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INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN PRESENT DAY BRITAIN. THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Perspective, opinion and commentary

Keywords
Multicultural;
Islamophobia;
Interethnic;
Minority;
Culture

Abstract

The situation of Muslims is one of the most pressing issues facing British society today. The purpose of this article is to explore the Muslim experience in this climate and to treat some of these problems, such as: the war against terrorism and its effects against all Muslims, the development of Islamophobia, but also the rules that Muslims gradually try to impose in Britain. All of these problems are closely linked, as Islamophobia is the result of the war against terrorism, which affected to a lesser or greater extent all Muslims, and Muslims, as a defensive measure, try to impose some of their own rules. The latter is a defensive measure, a measure of protection against assimilation and loss of religious and ethnic identity, claiming that in this way, they are acting in accordance with their religion. It is also important to see how these issues are represented in the media, because it has the power to influence the public opinion and the perception of certain ethnic groups.

INTRODUCTION

The majority population in many European states sees multiculturalism as a menace, considering that Muslims are creating tiny nations within the nation, unwilling to embrace a new identity as Englishmen, French or German. The British Muslims issue fits into the European situation.

Britain is a society where you can meet individuals from all over the world. Britain has always been a multicultural community, a country made up of many diverse regional identities, with accents and dialects, customs and cultures that reflect the heritage of each area.

Yet, even those who accept British society's multicultural character do not necessarily believe in the equal treatment of all groups. To many British, multiculturalism merely means the recognition of the fact that more people of diverse physical and cultural characteristics are now present in British streets. This attitude says nothing about how these diverse groups are to be treated or how their culture ought to be regarded.

According to Hunter (2002, p. 71), a good example of this attitude is the behavior of Ray Honeyford, a school headmaster of working class background in Bradford and a subscriber to Conservative politics, who, in 1980s, refused to carry out the city's multicultural educational policy. While he recognized cultural diversity as a fact, he insisted that the culture of Pakistanis was inferior to that of white Britons and that it should not be perpetuated in the schools. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher recognized Honeyford as an important thinker and invited him to Downing Street for consultations.

In contradistinction to this interpretation of multiculturalism, an attempt has been made to promote an alternative egalitarian version. Such alternative multiculturalism would involve, in Joly's (1995) words, 'Making a Place for Muslims in British Society'.

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN BRITAIN

The term islamophobia seems to date back to the late 1980s, but came into common usage after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States to refer to types of political dialogue that appeared prejudicially resistant to pro-Islamic argument. The British Runnymede Trust defined Islamophobia as the 'dread or hatred of Islam and therefore, to the fear and dislike of all Muslims', stating that it also refers to the practice of discriminating against Muslims by excluding them from the economic, social, and public life of the nation. It includes the perception that Islam has no values in common with other cultures, is inferior to the West and is a violent political ideology rather than a religion (Hunter, 2002).

Islamophobia has become increasingly more powerful after the 11 September 2001 attacks. Muslims around the world were targeted, and Muslims in Britain were by no means exempt. Muslim adults and children were attacked, physically and verbally. They were punched, spat at, hit with umbrellas at bus stops, publicly doused with alcohol and pelted with fruits and vegetables. Dog excrement and fireworks were pushed through their letterboxes and bricks were thrown through their windows. They were called murderers and excluded from social gatherings. One woman in Swindon was hospitalized after being beaten with a metal baseball bat; two Cambridge University students had their headscarves ripped off, in broad daylight outside a police station. There were death threats against Muslims. A total of 206 incidents were reported to the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) during the month after the attacks in the USA, ranging from serious crimes of violence (88 incidents), verbal and written abuse (74 incidents), to psychological pressure and harassment (17 incidents), discrimination (8 incidents) and miscellaneous incidents (9 incidents).

To contextualize attitudes following 9/11, it is interesting to consider the findings of a poll conducted by YouGov in October 2002 on behalf of the Islamic Society of Britain as part of their Islamic Awareness Week. The poll showed that: 84% of British people tended to be more suspicious about Muslims after 9/11; 35% stated that their opinion of British Muslims had gone down since; 82% believed that Muslims were too isolationist; 56% felt that they generally had nothing in common with Muslims; 63% suggested that Muslims did little to promote tolerance between themselves and others; one in six said that they would be 'disappointed if Muslims became their neighbors' (Allen, 2010, p. 84).

