

The Redeployment of Orientalist Themes in Contemporary Islamophobia

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This article aims to contribute to the understanding of contemporary anti-Muslim hostility, focusing on a specific national embodiment of it, namely Islamophobia in Britain. Globalization notwithstanding, anti-Muslim discourse does vary across different national contexts (witness, for example, the relatively strong opposition to manifestations of religion in the public sphere in France). However, these variations have not so far been the subject of any extensive empirical or comparative study. Discourse cannot be properly analyzed or understood in isolation from the context in which it arises, and the extent to which anti-Muslim rhetoric is linked to the concerns and anxieties of those who propagate it should not be overlooked. Questioning the claim that is sometimes made, by various interested parties, that contemporary Islamophobia is merely the most recent manifestation of an age-old hostility to Islam on the part of Christendom/the West which has existed since the very beginning, this article illustrates some of the ways in which the discursive content of selected themes has changed and evolved

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Studies in Contemporary Islam

according to the nature of the societies in which the discourse circulates. The current article aims to make a modest and qualitative contribution to the thematic analysis of anti-Muslimism and Islamophobic discourse.

While the term “Orientalist” has been primarily applied to academic production, as well as to art and literature, the term “Islamophobia” generally applies more to popular culture, including the media and grassroots prejudice. For various reasons, including the declining importance of the nation-state and the rise of postmodernism, academics are now far less likely to represent particular national interests than they were in the colonial period, or even in the 1970s when Said wrote his seminal book;¹ and the atmosphere in the academy is now one of greater uncertainty and an unwillingness to subscribe to metanarratives.² Therefore, continuities with classical anti-Muslim themes are more likely to be found in popular culture, which is the focus of this article.

It must be acknowledged that even with the best of intentions, it is not always easy to distinguish between “legitimate criticism” of Islam and “unfounded hostility”;³ but as Halliday argues, it is important to make the effort to do so.⁴ This is perhaps an even more crucial distinction in an age in which some Muslims themselves contribute to essentialist, Orientalist-style discourse which may be felt to enhance the status of Muslims or Islam as a “threat” to the West. Academically, and even Islamically (i.e. arguing from Islamic sources), it is not difficult to deconstruct the link between Islam and abusive practices such as forced marriages, honour killings, and female circumcision, though the link may persist in media coverage and popular discourse. However, the case is more nuanced when it comes, for example, to punishments sanctioned in the classical Shari’a and seen as harsh in today’s world.⁵ Even accepting that these

¹ See Said.

² Turner, 27-29.

³ Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, 4.

⁴ Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, 164.

⁵ Some of the *hadd* punishments (i.e. those prescribed in the Qur’an and/or Sunnah) have been consistently condemned as cruel and inhumane by Amnesty International. See, e.g.,

punishments are seen as valid by some Muslims, and that in a small number of Muslim countries they are sometimes carried out, a problem arises when the reporting of such things leads to the creation of an essentializing discourse in which the link between Islam and violence, for example, is naturalized through constant reiteration and reinforcement.

Three main themes—namely gender, violence and foreignness—have been selected for analysis because they were the main ones that emerged from my field research; in the course of this research, I found that even the non-verbal hostility my interviewees encountered seemed to fall under one of these three headings. The focus on specific themes (together with their accompanying *topoi* and motifs) will make it possible to observe the various ways in which they are constructed, their relative and shifting importance, and the interrelationship between them. The extent to which the treatment of these themes echoes or departs from traditional Orientalist approaches will be of interest, as will ways in which they reflect contemporary British and/or European concerns and anxieties, for example about national identity.

The primary research for this article is mainly based on interviews with British Muslim converts, but also includes some reference to the media, which will provide useful contextualization. Since converts are usually targeted *as Muslims*, this will shed light on contemporary British Islamophobia in general. Furthermore, the experiences of white converts (who made up approximately two-thirds of my sample) arguably provide an opportunity to observe anti-Muslim hostility in its purest form, excluding (in theory at least) the ethnic/racial dimension. To put it another way, on occasions when they are recognized and targeted *as converts*, it may be possible to extricate religious hostility from racial (although, as will be seen, the dividing line between the two may be blurred, even in the case of **white** converts). The inclusion of the “grassroots” element of Muslims’ actual experience in this article should be a useful

<http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA110021992?open&of=ENG-AFG> (accessed 04/06/2009).

complement to previous research in the British context which has often focused on newspaper coverage.⁶

After locating the three chosen themes in the historical context of Christian anti-Muslim polemic and Orientalist discourse, this article situates British anti-Muslim hostility in its sociopolitical context, and briefly problematizes “Islamophobia,” both as a term and a concept. This problematization is necessitated by the broad, sometimes indiscriminate, and often controversial, application of the term. The main section then draws on the findings of my own fieldwork, in which interviewees were asked about their experiences of hostility or discrimination.⁷ In conclusion, I will reflect upon the significance of my findings, and suggest possible future lines of enquiry which may help in arriving at a deeper understanding of Western responses and reactions to Islam.

1. Gender, Violence, and Foreignness as Perennial Themes in Anti-Muslim Discourse

Orientalist discourse up until the Enlightenment was predominantly Christian-led, and the language and discursive field were primarily religious and theological, with Muhammad, the Qur’an, and Islamic theology being the main areas of discussion. Primary concerns were the alleged falseness of the revelations, Muhammad’s deliberate manipulation of these, and his failure to perform miracles on a par with those of Jesus. Daniel’s magisterial study of late medieval Christian anti-Islamic polemic demonstrates the perennial nature of the preoccupation with violence and sensuality. In a medieval society in which Christianity formed the central element of individual, social and communal identity, distortions of Islam reached the point where

⁶See in particular: Poole, *Reporting Islam* and Richardson.

⁷While the general findings of that research were written up in my book *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, the issue of discrimination was only briefly touched on therein. I am indebted to the British Academy and to the School of Oriental and African Studies for providing, respectively, financial support and research leave which helped to make the empirical research on Muslim converts which is referred to in this article possible.

Zebiri: Orientalist Themes in Contemporary Islamophobia

“nonsense was accepted...because whatever seemed useful to faith was thought likely to be true.”⁸

The rise of secular humanism in the Enlightenment period and beyond gave rise to a reassessment of Islam, sometimes resulting in more positive views, for example secular-oriented admiration of Muhammad as a robust and effective leader, in contrast to Jesus’ lack of worldly success. However, it also led to a view of religion in general as irrational - a view which still often finds favor in the secular-dominated media. Rodinson provides a vivid description of images in art and literature which appealed to the European imagination in the Romantic period, in which the themes of exoticism (i.e. foreignness), sensuality (usually gender-related) and violence are intertwined:

Fierce and lavish scenes in a wild array of colors; harems and seraglios; decapitated bodies; women hurled into the Bosphorus in sacks; feluccas and brigantines displaying the Crescent flag; round turquoise domes and white minarets soaring to the heavens; viziers, eunuchs, and odalisques; refreshing springs under palm trees; *giaours* with their throats slit; captive women forced into submission by their lustful captors.⁹

The image of Islam that emerged in the Romantic era was not infrequently an attractive one; for example, Thomas Carlyle’s famous 1840 lecture on “The Hero as Prophet” rejected the widespread ideas that Islam was spread by the sword and that Muhammad was an “impostor,” and idealized the Arabs (including Muhammad) as “a swift-handed, deep-hearted race of men...a gifted noble people; a people of wild strong feelings,” etc.¹⁰

The colonial period gave rise to more geographically- and politically-oriented forms of Orientalism; anti-Muslim discourse now embraced a new function which has been amply documented in Said’s *Orientalism*: the justification of the imperial project, with a corresponding need to show the irrationality, barbarity, obscurantism

⁸ Daniel, 302.

⁹ Rodinson, 59.

¹⁰ Carlyle, 54.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

and backwardness of Muslims and Islam (and therefore their need to be “civilized” and “enlightened”). Ernest Renan’s famous lecture on “Islam and Science” (delivered at the Sorbonne in 1883), depicting Islam as antithetical to reason, progress, creativity and reform, was an early example of such attitudes.¹¹ In the postcolonial period, postmodernism has had conflicting and contradictory results, its championing of the “underdog” having a leveling effect with regard to genders, sexualities and races and (in theory at least) giving a voice to oppressed and disadvantaged minorities. In light of global inequalities, Muslims may be seen as such minorities, both internationally and in Western nation-states. The dominance of human rights discourse offers hope to dispossessed Muslims but can also give rise to the construction of Islam as politically repressive and intolerant (continuing the colonialist theme of the Oriental despotic ruler). The elevation of pluralism similarly offers certain advantages to minorities, but it does little to detract from a secular ethos which has scant sympathy for religious worldviews, continuing to see religions as outmoded and patriarchal, among other things.

