

Repairing the Crack-'ed lens: Redefining British Muslim Identity in Conservative Britain

The need to examine aspects of British identity from political and cultural perspectives have never been more poignant, especially in the face of the ongoing 'Trojan Horse' affair that has maintained the continuing spotlight on Muslim communities; only this time the focus is on specific schools in Birmingham. The success of UKIP and the far-right parties in the recent EU elections were largely considered a negative outcome for European politics and highlighted, to some extent, public mood surrounding issues like immigration. Islamism, Islamophobia and practically anything relating to Muslims today is the other pertinent topic of the day.

In view of, what some would rightly argue is a disproportionate and unfair amount of attention on this particular faith group, a redefining of who and what represents Muslims in 21st century Britain is necessary. Undoubtedly, the efforts from a few Muslims who now profess to embody everything quintessentially British while claiming to have abandoned previous cultural and/or religious delineations – some of it bordering on extremism – has influenced individuals like Michael Gove. He, like many from his party and the previous Labour lead government have been happy to court these 'prodigal sons' from Muslim communities who have arguably done more harm to those very communities than good.

A question of legitimacy: Who can and should speak on behalf of British Muslims?

An additional tendency of those claiming to abandon previous alleged religious affiliations or extremes is their ability to *'stir up anti-Muslim sentiment in an attempt to confer self-legitimacy.'*¹ One needn't look any further than the emergence and subsequent positioning of the think tank, Quilliam Foundation and a few of its members to identify the trait described above. Unsurprisingly, the Quilliam Foundation continues to be among the least popular entities among Muslim communities in Britain because of their rhetoric, sentiment and somewhat crass opportunism. However, interestingly enough, Michael Gove, appears to continue to hold counsel with them.

Quilliam and other similar entities have sought to place emphasis on anti-Muslim sentiment in order to garner support from various non-Muslim communities, religious and irreligious, on the premise of creating resentment and fear of the 'alien other' – this being particular sections of Muslim communities whose ideological delineations are different to their own. Consider, for example, MP Khalid Mahmood's accusation that one particular ideology (Salafism) is responsible

¹ Ibid, citing Zubeck, P. 'Cadets' guest speaker will focus on Christianity', Colorado Springs Gazette.

for current Ofsted and government concerns and that other ideologically lead communities (Barelwis and Deobandis) have suffered for many years as a result.² These sectarian tactics have been successfully deployed for a number of years now with the previous – and now current – government cosying up to liberal adherents whose narratives are successful in increasing Islamophobia against some of the more socially conservative Muslim populace. Gove has been influenced by such rhetoric to an extent that he articulated his view about the hijab being a cause for concern. Theresa May, the home secretary, rebutted this view in her response to him in an open row which has since embarrassed the ConDem government.³

Conferring self-legitimacy on the premise of inaccurate or exaggerated information is not something new. James Frey, in his (in)famous biography, 'A Million Little Pieces' which was first publicised and made famous on Oprah Winfrey's renowned chat show 'Oprah' was forced to return to explain why he had lied and embellished his story.⁴

Indeed, the failure to examine and challenge the legitimacy of self-publicists can be damaging to some of the communities from where these individuals or groups first emerge. In fact, such negligence in ascertaining the legitimacy of claims for the moral high ground have led to a proliferation of personalities either claiming a return from extremism, a return within the fold of democratic society as 'prodigal sons' or as experts in the field of counter-radicalisation, extremism and now, education.

Prior to the emergence of an extensive budget for the government's Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) Fund many of these voices were largely non-existent. Much criticism has been leveled against the PVEF; indeed, much of it is valid, especially insofar as it relates to the ineffectiveness of some of the organisations that received funding. I have been criticised for an altogether different reason by those sympathetic to and closely aligned with Quilliam's way of thinking; namely, that so-called 'non-violent' radicals are part of the problem and not the solution, irrespective of their effectiveness or success in countering violent extremism. A simple response to such criticism can be in relation to the legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness of organisations in tackling the existing grassroots problem of radical, extremist propaganda in their respective communities – are they succeeding or not? Additionally, a simple counter response to this criticism could be that such organisations have been consistent for more than 20 years in addressing and fighting violent radicalisation without any significant change in their

² <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/06/horse-uk-muslim-school-witch-hunt-2014610115441676100.html>

³ The Guardian 4th June 2014: 'Theresa May's letter to Michael Gove'
<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jun/04/theresa-may-letter-michael-gove-in-full>

⁴ Oprah to author: 'You conned us all' CNN.com International, Friday 27th January 2006,
<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/SHOWBIZ/books/01/27/oprah.frey/index.html>

religious, political or cultural delineations. This is unlike a few of its critics who have either undergone almost complete transformations of identity and occasionally, personality or who have only recently arrived in the counter-radicalisation arena. What is there to determine whether further transformations will occur to these personalities once the goal posts (most importantly, financially) have been changed?

