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Zahir Davdani

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Authors(s):

Zahir Davdani [1]

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A Brief Survey of Islam in Britain

Zahir Davdani
Student of the Hawzah ‘Ilmiyyah of Qum.

Abstract

Although the presence of large numbers of Muslims in the West is a more recent phenomenon, the influence of Islam on the West has a much lengthier history. This article offers a chronological survey of how Islam influenced various aspects of British history from the coins used by King Offa of Mercia in the eighth century to the printing of the first English copy of the Qur’an in the seventeenth century to the establishment of the Muslim Parliament in the twentieth century.

The article concludes by looking at some of the more recent incidents that have brought British Muslims into the limelight such the historical fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989 as well as the London bombings of 2005 and the growing trend of Islamaphobia that has ensued thereafter.

Keywords: Islam in Britain, History of Islam, Islamaphobia, British Muslims.

Early History

Contact between Muslims and the British Isles has a long history, going almost as far back as the period of revelation. King Offa of Mercia (died 796 CE) had a copy of the coins used by the Abbasid caliph Al-Mansur minted, with the Arabic text ‘Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah’ written on it in one direction, and ‘Offa Rex’ in the other. As for his reason for minting the coin, it is thought that perhaps it was to facilitate trade with the expanding Islamic empire in Spain, as the Islamic gold dinars were the most important coinage in the Mediterranean at the time, or it may have been part of the annual payment of 365

mancuses that Offa promised to Rome. In any case, Offa's coin looked original enough that it would be accepted in Southern Europe. Found in Kent, it was procured by the Duc de Blacas in Rome sometime before 1841 and has been in the British Museum since 1922.

Dating back to the ninth century, the Ballycottin Cross, found on the Southern coast of Ireland, is also worth mentioning. It is significant because, like Offa's coins, the cross also bears an Arabic inscription. Set in a glass bead is the word 'Bismillah', meaning 'In the Name of Allah'.

It is generally believed that the first Englishman known for certain to have been a scholar of Arabic was Henry II's tutor, Adelard of Bath (c.1152) who travelled in Syria and Muslim Spain and translated a number of Arabic texts into Latin. Among the works he translated was al-Khawarizmi's work on mathematics and astronomical tables. It was through these translations that the numerical value of 'zero', and the Hindi-Arabic numerals were introduced into Britain, and the West as a whole. If not for the work of al- Khawarizmi, and the translation made by Adelard, it is likely that Britain would have been using Latin numerals for a much longer period. His book 'Quaestiones Naturales', consisting of seventy-six chapters, is a dialogue in which he discusses different scientific questions and what he learnt about them during his seven-year stay with 'Arabs'.

Muslim scholarship was well known among the learned in Britain by 1386, when Chaucer was writing. In the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, there is among the pilgrims wending their way to Canterbury, a 'Doctour of Phisyk' whose learning included Razi, Avicenna (Abu 'Ali Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd). Avicenna's canon of medicine was a standard text for medical students well into the Seventeenth Century.

Following Adelard's footsteps, others too sailed from Britain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in quest of Arabic learning and returned to enlighten their fellow countrymen. This included Danel of Morley and Michael Scotus, whose translations of Aristotle from Arabic were of great value during the Renaissance.

Relationships were not confined to the intellectual, but also included political and partisan connections. For example, King John was excommunicated by Pope Innocent III in the twelfth century for offering his help to the North African King, Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad an-Nasir, in his campaign against the Spanish Catholic King of Aragon. Much later, Elizabeth I offered in 1588 to enter into an alliance with Murad III (1546-95) to overthrow the then King of Spain, as she viewed the Muslims as 'fellow monotheists' and the Spanish King as 'idolatrous'.

There were several Moorish delegations from Morroco to Elizabethan England around 1600, which are said to have inspired characters in works of literature, such as Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice', 'Titus Andronicus', and 'Othello'. Besides scientific works, works of Arabic fiction were also translated into Latin and English during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as the famous 'One thousand and One Nights'.

