

British and Muslim: communal living or parallel lives?

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Mishal Husain is one of the most successful broadcasters of the present generation. She regularly reads the news on BBC 1 and occasionally introduces news features on all the BBC channels. More impressively, she is one of the small company that leads the *Today* programme on Radio 4 each morning, holding her own against a host of national and international politicians and, even more challenging, against the likes of Justin Webb, Nick Robinson and the redoubtable John Humphries. Anyone who has heard her interrogating a cabinet minister, business executive or chief constable with grit, knowledge and agility of mind will recognise her expertise and skill and will agree that she well deserves her place in this small broadcasting elite.

Mishal Husain is a Muslim, the daughter of a devout Muslim mother who came to the UK from Pakistan and worked as a school teacher and, unlike her daughter, continues to wear her hair and her clothes in typically Pakistani fashion. She brought up Mishal to know and respect Islamic values, but also to prepare herself to play a full part in the community where she lives. Clearly she succeeded, possibly more than she could have imagined when she was teaching her little girl the stories of the Prophet Muhammad and the basic moral pillars of her faith.

Mishal Husain is an example of integration, by which is meant that she appears to have succeeded in growing up as a member of British society with comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the attitudes and values of most of her neighbours, while at the same time she adheres to the principles of morality of her own faith. She has become integrated as part of the society in which she and her family live, and for herself has integrated the teachings of Islam in with the customs and standards that characterise British life. So fully has this been achieved that recently when it came to light that she had had a difficult interview with Aung San Suu Kyi, in which the de facto Burmese head of state showed annoyance at being interviewed by a Muslim, Mishal Husain made no comment – a reaction you could say that is more British than British.

How typical is Mishal Husain of Muslims in Britain? Well, she is certainly not alone. George Alagiah, another BBC newsreader, is also Muslim, as are Nadiya Hussain, the winner of last summer's Great British Bake-Off, and Mo Farah, maybe the greatest distance runner Britain has ever known. If you think a moment or two, you can probably name a few more.

Sometimes when you read the credits of a TV programme you can be surprised at the number of Muslim-sounding names that appear, suggesting that there are many people who successfully combine full participation in British and public and professional life with the ways and values of Islam.

However, the news reports that Mishal Husain and George Alagiah introduce, and the newspapers in which their colleagues such as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (another Muslim) write all too often tell another story. This is a story of radical Muslims to whom social integration is anathema. Whether it is young men committing atrocities in British streets (usually explained as revenge for military attacks on ostensibly Muslim targets in the Arab or Afghan world), young women covered from head to toe and avoiding eye contact (explained as preserving their modesty), or so-called Islamic State blustering about spreading the rule of Allah throughout the world and destroying everything and everybody they think is wrong and against their shallow dogmas – so many images portray an Islam that does not tolerate difference, or respect opinions and ways of life that run counter to itself. Is this the typical Islam of the UK or the world, and is integration a wicked enticement that seduces the gullible few to abandon the straight path of the faith?

To put the question another way: Is it possible to live as a Muslim and as a British citizen, fully participating in the life of faith and in life in the UK, or must Muslims who wish to follow the teachings of their faith remain separate from wider society, forming enclaves where their perceived purity of life can be preserved, and communicating with others as little as possible?

Of course, there is no simple answer to this question, and any adequate answer cannot be simple. Before beginning to look for an answer, it is maybe worth considering briefly the nature of British society and how integrated into wider society any of us is.

A few years ago, tests were carried out on stone-age human remains from the Cheddar Caves in Somerset and also on members of some of the longest-established families in the town. The astounding result was that some people living in Cheddar today share DNA with individuals who had inhabited the Gorge some 12,000 years ago, and possibly farm the

fields first cleared by their ancestors. It would not be surprising to find that the same applied in Melbourne and similar stable communities up and down the country, if appropriate evidence could be found. But given the history of most parts of Britain over the last 2,000 years or so, it is very likely that such signs of stability would be relatively few. This is because the story of Britain is the story of incomers. To name no more than a few of the best-known arrivals, the Danes came in the eighth century and after, the Normans came in the eleventh century (Norman French is still used in some legal and legislative contexts), the Huguenots came in the late sixteenth century, Jews in the nineteenth century, Caribbeans and other Commonwealth citizens in the twentieth century. And, of course, before all these were the Angles and Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries, displacing the original inhabitants and dubbing them 'foreigners', Welsh. But these original inhabitants were all gentlemen and ladies, and put up with all this, though they did remove most of the vowels from their words in order to baffle their overlords about what they were saying.

