

# Being a Muslim in Britain

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'How does it feel to be a Muslim in Britain?' asked a young student during one of my lectures in a British school.

Having been brought up in Egypt, where freedom of worship is a matter of course, the question was something of a surprise to me. It just did not occur to me that, in the Britain of today, a young student would wonder about a question like that.

'It is easy,' I answered. 'I can pray any time and anywhere, I can fast any day of any month, I can give alms to the poor, I can go on pilgrimage, and I can freely declare my faith. And as for the moral values of Islam, I can see no contradiction there. On the contrary, I see respect for the Islamic moral code.'

The question did, however, reverberate in my mind, and, I have to admit, I am one of the privileged few who can do what they want when they want to, simply because I am my own boss. I know of fellow Muslims who are not permitted by their employers to pray on time, or to fast the month of Ramadan. On the major Muslim feast days, many Muslims cannot take time off to celebrate without putting their jobs at risk or losing an important school day. Many Muslims cannot take time off work to go for the mandatory Friday prayer, even though it takes place during their lunch hour.

Muslim workers who observe their religion are in fact often mocked by their fellow workers, and Muslim students are often harassed by their fellow students. Some school teachers and headteachers even saw the coming to Britain of a large Muslim population as a golden chance to 'save their souls' and, with missionary zeal, sought to convert their pupils to Christianity. And that, of course, is not all. It is more difficult for a Muslim student to get a place at university, or for a graduate to get a job. And Muslim women who decided to wear the Hijab found they were no longer welcome in their jobs, as it seemed 'bad for the company's image to have a woman in Hijab'.

All this sort of thing can only lead to a whole community turning inwards, and for extremist tendencies to appear. It all happened before and could easily happen again.

It is a fact that, for a Muslim to be 'acceptable' in Britain, he or she has to shed some of his or her Muslim skin and be more 'British'. The demarcation line between integration and assimilation seems, at times, almost invisible. 'When in Rome do as Rome does,' Muslims are often

told. But, when one considers that Britain is made up of many groups of varying beliefs and cultures, attempts by the host community to fashion the immigrant community to its own image or else reject it are certainly not fair. In any case, far from being a threat, cultural difference can be an asset. The High Street in every town in Britain has benefited from the great number of varying cultures that make up today's British society. If you get bored with fish and chips you can always try a curry, or a kebab or a Chinese take-away. That can't be bad.

Far too much has been made of the differences and too little of what is common to all cultures. Even less is made of how one culture may in fact benefit from the interaction. The media have made the British Muslim's life very difficult. Muslims are news only when it is bad news. How many complimentary stories have you read about Muslims in the past decade? Is it possible that nothing good happens in the Muslim community? I know that to be untrue. Muslims should be excused if they feel that the media in Britain have been waging a 'hate campaign' against them. It so often seems as if it is just that.

For example, in a campaign that featured prominently in the media a few years ago, to abolish the halal method of slaughter, the 'animal rights' campaigners accused the religion itself of being barbaric. Racist undertones were evident in many of the letters sent to many local newspapers. The campaigners did not just want halal meat off the shelves, they really wanted Muslims or 'Pakis' out of Britain—they said so. In fact, far from being barbaric, the halal method is the most humane. Mercy to animals is an integral part of the religion of Islam. We are told that a woman went to hell for imprisoning a cat, neither feeding it nor letting it feed itself. We are also told of a whore who was thirsty, who went down to a well to drink. When she came out, she saw a dog panting from thirst, and licking the wet sand on the edges of the well. She went back down the well, filled her shoe with water and held it for the dog to drink. For that one act of compassion, God forgave her all her sins.

That said, it is certainly commendable that such a large number of schools throughout Britain and many other public places, do now cater for Muslim dietary needs, a simple action that relieved a lot of social tension.

However, religious observance in Islam includes not only what food one eats but what drink one drinks, and what clothes one wears. Because Muslims do not drink alcohol, the traditional pub life is not quite their scene. For that they do lose out to some extent on mixing with their non-Muslim brothers and sisters.

Women in Hijab are thought of, by non-Muslims, to be second-class citizens, an assumption that is totally erroneous. For some reason, the Hijab is likened to a mobile prison cell, while for the Muslim woman it is the very symbol of freedom. Muslim women in Hijab are often harassed in public transport. Some complain of young vandals who.

ask: 'How many wives has your husband got?' Some are asked, as if they knew, 'Where is Terry Waite?' If you are looking for a job, and you happen to be a woman in Hijab, your chances are, to say the least, quite remote.

For many reasons, there is a difference in outlook between Muslim and non-Muslim girls. To find a husband, a non-Muslim girl is expected to go 'man-hunting' on her own, and must therefore look attractive. This is not the case with Muslim girls, who are expected to lower their gaze and endeavour not to provoke the sexual urges of men. Finding a marriage partner is a duty of the family as well as friends. It is an honourable tradition that should ideally ensure that no one is left out just because he or she did not happen to be in the right place at the right time. It also is a mechanism that takes good care of people's dignity, especially females. This mechanism of arranged marriages, is, however, confused in western eyes with enforced marriages. While it is true that abuse does happen, mutual consent, especially of the bride, is essential in Islam. Another misconception is that arranged marriages are loveless, which is not true. One often sees love growing in an arranged marriage, just as one often sees it fly out of the window in 'love marriages'. You can be sure, however, that one failed arranged marriage will hit the news headlines as a form of 'barbarism' of the immigrants.

