Britain. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the total number of Muslims is now around two million. These Muslims in contemporary Britain span the religious spectrum – from devout adherence to orthodox Islamic practice to nominal affiliation.

Among young British Muslims, there seems to be much heart-searching about where they belong – in Britain, or in an ‘Islamic’ community? They are developing differing perceptions of national, ethnic and religious belonging, and are negotiating new ways of being Muslim in Britain in which the British element of their identity forms an important part of the equation. There is, however, still a dominant, albeit contested, view that Britishness depends on a shared sense of (post)-Christian, cultural and racial unity and imperial history, and Muslims in Britain have had to think about themselves in reaction to being rejected and constructed as ‘the Other’. Their identification with Britishness is not particularly helped by the repeated questioning of the terms of their belonging. This can be questioning, and a natural part of communicating in our diverse society, or it can turn to violence.

Islamophobia, defined as ‘dread or hatred of Islam and fear or dislike of Muslims’, was expressed in a number of ways immediately after the events of 11 September 2001. Vandals attacked mosques and Asian-run businesses around the UK; alcohol bottles, firebombs and excrement were thrown through letterboxes; and death threats were made against Muslims. Pigs’ heads were dumped outside a mosque in Exeter.

More recently, just last week, we saw evidence of anti-Muslim sentiment shockingly displayed in the racist chanting at the England versus Turkey football European Cup qualifier in Sunderland - with the bile spewing out in the form of chants of 'Die Muslim Die' and 'I'd rather be a Paki than a Turk'.

The media's widespread prefacing with 'Muslim' of words such as 'extremists', 'terrorists' 'fundamentalists' and 'fanatics' has only served to perpetuate the view that Muslims and Islam are violent and frighteningly dangerous. Headlines such as 'slaughtering goats, burning books, mutilating teenagers ... and still they want me to respect the Muslim ways?' or cartoons depicting Arabs as savage and threatening, have all at different times contributed to this Islamophobic atmosphere. In a survey of the coverage of Islam and Muslims in the British media before 11 September, persistent stereotypes relating to Muslims were identified, namely that Muslims are 'intolerant', 'misogynistic', 'violent' or 'cruel', and 'strange' or 'different'. Parts of the media continue to create negative perceptions and a climate that is not conducive to bringing together all of our communities that make up the UK.

Soon after 11 September, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, seeking to clarify that the events had nothing to do with Islam or Muslims *per se*, stressed that Muslims should not be targeted in any way. This showed an understanding that, contrary to stereotypical and popular perceptions of Muslims as a monolithic, 'fundamentalist' group, one of the most striking aspects associated with Muslims living in Britain today is the diversity that they represent. An increased understanding of this diversity, and action to acknowledge and address religious discrimination, is now necessary.

Let us take a few moments to consider the socio-economic position of today's British Muslim community.

The majority of Muslim immigrants entered Britain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Many (mostly Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) are still concentrated in semi-skilled and unskilled sectors of industry. These communities suffer from unemployment, poor working conditions, poverty, overcrowded housing, poor health, and low educational qualifications.

However, as we all appreciate, a degree of social mobility exists within British Muslim communities. In the early 1990s the proportion of Pakistanis in professional

occupations, for instance, already exceeded that for whites; successful business ventures in property, food, services and fashion have emerged and small scale enterprises, in particular Sylheti-owned restaurants, have continued to expand. Many Pakistanis have moved to affluent suburbia. There is also a high proportion of highly skilled Arab settlers employed in professional positions as engineers, professors, doctors, and business people. Recent research also suggests that there are currently well over 5,000 Muslim millionaires in Britain, with liquid assets of more than £3.6bn.

However, irrespective of their socio-economic status, it is clearly the case that many Muslims have been subject to religious discrimination, as well as wider racial discrimination. At present, Muslim asylum-seekers are one particularly vulnerable group, especially since their circumstances are not always fully understood by the authorities and they also find themselves on the receiving end of negative stereotypes and assumptions. Among the issues resulting in discriminatory treatment or exclusion, more generally, have been the lack of *halal* food; a denial of time-off for religious festivals; refusal to allow time-off for prayers; lack of or inadequate prayer facilities; difficulties in obtaining planning permission for

mosques, schools and burial sites; and conflicts about dress and language in a range of settings (the wearing of the *hijab* has proved problematic in schools and the workplace).