The various incomers to these islands each brought with them languages, customs and forms of religion that conflicted with the norm of those who were already here. While over time these idiosyncrasies were increasingly reduced, you only have to look for a moment to find that few of them have disappeared completely. I was mystified to hear a Lancastrian tell me as we stood in the rain that we were getting a 'right degging', while few of us would find the menus provided in kosher restaurants in Golders Green at all familiar, and all of us if we visited Cornwall would be called 'emmetts', ants, by the natives as they happily turned out the Duchy biscuits.

The point is that in a very real sense the majority of parts of the UK are hybrid, with many of the communities within them preserving ways that outsiders find different or strange, traces of language that are unknown elsewhere, and sometimes moral attitudes that repel visitors: Sabbath observance in the Western Isles of Scotland can be purgatorial to holidaymakers from the south, while Friday night dress codes in central Birmingham clubs can upset outsiders lacking strong constitutions. Many communities within the larger community may think themselves reasonably well integrated, but it would be wrong to claim that there is harmony or uniformity almost anywhere. The reality in most places is that while there may well be degrees of social integration in small areas or among the members of particular social classes, over wider areas there is often such minimal integration that it can be a matter of trying to respect difference but of keeping contact to a minimum: in reality leading lives in parallel rather than in close contact. Miss Marple, as embodied by Joan Higson,

commented on one part of a village where she was investigating yet another dead body, 'Oh, this must be the development', a delicate way of referring to the council estate. How many of the inhabitants from the older parts ever ventured into this new addition to their community, one wonders. Surely, it has always been little different in towns in Derbyshire and throughout the UK.

Given that this is the reality of the hybrid communities that make up the UK, is the Muslim community really different?

At present they appear to be, and for two main reasons. The first is the history of most of those who make up the community. While there have been Muslims in the UK since Tudor times or even earlier, most of them coming from the Arab world and Ottoman Empire, the great majority arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, and originated from specific parts of Pakistan, western India and what is now Bangladesh. The form of faith they brought with them was intricately bound up with customs typical of South Asia that over many centuries had come to be recognised not as part of the local culture but as part of the faith itself. This distinction is not always easy to appreciate, that a local cultural tradition is not a fundamental part of the sacred teachings of the faith. Thus, for example, in most Churches of the Western world it is taken for granted that a person is baptised as a baby or a young child; in fact, it used to be taught that without baptism entry to heaven was impossible. But there is nothing in the Bible about this; indeed, the books of the New Testament show that among the first Christians baptism took place when a person was mature and old enough to understand what the faith they were entering taught, and they could assume responsibility for it.

The term that is often used to name this melding together of teachings from the sacred sources of a faith and the age-old customs of a community is 'inculturation', meaning that the principles of the faith have gradually blended so fully into the life of a community or group of related communities that the two are hardly distinguishable. This is why the Christianity of, say, southern Italy is very different from the Christianity of Denmark. While many teachings and observances are common to both, the way they are explained and put into practice are markedly different.

The Islam of the South Asian Muslims who came to the UK sixty or so years ago, usually as invited workers, was a form of faith inculturated into the ways of South Asia. This has meant that as these Muslims found their feet in the towns and cities where they settled and began to practise their beliefs they did so in the forms they had known back in their places of origin.

Thus, the sermons their imams preached at Friday prayers were usually in Urdu, even though increasingly few of the congregation could understand them – Urdu seemed ‘right’; the form of religious teaching they gave their children was to learn by rote and accept what they were told rather than inquire and find out for themselves; the food they ate, the clothes they wore all reflected the culture of South Asia, in the belief that these were part of their religious heritage and therefore fundamental to being a good Muslim rather than being the forms through which the teachings were expressed in one particular location. It is as though the complete style of living from one part of the world must be transferred to another in order for the faith to remain authentic – though I understand that beneath those flimsy-looking Pakistani shalwar and kameez more than one Pakistani Muslim has been known to put on thermal underwear brought from a British store to keep out the extremes of the climate.

This may seem odd, but is it? When the British went to India they took with them the Bible and Book of Common Prayer, and also church architecture that reflected the style of numerous village churches in Britain. All this was the familiar way in which they worshipped. Sunday was made the day of rest, and on this day clergy sweated their way through the liturgy in layers of thick vestments despite temperatures of more than a hundred degrees. They resisted inculturation, because to do so would mean to surrender their identity. Muslims in the UK are not so different.