There is, regrettably, a xenophobic streak in the character of the British. This is understandable given their history. Given the present economic conditions, it is even more so. What, though, is Christian about xenophobia? The answer is: nothing. For someone who really understands the teachings of Jesus, it is something to be ashamed of. Unfortunately, it is not the teaching of Jesus that predominates in the current secular western morality.

This xenophobic tendency is, however, more than balanced by the British sense of awareness of fair play. The less one reminds them of one's foreignness, the easier it is to get on with them. But to what extent can Muslims change their skin? This is the problem. Second-generation Muslims, born and bred in Britain, do think of themselves as British through and through, but are reminded again and again of their foreignness, and that they very much resent.

Caught between two cultures, the problems of second-generation Muslim are neither simple nor easy. At the height of the Rushdie crisis, young Muslims who had drifted slowly to a much more secular way of life were the first to rally back to the Muslim fold, and, more interestingly, their reaction was often more extreme than that of their elders.

One major difference is how the two cultures regard the institution of the family. To Muslims, the family is sacrosanct, and its influence and role continues, with varying degrees, at all times. The concept of the extended family is, however, a lost concept in the West, as it clashes with personal freedom and is certainly not politically or economically

encouraged. Under a socialist system, the state plays the role of big mum, and under the capitalist system, the emphasis is on the individual, not the family, at least not in the economic sense. Muslims are literally terrified of the possibility of dissolution of their closely knit family structure.

Following on the sexual revolution of the sixties, parents fear the possibility of their children indulging in premarital sex, which they see as one of the major sins. In Western eyes, an adult's sexual relations with another are nobody's business but their own. This is not so in Muslim eyes. Muslims, and women in particular, are regarded by the West as suppressed. On the other hand, in Muslim eyes men, women and families are preserved by such voluntary restriction.

Yes, there are differences between the western and the Muslim ways of life. Even so, the two cultures are certainly not incompatible. Islam, Christianity and Judaism are essentially compatible, at least on the level of morality. Only when one system shuns all other systems and fails to accept the right of others to differ will incompatibilities appear. Until they are fully accepted, regardless of the cultural differences, Muslims will remain on the margins of British society, and may even, perhaps, under pressure, turn further inwards.

The Muslims in Britain are mostly well-behaved peaceful citizens. Recent noises in the Rushdie affair, which shocked the West, were a result of being pressed beyond endurance by a misguided writer, who used the tactics of abuse to create the type of sensationalism that sells books. The reaction in some Muslim quarters, with death threats and a death sentence, has defamed the tolerant religion of Islam. The religious response, as seen clearly from Sura 4, verse 140 of the Qur'an, is very different. It simply says:

When believers or hypocrites mock the word of God, do not sit with them until they talk about something else.

I cannot possibly think of anything more tolerant than that. Compare that with one predominantly intolerant *fatwa* and you will have an example of what men can do to corrupt the religion of God.

There have, of course, been instances when Muslims have not practised the kind of tolerance preached by the Qur'an, but the verdict of history is, still, that the Muslims have been the most tolerant of the followers of the great world-wide faiths. The society of Cordoba and the rest of Muslim Spain is testimony to that. When the Jews were persecuted in Europe, they fled to Muslim lands where they lived safely for hundreds of years. It is ironic that the descendants of those who sought the Muslim's protection have themselves turned into high tech persecutors in Palestine of both Muslims and Christians.

Modern Western-style tolerance is not derived from a religious foundation but a secular one. With religion losing its major hold on western societies, the new kind of secular tolerance often means, at least on the issue of morality, that almost 'anything goes'. Outside religious

morality, it is almost impossible to agree on a common code of conduct or a common morality. The irony here, however, is that western secular laws are slowly but surely rediscovering Islamic law. This may appear surprising, but it is true. Look at the evolution of thought regarding divorce, for instance, and you will see that interesting development in action.

The West has nothing to fear from Islam. The Muslims, on the other hand, sometimes have reason to feel that they are still finding their way around in the post-Crusade period. Please, somebody, stand up and say the Crusades are over! The Muslims do feel, in general, a great affinity with the West; they would not have come here if there was not that affinity. Their presence in the West is a force for good, not evil, despite what some xenophobic politicians would lead us to believe.

The danger for Britain is not that of Muslims behaving according to their religion, but of them not doing so. In Islam, we have a strongly moralistic code of conduct that has a powerful hold on its adherents, and it is in the interest of Britain that Muslims are encouraged to learn their religion and behave accordingly. This way the streets will be safer and the homes happier.

Islam is not a new religion, it is the oldest one of all. It was Abraham who gave it its name, which means: making one's will at one with God's. That means submission indeed, but to the only true God of the universe. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. That is Islam. That is submission.

And it is the will of God that we establish justice, mercy, equality, chastity, charity, security, and good neighbourly relationships ... and that cannot be bad for Britain. It is God's will that we should leave our differences to Him to sort out on the day of Judgement, and busy ourselves instead with building our earthly existence with bricks that we can all agree on. This way, perhaps, we may not see the need to pull each other's houses down.

We are all sons and daughters of Adam. Humanity is our race, and earth is our home. Even if some of us do not believe in the same God, or in none, we are still answerable to each other in matters related to our earthly existence. We are all travellers in the same ship. If it sinks, we all drown.