Issues of gender and sexuality have a high profile in both Muslim and non-Muslim discourse on Islam. The subject of women in Islam is highly sensitized due to the long history of polemic and apologetic between Muslims and non-Muslims on this issue, and is not without political implications. In the colonial period, claims that Islam’s teachings on women were evidence of its “backwardness” provided justification for political intervention in Muslim countries, and the construction of Islam as “oppressive” towards women continues to serve specific Western political interests;¹² an example would be the invocation of women’s rights issues in connection with American military intervention in Afghanistan in recent years.¹³ The gender-related discourse changed markedly over time. In the early centuries of Muslim-Christian encounter, Islam was attacked for its alleged moral laxity and sensuality, with accusations focusing on Muhammad’s alleged “lustfulness” (with reference to his multiple

¹¹ Hourani, 120-121.

¹² See, e.g. Bullock, 227.

¹³ Abu-Lughod, 783-790.

marriages and in particular his marriage to Zaynab), the Qur'an's sensual depiction of Paradise, and the licitness of concubinage and divorce as well as polygyny. In the Romantic period, by contrast, the *harem* and the *seraglio* became objects of nostalgia and fascination. The increasingly restrictive sexual mores of middle- and upper-class Victorian England gave rise to a sensual and sexualized view of the Orient, with Oriental women being seen as objects whose purpose was to offer sexual gratification. As Kabbani says of the erotic paintings of this period: "Such portraits, in wishing to convey the East, described more accurately, Europe. They portrayed the repressiveness of its social codes, and the heavy hand of its bourgeois morality."¹⁴ More recently, with the rise of feminist ideas in Western societies, the "oppression" of Muslim women has become a favoured theme, even more so in the postcolonial than in the colonial era.

The theme of violence has been no less persistent than gender-related themes in anti-Muslim discourse, though the reasons for its prominence have changed. For early Christians, the idea that Islam was "spread by the sword" (and the accompanying idea of Muhammad and Muslims as "bloodthirsty") was significant because it contrasted so markedly with the Christian ideal model of Jesus, who did not engage in military activity. At certain points of the history of Muslim-Christian relations, various parts of Europe were in fact under threat from Muslim military expansion, the main crisis points being Muslim incursions into Southern Europe in the eighth century, the capture of Constantinople in the fifteenth and the siege of Vienna in the sixteenth. However, once subjugated by Western colonialist expansion Muslims were seen as rather less threatening and other themes, such as those of irrationality and backwardness, took precedence over that of violence, though the latter did not completely disappear. In recent decades, the alleged violence of Islam is related to the rise of political Islam and, latterly, Jihadist activism and so-called "Islamic terrorism."

Foreignness, in a sense, stands for Otherness in general – the perception of an alien culture, values, way of life etc. Inevitably, it is constructed differently in a world of nation-states than it was in

¹⁴ Kabbani, 85.

former times. In the early centuries of Muslim-Christian/European encounter, foreignness/Otherness was usually constructed in religious terms, with Islam being viewed as heretical or as a harbinger of the apocalypse, for example.¹⁵ If nineteenth-century Romanticism, inspired by the tales of travelers such as Richard Burton and Charles Doughty, constructed an exotic and alluring vision of the Orient (which has not wholly died out), twenty-first-century nations in the West are more concerned with issues of national identity, immigration and social cohesion. In recent decades – at least in the British context – racial and ethnic markers have decreased in importance as color racism has ceased to be acceptable; but a cultural racism which emphasizes the “foreign values” of Muslims has, if anything, increased.

2. Islamophobia in the British Context

Unlike other parts of the world, Europe has a long history of conflict with Islamic polities, and this has clearly influenced the development and evolution of its views of Islam. While not denying the impact of distant events on shaping the discourse, I would suggest as a general rule that the more recent the event, the greater its impact on contemporary views. To risk stating the obvious, imperialism is rather more important in the scheme of things than the Crusades. Halliday points out that British imperial history differs from that of France, both in terms of its general impact on national identity (imperialism being more formative in the case of France), and in terms of the role played by Muslims (again, being rather more significant in the case of France). Britain's most difficult encounters were with non-Muslim groups such as Hindu mutineers and Irish Catholic republicans rather than with Muslims.¹⁶ Similarly, Winter argues that British national identity differs from many of its European counterparts in that it lacks a history of self-construction against an Islamic rival, and that British xenophobia has been directed more against others than

¹⁵ Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, 188.

¹⁶ Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, 180.

against Muslims.¹⁷ Events of the past few decades such as the 1973 OPEC oil price rises, the Iranian hostage crisis, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and more recently 9/11, while important globally and having some influence on British views, have been relatively more significant for American perceptions of Islam.¹⁸ The July 2005 London bombings notwithstanding, the above considerations, taken together with Britain's recent history of multiculturalism, may mean that a less contentious view of Islam prevails in Britain, as compared to France and the US.

One incident which has had particular resonance in Britain occurred at the end of the 1980s; the Rushdie Affair gave a new impetus to anti-Muslim hostility in Britain. The events surrounding this affair marked a shift from race and ethnicity to religion as the core element not just in British Muslim identity, but also in anti-Muslim hostility, which was now increasingly expressed in religious rather than racial terms. Widely circulated (and sometimes staged) images of bearded, robed, foreign-looking Muslims demonstrating and burning books contributed to a view of Islam and Muslims as anti-modern, repressive, intolerant, and obscurantist; and the protestors appeared to be challenging one of the most cherished values of contemporary Western societies: freedom of speech. Equally importantly, by bringing religion into the public sphere they were going against the model of European modernity, whose trajectory over the course of the past two or three centuries had been in the opposite direction. More recently, the Danish cartoons affair has given fresh impetus to the above stereotype, with violent overtones being conveyed by the widely disseminated images of placards bearing threatening and bloodthirsty messages, ostensibly in defense of Islam and its prophet.

The term "Islamophobia" is increasingly used to refer to religiously-motivated hostility directed at Muslims. It was popularized in Britain by the publication in 1997 of the Runnymede Trust's report entitled *Islamophobia: A Challenge For Us All*, and it became more widely accepted in Europe as a whole after the publication of the

¹⁷ Winter, 7-12.

¹⁸ Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, 182.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

EUMC (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia) Islamophobia reports of 2001 and 2005.¹⁹ In general, it has become more prominent in public discourse since 9/11. The Runnymede Trust report concluded that Islamophobia was a pervasive feature of British society and that media reporting on Muslims and Islam was biased and unfair.²⁰ In 2002, the EUMC reported that there was a real possibility of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism becoming acceptable in European society.²¹ The far right, both in Europe generally and in Britain, have in the last few years begun focusing on religion rather than just race, often singling out Islam.²²

Muslims have been particular targets for hostility in recent years for a number of reasons. In the wake of 9/11 and the July bombings, more questions have been raised about their commitment to core European values such as democracy and gender equality, and there has been a new emphasis on social cohesion, with the blame for lack of integration sometimes being placed on Muslims rather than on racism and discrimination.²³ Exacerbating factors have included recent UK foreign policy, and the fact that a high proportion of asylum-seekers and refugees are Muslims.

Modood sees anti-Muslim prejudice as a form of cultural racism, and uses the term “Islamophobia” interchangeably with other terms such as “anti-Muslimism” and “Muslimophobia.” He describes cultural racism as a “two-step racism . . . with colour racism being the first step.” In other words, culturalism combines with color racism in a sort of “double whammy” which can be particularly potent (as with the combination of nationalism and racism);²⁴ this is

¹⁹See Cesari.

²⁰The follow-up report in 2004, *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action*, found that while there had been some improvements, levels of anti-Muslim prejudice had increased in certain quarters.

²¹Anwar, 31.

²²Chris Allen, 54. There have also been some positive developments in the wake of 9/11, such as a new openness in some sections of the media (and generally responsible reporting in the immediate aftermath of 9/11), new opportunities for dialogue between Muslims and government, and new Muslim initiatives to combat extremism. See Hussain, 125-126.