Another major incident has sparked outrage towards Muslims: the London bombings. Unlike the 9/11 attack, this one has directly affected the British population, heading their anger and hatred against the Muslim minority. Ordinary Muslims have been stigmatized en masse since the 2005 bombings by parts of the media and government policies. A misrepresentation in the media has led to several unfortunate events, which concerned ordinary Muslims.

In March 2006, Jamia Masjid mosque in Preston was attacked by gangs of white youths using brick and concrete block. The white youths damaged a number of cars outside the mosque and stabbed a 16-year-old Muslim teenager. In the same town, a 20-year-old Muslim, Shezsan Umarji, was killed by three youths in July 2005. On July 6, 2009, the Glasgow branch of Islamic Relief was badly damaged by a fire that police said was started deliberately and

which members of the Muslim community of Scotland allege were Islamophobic.

This type of events has led to a fight between the majority population and the Muslim minority. Not only Britain faces these situations, but other states also. Minority populations are often seen as intruders and any act of a member reflects on all members of that community.

THE SHARIA LAW

Although many British Muslims have demonstrated their commitment to the principles of a democratic, pluralist state and society, others have supported withdrawal into cultural ghettos, with still others keen to initiate mass conversion to Islam and, if possible, have the Sharia (Islamic legal traditions) incorporated into the legal framework of British society.

The place of Islamic religious law in relation to British society and its institutions has been a continuous topic of discussion. 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 behavior as subject to the Sharia: individual duties vis-à-vis God, and individual duties vis-à-vis society. Sharia law is based on a combination of sources, including the Quran, the Hadith or Sunna (sayings and actions of Prophet Mohammad), Islamic jurisprudence and rulings or fatwas issued by scholars.

In Sharia law's penal code, women can be stoned to death for sex outside of marriage. Homosexuality and apostasy are punishable by death. Eating during Ramadan is punishable by imprisonment or flogging. Improper veiling is punishable with fines and imprisonment and with threats, intimidation and honor killings, even when it is not compulsory. The punishment for robbery is amputation. Many aspects of Sharia's penal code are based on retribution. For example, if a victim loses an eye in an altercation, the law requires that the eye of the perpetrator be surgically removed in return. There is also the concept of blood money (or Diyeh) for first or second-degree murder, where the family of the murder victim can decide whether to accept financial compensation or demand the death penalty (Namazie, Atasheen, Waters & Seltman, 2010).

Sharia law is applied in Britain primarily via an indeterminate number of Sharia Councils and Muslim Arbitration Tribunals (MATs). Most reports cite five MATs in: London, Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester and Nuneaton, established since 2007, which have decided on over 100 cases (Edwards, 2011). Sharia Councils have been around much longer. The first one was started in Birmingham in 1982. The Islamic Sharia Council has decided on more than 7,000 cases in that time, with 95% relating to divorce (Bell, 2011).

In Sharia courts, there is neither control over the appointment of 'judges', nor an independent mechanism for monitoring them. People often do not have access to legal advice and representation. The proceedings are not recorded, there aren't any searchable legal judgments and there is no real right to appeal (Namazie et al., 2010).

In a Channel 4 (2007) documentary, Suhaib Hasan, Secretary General of the Islamic Sharia Council and a Spokesperson of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) at the time, says that if Sharia law was implemented in Britain: 'then you can turn this country into a haven of peace, because once a thief's hand is cut off nobody is going to steal. Once, just only once, if an adulterer is stoned, nobody is going to commit this crime at all. We want to offer it to the British society. If they accept it, it is for their good and if they don't accept it they'll need more and more prisons.'

Another documentary of the same channel, called 'Divorce Sharia Style', presents Sharia law in civil matters in Britain. Compared to a documentary called 'Divorce Iranian Style', about a family court in Iran, demonstrates the fact that the similarities in the subjugation of women as applied in both Britain and Iran are striking, even though one takes place in a parliamentary democracy and the other in a theocracy.

Despite all efforts to package Sharia's civil code as mundane, its imposition is generally seen as a concerted attempt by Islamists to gain further influence in Britain. By undermining British legal principles of equality before the law, the universal concept of one law for all and the protection of the rights of women and children, these courts are perceived as major threats to human rights.

REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIMS IN BRITISH MEDIA

Media representation of minorities and minority group issues, or the lack of representation, is a key factor in determining how majority audiences think about minorities in their societies.

Ameli, Marandi, Ahmed, Kara and Merali (2007) state that for some time now, Muslims in Britain, and across the Western world, have expressed their concerns about the way Islam is portrayed in the media. Aside from the actual inaccuracies and negativity prevalent in media discourse, they feel that people's perceptions of their faith and beliefs are adversely affected by such representation.