The first English convert to Islam mentioned by name is John Nelson. Similarly, a number of British pirates based in the Maghrib also converted to Islam, such as Captain John Ward (c. 1553 – 1622) of Kent. Ward, who was also known as Jack Ward and by his Muslim name of Yusuf Reis, was in fact a notorious English pirate who later became a Barbary pirate operating out of Tunis. Before dying of the plague in 1622, Jack Ward (like many other Christians who sailed to North Africa) abandoned his religion and adopted the Muslim religion of the Ottoman Empire. Around 1645, Barbary pirates under command of the Dutch renegade Jan Janszoon operating from the Moroccon port of Salé occupied Lundy (the largest island in the Bristol Channel, lying 12 miles off the coast of Devon, England, approximately one third of the distance across the channel between England and Wales), before he was expelled by the Penn. During this time there were reports of captured slaves being sent to Algiers and of the Islamic flag flying over Lundy.

The turmoil of the Civil War may have encouraged some Englishmen to break with tradition and an account written in 1641 referred to "a sect of Mahomatens" being "discovered here in London". By 1646, King Charles was holed up in Oxford under siege by Cromwell's army and the worst of the fighting was soon to be over with defeat for the Royalists. In December 1648, the 'Council of Mechanics' of the new Commonwealth voted for a toleration of various religious groups, including the Muslims. The next year, in 1649, the first English translation of the Qur'an, by Ross, was printed. It had two imprints, attesting to a wide circulation. Reference to Islam and Muslims was part of the discourse of the times. Cromwell's enemies attacked the revolutionaries for their disrespect of parish priests and rejection of the 'High Anglican' official tenets: "And indeed if Christians will but diligently read and observe the Laws and Histories of the Mahometans, they may blush to see how zealous they are in the works of devotion, piety and charity, how devout, cleanly and reverend in their Mosques, how obedient to their Priests, that even the Great Turk himself will attempt nothing without consulting his Mufti." From secretary to antiquarian to Lord Protector, the Qur'an was a text widely consulted and quoted: it had legitimacy for addressing not only Muslims overseas but Christians in England and the rest of the British Isles.

Unitarians in Britain were also interested in Islam, such as Henry Stubbes (1632–1676) who was an English physician, writer and scholar. In the 1671 he wrote 'An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism, and a Vindication of him and his Religion from the Calumnies of the Christians'. He was unable to publish this book, considered the first work in English sympathetic to Islamic theology; it circulated privately. He tried to demonstrate the similarity between the beliefs of Islam and Unitarian Christianity. Stubbe can also be seen as part of a growing tradition at this time who expressed a dissatisfaction with intellectual inconsistencies of trinitarianism and sought to discover the original unitarian roots of the Christian tradition in the Middle East.

The Colonial Period

The first large group of Muslims to arrive in the eighteenth century was composed of the lascars (sailors) recruited from the Indian subcontinent to work for the British East India Company. They established the

first communities in the main ports of England and Scotland. Four hundred and seventy lascars were recorded in 1804. By 1842 between three and twelve thousand arrived in Britain. Records dating from 1873 show that the majority of the lascars were Muslims from India, Egypt, Turkey, and Malaya (now Malaysia). Similarly, other migrants came from a broad range of ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. They consisted of people connected to the British Empire: Malaya, Yemen, India, and British Somaliland. Initial communities were formed in Manchester, Cardiff, East London, and Liverpool. Early immigrants were mainly sailors, but also merchants, servants, students, itinerant entertainers, princes, and people from professional classes.

From the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries Islam was firmly establishing itself in Britain, with significant activities both on the part of converts and migrant Muslims to set up institutions. The following timeline is a demonstration of this:

1860: Existence of a mosque at 2 Glyn Rhondda Street, Cardiff, recorded in the Register of Religious Sites.

1887: William Henry Quilliam (Shaykh 'Abdullah Quilliam) embraced Islam and led a small community in Liverpool. In 1889 the community rented a house, 8 Brougham Terrace, to serve as a prayer hall. He would personally call the adhan (the call to prayer) from one of its upper windows. The community was soon able to purchase the rented property and also 9–12 Brougham Terrace, which became the Liverpool Muslim Institute.