²³Tariq Modood, “Foreword,” viii.

²⁴Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics*, 8.

to be understood in light of the fact that two-thirds of British Muslims are of South Asian descent. Modood maintains that “Muslimophobia is at the heart of contemporary British and European cultural racism.”²⁵ His description of the way in which cultural racism operates more than hints at why Muslims should suffer from it to a greater degree than most:

Racialized groups that have distinctive cultural identities or a community life defined as “alien,” will suffer an additional dimension of discrimination and prejudice. The hostility against the non-white minority is likely to be particularly sharp if the minority in question is sufficiently numerous to reproduce itself as a community *and has a distinctive and cohesive value system that can be perceived as an alternative, and a possible challenge, to the norm...* Cultural racism is likely to be particularly aggressive against those minority communities that want to maintain, and not just defensively, some of the basic elements of their culture or religion and if, far from denying their difference (beyond the color of their skin) *they want to assert this difference in public* and demand to be accepted just as they are. [My emphasis.]²⁶

As mentioned above, in view of the controversy surrounding “Islamophobia,” any in-depth discussion of it needs to problematize it as a term and, equally importantly, as a concept. Even the Runnymede Trust report which led to its popularization and acceptance in the British context concedes that the term is “not ideal,” but justifies its use on pragmatic grounds: “because there is a new reality which needs naming: anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly that a new item in the vocabulary is needed so that it can be identified and acted against.”²⁷ The term “Islamophobia” is problematic not least because it applies to a very diverse set of phenomena, including many different forms of discourse (e.g. journalistic, literary, vernacular) and different types of action. The Runnymede Trust report lists different ways and contexts in which Islamophobia may operate: exclusion (e.g. from government

²⁵ Ibid., 37.

²⁶ Ibid., 38-39.

²⁷ Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, 4.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

or employment), violence (including verbal abuse), prejudice (e.g. in the media or everyday conversation) and discrimination (e.g. in employment practices or the provision of services).²⁸ It could be argued that its usage has become too broad and generalized to have much explanatory value. The fact that, like the term “fundamentalist,” it is often used uncritically and seldom problematized, only adds to the difficulties.

Controversy over the term “Islamophobia” turns on at least three different axes. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, there is discussion of the relative merits of this term as opposed to alternatives such as “anti-Muslimism” (with some fearing that widespread use of the term “Islamophobia” may lead to restrictions on criticism of Islam or on academic freedom in the study of Islam). Secondly, there is disagreement over the extent to which it is valid or helpful to treat Islam and Muslims as a special case, as opposed to subsuming them under a more general category such as “cultural racism.” Thirdly, and related to the second axis, there is a debate over the extent to which it is helpful to promote “Islamophobia” as a centrally organizing concept which informs and shapes the opposition to hostility and discrimination against Muslims. Some point to the danger of promoting a “victim mentality” or to the inevitable backlash when one group is seen as receiving special treatment. The second axis is the most relevant to the present discussion, since the view of Islam as a special or unique case often goes hand-in-hand with the belief that anti-Islamic prejudice is a perennial, entrenched phenomenon and that Orientalist modes of discourse are relatively constant over time. This stance is all the more powerful because it reflects vested interests: a Huntingtonian view of divisions along cultural fault-lines can be used to justify certain foreign and domestic policies, but it is also convenient for Muslim leaders who wish to enhance their own position by invoking threats and stirring up hostility.

Those who see anti-Muslim feelings as being engrained in the Western psyche tend to underestimate the importance of contingent factors while overemphasizing the importance of Islam as an

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

explanatory factor. They also tend to downplay or ignore the fact that both historically and in the present, other foes such as Jews, gypsies or rival Christian sects, have been equally demonized at different times.²⁹ In relation to the portrayal of “folk devils” in the media, Muslims can be seen as just one in a long line which has included, among other things, punks, welfare scroungers, teenage mothers, gypsies and travelers, and different groups of immigrants.³⁰ Halliday cautions against exaggerating the continuity between the medieval and the contemporary polemic, arguing that focusing on contingent causes is more conducive to change than attributing hostility to entrenched historical positions.³¹ It is clear from the thematic overview above that although anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic sentiment may have existed to varying degrees through the ages, its discursive content has changed dramatically according to the historical context.

The media is arguably one of the most powerful driving forces of anti-Muslimism in Britain. For most non-Muslim Britons, the media is the primary source of information about Islam and Muslims; and Poole’s research shows a close correspondence between representations of Islam in the press and public opinion.³² The 2007 report commissioned by the then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, *The Search for Common Ground: Muslims, Non-Muslims and the UK Media*, found a prevailing view that “there is no common ground between the West and Islam, and that conflict between them is accordingly inevitable.”³³ The overall picture in the media is that globally, Islam is “profoundly different from, and a serious threat to, the West, and that within Britain Muslims are different from and a threat to ‘Us.’”³⁴ Muslims are depicted as “challenging ‘our’ culture, values, institutions and way of life.”³⁵ The report, which examined press material from the year 2006, identifies several components of the dominant narrative. These include the failure of Muslims to

²⁹ See Joseph.

³⁰ *The Search for Common Ground: Muslims, Non-Muslims and the UK Media*, 119.

³¹ Halliday, “‘Islamophobia’ Reconsidered,” 895.

³² Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 240 and 250.

³³ *The Search for Common Ground*, xiii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

integrate, their unreasonable demands, their mixed loyalties and support for extremism, their obscurantism, and the incompatibility of their values and interests with those of mainstream society.³⁶ Other studies, notably those by Poole and Richardson,³⁷ which focus on material from the mid- to late-1990s, confirm the overriding impression of the Otherization of Muslims in the British press, with non-Muslims and Muslims being constructed as “Us” and “Them” respectively. Both studies found that there were strong consensual interpretive frameworks operating in the representation of Muslims, with coverage mostly confined to a limited range of themes, and stories selected on the basis of how well they fit in with those themes.

It may well seem that, as Miles and Brown suggest, “there is something unique about Islamophobia,”³⁸ in light of the fact that currently, Muslims seem to be relatively more demonized than most, if not all, other groups in the Western media.³⁹ They are criticised by elements across the whole political spectrum, being liable to fall foul of the xenophobia or anti-immigration stance of the right wing as well as the liberalism/human-rights stance of the left. Ironically, Muslims received some positive coverage in the conservative press in 1999-2000 for their opposition, together with other faith groups, to government plans to withdraw Clause 28 which prevented the promotion of homosexuality in schools.⁴⁰

3. Case Study: the Experience of British Muslim Converts

This section is based mainly on field research conducted in 2005-6, but it also draws on research on the media and refers to selected articles from the British press. It begins by providing an overview of

³⁶ Ibid., 103.

³⁷ For details, see fn. 5 above. Poole has also published a follow-up article dealing with more recent developments: “The Effects of September 11 and the War in Iraq on British Newspaper Coverage,” in Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson, eds., *Muslims and the News Media*, 89-102.

³⁸ Miles and Brown, 164.

³⁹ Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 252.

⁴⁰ Poole, “The Effects of September 11,” 100.

the type and extent of hostility encountered by the interviewees, before focusing on the three chosen themes. This overview will serve to highlight the gender imbalance in terms of degree and frequency of hostility encountered, and to show that ideas and concepts related to the three themes may be “in the air” even when not expressed verbally.

On beginning my research I anticipated that the nature of the hostility encountered by converts would be broadly similar to that encountered by born Muslims, with the possible added dimension of “betrayal” – whether cultural, political or racial - when they are targeted *as converts to Islam*. While discourse related to foreignness (e.g. “Why don’t you go back where you came from?”) could be expected to be less prominent, at least in the case of white converts, I expected that there could be an element of “racism by proxy,” as described by Franks.⁴¹ She found that some of her white Muslim respondents experienced racial abuse; she explains this with reference to the fact that these Muslims are “linked by association” with Pakistani or South Asian Muslims.⁴² She suggests that converts are of particular interest in this context: “As *white* Muslims in Britain, located at the intersection of religious and ‘racial’ boundaries, their experience of wearing the *hijab* in a liberal democracy draws attention to the issues of religious tolerance and discrimination.”⁴³

4. Methodology

In all, thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2005 and July 2006.⁴⁴ Potential interviewees were contacted mainly through snowballing and convenience sampling, and some effort was made to ensure a spread which reflected the makeup of British converts as a whole (insofar as this is known) in terms of gender, age, ethnic background, and Islamic orientation. The

⁴¹ Franks, 926.