The trouble is that for many Muslims presently in the UK, this form of Islam as a South Asian version of faith forms a barrier to outsiders because it establishes a cultural context for the faith that keeps it and its followers distant from those outside. As long as this is perpetuated there is little hope for UK Muslims to regard themselves as part of wider society or to be seen as such, without a tremendous effort of the will. They must always be different if their Islam takes the form of belief and culture from another part of the world and must be defended as such. They can only ever live lives in parallel to the lives of the wider community, rarely touching or meeting and giving little possibility for comprehending or negotiating.

Yet some Muslims are different. A few weeks ago I was lecturing in Exeter, and afterwards went for a pub meal with my hosts. The one Muslim among us blended in with no apparent difficulty. He ate what everyone else ate and drank what everyone else drank, except that he chose a vegetarian dish from the menu and chose lemonade from the bar. Anyone looking at our group would see a man who preferred vegetarian food, and was not drinking alcohol

because he was driving. They would not notice that he was avoiding meat because the animal had not been slaughtered according to the halal rules, and was avoiding alcohol because it is forbidden in the Qur'an.

Presumably, Mishal Husain negotiates herself through BBC canteen meals and staff parties in much the same way, not drawing attention to difference but risking the chance that a dish or canape will contain pork products, keeping to soft drinks, and otherwise doing the same as everyone else. Nadiya Hussain consistently managed this as she impressed the judges in last year's Bake-off. Viewers had to look hard to see there were no alcoholic additions to her cooking or anything that may derive from a pork product. But she did not draw attention to this, tacitly saying, as it were, that she was fully part of this idiosyncratic English programme and had found a way to balance her faith with the British culture in which she practised it. One thing that made it clear she was a Muslim was her headscarf, which Muslim women often wear in response to the Qur'an teaching that they should observe modesty. But it was difficult for anyone to take offence of any kind when she made it as much a fashion accessory as any religious symbol, and often got flour on it. This was hardly a barrier that said to Paul Hollywood or anyone else, 'Keep away', or made her distant and unapproachable.

My Exeter colleague, Mishal Husain, the exquisite Nadiya Hussain and countless other Muslim individuals, as they negotiate ways between the teachings of their faith and the society in which they live, are achieving a new form of inculturated Islam, one that has been extracted from a South Asian or Arabian context and fitted into a British context. This kind of faithful experimentation holds the possibility that just as there has been and is a Pakistani or Egyptian inculturated Islam, so there may also be a British inculturated Islam.

The main factor that would hasten this for Muslims who do not have the courage and independence of mind exhibited by Nadiya Hussain and the others, and would lessen the sense of alienation that is often expressed by young Muslims who do not see that their faith can be compatible with British life is a Muslim clergy who could take a new approach to teaching Islam. At present, the typical approach in Muslim seminaries as well as mosque madrasas is to pass on the body of knowledge that makes up the authoritative sources of Islam. This comprises the Qur'an, which is learnt by heart, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and the numerous sayings that are attributed to him. These provide the knowledge by which a Muslim can be nurtured, and so when a Muslim is asked for an

opinion about a matter of belief or morality they will often reply with a verse from the Qur'an or a story from the Prophet's life.

This is fine, but what seminary students are rarely taught in this system is to draw out the moral from a verse or story or even see that there is a moral contained within it. In other words, this system does not equip Muslim clergy to know how to apply their inherited teachings in new situations and see how the teachings can help to understand and interpret these situations. There are thus no means of recognising the possibilities in new situations, or whether they may actually be expressions of the teachings of Islam. In other words, to use a religious form of language, this system of education does not enable Muslims to see where God may be present in new contexts, or where their faith may be as real in new situations as in old. The result tends to be reluctance to move away from the familiar and traditional, and a resistance to see that what is different may not necessarily be threatening or destructive to Islam.

Until there are teachers who can inculcate new approaches towards making the traditional teachings malleable and adaptable to the context of the UK in the twenty-first century, there will only be tentative steps towards blending or inculturating the faith in with the prevalent social and moral norms of society. The alternatives for Muslims are either to abandon the faith as not suited to the modern world, or else to condemn the modern world as godless, resist any change at all, and condemn those who follow any other path than fundamentalist obedience as equally godless as well. This is the attitude of so-called Islamic State and its sympathisers in the UK and Europe. Again in religious language, for them God is present only in the old ways never in the new, and so society and individuals must be made to conform and never depart from them.

This is the first reason why Muslims appear to be different, a form of faith that is bound up with the cultural history of one particular part of the world or one historical period, and an inability to find ways of relating to the new part of the world where UK Muslims live.