The media in Britain continues to reinforce Islamophobic attitudes in the majority community. In addition, many Islamic movements, as well as Western Islamophobia, have helped create a perception that Muslims share few civic values with other faiths and traditions in Britain, that they are not sincere in their acceptance of democracy, pluralism

and human rights. Government and other mainstream politicians also use a vocabulary that has the potential to generate fear, threats and antipathy towards British Muslims. The media's negative treatment of Islam reinforces its popular image as a onedimensional and monolithic religion that poses a threat to Western democratic values. It has been argued that the media's portrayal and representation of Islam has been one of the most prevalent, virulent and socially significant sources of Islamophobia in Britain (Allen, 2001).

In exploring the 'language of Islamophobia', Henzell (2001) names particular discursive structures and strategies that can be commonly found in texts. These include repetition, hyperbole, ridicule, metaphor, blaming the victim, and use of assumptions and taken for granted presuppositions about the subject.

In his analysis of Muslims and Islam in the British press, Whitaker (2002) notes that there are four very persistent stereotypes that crop up time and again in the different articles. These tell us that Muslims are intolerant, misogynistic, violent or cruel, and finally, strange or different. He observes that Muslims are reported on mainly when they cause trouble and though negative stories often come from other countries; they obviously have some effect on readers' perceptions of Muslims in Britain.

The Daily Telegraph, under the heading, 'A religion that sanctions violence', selectively invoked the Quran in order to show that Islam posed a major threat to peace. Basing itself on the inaccurate assertion that 'many Muslims rejoiced at the tragic loss of American lives', it concluded that 'the World Trade Center attack cannot be dismissed merely the work of a small group of extremists' (Sookhdeo, 2001). Overall the affiliation between Islam and fanaticism remained prevalent.

Processes of negativization in relation to British Muslims are exemplified by the theme of 'cultural clash', which is observable in media representations of the Muslim presence in Britain. For instance, Poole (2002) notes the prominence of this theme in the British Press during the Sarah Cook Affair, which referred to the case of a 13-year-old British girl who married an 18-year-old Turkish waiter while on holiday in Turkey. Poole argues that the social representation of 'cultural clash' between Muslims and the West was reproduced partly through the invocation of a series of dichotomous social representations emphasizing group differentiation. The dichotomous representation 'freedom versus constraint' was frequently illustrated by featuring young Sarah Cook wearing the Islamic veil and other Islamic dress. This seemed to contribute to the social representation that the freedom of Sarah Cook, an ethno-national in-group member, was under threat from (out-group) Muslim norms, values and traditions. Crucially, Britishness embodied freedom, while the Islamic veil symbolized constraint. The dichotomy consisting of positive elements attributed to the in-group and negative elements to the out-group has obvious benefits for the self-esteem principle. This leads to an additional dichotomous social representation, namely that of British Muslims' immorality vis-à-vis British morality. Poole concludes that Muslim-ness is frequently problematized and constructed as a causal factor underlying immoral behavior. She notes that even 'quality newspapers', such as The Times, constructed Muslim schooling as inferior to British schooling, due to the allegedly inferior morals, values and traditions associated with Muslim identity.

Media is the one that can put label on people, can stereotype and can create a positive or negative image, voluntarily or involuntarily. The representation of Muslims in British media is a complex and delicate issue, since it carries versions of both camps. On the one hand, Muslims are unhappy with the way they are portrayed in the media, believe that they are discriminated, that some facts are distorted and only negative examples are presented. On the other hand, the British majority consider that their country is becoming islamified and that their values are in danger. Yet, despite the often negative portrayal of Islam, thousands of British are adopting the religion every day.

CONCLUSIONS

History brought Muslims in the European region, but because they emanate from another world, with other traditions, visions, culture, it is still hard for them to deal with pressures of a modern and democratic world. A series of unfortunate events have brought them into the spotlight of the public agenda, their lives becoming increasingly difficult. After the terrorist attacks, the hatred against Muslims has grown and there were violent repercussions on ordinary people. In addition, their representation in the media was a negative one, scandalous events being prevalent. The Islamic religion is represented as undemocratic, a religion of extremist nature, calling on violence.

Britain is a multicultural space, a true cultural mosaic, in which the Muslim minority is still trying to find its place. Nowadays, the relations between the majority and the minority population are not very 'healthy', because there are some tensions on various topics, from religion and ending with politics. Britain is struggling to keep the democratic values and Muslims are continuously fighting to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity.

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