⁴² Ibid., 922.

⁴³ Ibid., 918.

⁴⁴ Seven out of the thirty interviews were conducted by my research assistant, Aisha Masterton.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

interviewees comprised twenty women and ten men (possibly corresponding to the male-female ratio among British converts generally, though this is not known for sure), between the ages of 19 and 59, with an average age of 34. The length of time that they had been Muslim varied from 4 months to 28 years, with an average of 10.5 years. With one exception, the interviewees were brought up in the UK and (in one case) southern Ireland.⁴⁵ Twenty-four of them were living within the greater London area, while six lived in small towns or rural areas in the Midlands and Home Counties.⁴⁶ Twenty of the interviewees were white (including four Irish, two Scottish, one Welsh and two mixed European), six were Black African or Afro-Caribbean, one was mixed-race (Afro-Caribbean and white English), and three were Asian. This tallies reasonably well with the probable national profile of converts (approximately one-third black, a tenth Asian and the rest white).⁴⁷ The educational level of the sample was above average, with just over half being educated to first degree level or higher (including one PhD). As far as professional qualifications are concerned, the sample included three teachers, a doctor, a chartered accountant, a psychologist, an engineer and a social worker, although not all of these were currently employed. As regards employment status, seventeen people were in salaried employment (including five who worked in an Islamic context), two were self-employed, and three were students; in addition five women were at home with young children, and three people were unemployed.

5. The Particular Experience of Converts: Family Reaction

⁴⁵ The exception was a woman who was brought up in an English-speaking country and who had spent nearly all her adult life in Britain.

⁴⁶ Interviewee numbers were too small to be able to discern any significant regional differences in experiences of hostility; however, several of the London-based interviewees expressed positive appreciation for London's diversity and multicultural ethos.

⁴⁷ See Birt.

The great majority of converts encounter an initial negative reaction when they tell their family about their conversion.⁴⁸ Family reaction is relevant here because the reactions converts encounter from their families of origin reflect the attitudes of society at large, but with the important difference that parents have a strong motivation to find a *modus vivendi* and retain the ties of affection. Also, a negative reaction on the part of a parent may be partly the result of anxiety that their son or daughter will encounter discrimination and hostility from mainstream society. In particular, many parents are anxious about the consequences of their daughter wearing *hijab*. The parents of female converts also often harbour fears about the general position, status or role of women in Islam. One woman's parents, for example, were afraid that when she got married her husband would beat her, although when they subsequently got to know the husband their fears were allayed.

Several interviewees felt that negative media images of Muslims had adversely affected their parents' attitudes; in some cases parents insisted on bringing up political issues or even engaging in heated debates about such matters as the Taliban or countries seen as implementing Islamic laws such as Saudi Arabia, and, in particular, terrorism. The conversion of a son or daughter was sometimes seen as a sort of political betrayal; a male interviewee who had been Muslim for fifteen years, and who felt that his relationship with his family had deteriorated as a result, told how his family were convinced that he was either a terrorist or a supporter of terrorism. The "betrayal" could also be seen as cultural, as described by one woman: "My mother, who believes European culture is the most civilized, cannot get over the fact that I have 'gone native' and adopted a 'foreign culture' that seems more primitive and barbaric. She actually finds it distasteful." The perceived "foreignness" of Islam was also a problem for another woman; she says that her parents were not at all happy about her conversion "because they saw it as becoming an Indian"; her mother had told her: "You need to come back down to earth and be Westernized." As will be seen

⁴⁸ I have gained the impression that compared to, say, twenty years ago, family reaction is, on average, less severe nowadays.

below, the themes which come up in relation to family reaction are, to a great extent, those which converts and, by implication, other Muslims, encounter in relation to society at large.

6. Experiences of Hostility and Discrimination

Human experience and the reporting of it is a highly individual matter, and this necessarily complicates any attempts at academic research in this area. I noticed during my fieldwork that the broad answers people gave when asked whether they had experienced any hostility or discrimination because of being Muslim did not always correspond to the experiences they reported when questioned in more detail about particular incidents. For example, a person might report that they had not suffered any hostility or discrimination, and then on further questioning reveal that they had been sworn at or verbally attacked in the street. This drew my attention to the element of subjectivity: different people have different reactions or attitudes to the same stimulus. Contrasting attitudes emerged on a range of issues, all affecting the way in which discrimination is experienced and reported. Compare, for example, the reported experience of one young convert writing in to *Q-News*, reproduced here, with a comment made by one of my interviewees, reproduced below:

I began practising Islam after the events of September 11th...I grew a beard, put on a *topi* [Muslim cap] and raised my joggers above my ankles. Since the change in lifestyle, I have encountered one obstacle after another...I am 17 and have my whole life ahead of me but what is the point of studying so hard when no employer will hire a bearded man wearing a *jubbah* [Muslim overcoat]? Is it wrong for me to expect to be hired for my knowledge and skills, rather than my appearance? I feel like it is just going to get worse and the only remedy is to exclude myself from everything and just keep myself engaged in the remembrance of my Creator.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *Q-News*, no. 352, December 2003.

By contrast, a male interviewee talking generally on the problems encountered by Muslims in Britain volunteered the following: “I’ll be frank and say if you wanna have a long beard and *shalwar kameez* and turn up for a job interview like that you might not be doing yourself too many favours - you might need to just wear a suit for the interview at least.” The pragmatic realism of the latter, a convert of almost twenty years, contrasts with the idealistic fervor of the former, much younger convert who had only been Muslim for two years.

Interviewees reported a range of varying types of experience ranging from verbal abuse to more subtle forms of discrimination such as difficulty in getting jobs or in being promoted at work. Most people felt that things had become worse since 9/11, and that they had deteriorated at least temporarily in the immediate aftermath of 7/7; however, sometimes they were describing a general impression they had gained, rather than direct personal experiences of hostility. Not surprisingly, men reported far fewer problems than women, whose religious identity tends to be much more visible. In fact a relatively small minority of male converts dress in a way that is identifiably Muslim;⁵⁰ while many have beards, the beard is usually not unambiguously Islamic. Of the ten men in my sample, nine wore a beard, but only three of these regarded their beard as distinctively or recognizably Islamic. Only one man habitually dressed in “Islamic” style, wearing a robe, but because his ethnic origin was black African, he found that people often took his attire to be African rather than Islamic (and his “African” appearance did not seem to evoke hostile reactions).⁵¹

Due to this low profile, most of the men were unsure as to whether they had encountered prejudice, or whether any negative experience could be attributed to their religious affiliation. The black African male convert mentioned above, whose appearance was perhaps more “African” than “Islamic,” felt that he had definitely suffered discrimination which was racially motivated, but was not

⁵⁰ Maha al-Qwidi’s Phd thesis found that all twenty men in her sample dressed in European style: see pg. 210; similarly, in Ali Köse’s study of conversion to Islam in Britain, only three out of fifty men radically changed their dress: see pg. 131.

⁵¹ In addition, three of the men wore Islamic dress on an occasional basis, for example at the mosque or Islamic events, or when in a Muslim country.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

sure whether religious motivation had also been a factor. In addition to the visibility factor, it emerged that men were less likely to be verbally abused than women due to the latter being a softer target. One rather tall and well-built male convert joked about the fact that no one would dare to express overt hostility towards him by virtue of him being “a large, black guy.” His wife, who was present during the interview, said that she sometimes received verbal abuse when she was on her own, but never when she was with her husband. For whatever reason, the types of experiences reported by the men were largely to do with getting job interviews or jobs (in the case of those who used their Muslim names in that situation), or being promoted at work. One man who felt he’d been “left out of the loop” at work commented that he never went to the pub when invited, adding: “I may have inadvertently excluded myself.” As Modood points out, cultural racism can affect groups which do not accept mainstream norms, including, as in this case, those who abstain from drinking alcohol in a social context, as well as those who choose to dress in distinctive ways.⁵²

The women’s experience differed markedly from that of the men. For example, almost half of them reported definite incidents of verbal abuse. None of the women had actually been physically assaulted (though some knew of women who had been). Probably the most traumatic-sounding experience reported was someone who had been attacked by a woman in the street, seemingly out of the blue and without provocation: “She was going with her fists as though she was gonna punch me in the face...and then she made the sound of a bomb.” At the time this convert had been pregnant and accompanied by her toddler, so felt particularly vulnerable and unable to challenge the attacker as she normally would have done. She said that she had been reluctant to go out with her children for some time following that incident.