The second reason why Muslims appear to be different is the nature of the sacred sources from which they derive their teachings. These are the Qur'an, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and the sayings of Muhammad. They form a body of unassailable, timeless authority that is believed to apply in all places and in all aspects of life.

The Qur'an for Muslims is the eternal utterance of God, revealed over a period of twenty-three years to Muhammad in early seventh-century Arabia. It was given as the culmination of a series of revelations from God, and was the final and complete utterance, whose teachings cover all aspects of life.

The biography of the Prophet is the record of his activities both public and personal. They provide examples for Muslims to follow, and well as an entire model on which they can frame their lives.

Thirdly, the sayings of the Prophet, known as the Hadiths, consist of thousands of individual teachings he gave, together with remarks he made about what others said or did, answers to questions, and so on. They provide a vast body of precedents that Muslims use to help them know how to conduct themselves. And since Muhammad is regarded as the perfect man and the complete embodiment of what it is to be human, they are used to flesh out instructions in the Qur'an that are usually given there only in outline form. Thus, for example, where the Qur'an enjoins Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, it is the Hadiths, together with the records of Muhammad's life, that instruct Muslims about what observances to perform there and how to perform them.

These sacred sources, made up to God's utterance and what may be called Muhammad's response in word and deed, constitute an elaborate edifice of teachings far more comprehensive than anything in Judaism or Christianity that can guide Muslims throughout all parts of their life. The sources thus offer a framework that both elicits a response of simple acceptance and also establishes boundaries beyond which it is wrong to err. They are seen to apply as fully in Leicester or Derby in the twenty-first century as they did in Mecca or Medina in the early seventh century.

Herein lies the problem. With such a comprehensive body of unquestionable guidelines and boundaries for the practicalities of life and for life's moral decisions, it is easy for Muslims to assume a position of not only knowing what is right and wrong but also of condemning other forms of living and moral outlooks that differ. Erecting barriers between their world and the wider world outside is not difficult, and the way to resist the attractions of this world and even to destroy them in the name of God can appear the obvious course of action. This is some distance from integration and inculturation.

What is overlooked by Muslims who accept and try to put into practice this great body of teachings is that it is clear that in so many places these teachings were addressed to the needs of a society living in western Arabia in the seventh century and are deeply bound in with the norms of that society. The result of the failure to recognise this is very often the impulse to make the very different society of today conform to that society of centuries ago, at least as it is conceived through the eyes of Muslims from South Asia. The consequence of this is to shun and condemn features of wider, non-Islamic society and to set a distance between oneself and one's family and this sinful world – to turn parts of twenty-first century UK into romanticised versions of seventh century Arabia, where everything was supposedly in harmony and in conformity with the will of God.

This is an unworldly and unrealistic expectation, but the remedy for it is difficult to find. Again it would appear to be thinkers who can discern the principles that underlie the teachings of the sacred sources and help Muslims both to put these principles into effect in situations very far from Mecca and Medina centuries ago or Karachi and Lahore decades ago, and also to see where in wider non-Muslim society they are already being put into effect.

Are we in the UK then doomed to separation between rigid and intolerant Muslim enclaves who live in the same cities as others and walk down the same streets but rarely mingle? Or is there an alternative? At present, the loudest Muslim voices are those that call for rigid loyalty to what they claim are the true ways of Islam, and it is possible that in their unreflective purism they will grow louder still. However, one may predict that more and more of those who hear them will realise the unrealistic and nihilistic consequences of their demands and conclude that this is not the Islam that was actually first proclaimed and that successfully underpinned a myriad of different societies all over the world for fourteen hundred years.

The alternative is that increasing numbers of UK Muslims will, like Mishal Husain and Nadiya Hussain, discover how to live as British citizens and as Muslims in a creative blend that produces the sense of well-being the term 'Islam' means and stirs non-Muslims to admire and respect. For this to happen in more than isolated incidents, there is a need for thinkers and teachers who will take seriously what it means to be Muslim and also British, and who can help their fellow believers to see they are following an authentic path of faith, and can show them how to do this intensively and enthusiastically.

There is a real alternative here. It is one in which Muslims either give ear to the life-denying hectorings that call them into a narrow and eventually unreal form of existence cut off from the wider society of which they are part – this is a parallel form of living in which they move through wider society to the extent this is necessary but without touching or being touched; or they make use of their faith in the service of their own lives and of the lives of the wider society around them as full members of this society and as contributors to the common good – this is communal living in which they get involved, are affected by others and are in turn affect others, and contribute from the store of their faith.

What, then, does the future hold? Only time will tell, but there will hopefully be more like Mishal Hussain to tell us how it turns out.