Following a visit to Turkey, 'Abdullah Quilliam was given the title 'Shaykh al-Islam of the British Isles' by the Sultan. The King of Morocco made him an 'Alim and the Sultan of Persia appointed him as Consul. The King of Afghanistan granted him two and a half thousand pounds toward the building of the Islamic Institute and Masjid in Liverpool.

He was also a social activist. He not only established a Muslim College with courses for both Muslims and non-Muslims, he also established a refuge for women and organised care for illegitimate children and found foster homes for them.

'The Crescent', a weekly paper, and 'Islamic World', an academic journal, were also initiated by him. He further wrote The Faith of Islam and wrote on inter-faith issues, addressing Christianity and the Judaic Laws. Quilliam is buried at Brookwood Cemetery, near Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking.

1889: Establishment of the Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking, with an adjoining student hostel, under the patronage of the Indian Muslim princess, the Begum of Bhopal. It was the base for the journal 'Muslim India and the Islamic Review', re-named as 'The Islamic Review' in 1921. An early editor was the charismatic Khaja Kamal al-Din, a barrister originally from Lahore.

1913: Lord Headley al-Faruq, the 5th Barron of Headley (1855–1935), accepted the Islamic faith. He was born in Woking and educated in Cambridge. By 1877 he had become a peer and served as captain

and later lieutenant in the army. He was also Colonel in the 4th Battalion of North Minister Fusiliers. In addition, he wrote several books, the most famous being A Westerner Awakening to Islam. In 1916 he wrote to Secretary of State Austen Chamberlain for allocation of state funds for the purchase and construction of a mosque in London "in memory of Muslim soldiers who died fighting for the Empire".

1917: Sir Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936), after extensively travelling around the Muslim world, accepted Islam. Pickthall was born in London to an Anglican clergyman. He was a deeply literary man who dedicated most of his time to writing and lecturing, especially on Islam and its message. He is most famous for his translation of the Qur'an, the first of its kind. 'The Meaning of the Glorious Koran' was published in 1930, and it is still one of the most well-read translations of the Qur'an.

1928: Formation of the London Nizamiyah Mosque Trust Fund by Lord Headly (Al-Hajj al-Faruq); these funds were subsequently transferred to the London Central Mosque Fund (which is the present day Islamic Cultural Centre in Regents Park).

1933: Muslim Society of Great Britain, under the presidency of Isma'il de Yorke, organises Islamic events at the Portman Rooms, Baker Street.

1937: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, best known in the English-speaking Muslim world for his monumental translation and commentary of the Holy Qur'an, finally settles in Britain after years as an itinerant educationalist. British Muslims initiate their first political campaign by expressing opposition to the Peel Commission's proposals for the partitioning of Palestine. Yusuf Ali, drawing on his first-hand knowledge of the mandates drawn up by the League of Nations, lectured widely on the injustice in Palestine, at venues in Brighton, Cambridge and London. Yusuf Ali was the only non-ambassadorial trustee of the London Central Mosque Fund, thus representing the British Muslim community.

1944: King George VI visits the Islamic Cultural Centre— Regents Lodge in Regents Park—for its official opening.

The Modern Era

The majority of Muslims in Britain come from what was the former British colony of India, both before and after partition; hence from Pakistan and Bangladesh as well.

The mass migration to Britain of Pakistanis (including Bangladeshis) had its origin in colonialism. For example, many soldiers who joined the British army in the war were posted to the British Isles, and some of them began to settle there. Initially, however, their number was very small, until after the partition of India. Partition caused the displacement of large populations, especially in the Punjab and Mirpur (a significant sector of the populations who joined the British army), who then began to look to Britain for their future over a longer term. Following the Second World War and the break-up of the British Empire, Pakistani migration to the United Kingdom increased, specifically during the 1950s and 1960s, as

Pakistan was a part of the Commonwealth. Pakistanis were invited by employers to fulfill labour shortages and by being Commonwealth citizens, Pakistanis were eligible to full rights of entry and residence as well as full civic rights. Pakistanis found employment in the steel and textile industries of Yorkshire, Lancashire, and the West Midlands, mainly working night shifts and in the light industry of Luton and Slough.