Women also described more subtle forms of prejudice. Several had noticed whispering, funny looks, or felt they were stared at when

⁵² Modood, *Multicultural Politics*, 41-42.

they took on the *hijab*.⁵³ One woman said that she often had people look her up and down from head to toe; sometimes she would smile at them, at which point they would usually look away or get embarrassed. She compared this to the experience of people with visible disabilities: “People forget that you’re not just an object.” The women who did not wear *hijab*, of whom there were three, tended to experience the same kinds of discrimination as the men, i.e. work-related. One of these described a similar form of social exclusion to the man quoted above who had refrained from going to the pub with his workmates. She had previously worked in the City, and said that she had experienced “bullying” in the form of pressure to go to the pub and drink at lunchtime. She had found that there was “a very heavy pub culture, and if you don’t comply you do get the sense that you’re not being considered one of the gang...You lose chances.” Another woman who did not wear *hijab* spoke of “sarcastic comments” at work, but ironically perhaps felt that people would not dare to make them if she *did* wear the *hijab* (possibly an implicit reference to new legislation against religious discrimination in the workplace).⁵⁴

7. Thematic Analysis

Gender and Hijāb

This theme provides perhaps the richest set of motifs, arguments and images, both in media coverage and the popular imagination, Islamic gender norms being represented in much of the discourse as challenging or negating some of the most cherished and recently-won “Western” values of human rights, female emancipation, and sexual liberation. While it is not surprising that press coverage is mainly devoted to politics, violence and terrorism, themes related to gender

⁵³ In a broad sense “*hijab*” is used (among other things) to denote the female dress code prescribed in classical Islamic law, usually understood as covering everything except the face and hands. The word is also often used to mean “headscarf.”

⁵⁴ The European Directive on Employment outlawed religious discrimination in the workplace from December 2003.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

are given an airing whenever current events (such as the Jack Straw *niqāb* affair) allow the opportunity.⁵⁵ Issues such as female circumcision, arranged/forced marriages (the two sometimes being conflated) and honor killings have periodically become prominent in the news, and certain relationships – particularly those involving a glamorous/rich/famous white female and a Muslim male – received extensive coverage in the 1990s.⁵⁶

The original Runnymede Trust report found a recurring theme in the media representation of Islam to be “the claim that Islam oppresses women, in ways significantly different from and worse than the ways in which women are treated in other religions and cultures.” Hence the preoccupation with arranged marriages, which are generally seen as unhappy, and contrasted with “love marriages” prevalent in Western countries. In particular, the occasion of Jemima Goldsmith’s engagement and marriage to Imran Khan in the 1990s provided an opportunity for some particularly glib generalizations about the place of women in Islam, including one commentator (writing in the *Guardian*) who predicts that she will be “expected to live in women’s quarters,” and that her new life will be “diametrically opposite to that of a Western woman.” Another laments that the new bride “must always have one niggling thought on her mind: how many other wives will Imran Khan take?”⁵⁷

The “veil” (a term which can incorporate both *niqāb* and *hijāb*, and is often ambiguous) provides a rich and endlessly versatile symbol, perhaps the most powerful symbol of Muslims’ Otherness and alien values. Often portrayed in the media as “restrictive and burdensome,” it is closely related to the theme of women’s subjugation, and is seen as something imposed rather than chosen.⁵⁸ In the wake of the Jack Straw affair, the word “*niqāb*” was added to the existing repertoire of “*burqa*,” “veil,” and “*hijāb*,” enabling columnists to make finer distinctions between the different types of

⁵⁵ In late 2006, heated public debate followed comments by Jack Straw (then Leader of the House of Commons), and Tony Blair, which strongly implied that the *niqāb* (face veil) represented an obstacle to the integration of British Muslims.

⁵⁶ Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 255.

⁵⁷ Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: A Challenge to Us All*, 28-29.

⁵⁸ Richardson, *(Mis)Representing Islam*, 91.

covering. Excerpts reproduced in *The Search for Common Ground* show the variety of themes which come into play. Joan Smith of *The Independent*, in an emotive piece in which she declares that she “loathes” the *niqāb* and *burqa*, sees the phenomenon of female covering as “a human rights issue”: “I can’t think of a more dramatic visual symbol of oppression, the vast majority of women who cover their hair, faces and bodies do so because they have no choice.” Melanie Phillips sees “the Muslim veil” in even more explicitly political terms, pronouncing it “unacceptable” on the grounds that it is associated with “the most extreme version of Islam...It’s inherently separatist and perceived by some as intimidatory.”⁵⁹ Suzanne Moore of *The Observer*, says of *burqas*: “These garments are shrouds, they stop the wearer from living a full life,” adding: “That goes for Lancashire as much as Kabul.” But for her, issues of sexuality are uppermost: “If the female body is so sinful it must be completely covered, or if its exhibition shows the whorishness of all women, we make all sexuality something which is women’s fault. The idea that men can’t control sexual impulses while women must does nothing to liberate women – or men – from the horrific round of repression, guilt, blame and shame.”⁶⁰

The *hijāb* clearly played a significant part in the hostility encountered by the female interviewees. When women converts adopt the *hijāb*, there is usually some kind of adverse reaction from family, friends and/or work colleagues; in many female testimonies, the family is reasonably accepting of their conversion until they take on the *hijāb*, at which point the attitude changes. Because female converts are aware of this, the decision to take on the *hijāb* is often preceded by much trepidation and hesitation. In fact the three women in my sample who did not wear *hijāb* (two of whom hoped to do so in the future) all feared that to wear it would create a barrier or have an isolating effect. One professional woman feared that it would adversely affect her relationship with her clients, as her work

⁵⁹ *The Search for Common Ground*, 13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14. Ironically, she hereby reproduces the male-dominated Islamic discourse on woman as *fitnah* (temptation), ignoring the female-dominated discourse on *hijāb* as liberation.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

involved dealing with families and their emotional problems: “I just think would it be a barrier in this current climate, because people have perceptions that you’re not going to understand my world because you must be in a different world if you’ve got that thing on your head.” Several of the women had felt extremely self-conscious when they started wearing *hijāb*, like the one who commented: “I found it hard at first, everyone’s staring at you, you become completely paranoid.”

The theme of Muslim women’s supposed oppression came up fairly regularly in the interviews in the context of female covering. The only woman in my sample who wore *niqāb* full-time in public said that she had received a lot of sympathetic smiles and comments such as: “You alright love?,” adding: “They think you’re oppressed.” Another said of the *hijāb*: “A lot of people think you must have been forced to wear it because you’re married to an Arab.” A third woman said that her friends had asked her why she had gone into “a religion that treats women so badly.”

Women who convert to Islam sometimes find themselves on the receiving end of a particular type of hostility, being accused of having betrayed the cause of feminism for which women in the West fought so hard. Katherine Bullock, a Canadian convert and author of an academic study on perceptions of the *hijāb*, reports that she was told that she “didn’t belong” at an International Women’s Day gathering, as it was felt that she represented the subjugation of women.⁶¹ One interviewee described how her mother (who was not particularly feminist and in fact held quite traditional values) had told her that her (the mother’s) friends felt that she’d “betrayed everything they’d fought for” in terms of women’s rights. English convert Huda al-Khattab describes how after she adopted the *hijāb*, a woman at a public exhibition “got angry when she realized I was English and had willingly embraced Islam. She accused me of being insane (virtually), how could I possibly have embraced a religion which did such terrible things to women?”⁶²

⁶¹ Bullock, xv.

⁶² al-Khattab, 87.

While *hijābīs* sometimes encounter anger from non-Muslim women as a result of their alleged betrayal of the feminist cause, they may encounter anger from non-Muslim men, and sometimes women as well, for an entirely different reason. One woman had had a man comment: “Look at the state of that, must be boiling” (a reference to wearing full covering during the summer months). Another had had a woman in the street remark: “Look at that for a pig’s ear.” These comments are likely to be a reaction to the sexual non-availability of Muslim women (if not literally, then at least symbolically – they are not even playing the game and making a pretence of such availability); Franks points out that women as well as men can find it hard to forgive those who “disrupt” the “pattern of the masculine gaze.”⁶³ Probably not unrelated to this is the fact that several interviewees volunteered the view that it was mostly *men* who expressed hostility towards *hijābīs* in the street.