Beyond disadvantage and discrimination, there has been considerable exclusion of Muslims from public life. However, for the first time, a Muslim, Mohammad Sarwar, was elected to Parliament in 1997. A record 53 Muslim candidates then stood in the 2001 general election. There are currently two Muslim members of Parliament and one who is a member of the European Parliament. Meanwhile, five Muslims have been appointed as peers. In addition, Muslim participation in local politics has expanded and 160 Muslim local councillors (153 Labour, 6 Liberal Democrat and 1 Conservative) were elected in 1996. By 2001 this figure had risen to 217.

However, while we can point to the fact that Muslim influence and involvement at the grass-roots level has gradually increased within mainstream parties, Muslim politicians have remained largely sidelined. By the late 1990s there were still no Muslim leaders of local councils, and only a handful of deputy leaders. Muslims have faced resistance in selection processes because of negative

stereotypes. Muslim networking, for example, has been seen as 'undemocratic', and Muslims have been accused of opportunism, illegal recruiting practices, bribery, corruption, and using politics for personal gain, despite the fact that there is little evidence to show that their conduct is any more open to suspicion than that of their white counterparts. There is obviously still a long way to go before Muslim involvement in these aspects of British life is not tainted by negative assumptions.

One aspect of contemporary British Muslim experience where we can see Muslims having to interact with wider British society is in relation to matters of law. For many Muslims in Britain, adherence to Islamic law is part of living in accordance with God's will. Muslims regard two kinds of human behaviour as subject to the *Sharia*: individual duties *vis-à-vis* God, and individual duties *vis-à-vis* society. In two specific areas of English law, Parliament has legislated to exempt Muslims from certain statutory provisions – shops can be opened on Sundays without breaching trading laws, and Muslims can slaughter in abattoirs according to their religious methods.

At present, however, there is an anomaly in the Race Relations Act of 1976, as it

covers Sikhs and Jews but not Muslims. While the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 has extended and deepened safeguards against racial discrimination, it still leaves Muslims no less vulnerable to religious discrimination. Moreover, Sikhs and Jews are also protected from exposure to material and physical harm under the Public Order Act 1986 (subsequently strengthened by the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998), while this is not the case for Muslims.

The existence of differential treatment for Muslims under the law can be seen in relation to the whole issue of blasphemy. The law on blasphemy in England is narrowly formulated and does not recognise vilification, ridicule, defamatory language, and contempt of Islam or other non-Christian faiths. In protecting only Christianity, it is undoubtedly discriminatory. Consequently, British Muslims have felt justified in feeling that they are being treated unequally. Problems reached a peak in the outbreak of the Rushdie Affair, when British Muslims, outraged by the perceived blasphemous content of *The Satanic Verses*, petitioned the government to ban it. The call for the banning of *The Satanic Verses* and a change in the Blasphemy Law, however, did not succeed because, at least partly, Muslims failed to present the validity of

their case in ways that were accessible to the non-Muslim majority, who therefore remained unpersuaded.

Muslims in Britain have felt increasingly vulnerable since September 2001. For some, this vulnerability has been accentuated by the many acts of violence perpetrated against them as well as the introduction of new legislation to deal with suspected terrorists. There has been substantial criticism from Muslim and non-Muslim individuals and organisations about the government's 2001 Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act, which allows internment without trial and suspends obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Bearing in mind the lengthy history of a Muslim presence in Britain, and the ways in which Muslims have put down roots in this country, British Muslims need to be looked at not as "newcomers", "the other" and as "alien", but very much as a people whose roots, increasingly, are in the UK. Young British Muslims are, obviously, from 'here' – if they are told to 'go back home' then it is to London, Bradford, Birmingham or Cardiff that they should go, not Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Somalia.

Under these circumstances, people in Britain need:

- To recognise that Muslims make positive contributions across the whole of our society
- To stop automatically seeing Muslims as a threat to Western society; and
- To start to think of Muslims as 'us' rather than as 'them'.

Unless the root causes of Islamophobia are addressed, the deep divisions in our society will remain. This, I hope, is beginning to happen, and Centres such as the LMC certainly project a very positive message to wider society. The LMC's aims of providing services open to all, of creating an environment for effective interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, of providing non-Muslims with the opportunity to learn and understand Islam through dialogue, discussion and social interaction, and of contributing to the social, cultural and economic development of the whole community, are thus wholly laudable.

As wider British society begins to move away, albeit hesitantly, from negative images and stereotypes to a more positive understanding of Islam and Muslims, we can also detect an increasing recognition in the establishment of the needs, concerns and aspirations of British Muslims. During the past few years, for instance, there has been greater acknowledgement of the

Muslim contribution to the development of British business.