Large-scale immigration began in the mid-1950s when manual workers were recruited to fulfill the labour shortage which resulted from World War II. Many people began immigrating from Azad Kashmir after the completion of Mangla Dam in Mirpur in the late 1950s as well. The construction of this dam, in effect, displaced 100,000 people, especially the Mirpuris. With their compensation money, some settled in other parts of Pakistan; others, however, looked for the sponsorship of their relatives in Britain and subsequently settled there in large numbers. Their initial intent was to earn enough money to buy a plot of land and build houses for their families and settle in Pakistan. The rapid increase in demand for unskilled labour in British industries also occasioned large scale migration.

The economic climate in post-war Britain changed rapidly. There were fewer jobs and opportunities for people compared with the early 1950s. Inevitably, the government began to restrict migrant workers and in 1961, the Commonwealth Immigration Act was passed which came into force the following year. Arguably, this Act was the turning point in the growth of the Muslim population in Britain. The eighteen month long gap between the passing of the Immigration Act and its enforcement provided time for reflection for those who were working in Britain: did they want to return to their country of origin, or make Britain their home? Basically, the Act imposed restrictions on adults intending to work in Britain. By 1964, the Ministry of Labour stopped granting permission for the unskilled to work in Britain.

The impact of this legislation was such that each single male who had formerly shared a house with others, now began looking for houses for their families in a nearby neighbourhood. Once their families arrived, the immediate concern of the parents was for their children. They wanted to impart religious education by teaching the Qur'an, basic beliefs and the practices of Islam to their children. This meant allocating a house for their children's education in the neighbourhood and using the same house for the five daily prayers. Muslim dietary laws saw the development of halal butcher shops and the import of Asian spices. This also gave birth to the Asian corner shops in Britain. In this way, the growth of the Muslim neighbourhood had begun.

The second wave of migrants came from East African countries. Asians, who were occupied in the wholesale and distributive trade in Africa, provided the necessary banking and financial services there. Their participation in the economy, however, was checked by the Africanization policy of the newly independent African countries. Banks and private businesses were nationalized. This left Asian businessmen and their families with a stark choice between African enterprise, under strict regulation, or leaving the country. They opted for the latter. A large number of Asians had British passports, and so, they decided to come to Britain. This resulted in the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1968, which

removed the right of entry to the U.K. for passport holders living abroad.

The Conservative government nevertheless allowed, amid much controversy, the immigration of 27,000 individuals displaced from Uganda after the coup d'état led by Idi Amin in 1971. On August 4, 1972, Idi Amin, President of Uganda, gave Uganda's Asians (mostly Gujaratis of Indian origin) 90 days to leave the country, following an alleged dream in which, he claimed that God told him to expel them. Their expulsion resulted in a significant decline in Uganda's Asian Hindu and Muslim population. Many Asians owned big businesses in Uganda and many Indians were born in the country, their ancestors having come from India to Uganda when the country was still a British colony. Those who remained were deported from the cities to the countryside, although most Asians were granted asylum in the United Kingdom. A plurality of the Asians with British passports, around 30,000, immigrated to Britain.

The number of Muslims in Britain from 1970 to the current time has undergone a staggering increase, going from 0.7% of the population in 1971 to 4% of the population in 2009, mainly due to massive amounts of immigration from Commonwealth countries. This has resulted in a much broader exposure of the British public to Islam and Muslims, to the setting up of numerous Islamic organisations, and more recently to growing sense of Islamophobia reflecting global events.