The *niqāb* has a rather different impact from the *hijāb* on the public persona or identity of the Muslim woman. According to British convert Na’ima Robert who has written a book about her own experience as well as that of other women converting to Islam: “It is as if, once you put on the *niqāb* you cease to have a human identity. I know that the *niqāb* is a shock to the system for most people in non-Muslim societies – we are used to seeing so much personal information about people around us, being able to tell their race, their age, their physique and their attractiveness. The *niqāb* gives none of this information.”⁶⁴ This depersonalization renders the covered Muslim woman a blank screen on which others may project a plethora of negative images; it also has a “shock” value. Robert shows a keen awareness of the possible impact of the fully covered woman on observers or passers by: “What does the non-Muslim see when he or she sees us in the street? A relic of a bygone age? A lingering symbol of oppression in a liberated world? A religious fanatic? A terrorist or terrorist’s aide? An outsider, immigrant, interloper?”⁶⁵ As mentioned above, only one of my female

⁶³ Franks, 920.

⁶⁴ Robert, 127.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

interviewees wore the *niqāb* at all times when in public; additionally, six wore it on an occasional basis. Several female interviewees abstained from wearing the *niqāb* when in Britain, either because they would not feel safe, or out of fear that it would create a bad image for Islam or be counterproductive from the point of view of *da'wah* (the propagation of Islam).

The discrimination and hostility experienced by women who wear *hijāb* is offset by the benefits and advantages – perceived or experienced – which come from wearing it.⁶⁶ Some women converts commented explicitly on the way in which wearing *hijāb* had strengthened their Islamic identity or heightened their sense of self-confidence. Some women who report a rise in self-esteem relate it to the issue of sexuality, feeling that they no longer have to dress to please men (or that they are taking a stand against consumerism, and against the commodification and objectification of women's bodies).⁶⁷ Taking these perceived advantages into consideration highlights these women's agency and militates against seeing them as passive victims of abuse; the discourse of "empowerment" runs directly counter to common perceptions of *hijāb* and *niqāb* as symbolizing the subjugation of women.

Violence

Both Poole and Richardson found that in the mid- to late-1990s, conflict and violence were central to reporting on Islam and Muslims, with "Muslim" or "Islamic terrorism" being a central theme; Poole's

⁶⁶ In the context of Western, non-Muslim societies, the perceived advantages, some of which are described in this paragraph and in the following footnote, are somewhat different from those which are commonly reported in Muslim countries, such as enhanced freedom of movement or improved employment or marriage prospects.

⁶⁷ A further advantage reported by my interviewees was the strengthened sense of belonging to a community, as reported by one woman when she started wearing the headscarf: "There was suddenly this network of people, and suddenly there were brothers on the tube that would stand up and give me their seat, or would look out for me, and I would see that they were making sure that everything was okay and it was just completely different. I just felt like, this is making me part of something."

follow-up article, coming into the 2000s, found that this theme predominated over all others relating to Muslims.⁶⁸ Muslims in general are routinely portrayed as a threat to security, with the motifs of “the enemy within” or “fifth column” implicating British Muslims in particular. Richardson identifies four main *topoi* which are used to negativize images of Muslims: the military threat posed by Muslim countries; the threat of Muslim political violence and extremism; the threat to democracy posed by authoritarian Muslim political leaders; and the “social threat” of Muslim gender inequality.⁶⁹ The first three are either implicitly or explicitly related to violence.

While, as discussed below, coverage of British Muslims may in some cases be less negative than that of Muslims globally, even prior to the phenomenon of “home-grown terrorism” violence was sometimes attributed to Muslims in the domestic context. An example of this is provided by Richardson, who analyses the representation of Muslim opposition to a bingo hall which undergoes a name change to “Mecca.” He finds that the Muslim opponents are consistently represented as reactionary and/or violent, the reports being sprinkled with references to the Muslims’ “demands” (as opposed to them asking or requesting), “violent protest,” “attacks,” their “anger and irritation,” “ire,” and “outrage.”⁷⁰

It is not difficult to find references to violence in the media which chime in with age-old anti-Muslim themes. The first Runnymede Trust report reproduced a particularly crude example from an article by Robert Kilroy-Silk published in the *Daily Express* in 1995. After referring to the public cutting off of ears and hands in Iraq, the article continues: “Moslems [*sic*] everywhere behave with equal savagery. They behead criminals, stone to death female – only female – adulterers, throw acid in the faces of women who refuse to wear the chadar [*sic*], mutilate the genitals of young girls and ritually abuse animals.”⁷¹ His infamous article entitled “We Owe Arabs Nothing” published several years later in the *Sunday Express* did not

⁶⁸ Poole, “The Effects of September 11,” 102.

⁶⁹ Richardson, *(Mis)Representing Islam*, 75.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷¹ Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: A Challenge to Us All*, 26.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

refer explicitly to “Moslems,” but the reference to “suicide bombers, limb-amputators, women repressors” was clearly intended to invoke Islam, and not just the Arabs of the title.⁷² *Evening Standard* columnist Brian Sewell argues that “Islam has always been militant; the urge to conquer and convert began with the great imperial thrust of Mohammed himself.” Asking rhetorically what “Islam” will gain from a clash with the West, he replies: “It will secure the old certainties of poverty, disease, the suffocating conformism compelled by the beatings, amputations and hideous executions of sharia law – ‘the will of Allah,’ as they say when children die, and ‘God is great,’ they shout when men and women, hanged for what we see as mere misdemeanour, choke slowly in the noose.”⁷³ The war historian John Keegan, as Defence Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, explains that the religion of Islam “inspired the raiding Arabs to become conquerors of terrifying power,” before drawing a direct parallel between 9/11 and “the Oriental tradition”: “Arabs, appearing suddenly out of empty space like their desert raider ancestors, assaulted the heartlands of Western power, in a terrifying surprise raid.”⁷⁴ Thus we find a potent mix of old and new themes combined in mutually reinforcing ways: the initial Islamic conquests, harsh Islamic punishments, and “Islamic terrorism.”

Given the timing of my interviews, which began the month after the July bombings, it is perhaps not surprising that interviewees felt that the theme of terrorism was somehow present, even if it wasn't verbally expressed; several commented that their families expected them to explain or defend so-called Islamic terrorism or political extremism. One woman said that since 7/7, “People look at you like you are a terrorist, as soon as they see your head covering they think you're going to blow them up.” Another sensed “a kind of wariness...Is she a terrorist?...There is a kind of barrier which people are scared of Islam.” Another commented on an experience of being stared at by both customers and staff in a bank: “I was so scared...I

⁷² The article was accessed at http://www.bintjbeil.com/E/news/040104_kilroy_silk.html on 06/06/2009.

⁷³ See Sewell.

⁷⁴ See Keegan. Both Sewell and Keegan were quoted in the second Runnymede Trust report, but I have chosen slightly different quotes from the original articles.

actually felt that they were feeling I was a terrorist or something.” Such experiences were more common immediately following the July 2005 London tube bombings, but most said that the sense of hostility had subsided somewhat fairly soon afterwards. One woman said that she had felt uncomfortable at work after the bombings when her colleagues were discussing the event. When a non-Muslim colleague had mentioned that she was scared to go on the tube, this convert had said that she too was scared: “They looked at me in surprise, to see that I felt the same way that they did.” One female English convert who was known to me because she assisted me in my research on British converts was accosted in the street by a man shouting “Muslims are murderers!”⁷⁵

At times, the theme of violence is linked to the *hijāb*. As Farhia Thomas of the Muslim Women’s Resource Centre in Glasgow points out, describing reactions that she and her *hijāb*-wearing friends encounter: “We’re either oppressed or we’ve got Kalashnikovs under our coats.”⁷⁶ Interestingly, a male interviewee who was himself very discreet about his Muslim identity, preferring a culturally minimalist and theologically-oriented version of Islam, echoed the view expressed by Melanie Phillips above: “*niqāb* is the uniform of an al-Qaeda sympathizer...When I see women in *niqāb*, I just think they’re the sympathizers of the terrorists of today and the breeders and nurturers of the terrorists of tomorrow. You don’t wear that unless you’re committed to a hardline version of Islam which is anathema to me.”