A couple of years ago, the Queen gave her backing to Britain's Muslims in her first public comment on the war against terrorism and acknowledged the contribution made by the Muslim community to British life. It is gratifying to note that right at the top, Prince Charles has understood this changing environment and has reached out to the British Muslim community. This has been reflected in his indication that he wishes to be the Defender of Faiths (as opposed to being the Defender of the Faith, i.e. the Church of England). That both Prince Charles and Tony Blair have sent encouraging messages to the LMC is to be welcomed.

Muslims, too, are demonstrating their wish to enter into meaningful dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and full participation. We have Muslims who are prominent in the mainstream in sport, entertainment, business and politics. Here in the East End of London, there are many examples of Muslims contributing in this spirit - wonderful examples of individual achievement, entrepreneurial spirit, Islamic values, but also willingness to engage with mainstream British society.

With the war in Iraq currently raging, Muslims feel fearful of what this will mean for them in Britain. There is a great deal of anguish. There is much anxiety across the Muslim community. Will this frustration and anger boil over? Will supposedly alienated volatile young men give vent to violence? So far the mood seems to have been reflective. It seems obvious that Palestine and Iraq are more than Muslim problems. The link between the local and the global has been established; between affluence on the one hand and poverty and deprivation on the other; between local and global injustices. At the anti-war demonstrations, at which British Muslims have featured prominently among tens of thousands of faces, they have felt confident that this is the way to bring sense and peace. Instead of calls for retaliation, anger is being channelled into civic action. This anti-war movement has done wonders for integration. As Fareena Alam wrote recently in *The Observer*:

'Where else, except at the peace marches, would one find stern-looking old men in turbans and sarongs clapping in unison with anarchist musicians, or Bangladeshi mothers in traditional headscarves linking with gora women from Middle England? Cucumber sandwiches are eaten with pakoras and washed down with hot cups of masala chai. In between these

odd bedfellows are thousands upon thousands of ordinary Britons, trade unionists, students and teachers, politicians. Rock stars - the young, the old, men, women and children. United together with a passion for a common cause.'

These recent events and images suggest that we have come a long way from those book burnings of 1989 when we were lampooned by the media as "intellectual hooligans" and intolerant Nazis totally out of touch with the tenor, traditions and values of British society. Thankfully, important lessons have been learned. Muslims who had isolated themselves at the margins, seem to be now much more part of the mainstream.

Indeed, out of this almost unimaginable tragedy that we are living through at the moment, the war seems to have brought a little hope. Muslims and non-Muslims need to grasp this tightly with both hands and build on the progress that we have made so that we, and subsequent generations, can realistically anticipate a bright future.

Thanks and God bless you.

9 April 2003.

* Keynote speech delivered at a Reception Dinner held at the East London Mosque, to celebrate the construction work of the London Muslim Centre. The event was attended by major Muslim organisations, institutions and personalities in the UK.

About Dr Khizar Humayun Ansari

Dr Ansari is the Director of the Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies and Equal Opportunities at Royal Holloway, University of London. In addition, he is a senior lecturer in the Department of History and supervises postgraduate students. As Director of the Centre, Dr Ansari is responsible for overseeing the strategic development and organisation of the Centre's activities, and for supervising its research and consultancy projects.

Dr Ansari has written extensively on equal opportunities, employment and career opportunities of ethnic minorities, racial equality, cross-cultural communications, managing cultural diversity and contemporary Islam. His latest book 'The "Infidel" Within – History of Muslims in Britain, 1800 to the Present' is forthcoming. Dr Ansari was awarded an OBE in 2002 for his work in race relations.

For further information about the Centre please look at the website: www.rhul.ac.uk/cems

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About The East London Mosque & London Muslim Centre

The East London Mosque, which dates back to 1910, is the oldest Mosque in London. It has been in the forefront of community involvement, contributing to the cultural, social and economic development of the area. With wide scale community backing, the mosque has been pursuing a £9M extension project – London Muslim Centre (LMC). Construction work at the LMC site started in the month of Ramadan (2002) and work is progressing steadily. Once complete early 2004, LMC will become the largest Muslim complex in Western Europe, dubbed a 'Centre of Excellence'. It will act as a hub of community activity and celebrate the richness of communities across London, both Muslims and non-Muslims. With six floors (90,000 square feet) of multi-purpose useable space, LMC will provide:

- *Increased prayer space (10,000 worshipers at a time) & ablution facilities*
 - *Health, education, sports & learning provisions for children and adults*
 - *Workspace for community enterprises & entrepreneurship*
 - *Increased facilities for women, elderly and those with special needs.*
 - *A range of community and youth provisions*
- *Facilities to promote better interaction between communities*

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* Picture on cover page is the proposed frontage elevation of the London Muslim Centre