Shared beliefs, shared values and social conservatism

Another response that has been long overdue is in relation to questions regarding social conservatism and the anti-social values to which some Muslim communities supposedly subscribe. Some of these values are considered to be at variance with that of 21st century Britain. In actuality, upon honest inspection many of the beliefs and values espoused by a significant number of Muslims are closer to those which existed in Britain post World War II right up until present day. In fact, their beliefs and values are not too dissimilar from those also held by other religions such as the Jewish and Christian faiths. There are many adherents – religious and non-religious - to various aspects of social conservatism from different walks of life in the UK today but they are not ostracised for aspects of their beliefs or values that do not concur entirely with today's societal dictates and norms. Indeed, much of their values and beliefs are actually more in line with British society's than at odds with it. This is the same with the vast majority of Muslims. Many socially conservative Muslims have accepted a religious pluralism in Britain where they do not seek to impose their beliefs on others and, at the same time, not have some societal values – that have changed with the passage of time – imposed upon them as a requirement to prove their Britishness. Some of these values, beliefs and practices can be considered subjective, affecting individuals and groups choosing to subscribe to them. Non-subscription to some beliefs or values should not be considered threatening or unpatriotic, unless of course one forcibly seeks to impose a counter position or view upon others. Peter Hitchens' recent Mail on Sunday article reflects many – not only Muslim's – exact sentiments.⁵

Until now, the issue of religious social conservatism has been largely a one sided affair, dominated by the usual suspects who are the most vocal in seeking to define Muslim identity in 21st century Britain. There is a need to redress this imbalance as well as the illegitimacy of some claimants that only their perspective regarding identity is the correct one to which all Muslims must either subscribe, be ostracised or damned.

⁵ Hitchens P. Mail on Sunday 15th June 2014: 'It's not a Muslim Issue: In our modern nation you're an extremist too.' <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2014/06/peter-hitchens-its-not-a-muslim-issue-in-our-modern-nation-youre-an-extremist-too.html>

Bridging existing areas of dissonance between Muslim communities and the wider majority society

British Muslim converts have an even more important role to play today in society in view of their dual identities. Their voices have, on the whole, been muted in part due to more vocal representations by the larger, predominant South Asian Muslim populace in Britain. While this is unsurprising due to the multifarious and complex social dimensions of this largely progressive section of Muslims, their representation of almost everything that is supposed to reflect Muslim 'Britishness' should now be reexamined in view of the existence and growing influence of British converts to Islam. Roald raises the following question when examining the impact of converts in a Scandinavian context:

How important is the role of new Muslims as intermediaries between Muslim communities and Scandinavian society? Is the particular position of new Muslims who have 'one foot in each culture' beneficial for a fruitful dialogue between the two cultures?⁶

Muslim converts traverse all spheres of British society and yet their voices are seldom heard against the backdrop of socio-economic, political and religious issues that by and large relate to the predominant South Asian (and of late, increasingly Somali) culture. Cultural issues such as forced marriages, female genitalia mutilation and honour killings etc. are and continue to be alien concepts to British converts (and increasingly, 2nd/3rd generation Muslims) who continue to maintain fundamental values which have been inherent since childhood:

Converts may have greater empathy with non-Muslims because of their non-Muslim past and ongoing relationships with their family of origin. They often have a heightened awareness, compared to other Muslims, of how Muslims are viewed by outsiders, so there can be a strongly reflexive element to their discourse.⁷

Without ignoring or marginalising the overwhelmingly positive contributions of these more predominant communities, British converts can play an invaluable role as conduits or bridge-builders between the wider non-Muslim society and the more culturally orientated Muslim communities. To varying degrees, some converts are already playing such roles, however not on the scale of their European counterparts:

New Muslims function on various levels in society and...[those] who have a role as intermediary between Muslim immigrant communities and wider Scandinavian society are mostly highly educated. As academics they have the ability to promote a balanced view of Islam and Muslims that might be accepted by majority society. They also

⁶ Roald, A. S: 'New Muslims in the European context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts', Brill, 2004, p. 289

⁷ Zebiri, K: 'British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives', Oneworld, Oxford, 2008, p.39

tend...to distinguish between 'ideal Islam' and 'Muslim practice'...By this, non-Muslims might more easily understand the complexity and the problematic issues of Muslim communities in Western society.⁸

Conclusion

Debates relating to the (r)evolving issues around British Muslim identity must begin to incorporate a wider audience from the very communities they affect the most and no longer be confined to the more vocally established personalities or entities who, although successful in jettisoning their previous religious, cultural or political identities, are by no means representative of British Muslims today. It would be politically naïve to continue to focus or seek counsel from a particular section of Muslims who will, more than likely, continue to exacerbate existing negative perceptions of particular communities in order to confer self-legitimacy and preference for their preferred religious practices. Policy makers and their advisers would therefore be well advised to redirect their focus on communities whose track records bear testimony to their legitimacy, experience and ability to function at various levels of society, before deciding to limit their engagement to the few familiar voices they may have already become accustomed to.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that majority South Asian section of the Muslim population should not be ignored or marginalised in preference for convert voices or their participation in the political arena to be increased. The former's societal contributions are very much needed as is the participation of the 2nd/3rd generation who are more intrinsically British than their parents. These are essential for the continuing and effective social cohesion of society and nobody can argue against this. However, the importance of convert Muslims' contribution and participation as conduits or bridge-builders between wider society and Muslim communities can no longer be ignored or consigned to the shelves of obscurity in light of the challenges and threats relating to increased misunderstandings, suspicions and fears between the two about the very real, very ugly faces of far right and religious extremism affecting our society today.

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16th June 2014

⁸ Roald, A. S: 'New Muslims in the European context: The Experience of Scandinavian Converts', Brill, 2004, p. 295