Foreignness

Quantitative and qualitative studies of the British press show that although at times British Muslims are seen in a slightly more favorable light and in less stereotypical ways, the lines between British Muslims and Muslims globally are blurred, with direct links

⁷⁵ The scene of this happening was actually shown on *Newsnight*, 08/03/2005. Aisha Masterton had been walking along the road talking to the *Newsnight* interviewer with the cameras rolling when the incident happened.

⁷⁶ <http://www.nujglasgow.org.uk/understandingislam.html> (accessed 11/11/2006).

Studies in Contemporary Islam

frequently being made between them.⁷⁷ While global Islam outweighs British Islam in terms of quantity of coverage, there is a good deal of osmosis between the two, for example when British Muslims are seen as “the enemy within,” or as a conduit for the penetration of “foreign” values into Britain.⁷⁸ Islam and Muslims are thus still seen as a foreign phenomenon. The permeability of the boundaries between domestic and foreign Islam/Muslims contributes to the sense of the Muslim presence in, and immigration to, the UK as threatening. Indeed, both Richardson and Poole found that British Muslims, like other Muslims, are strongly Otherized, to the extent that they are excluded from Britishness, either because of values or characteristics they are perceived as lacking, or because of those that they are perceived as having (namely “Islamicness”).⁷⁹

Both the Honeyford and Rushdie affairs in the 1980s had a strong foreign dimension (pertaining to pupils’ extended visits to Pakistan and Khomeini’s so-called *fatwa* respectively), and with the rising specter of “Islamic fundamentalism” and then “Islamic terrorism” in the 1990s, specific connections were made between events abroad and the infiltration of Islamists into Britain (bringing right-wing criticism of Britain’s relatively liberal immigration and asylum policies). The link between foreignness and violence is made even more explicit in stock images of cartoonists who, in recent years, have depicted an enemy who resembles bin Laden – complete with beard, turban, robes, Kalashnikov and hooked nose.⁸⁰ Bin Laden is of course just one of a number of obligingly foreign-seeming and bellicose “folk devils,” including Abu Hamza and Omar Bakri Mohammed.

As indicated or hinted at above, a major motif in Muslims’ perceived foreignness is their allegedly alien culture and values. A certain emphasis on education in press coverage of Muslims,

⁷⁷ E.g. Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 98.

⁷⁸ Poole. “The Effects of September 11,” 96.

⁷⁹ See Richardson, *(Mis)Representing Islam*, 152, and Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 249 and 259.

⁸⁰ Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action*, 17. The report explains that this enemy is depicted not just as evil and threatening, but also as “stupid, naïve, unsophisticated, unscientific, primitive, a figure of fun.”

especially in the 1990s, arose from the recognition of the key role which education plays in transmitting cultural values and social norms to the younger generation.⁸¹ This strand of discourse resonates with Huntington's famous "Clash of Civilizations" thesis. In much anti-Muslim rhetoric, exclusion of Muslims goes beyond the national context; as Miles and Brown observe, "the difference which is imputed to Muslims is not just cultural but civilizational."⁸² Poole reports that Islamic cultural practices are seen as "restrictive and abhorrent to a modern liberal society," while Richardson observes the centrality and dominance of the idea that Muslims are "barbarians in need of (Our) civilisation."⁸³ Cultural difference is predominantly seen as "cultural deviance," and increasingly as a cultural threat.⁸⁴ Thus Samuel Brittain of the *Financial Times* is able to contend that "Islamist militancy is a self-confessed threat to the values, not merely of the United States, but of the European Enlightenment: to the preference to life over death, to peace, rationality, science and the humane treatment of our fellow men, not to mention fellow women. It is a reassertion of blind, cruel faith over reason."⁸⁵ As seen above, attitudes to gender are framed as a particularly prominent part of Muslims' alternative cultural values.

As with the theme of violence, the theme of foreignness is often linked with the *hijāb*. Franks observes that the wearing of the headscarf can be seen as "very unBritish"; one white Muslim woman wearing a headscarf, being asked by a friendly older woman on a train where she was from, "felt almost obliged to claim to be foreign." As Franks points out, white Muslims (the most visible of whom are *hijāb*-wearing women) are sometimes seen as "race-traitors" by white supremacists.⁸⁶ As mentioned above, for my interviewees family reaction was sometimes exacerbated by the sense that the son or, more likely, daughter was adopting a "foreign" culture. Some of the

⁸¹ Richardson, *(Mis)Representing Islam*, 137.

⁸² Miles and Brown, *Racism*, 164.

⁸³ Poole, "The Effects of September 11," 99; Richardson, *(Mis)Representing Islam*, 230.

⁸⁴ Richardson, *(Mis)Representing Islam*, 232.

⁸⁵ Cited in Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action*, 11.

⁸⁶ Franks, 923-924.

comments received by the female interviewees indicated that they were being perceived as foreigners; one white English woman was told to “go back to [her] tent” and referred to as a “bloody Arab,” while a mixed-race woman was told to “go back to [her] own country.” An Afro-Caribbean woman said that other Afro-Caribbean people did not see her as “one of them,” but “just as a refugee or someone who’s just come over, she’s ‘other.’”

The assumption of foreignness was not always accompanied by hostility. A rather less pernicious experience of women wearing *hijāb* was that of being spoken to slowly as if they didn’t speak or understand English very well (and subsequently of encountering a shocked reaction when they answered in an English/Welsh/Irish/Scottish accent). One female interviewee said on the subject of adopting the *hijāb*: “You became an ethnic minority...not that many comments but odd looks and also people treating you like you’re stupid,” adding: “I kind of miss those days because now you get treated like you’re evil.” Generally speaking, the kindly indulgence and efforts at sympathy which South Asian Muslims with their “foreign ways” may sometimes encounter (as in Jacobson’s description of a white woman expressing concern for a fasting Pakistani girl: “Are you feeling alright? You must be careful, you know”)⁸⁷ are less likely to be on offer to white converts.

8. Conclusions

The following description, in the Runnymede Trust 2004 follow-up report, of some common symbols in cartoon imagery illustrates the complex ways in which different Orientalist or Islamophobic motifs are interrelated, often intertwined, and mutually reinforcing: “magical flying carpets, with their implications of exotic and alluring irrationality; genies kept in bottles and lamps, evoking dark, destructive, uncontrollable forces; scimitar-shaped swords, symbolising primitive cruelty; and minarets, implying foreign and outlandish beliefs and practices.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Jacobson, 130.

⁸⁸ Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action*, 17.

What emerged from the “grassroots” interview material (as opposed to newspaper coverage which places more emphasis on politics and, correspondingly, violence) was the predominance of issues related to gender. For non-Muslims in contemporary Britain, and no doubt elsewhere, it seems to be issues related to gender and sexuality rather than religious concerns in the narrower sense that epitomize Islam’s Otherness; no doubt this is because Islamic teachings on male-female relations are highly distinctive when set against the norms of contemporary mainstream Western society. The *hijab* provides a visual stimulus and seems to act as a lightning rod for feelings of hostility, to the extent that it even becomes associated in some cases with violence and terrorism, as indicated above. Because it draws together so many anti-Muslim themes and motifs, the *hijab* seems to have the capacity to serve as a focal point for Western antipathy to Islam; in fact, the *hijab* or veil acts as a metonym not just for gender relations in Islam but for Islam in general. Beattie gives an idea of its symbolic potency and semantic flexibility: “The veiled woman is part of the Otherness which the so-called western man of reason projects onto his eastern counterparts, by depicting the Arabic-Islamic world as feminized and irrational. This oriental figure...represents seduction and threat, mystery and challenge, so that it is very difficult to see her humanity clearly through the west’s own cultural veils.”⁸⁹ Different readings of the “veil” illustrate opposing agendas and worldviews; while to the wearer (and to Muslims in general) it often symbolizes piety, and sometimes empowerment, in anti-Muslim discourse it symbolizes women’s oppression, first and foremost.

The various issues which are commonly thrown up by the discourse around the veil in contemporary Britain – the subjugation of women, the insertion of religion into the public sphere together with the removal of sexuality from that same public sphere (in both cases going against the grain of mainstream society) - all relate to a broader theme, that of the alleged dichotomy between the veil and modernity. Blatant religiosity itself is seen as offensive, the more so

⁸⁹ See Beattie, cited in *The Search for Common Ground*, 12. For an in-depth study of the symbolic versatility of the veil, see Shirazi.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

when the religion in question espouses values which are seen as belonging to a bygone age (as seen in the accusations of betrayal of the feminist cause). This is particularly highlighted in the case of converts, who cannot simply be dismissed as having an “exotic” or foreign culture.