The Salman Rushdie affair of 1988, and Imam Khumayni's subsequent fatwa of 1989 was a turning point for Muslims in Britain, uniting them along religious lines in condemnation of the book and giving them a sense of being backed on a global scale. The event also signalled a noticing by the British public of the Muslims amongst them, and has had profound and far reaching cultural and political connotations which resonate to this day—from self-censorship of literature and art to the spreading of anti-Islamic sentiment.

After the late Dr. Kalim Siddiqui's role in leading the defence of Imam Khomeini's fatwa in Britain, he effectively became the spokesperson for the British Muslim community; given the terrible fallout of the Rushdie affair, he used the opportunity to create 'The Muslim Manifesto'. This was published in 1990, at a Muslim Institute conference on 'The Future of Muslims in Britain' and laid out both the problems facing Muslims here and the duties and responsibilities the Muslim community had living in a non-Muslim country. The Muslim Manifesto was to become the foundation document of the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) was set up in 1997 to act as an umbrella body for Muslim organisations and has over 500 affiliates. The MCB replaced the National Interim Committee for Muslim Unity (NICMU) after a "process of countrywide consultations ... indicated that a large majority of British South-Asian Muslims were very concerned with the lack of unity, coordination and representation and supported the establishment of an umbrella body." The name 'The Muslim Council of Britain' was chosen on May 25, 1996 and it was inaugurated on November 23, 1997 at Brent Town Hall, by representatives of more than 250 Muslim South-Asian organisations from all parts of the UK.

The event of September 11th has probably been the single most significant event in terms of its effect on the life of Muslims in Britain, as it has elsewhere. Within hours of the Twin Towers attack, Muslim organizations in Britain were receiving hate mail. Examples include the following: “Are you happy now? Salman Rushdie was right your religion is a joke! Long live Israel! The US will soon kill many Muslim women and children! You are all subhuman freaks.” “The rest of the world will now join to smash your filthy disease infested Islam. You must be removed from great [sic] Britain in body bags.” British Muslims found themselves catapulted to a front line not of their making.

And these were not idle threats: Muslims were being abused and mosques desecrated as people responded in a knee-jerk manner. In Exeter, two days after the September 11th attacks, eight pig heads were thrown into the car park of the local mosque and a banner was erected saying “The blood of the American people is on the hands of every Muslim. Nuke ‘em, George.” In Swindon, a nineteen year-old Muslim woman wearing a headscarf was left hospitalised after being chased and hit hard on the head with a baseball bat.

A quick uniting of British Muslim bodies and condemnation of the attacks, however, prevented Britain slipping into an environment of intolerance towards Muslims, as happened in the US. The event, nevertheless, left its mark as a watershed in the relations between the Muslim community and the wider British public, sparking an increasing trend of Islamophobia and a viewing of British Muslims as outsiders.

Then on July 7, 2005, Britain had its own version of September 11th with the London bombings. The bombings were carried out by four British Muslim men, three of Pakistani and one of Jamaican descent, who were motivated by Britain’s involvement in the Iraq War. At 8:50 a.m., three bombs exploded within fifty seconds of each other on three London Underground trains, a fourth exploding an hour later at 9:47 a.m. on a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square. The explosions appear to have been caused by home-made organic peroxide-based devices, packed into rucksacks and detonated by the bombers themselves, all four of whom died. Fifty-two other people were killed and around 700 were injured. This event naturally heightened the already tense relations between Muslims and the British public (On July 9, Richard Littlejohn used his column in the Daily Mail to attack politicians in an article titled ‘Hello bombers...and welcome to Londonistan’).

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the situation of Muslims on the British Isles does not look bright. Anti-Islamic sentiment is on the rise, with the BNP (British National Party) gaining support after the formation of the violent English Defence League (EDL) in 2009—a single issue organisation whose aim is to oppose the spread of Islamism, Shari’ah law, and Islamic extremism in England.

In surveying the history of Islam in Britain, we notice that it always reflects the global situation of the Ummah at the time, especially in today’s increasingly close global community. The fortunes of British Muslims are tied then to the aspirations and progress of the Ummah as a whole, and it would seem that things are going to get worse before they get any better.

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