One reason for the hostility encountered by women wearing *hijab* is that it subverts a longstanding tradition in Western culture which assigns to women the role of being looked at, of being evaluated and enjoyed visually, by men in particular but also by other women. Franks refers to the long history of female nudity in Western art which has contributed to this, and points out that although British society is liberal in many ways, it still has certain expectations of women, in particular that they be “the object of the gaze.” The refusal of Muslim women who cover to conform to this expectation constitutes a disruption of power relations.⁹⁰ While at certain times and places the “veil” has been constructed as exotic and sensual, in contemporary, highly sexualized Western societies, it may be resented for its perceived repression of sexuality. The “puritanical” aspect of the *hijab*/veil is reflected in Werbner’s suggestion that in psychoanalytic terms, the fear of Islam could be framed as “the fear of the super-ego gone wild,” with its claim to moral superiority.⁹¹ Despite the varying constructions put on the “veil,” one element of continuity, both historically and in the present, is the Western ambivalence towards Muslim or “Oriental” women, as seen in Rabbani’s description of nineteenth-century European feelings of “desire, pity, contempt and outrage,” with Oriental women being seen “as erotic victims and as scheming witches.”⁹²

The *hijab* draws reactions varying from sympathy to outright hostility, partly according to the perceived degree of agency of the wearer. Ironically, it is sometimes the case that the more freely the *hijab* is perceived to have been chosen, the greater the hostility. Despite the fact that freedom of choice and individual agency are highly-prized values in Western societies, the woman who freely

⁹⁰ Franks, 920.

⁹¹ Pnina Werbner, 8.

⁹² Kabbani, 26.

chooses Islam and/or the *hijab* may incur anger; on the other hand, when women are perceived as wearing the *hijab* out of compulsion rather than free will, this leads to a construction of Islam as “oppressive”—so either way, hostility may be directed at Muslims as a result. As with the issue of freedom of speech, this issue brings out the “liberal paradox”—the difficulty liberals have in tolerating something which they perceive as illiberal or intolerant.

Repeated references to the violence, barbarity and cruelty of the Other clearly fulfils the function of distancing these undesirable traits from the Self, which can then be seen as decent, peace-loving, just, humane, and promoting human rights. The treatment of the theme of violence is quite closely linked to contemporary global political events; while the Iraq war did not have the same kind of impact as 9/11 or 7/7, it nevertheless raised questions about Muslims’ loyalty (notwithstanding widespread opposition to the war among non-Muslim British people). Werbner suggests that the Muslim as “religious fanatic” or as “violent terrorist” is “the folk devil *par excellence* of a post-modern age.”⁹³

Despite the continual coverage of “Islamic terrorism” and related themes in the press, in Muslims’ actual everyday experience these issues came to the fore in the wake of particular events, especially 9/11 and 7/7, and for the women especially, were ultimately superseded by issues related to gender.

The theme of foreignness fulfils the overriding function of Otherization, polarizing categories of humanity into “Us” and “Them.” As Poole observes, “to exoticise and render the internal Other inherently different, if not foreign, allows the Other to be managed, and promotes a sense of national identity at the Other’s expense.”⁹⁴ She concludes that such representations are used to justify social and aggressive policies to manage Muslims worldwide.⁹⁵ While the *hijab* is sometimes associated with literal foreignness, but mostly with “foreign” or alien values, the same can be said of

⁹³ Werbner, 8. Werbner explains this with reference to the fact that this particular folk devil negates the impulses of “consumption and individual self-gratification,” which are celebrated in Western societies today.

⁹⁴ Poole, *Reporting Islam*, 251.

⁹⁵ Poole, “The Effects of September 11,” 101.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

customs which are perceived as culturally alien, such as abstention from alcohol and non-mixing of the sexes. Given that Islamophobia can be seen as a form of cultural racism, it is perhaps ironic that while in previous decades media images were of Arabs (especially in the 1970s) or Iranian Mullahs and Ayatollahs (especially in the 1980s), the “Islamic terrorist” of the past decade or two in some ways transcends ethnicity. Having said that, even the faceless and raceless “Islamic terrorist” is no doubt conceived of as foreign and Other in a general sense, as seen in the racialized cartoons of terrorists resembling Bin Laden referred to above.

Robinson’s study of representations of Islam in early modern English literature draws parallels between the seventeenth century and the present day, particularly in terms of the function of anti-Muslim discourse. Describing the seventeenth century as a moment of crisis and transformation in terms of both Europe’s self-understanding and its understanding of the differences between itself and Islam, he relates that the discourse of “fanaticism” was projected onto Islam in order for Christendom to distance itself from its own recent past of religious wars and violence; from this emerged the discursive contrast between reason and fanaticism (then called “enthusiasm”), between political modernity and premodern irrationality. The role of Islam was to aid Europe in its negation of its own premodernity, to become the name for all that Europe had rejected in its own self-image. He concludes that today, “images of Islamic fanaticism are again being circulated in order to provide cover for the most radical transformations of state power, citizenship, and the rule of law.”⁹⁶

This article has not addressed the institutional aspects of Islamophobia, as that has been done elsewhere by those who are more qualified to do so.⁹⁷ The suffering caused by anti-Muslim hostility to individuals such as the woman referred to above, who feared going out with her children after being accosted in the street, necessitates an urgent institutional response. Alongside that, it is my

⁹⁶ Robinson, 178-179.

⁹⁷ See for example the two Runnymede Trust reports and *The Search for Common Ground*.

belief that there is a place for exploration of the deeper, underlying psychological causes of contemporary anti-Muslimism, and the resulting understandings can contribute, no matter how subtly or imperceptibly, to a change of consciousness. Such an exploration could benefit from the insights provided by psychoanalytical theory and developmental and humanistic psychology. Gilman's work on stereotypes provides an example of such an approach. He sees the creation of stereotypes as linked to an early developmental stage when the child's sense of self splits into a "good" and a "bad" self, a division which the child subsequently projects onto the outer world. He concludes that "we need crude representations of difference to localize our anxiety, to prove to ourselves that what we fear does not lie within."⁹⁸

In conclusion, there seems little doubt that a significant factor in understanding Islamophobia is the seemingly unusual capacity of Muslims/Islam to resist—in terms of culture, moral values, and religiosity—Western universalistic aspirations; Islam appears to challenge prevailing intellectual trends of relativism and pluralism. The rapid changes brought about by globalization, including increasing pluralization and shifts in the international political order, contribute to a feeling of insecurity. For Britain in particular, the end of empire, the nation's gradual diminution as a world power, its involvement in Europe, migration and regional devolution have all added to the sense of uncertainty.⁹⁹ At such times, the creation of "folk devils" onto which one can project one's own shadow side (unwanted or unacknowledged traits) is especially appealing. The representation of Muslims as barbaric, cruel, irrational, backward, repressive of women, irredeemably alien and Other, goes hand in hand with a view of the Self – whether it be the West, Europe, or Britain – which is modern, progressive, rational, civilized, humane and liberal. The shadow side may also include the past Self. Referring to Western civilization's prolonged struggle to overturn the

⁹⁸ Gilman, 240; see also 17. Jungian concepts which embrace both the individual and the collective (in particular archetypes, the shadow and the collective unconscious) could provide an alternative approach.

⁹⁹ For further details, see Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain.

Studies in Contemporary Islam

domination of the Church, Werbner observes that in facing Islam, Europe in some sense faces its own past: "Islam evokes the spectre of puritanical Christianity, a moral crusade, an attack on permissive society."¹⁰⁰ Reactions to the *hijab* bring this out particularly clearly: the subjugation of women, the covering of women's bodies and the restrictions on sexuality, or maybe just old-fashioned "family values" whereby the wife takes care of home and husband, all conjure up a past which for some people is still a living memory. The "threat" of Islam is perhaps all the greater because it conjures up such a recent past.¹⁰¹

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¹⁰⁰ Werbner, 8.

¹⁰¹ As Werbner comments, it is not only *difference* which is threatening in the Other, but also *resemblance*. Werbner quotes Julia Kristeva: "the Other, the alien producing animosity and irritation, is in fact my own unconscious, the return of the repressed" - "Islamophobia," 8.

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